

## News from the FWG: Spring 2005

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By Christine Hanrahan

Spring 2005 will probably be remembered for excessive dryness, followed by soggy dampness and unseasonably cold temperatures. Nonetheless, by late April the Backyard Garden volunteers were back in force, their arrival as enduring a sign of spring as anyone could hope for.

### Backyard Garden News

Work on revamping the Backyard Garden (BYG) continues with plans to extend the Woodland Walk eastward and add a stepping-stone path to form a boundary between the Grass and Woodland Gardens. By late summer six new benches will be built and placed around the garden, and the service entrance south of the building will be widened to 8 feet. Plans call for an 8" wide brick maintenance edge to separate the lawn from the Heritage, Butterfly, Rock and Grass Garden beds. Jay also notes that *"A 2½ foot tall farmer's wall will be added at the north-east boundary of the Grass Garden in the style of the existing walls"* and *"a test plot of Low-Mow lawn will be seeded to see if this grass seed mix from Wildflower Farm would be a viable option for the BYG."* The entrance sign welcoming people to the BYG and explaining its purpose will most likely be in place before the garden season ends. This year is the second in the projected 5-year plan and as can be seen, lots of creative changes have been made and will continue to be made for some time to come. The BYG volunteers (A.K.A. the Friday Morning Crew) have their work cut out for them. New volunteers are most welcome and if you would like to help out, please contact Jay at [jay\\_ladell@yahoo.com](mailto:jay_ladell@yahoo.com) or leave a message at 234-6767.

### Events

The FWG participated in the annual Ottawa Wildlife Festival's 'Wildlife Awareness' event which this year was held at Billings Bridge. Interest and enthusiasm was much higher than at the previous location and our exhibit garnered a lot of interest. Approximately 12 people signed up to volunteer at the garden.

We also participated in the festival's workshop on 'Protecting Wild Places',

held at the Canadian Museum of Nature.

Reports on two coming events, the annual FWG Native Plant sale and International Migratory Bird Day, will be in the next update.

### Brochures, etc.



*Pond, spring 2005*

We've been trying to develop a new general information brochure on the FWG to replace the now outdated original. After several attempts by several people, Elizabeth Gammell took all versions and produced a nice, informative, attractive brochure. Watch for this starting in June.

Jay has taken the lead in developing a common look for all our printed material: brochures, newsletter, information sheets, etc. Over the next year as we update all our material, we will adopt this common look.

## Signs

Thanks to Charlie Clifford's good efforts we now have a new sign by the entrance road on Prince



*New entrance sign*

of Wales Drive. This sign looks exactly the same as the old one, but is durable, sturdy, fresh and bright rather than careworn and neglected. We are also planning to erect a kiosk to replace the map sign by the parking lot. When completed it will hold a dispenser for our brochures and have space to add current information (events at the garden, interesting things to see, etc.). No time limit has been set for this project so I can't tell you when to expect it, but keep watching!

## Dogs

In the last update I mentioned Colin Freebury's contact with many of

the regular dog walkers at FWG. Several agreed that a spring clean-up to remove doggy waste would be a good thing. Accordingly Colin, with the help of Patrice, owner of Misty, arranged a date, April 16<sup>th</sup>, and were at the garden bright and early with coffee, donuts, plastic gloves and plastic bags. It was a gorgeous warm day and more than 50 people agreed to help with the Poop Patrol. After the event, Colin prepared an interesting 2-page "Fletcher Dog-owners" which he distributed to dog-owners and posted on the Map Sign by the parking lot. Since dog-walkers are perhaps our most numerous visitors, and also amongst our biggest fans, we believe this outreach to them was very worthwhile.

## Problems

The stress of exams seems to breed the need for night-time bush parties. Each spring (and again in September) fires become a feature at the garden. While we cannot state absolutely that Carleton University students are responsible, the location of the university just across the canal from FWG, not to mention the timing of the fires, makes us very suspicious. This spring at least 6 fires were built, although fortunately none got out of control. One very large fire pit was built and re-used several times right next to the bird feeder at the Ash Woods. Once again we remind readers that if they see anything suspicious at FWG to please call AAFC Security at 759-1985

and the FWG at 234-6767.

## **Managing the Garden**

### ***Invasive species control***

The battle to control invasive plants continues in 2005. The primary invaders are Dog-strangling Vine (AKA Pale Swallowwort), Glossy and Common Buckthorn, Garlic Mustard, Tartarian Honeysuckle, Amur Maple and Flowering Rush. Also invasive, but of somewhat lesser concern to us for now, are Purple Loosestrife, Common Burdock, Canada Thistle, and Bull Thistle. There are of course, other alien species in the garden, but the above are the most problematical.

### **Dog-strangling Vine (*Cynanchum vincetoxicum*)**

In a previous update (Hanrahan 2004) I wrote about the work being done by Colin Freebury and Annie Belair who set up several study plots to test different methods of (potential) control. This summer they will check their test sites for results and a report will appear in the next FWG update.

Meanwhile, we are looking at what else we can do this year in the continuing fight to control if not eradicate, this remarkably resilient and aggressive plant which can quickly and completely overruns natural habitats. As we did last year, we'll continue mowing certain areas on a regular basis, and digging and pulling. One of the suggestions made last year was to set up several more test plots and try several control methods side by side. One technique we haven't yet tried but intend to in 2005, is rototilling. Clearly there are various problems with this. First, it won't work in areas where we have plants we want to preserve, and secondly, every bit of chopped up root crown has to be removed from the soil or it will re-sprout. However, if it can work for small areas, it could be useful.

For updates on our swallowwort work, please check the FWG website at:

[http://www.ofnc.ca/fletcher/research/index\\_e.php#dsv](http://www.ofnc.ca/fletcher/research/index_e.php#dsv)

### **Garlic Mustard (*Alliaria officinalis*)**

Most of the Garlic Mustard at FWG grows in the Ash Woods. Patches are found elsewhere, but none are as extensive. For some years volunteers have consistently removed the plant from the woods and it looked like they were winning. However, this spring considerable new growth was noted in the woods and it was evident that the plant was spreading again. Control will again be undertaken - stay tuned for the next chapter in removal of this pesky plant.

### **Common Burdock (*Arctium minus*)**

We plan to remove all but about 10% of the Common Burdock this year (a massive task - wish us luck). It has spread substantially in the last few years to the point where we can't afford to completely ignore it. Spring is a good time to try digging up the new growth before the plant gets too large when cutting is about the only viable option. Because many birds feed on burdock in the winter when other food is scarce, we have decided to leave enough standing plants for this purpose.

### **Buckthorn species**

Both species of buckthorn grow at FWG, and both produce abundant seedlings. Each year since 2001 we have been consistently removing quantities of these shrubs. Most of the ones in the Ash Woods have now been taken out, and in 2004 an extra effort was made to remove many from the thickets around the Old Field. Our main concern is with the female (fruiting) buckthorns and in 2004 we took out some substantial shrubs which unfortunately created large gaps in the thickets. Since this area has always been an important nesting and roosting site for birds, we are hoping to minimize habitat disturbance by not removing all shrubs at once. Plans call for judicious removal over a period of some years. We have replanted in some sections but many more trees and shrubs are needed to replace the buckthorn and it will be some years before the new shrubs are big enough to adequately fill in the gaps. Trying to balance the needs of the wildlife we have successfully attracted to the garden with the need to remove serious invasive plants, is a delicate balancing act. Thanks to Tony Denton, who oversees the buckthorn removal project, we are making progress.

### **Other invasive plants**

We will continue to remove Flowering Rush (*Butomus umbellatus*) from the pond, Tartarian Honeysuckle (*Lonicera tatarica*), Amur Maple (*Acer ginnala*), and a certain percentage of Manitoba Maple (*Acer negundo*) from the FWG. Purple Loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) has never been a real problem in the FWG and when we do see it we remove it immediately. The few plants that have appeared thus far were primarily in the Old Field and near the Pond.

### **Volunteer Opportunities**

If you would like to help us remove invasive species, plant trees, work in the BYG, or with any number of other activities, please contact the FWG (details at end of article).

The usual volunteer opportunities at FWG will continue during the spring through fall of 2005:

- *Friday morning*: regular work in the BYG takes place.
- *Sunday morning*: volunteers work primarily in the rest of the garden, planting, weeding out invasives, and helping with other tasks as required.
- *Sunday afternoon*: During summer months the Interpretive Centre is staffed by volunteers usually from noon to 4:00 p.m.
- *Wednesday evening*: Organized by Jay to do more of the heavy landscaping work in the BYG as well as other tasks as they arise.

### **Brushpiles**

Visitors to FWG have probably noticed numerous brushpiles scattered around the site. They are the result of buckthorn cutting. Rather than chip or haul away the downed shrubs, we have created brushpiles for wildlife. Almost any good reference book on creating wildlife habitat in urban gardens or rural properties, extols the benefits of such woody piles. They offer two important features for wildlife: warmth and safety and are utilized by a wide variety of animals.

At the FWG, we have noticed many creatures using these brushpiles over the years. One year a late lingering Song Sparrow was able to survive the frigid winter days and nights by roosting in the middle of a large brushpile. Many other species of birds have been observed taking cover in them, along with rabbits, chipmunks, and squirrels.

Our brushpiles are merely branches and small tree trunks piled haphazardly, but one can construct brushpiles according to a specific design, something we may try in the future.

## Plants and Animals

### *Birds*

The late spring delayed migration by some weeks. Red-winged Blackbirds were later than usual in the Ottawa area, and not seen at FWG until March 23<sup>rd</sup>. However, they were soon followed by Eastern Phoebe, Tree Swallow, Song Sparrow, and others. Our last sighting of a Great Gray Owl was on March 16<sup>th</sup> when one was found in the Ash Woods suffering from an injured eye. On the same day, a Great Horned Owl was located in the Arboretum. A month later, on April 16<sup>th</sup> a Northern Saw-whet Owl was observed by Kevin Wallace and later by many others, in the Ash Woods, our 3<sup>rd</sup> owl species for the garden and a new bird for the list. Another new species, Wild Turkey, was seen running into the New Woods, by Tony and Gretchen Denton. Apparently, this species was reported from the Dow's Lake area a day or so earlier. Despite several searches, the bird wasn't found again.

American Kestrels returned March 18<sup>th</sup>, and soon began checking out the nest box on the barn. On April 16<sup>th</sup> I watched the male who was carrying a rodent, fly past the nest box several times while the female watched. She then flew out and landed on a nearby tree where the male passed the rodent to her. He then sat and watched as she ate. For part of April they were very much in evidence and were noticed mating two or three times. Wilson Hum took some excellent photos of them including this one of the female looking out of the nest box. For more photos of kestrels many of them taken at FWG, please see his website at:

[http://www.pbase.com/golfpic/american\\_kestrel](http://www.pbase.com/golfpic/american_kestrel)

A Snowy Egret, rarely seen in Ottawa, turned up at Dow's Lake in April and stayed around for 8 days providing excellent views. Despite much looking and hoping, this beautiful bird was not seen from or at the FWG, and sadly was not added to our list.



*Kestrel in nest box. Photo by Wilson Hum*

Six new Tree Swallow nest boxes have been erected thus far, two by the Interpretive Centre, one on the south slope of the ravine just east of the pond, one on the south side of the pond, and two on the north slope of the pond. It didn't take long for the swallows to find and lay claim to these brand new houses. We are working on a design that we hope will be the ultimate Tree Swallow box and hope to have at least a few built this year. More swallow news next update.

Green Herons returned to FWG on May 10<sup>th</sup> and if they nest it will be for the fourth straight year!

Orioles, Yellow Warblers, Eastern Kingbirds, and many more began arriving on May 10th. On May 11<sup>th</sup> a Northern Mockingbird was found in the Arboretum and a Winter Wren in the Ash

Woods.

The 'Birds of the Fletcher Wildlife Garden' brochure was updated in March 2005. As always happens anytime I update this brochure, a new species is found within weeks! This time, 2 new species were added after the update, bringing the current total to 127 species. You can find copies of the new brochure at the Interpretive Centre.

### **Other Fauna**

Wood Frogs were heard only a few times this spring at FWG (but abundantly in some other locations). American toads began trilling in the pond on May 9<sup>th</sup> and in the ravine on May 10<sup>th</sup>.

The first butterfly of the season was a Mourning Cloak on April 16<sup>th</sup>, followed in early May by Cabbage Whites, and Spring Azures on May 12<sup>th</sup>.

A lone muskrat was noted in the pond this spring but not relocated. Foxes continue to puzzle by their absence, but the rodent population is clearly benefitting. A dead fox, probably from the early winter judging by its condition, was found just north of the red barn. We really miss seeing these graceful animals and hope they return, although so far the signs are not promising, at least not for 2005. I hope I am wrong.

**Acknowledgments:** As always, grateful thanks to the many volunteers without whom the garden would be a very different place. Thanks also to Wilson Hum for his great photo.

### **References:**

Hanrahan, Christine. 2004. News from the FWG: Summer 2004. T&L 38(4):169-178.

### **FWG Details and Contact Information**

The FWG is located off Prince of Wales Drive on the Central Experimental Farm. For more information please visit the website at: <http://www.ofnc.ca/fletcher.php>. There you can sign up for our free newsletter *What's Up at the Fletcher Wildlife Garden*, available electronically. Brochures about the garden are available from inside on Friday mornings from spring through fall, Sunday afternoons in the summer, or during the week June through August when we have a summer employee.

- FWG phone number: 613-234-6767
- David Hobden, Chair, FWG Management Committee: [dhobden@magma.ca](mailto:dhobden@magma.ca)
- Jay Ladell, BYG Manager: [jay\\_ladell@yahoo.com](mailto:jay_ladell@yahoo.com)
- Sandy Garland: Newsletter, information about the FWG: [sgarland@magma.ca](mailto:sgarland@magma.ca)
- Christine Hanrahan: bird and wildlife observations: [vanessa@magma.ca](mailto:vanessa@magma.ca)