

## News from the FWG: Spring 2007

*By Christine Hanrahan*

Spring came slowly this year, but the gradual slide into warmer days was far more pleasant than the abrupt change from cold to heat that too often characterizes our Ottawa spring. Spring also brings the volunteers back to the garden and for many, the return to their work at FWG is an integral part of the changing seasons.

### **Backyard Garden News**

The BYG volunteers met for the first time this year on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>. Whether this is auspicious or the opposite, well, we'll see! There were at least five new faces around the table and Isabelle Nicol provided her usual very thorough volunteer orientation (tour and briefing). Isabelle has also kindly agreed to become the Interim BYG Coordinator, until we find someone willing to assume the role on a more permanent basis.

In the few short weeks since then, work in the garden has leaped ahead. At the time of writing, mid-May, the garden is looking very green and new growth is everywhere. Much of the work has involved general tidying up after winter wear and tear. The bird bath is once again installed (and frequently used), hoses are connected, the irrigation system has been repaired (thanks, Charlie), and the compost bins turned. We've decided that a complete reconstruction of the BYG pond isn't feasible at this time, and so new ideas are being considered. There is talk about a Wednesday evening work crew to deal specifically with this project.



*Dale's Bench*

Inside the Interpretive Centre, signs of the spring plant sale dominated for awhile with, at one time, four tables full of healthy growing seedlings. By the time you read this, the plant sale will be long over, and those attending will already know that we had a fantastic variety of native plants for sale. More on the plant sale in the next update.

Regular visitors to the BYG will note a new addition. The beautiful

and very comfortable bench is in memory of our good friend, Dale Crook who passed away in 2005. It was made by Malcolm Leith, Tony Denton and Al Beaulieu, and as you can see, they did a remarkable job on this great memorial for Dale.

The OFNC/FWG lost another good friend with the passing of Eileen Evans last year. Eileen was often to be seen at the garden and many of us probably have good memories of Eileen and her beautiful dog, at FWG and the Arboretum. Her family, in memory of Eileen, has very generously donated funds towards the construction of a pergola. This long anticipated structure can now go ahead, thanks to this wonderful gift, and by the time you read this issue, the pergola should be completed. I think Eileen would have approved of this addition to the garden.

### **Signs**

Cedar posts will be used for erecting the habitat signs, mentioned in the last update. The posts are kindly donated by David Stewart of Landscape Ontario who will also arrange for delivery. By the time you read this, the signs should be installed.

### **Events, Tours, Walks**

The FWG once again participated in the annual Ottawa Wildlife Festival event at Billings Bridge Shopping Mall. As usual, we were paired with the OFNC display, which, also as usual, was brilliant! We fielded all sorts of questions, from identification of birds and animals (and their tracks) to requests for gardening information. About half a dozen people signed up to volunteer with the garden. Overall, it was quite successful and a lot of fun.

Several of the FWG volunteers led groups of students and cub scouts around the garden, the latter group also came prepared to work!

Peter Fuller led a group of enthusiasts around the FWG to look for birds on May 12<sup>th</sup>, International Migratory Bird Day (the event occurs annually on the second Saturday in May across North America and parts of Latin America). Although the weather was cool and partly cloudy, the 41 people were treated to a good selection of birds, including Yellow Warblers, Brown Thrasher, Gray Catbird, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Warbling Vireos, Baltimore Orioles, and many others, 38 species in total. This year, the IMBD organizers in the US, set up a special page on e-bird so that any group leading a walk for IMBD can submit their observations. FWG will be part of this group effort. Many thanks to Peter for once again generously donating his time to this event. It is greatly appreciated.

A summer field camp at Carleton University for Geography students, will use the FWG for part of their program. One of their suggested activities was to conduct ongoing visitor surveys, which we are quite interested in. It will be illuminating to find out what people think of the FWG, and why they visit. We probably can guess the reasons for many visitors: dog walking, birding, photography, but what about the others?

### **Miscellaneous**

We held our annual spring clean-up in late April. This is the time when we install the window screens, give the Interpretive Centre a good airing and sweeping, tidy up, discard, and spread

throughout the garden picking up garbage. At the end of the morning we had filled 6 bags with refuse and the garden was looking much cleaner. Of course, garbage accumulates all year and we do our best to remove what we see. During the clean up day, however, we are actively searching for garbage, under trees, in thickets, in places we don't normally go. Grateful thanks to all the many volunteers who came to help out.

## **Habitats**

Work on the continued rejuvenation of the Butterfly Meadow, led by Diane Lepage, has begun again. In other parts of the garden, garlic mustard removal is occurring, planting is being done, and brushpiles for small animals and birds are being built. Later, we'll have more news to report from other areas of the FWG.

## **Plants and Animals**

Despite the cool spring, many birds arrived back more or less on schedule. On sunny days when the temperature rose, butterflies and other insects were briefly seen. By the end of April, however, spring really had arrived and the garden was alive with song, sound and sight of small creatures going about their busy lives.

### ***Birds***

A single Red-winged Blackbird arrived back at FWG on March 13. Within days he had been joined by many others, and soon that wonderful "ok-a-ree" call was ringing throughout the garden all day, no matter the weather. After that, other migrants were slow to arrive. Eastern Phoebe, first observed in the Arboretum in late March, and found sporadically there since, made only a few appearances at FWG. Killdeer were found around the same time, mostly on the farm fields, but occasionally flying and calling over FWG. Common Grackles were the next to arrive, followed by Song Sparrows. Tree Swallows arrived about the third week of April, only a few at first, but by the 24<sup>th</sup>, were present in good numbers and already checking out nest boxes. Installing a repaired nest box (thanks, Colin) in the Old Field in early May, I



*Tree Swallow*

was several times swooped down upon by a pair of impatient swallows. No sooner did I move away than they claimed the box, at least momentarily, checking it inside and out. A few minutes later, five more swallows came over to investigate and a great kerfuffle ensued! However, at this writing, none have taken up residence in that particular box.

It can be illuminating to watch the interactions between birds. On one occasion I watched a

prolonged battle for control of a bird box, between a pair of house sparrows, who had previously staked out the place before the swallows arrived back, and a very determined tree swallow. I sat down some little distance away and watched this avian drama unfold. For at least a week afterwards, it was touch and go for the sparrows, but they finally retained right of residency.

Several bird boxes are being used by *Peromyscus* mice, and a couple by red squirrels. At least a couple more have been claimed by House Sparrows, but there are still more than enough boxes left for swallows, so hopefully, everyone will be happy and successfully breed.

Warblers began appearing in the garden just before International Migratory Bird Day (IMBD) and at this writing, there was still an excellent variety including Ovenbird, Common Yellowthroat, and Nashville Warbler.

The Green Herons, first spotted on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, quickly became the star attraction, as always! Whether they nest in the garden again, after a hiatus of several years, remains to be seen. The American Kestrels, on the other hand, appear to be using their traditional nest site at FWG.

### *Other Fauna*



*American Toad trilling*

Wood Frogs began ‘quacking’ away about April 10, but the full chorus didn’t get going for another week or so. The number of Wood Frogs seemed lower than in other years, although we don’t know for certain that this is so. On the other hand, the American Toads were abundant. The peak of their activity was a few days in early May, when their trilling call dominated the soundscape at the garden, as well as the small wetlands near Hartwell’s Locks. I spent an absorbing hour watching their frenzied activity which caused the water to churn and roil with a vigour that astonished passers-by who wondered what was going on. One of the green herons stood and watched too, but although the pickings were easy, I didn’t see him make even an attempt to catch anything. No doubt he had just dined well. But also, toads are toxic, and

I don’t know for sure that Green Herons will eat them. The male toads were in such a frenzy that any creature moving was in danger of being pounced on. This included a small painted turtle that was many times besieged by ardent males. Finally, having enough, it submerged itself into the debris at the bottom of the pond, still being clung to by misguided males. At present, Gray Treefrogs are calling from all over the garden. Soon, the banjo-like call of the Green Frog will be heard, and on warm June nights the sound of Green Frogs and Treefrogs presents an aural delight at the FWG pond.

There are innumerable insects at the FWG, but it is usually the biggest and brightest that are

noticed: the butterflies, bumblebees, and wasps. But even the tiniest creature can be an amazing sight. In early May I was delighted to find good numbers of little Beeflies (*Bombylius major*) and tiny red bees of the *Nomada* genus, in many locations around the garden. Dandelions were a favoured plant for the *Nomada* bees, various other bee species and the gorgeous little native ladybird beetle, *Coleomagilla maculata*.

Turning to mammals for a moment, it is a pleasure to report that the CEF foxes have three young! When I first saw them, they still had their charcoal coats, but when I last looked they were beginning to acquire their rusty red pelage.

The red and the gray squirrels are thriving, as are the chipmunks which seem far more numerous than I can remember, and much bolder! Groundhogs, on the other hand, our other common mammal, are not doing so well at FWG, although they thrive on the rest of the CEF. The only groundhog of the spring was a dead one, severely mauled, presumably by a dog. The poor creature appeared to have tried hiding behind a fence, where it died. Groundhogs may be common, they may be a 'nuisance' to some, but they are part of our native fauna. Were they as rare as their western relative, the Vancouver Island Marmot, perhaps we'd see them differently.

### **Volunteer Opportunities**

If you would like to help out at the garden, we are always happy to see new faces. You can try your hand at removing invasive species, planting trees, working in the BYG, or with any number of other activities. Why not contact us? (Details at end of article). Regular volunteer groups meet on Friday morning (BYG), Wednesday evening (Butterfly Meadow) and Sunday morning (the rest of the FWG), spring through fall.

**Acknowledgements:** As always, thanks to all the volunteers who make FWG happen!

**Photos:** Christine Hanrahan.

#### **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>. Brochures about the garden are available from the Centre 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
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  - Sandy Garland: website and information about the FWG newsletter: [sgarland@magma.ca](mailto:sgarland@magma.ca)
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