

News from the FWG: Summer 2004

By Christine Hanrahan

Summer is for enjoying the bounty of nature. All things flourish and young creatures born in the garden make their presence known. Helping maintain this most enchanting of city oases are the many volunteers without whom the garden could not operate. Give them a nod next time you wander through the garden appreciating its wild beauty.

Backyard Garden News



Rock wall, BYG,

The Friday Morning Crew has been busy implementing Jay Ladell's plans for the Backyard Garden (BYG). The rockery is planted, the Heritage Bed is nearly complete, the bird feeder has been moved, a new entrance way has been created complete with a rock wall on the north side, and the garden is evolving and changing in a truly exciting fashion. Jay has developed attractive new labels to identify the garden plant and visitor comments have been overwhelmingly favourable. By the time this update is in your hands, the new entrance sign welcoming visitors to the BYG should be in place. Check it out and let us know what you think.

Events

International Migratory Bird Day

This annual event which occurs on the second Saturday of May each year was held on May 8th. This year it was again co-sponsored by the Ottawa Wildlife Festival and followed on the heels of the bird conservation workshop held at the Museum of Nature. Over 70 people turned out on a sunny but brisk day for guided birding walks around the site, capably led by Ken and Tim Allison. Thirty-six species were found, including many warblers. Post-walk they returned to the centre to mingle, to chat and to taste test some bird-friendly coffee. For those who were visiting the FWG for the first time,



IMBD bird walk, Photo by David Hobden

the garden was a revelation. Subsequently I saw some of them in the garden, including a father with his young son who was a *serious* birder. I think they said they'd been there since 8:00 a.m. (it was 1:00 p.m. when I spoke with them) and it was with great reluctance that they finally left.

Schoolyard Greening Workshop

On May 23rd, Anne Coffey of the Canadian Biodiversity Institute held an interesting workshop for about 20 people on transforming schoolgrounds into green and healthy places for children. The workshop was co-sponsored by FWG.

Health Canada Environment Week Fair

Held as part of National Environment Week, the fair took place at Tunney's Pasture on June 2nd. FWG participated again this year with Lise Trudel and I manning the booth. As usual, it was very busy and lots of people stopped by to pick up brochures and look for advice on gardening and wildlife. Birds were certainly the theme du jour. I answered more questions about birds (how to identify them, where to go to watch them) and how to attract them to a garden than anything else.



Plant sale,

FWG Annual Plant Sale

Held under warm, sunny skies, the plant sale was again a great success, bringing in about the same amount of money as last year which gives us the necessary leeway to carry on with various plans. The sale is always a festive occasion helped by the presence of other independent, small nursery operators. Philip Fry, Deirdre Furlong and Margaret Hartshorn all brought a unique selection of plants to sell, which complemented those being sold by FWG. This year Lise Trudel set up a display of

her lovely artwork, including framed originals and artcards, showing the garden at different times of the year. Kudos to Jay Ladell for all his work in organizing the sale, which just gets better every year. Sandy Garland and Jay also grew many of the plants we had for sale, not an easy task. Thanks guys! And many thanks to all the volunteers who arrived to help out. A great day was had by all.

Summer Employee

Many of you probably had the pleasure of meeting Annie Belair at the FWG in 2003 when she staffed the centre for the summer. Fortunately for us, an HRDC grant allowed us to hire Annie again for the summer 2004 season. It's no secret that Annie has become an integral part of the FWG operations. She staffs the centre, leads guided walks, keeps an eye on the site with daily walks around the garden, and works on invasive species control (more on this below). She has re-organized the library, as noted below, and undertaken a myriad of other chores, far too many to list here. Even better, she comes up with good, workable suggestions, and brings a fresh approach to ongoing projects. We would, if we could, like to have her full-time at the FWG! If you wonder where Annie vanishes to when the summer is over, it is not too far away. In addition to schoolwork and spending time with Stefan (whom she married at the FWG in 2003!), she works with the Macoun Club.



Annie Belair

Volunteering at the Garden

Regular work sessions continued throughout the summer.

- The Friday Morning Crew were busy as always but not only in the BYG. The Bill Holland Trail needs regular mowing(Charlie Clifford), and buckthorn removal continues (Tony Denton) and many other jobs need doing. Possibly the most important person on Friday morning is Marilyn Ward who amongst her many chores, provides the coffee for that necessary caffeinated break.
- On Wednesday evening Jay works with a group of people on the heavier landscaping duties in the BYG. Most recently they installed a sprinkler system for the nursery bed. For a change of pace they have also been doing swallowwort duty, weeding out the plant we love to hate.
- The Sunday morning volunteers usually work in the rest of the garden. This year they have focused a good deal of effort on controlling invasive species, particularly swallowwort, and flowering rush. The 'Pond Trio' (Sandy Garland, Isabelle Nicol and Diane LePage) could often be found wading the depths of the pond to haul out flowering rush and frog's-bit. They've done a remarkable job.
- For some years now we've kept the Centre open on Sunday afternoons, June to October, from 1:00 - 4:00 p.m. Many thanks to all the volunteers who do such a great job explaining the FWG to visitors.

FWG Library

One of the tasks we've been wringing our hands over for what seems like forever, is re-organization of our library. With nothing more than broad categories under which to file books it is inevitable that some things get lost (mis-filed). Thanks to Fiona McPherson, a librarian, who gave us some ideas, we are finally on our way to having an organized library. Based on Fiona's

input, Annie and Sandy have devised a classification system that will work!

We've also been reconsidering the books in the library. With limited space and several recent very large, generous donations of books, we've had to acknowledge that we can't keep everything. Books not pertinent to our areas of interest have been set aside for sale. Check the OFNC website (www.ofnc.ca) for details. Money from the book sales will help maintain the FWG.

Signs

Charlie Clifford continues to make sure our various signs are in good shape. In early summer he repainted the big entrance sign on Prince of Wales Drive, a fiddly, painstaking job which he performed meticulously. He is also looking at replacing the directional sign by the parking lot. The present sign, which Charlie repaired last year, has always bugged us because the 'North' symbol points south and while it is highly entertaining to watch visitors contorting themselves as they try to sort out the confusion, we really have to 'do something'.

Problems

Plant theft is nothing new at the FWG, particularly around the time of the plant sale when potted plants are stolen, but this year it seemed to occur with more frequency. In early May I caught someone digging up a plant from the BYG. When I confronted him he said he was "transplanting" it to his garden. For reasons known only to him, he believed it his right to take whatever he wanted and became angry when I argued with him. Only the threat of calling AAFC Security persuaded him to leave. Most plant thieves are not so brazen and the plants tend to vanish when we're not around. Most recently (late July) several large blue lobelias were dug up from the BYG. If you see anything suspicious while visiting the garden, call AAFC security at 759-xxxx and FWG at 234-6767 with details.

Plants and Animals

Birds

We had some good news and some bad news with nesting birds. The good news is that the green herons nested again for the third year in a row. The bad news is that the kestrels abandoned us and I'm not sure why. They hung around for awhile in March and April, checked out the box several times, came back in mid-May, checked it out again and then left. Since then we've had only sporadic sightings. Both starlings and house sparrows attempted nesting in the box, although I'm not sure who won. However, at time of writing (late July) house sparrows were using the box for roosting.

While the green herons investigated their old nest site, they finally chose a well-hidden spot north of the previous one. Only two young were found this year, but given the



Green Heron, Photo by Canute

difficulty of seeing anything in the thick tangle where they nested there could well have been more. The adults were seen frequently early in the season but less so as summer wore on. As the herons stalked frogs in the pond, photographers stalked the herons from the shore, sometimes with success. As always, the herons are a huge hit with visitors.

A Red-eyed Vireo built a nest precariously low and flimsily attached to the tip of a branch, an unusual location for this species. Although I several times saw the adult on the nest, at some point the nest was dislodged and any young there might have been, vanished. Warbling Vireos, however, nested successfully, as did Cedar Waxwings, and our usual assortment of regular FWG breeding birds including at least 4 pairs of Yellow Warblers and possibly half a dozen pairs of Song Sparrows. Great Crested Flycatchers and Eastern Kingbirds nested just north east of the Ash Woods near the Canal.

Although Tree Swallows arrived back more or less on schedule, once breeding season progressed their numbers seemed to decrease. I cleaned out the swallow nest boxes at FWG on 2 August to see if there were any answers there. But what I found raised more questions. Out of 30 nest boxes, only 10 had successful tree swallow nests. I found 10 dead swallows, 4 adults and 6 nearly fledged young in 8 other boxes, including one adult in a box which was devoid of nest material. House Sparrow nests occupied only 3 of the boxes, Red Squirrels had used another 3, while the rest were unused. For the full report, please see:

<http://www.ofnc.ca/fletcher/alphabet/birdboxes.php>. One possible explanation is the cold weather through much of the spring and early summer which certainly has a deleterious effect on birds both in terms of temperature and in suppression of insects which they feed on. In general I noticed that breeding activity overall was somewhat quieter than in previous years, despite the good numbers of Yellow Warblers, Song Sparrows and Red-winged Blackbirds.

Speaking of blackbirds last summer I reported on the large numbers gathering in the pond each evening from mid-July on (Hanrahan 2003). This summer the Red-winged blackbirds were congregating at the pond but in far smaller numbers, at least at the time of writing.

Other Fauna

Butterflies

The generally cool weather certainly influenced butterfly numbers as well as that of birds. However, the overwintering species are hardier and on sunny, if somewhat cool days, Mourning Cloaks and the occasional Milbert's Tortoiseshell and Eastern Comma were found, especially on the southern edges of the Ash Woods. Later in the season, the Pond, Old Field and the BYG were all excellent places to find butterflies. In addition to the regularly occurring species such as European Skipper, White Admiral, Black Swallowtail, Tiger Swallowtail, Common Ringlet, and Clouded Skipper, we had a good variety of other less common (at FWG) species. Great Spangled Fritillary, Viceroy, Least Skipper and Hobomok Skipper were found in small numbers. A Banded Hairstreak was found again (the first record was summer 2003), and Silver Spotted Skipper, which hasn't been seen at FWG for some years.

Reptiles and Amphibians

For the first time in several years we had turtles back in our pond. First to arrive was a fairly large Painted Turtle, followed some weeks later by a Snapping Turtle. Whether they'll stay or try to find another site is anybody's guess. Tree Frogs continued to be very vocal and visible, in nest boxes, behind the BYG brochure dispenser, in milkweed leaves, on tree branches, etc. Wood Frogs, American Toads, and Green Frogs remained fairly common as in previous years.

Plants

Dale Crook has prepared a detailed inventory of the Black Walnut and Butternut trees growing in the garden. For several years now he has been tagging them and tracking nut production. For the full report, please see: http://www.ofnc.ca/fletcher/our_plants/nut-inventory.php



DSV, photo by C. Hanrahan

Invasive Species

Pale Swallowwort, also known as Dog-strangling Vine (*Cynanchum rossicum*), has been around the FWG for a number of years. The real spread began when we took over the site and mowing, which had suppressed the growth, was stopped. By the mid-1990's we realized we had a real problem and commenced hand pulling the plants, eventually resorting to mowing again, but only selected areas (Hanrahan 2003). By 2004, the plant had spread further into the Old Field and was more noticeable in the New Woods, both areas which had been previously relatively free of swallowwort.

During 2004 volunteers were consistently trying to curtail the spread of seeds by cutting or pulling flowering plants. We discovered that, cut too soon, the plants quickly sent forth new shoots complete with flowers from below the cut. Pulling stimulated the growth of new plants. Cutting later in the season, after the seedpods have formed probably makes more sense; it certainly makes for less work since there is less repetition.

Acknowledgments: As always, grateful thanks to the many volunteers without whom the garden would be a very different place. Thanks also to Canute and David Hobden for use of their excellent photos. All other photos by Christine Hanrahan.

References

Hanrahan, Christine. 2003. News from the Fletcher Wildlife Garden: Spring and Summer 2003. T&L 37(4):170-178.