

Four Season Programming for Ecological Stewardship

by Katie Krelove

The calm exterior of the little white building on the edge of the park belies the bluster of activity underway inside. It is 9:30 on a Saturday morning in December, and boys and girls aged 8 to 10 are finding tasks with which to busy themselves: updating nature journals, flipping through new books, feeding Houdini (our red-eared slider turtle) or simply chatting with each other. One boy is eagerly recounting the various birds he's spotted in the last two weeks.

Jon, the group's leader, calls the Nature Centre's familiar "chick-a-dee-dee-dee" attention-getter, and soon everyone is seated on the floor. First order of business: trivia! The topic of the day is squirrels and the children have come prepared with questions to test their peers. The respect and attention these young nature enthusiasts give one another is impressive. Everyone listens intently, waits their turn and offers kudos for a right answer or an especially interesting question.

Once quizzed out, topographic maps are consulted to plan a hiking route. Suggestions for sites to visit are put forth — among them, notably, one of the park's big hills. It is, after all, the first snow of the year, and at least some sliding between squirrel observations is a must. With excitement mounting and winter gear applied, the group starts out on the trails, "nature voices" dialled to low, clutching scavenger hunt sheets.

Welcome to a typical session of the Ramblers Hiking Club for Kids, run out of the High Park Nature Centre in Toronto's west end. Most members are seasoned veterans of the Nature Centre's programs, and well acquainted with both the park's many nature trails and each other. They have participated in clubs, camps, family events

and school trips, and have become caretakers, explorers and admirers of the park's natural beauty throughout the seasons. As a nature interpreter who has had the pleasure to teach, learn from and explore with many people of all ages, it is clear to me that these young people represent among the best hope for the future of a valuable natural place in the heart of the City of Toronto that is constantly threatened — High Park.

Starting in Place!

"High Park sometimes reminds me of Algonquin Park, one of my other favourite places. Sometimes the pine trees smell and you forget you're in the city." — Jack, age 8½

While many children travel far from the city to experience nature, the green spaces in our own cities are often overlooked as places with educational or recreational value — particularly when it comes to nature study! But there is much to gain by introducing kids to the outdoors in their own neighbourhood. Because it is close by, the local environment provides far greater opportunities for long-term involvement and attachment than do more far-away places. In addition, not all children have the same opportunities for travel, so starting in the place where they live helps to level the playing (and exploring) field.

High Park, at nearly 160 hectares, is the largest park in the Greater Toronto Area. Its history as a public park goes back over 130 years — and as a centre of human activity, even longer. The park is multi-use: you can visit the historical home of the original landowners, fish or picnic by a 14-hectare pond, use sports facilities, walk dogs or saunter along trails once used by the Iroquois

people. It is also a centre for ecological study; in fact, one-third of High Park's terrestrial system is considered to be ecologically significant, and approximately 23 hectares has been provincially designated since 1989 as an Area of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI).

The park's most famous plant communities are the black oak savannahs, remnants of the sand prairies that once covered much of southern Ontario's landscape. By some estimates, less than 1% of the original coverage of this ecosystem remains, and High Park shelters the fourth largest remnant (City of Toronto, 2002). The park is a corridor for migrating birds and home to over 50 species of regionally rare plants. Overall, it is an urban treasure, providing a rare opportunity to connect with nature and our natural heritage in our own city, to glimpse and preserve the biodiversity that thrived here pre-settlement.

The ecological integrity of the park is constantly threatened by a myriad of urban pressures. In response to scientific studies and community interest, the City of Toronto implemented a management plan to emphasize the protection and restoration of the park's woodland and savannah ecosystems, including a mandate to foster sustainable use.

The High Park Nature Centre was established in 1999 to aid in reaching these goals. Programs were initially offered in summer only and were designed to highlight the diversity of life in the park, to demonstrate the degradation of High Park's natural areas and to provide opportunities for community participation in remediation efforts. Through the years, the Centre's program offerings continued to expand. By 2005 the Centre had become a year-round outdoor environmental education facility, offering programs for elementary schools and local families, highlighting stewardship and ecological themes specific to the season.

Participants get their hands dirty in restoration activities — planting savannah plants in the spring, removing invasive species in the summer, collecting seeds in the fall and feeding birds in the winter. These are coupled with naturalist themes attuned to the time of year, among them wildflowers, butterflies, migration, winter birds, tracking, snowshoeing, trees, soil science and pond study.

The sustainable use of High Park depends on people understanding the significance of its natural areas, supporting the City's restoration efforts, and learning what they can do to help (or at least not hurt) the treasured ecology. Whenever possible, the Nature Centre strives to offer opportunities for long-term educational programs instead of one-off visits, as we believe that building ecological values and changing behaviours toward the environment takes time and comes only through the creation of feelings of respect, understanding and appreciation for a place. This can only truly be achieved by reaching people year-round, throughout the four seasons.

The Benefits of Four-Season Programming

Environmental Stewardship

"We helped protect the natural places in High Park with our litterless lunch contest and by pulling garlic mustard leaves." — Avery, age 8

Stewardship, by definition, is something that happens over time. A key lesson for the environmentally literate is that there are no quick fixes for the ecological problems we face. Whether it is conservation or restoration, care-taking is something that requires hard work, perseverance and learning from our mistakes. Potential stewards need the chance to become actively involved over time in caring for ecosystems; a variety of seasonal actions give a fuller picture of the vigilance required.

Perhaps more importantly, seasonal programming allows people to see and learn from the fruits of their work over time, the successes, failures and somewhere in-betweens! In the children and families enrolled in four-season programming at the Nature Centre we are beginning to see their sense of accomplishment and connection to High Park. As they continue to grow with us, we hope to instil in them a sense that their efforts make a difference to the long term well-being of the park, and to the city in general.

Understanding

"We got to get more involved with nature." – Eve, age 9

"What do you think High Park looked like when dinosaurs were alive? I hope our seed balls grow into awesome tall grass." – Martin, age 8

Responsible stewardship also depends on knowledge of ecological processes. Only by experiencing nature throughout the seasonal changes can the intricacies of interdependence be realized. Four-season programming allows students to make larger connections and to think of nature as a living, dynamic reality. In a time of uncertainty around the effects of climate change, greater emphasis in environmental education is being placed on monitoring. At the Nature Centre, we engage people in keeping records of such things as migration, bird populations, budding, flowering and spread of invasive species. This not only allows participants to observe the flora and fauna in the park more closely, it also allows us to recognize and evaluate subtle changes over time.



Community Building

"I like the hikes, learning about nature and being with the other kids. I'd never gotten to spend so much time in the park before. I tell my family, friends and classmates about what I did at Ramblers." – Jack, age 8½

A big part of being a responsible steward is passing on knowledge and information to others in the community. Four-season programming gives participants the chance to come to the park in ever-widening roles: as student, family member, club member, camper, naturalist and friend. Children, parents, teachers and staff who visit the Nature Centre are then able to expand their roles in their communities, and share their interest in nature with others.

At the Nature Centre, we have been able to create a unique “family of families” who spend a great deal of time in the park in all weather and seasons, appreciating the natural environment, picking up garbage and trying to educate others about how to be responsible park users.

Making It Happen! Some Tips for Four-Season Programming

Offer a Variety of Doors to Nature

At the Nature Centre, we aim to offer many different program options for people to get involved at their comfort level. In addition to school field trips we have naturalist clubs for kids, family walks and workshops, volunteer opportunities, summer camps and programs for daycares, Guides and Scouts, ESL groups, and youth from at-risk environments. Offering a variety of themes also helps; ecological learning and stewardship can often be effectively paired with games, the arts, or even fantasy (our “Fairy Friends and Gnome Homes” program is very popular!).

In addition, we have found it beneficial to market ourselves as four season. In 2005 we introduced “High Park through the Seasons,” which gave school groups a discount when they booked a program in each of fall, winter and spring. Since then the number of “Through the Seasons” classes has risen from 5 to 17.

Dedicated Staff/Volunteers

The greatest asset to four-season outdoor environmental education is the people who know the place. Guides, interpreters and volunteers need time to explore and fall in love with a particular environment, whether it is a public park, garden, river or overgrown field. Make sure plenty of training is allotted in the form of long rambles armed with guidebooks. Recruit the help of local naturalists who know the area. It is especially inspiring if guides, teachers and volunteers

can share personal stories relating to place with others.

Offer Opportunities for Stewardship

No matter what kind of green space you are working with, there are always things people can do to take care of it: picking up litter, planting native species, weeding, feeding birds, watering and sharing information are just a few suggestions. There are many great monitoring programs in place to help you get started with information gathering, such as PlantWatch and FrogWatch. You can also consult your local government to find out if and how your green space is being managed.

Let Nature Guide Your Programming!

Four-season programming should emphasize natural seasonal occurrences. Again, this is where people who know the place are invaluable. Whether it is squirrel, frog or cricket mating, trilliums blooming, acorn harvesting or monarchs migrating, there is a time for everything in nature. When you get to know these rhythms, are able to recognize them and are familiar with the locations where to observe them, programming is easy!

For more information about the four-season programming offered by the High Park Nature Centre, please visit www.highpark.org.

References

City of Toronto Parks and Recreation. (2002). High Park woodland and savannah management plan (Toronto: City of Toronto).

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