UPPER THAMES RIVER
CONSERVATION AUTHORITY

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June 2021


Indigo Bunting

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Mornington Central PS - Schoolyard Outdoor School and Trees

Despite the global pandemic, there was a time over the winter when Wildwood Education staff were fortunate enough to be asked to provide schoolyard professional development programming at Mornington Central Public School. This temporary return to teaching, outside, with students and staff, was a welcome reprieve.

The participating classes suggested topics of interest prior to the visit and Wildwood Education staff incorporated teaching methods and activities using the schoolyard as an extended classroom. We also enjoyed turning

whatever nature offered at any given moment into learning opportunities!

Lisa Meszeros, a teacher and long time supporter of Wildwood Education programming, secured a TD Friends of the Environment Foundation grant for the school to provide all classes with some form of outdoor learning opportunity. For Wildwood Education staff, that meant teaching all classes from Kindergarten to Grade 6 and arranging for five large stock trees for the schoolyard, adding to the 25 or so planted last spring!

Contact: Maranda MacKean, Community Education Specialist

Staff from Cedar Hollow Public School laying out plants for the pollinator garden.

Cedar Hollow PS Pollinator Garden

In partnership with the Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB), the UTRCA is delivering a pollinator garden project to five schools this spring. Virtual programs about pollinator gardens developed by UTRCA education staff are shared with classes on-line (see story below). While the original plan was for students to do the actual planting, staff at the schools have pulled together to make the gardens happen.

Various projects include establishing pollinator plants in planter boxes (previously built by students), in outdoor learning areas, and in a canoe (see the **David Suzuki Canoe project**).
Contact: Karen Pugh, Resource Specialist

Pollinator Power!

During the month of June, Fanshawe Community Education staff taught virtual Pollinator Garden field trips for 36 classes from five TVDSB schools: Cedar Hollow, East Carling, Innerkip, West Nissouri, and W.S. Fox. These synchronous sessions complemented the new pollinator gardens being planted this spring at each of these schools, expertly coordinated by the UTRCA's Karen Pugh. The pollinator gardens also support schools seeking to become certified as an EcoSchool with EcoSchools Canada. Each school demonstrated creativity and adaptability in planting these gardens safely during COVID-19 restrictions.

Our engaging virtual field trips helped students get excited about their school's new pollinator garden and encouraged students to get involved by helping with future watering, weeding, and recording pollinators that visit the garden. Another goal of the virtual sessions was to inform students, ranging from Kindergarten to Grade 8, about how native plants support native pollinators such as bees, hummingbirds, and butterflies.

Community Education staff developed three different presentations to suit all elementary grade levels and added a variety of fun and interactive experiences, such as reading the story "Give Bees a Chance," singing an insect song, and creating various games for younger participants. Older grades participated in Google Jamboards, a Kahoot quiz, and were challenged to answer a variety of true and false questions about pollinators. Students could ask questions at the end of each virtual presentation, and they had some great queries including *"Is there a king bee as well as a queen bee?"*, *"What is the biggest bee in the world?"*, and *"Have bees ever been to space?"*

It is both our hope and the hope of the TVDSB, which generously funded these gardens and virtual field trips, that these schoolyard pollinator gardens will create a place to support and protect pollinators while also providing students with another rich teaching and learning environment as an outdoor classroom.
Contact: Fiona Navickas, Community Education Specialist, or Kim Gilbert, Community Education Technician

St. Marys Sparling Bush Pollinator Garden

Thanks to funding from TD Friends of the Environment Foundation, hundreds of pollinator plants are now growing next to Sparling Bush in St. Marys. Staff from the Town of St. Marys and the UTRCA worked together on the morning of June 4. St. Marys staff prepared the site, which included stripping the sod, bringing in topsoil, tilling, and providing mulch.

Originally, the plan was for local students to participate and get hands on planting experience. The plants were grown at Heeman's Greenhouses and include species such as purple and white coneflower, bergamot, black eyed Susan, butterfly milkweed, coreopsis, and sedum.

The activity generated a lot of interest from passers-by, including Mr. Sparling, the original landowner and farmer who just happened to be visiting the area from out of town. The planting site was once land that Mr. Sparling drove his cattle through, past the bush.
Contact: Karen Pugh, Resource Specialist

Tailgate Lunch!

A number of industry partners are helping to make the UTRCA's new Thorndale Demonstration Farm come to fruition. Contractors are busy installing tile, inlets, and structures for the controlled drainage system. Tony Kime, of Bluewater Pipe, provided a BBQ lunch to keep the workers fed – a gesture that was appreciated by all!

Staff are planning a field day in the fall to showcase the new features installed on the farm.
Contact: Craig Merkley, Conservation Services Specialist

GREEN Leaders Program & Virtual Student Summit

In January, Community Partnerships and Education staff Brad Hertner and Julie Read launched a virtual version of the GREEN Leaders Program. This June, more than 400 students in grade 7 and 8, along with the grade 10 H^{3}ELP class (Head, Heart, Hands Environmental Leaders' Project), completed this program and had the opportunity to become youth environmental leaders and implement sustainable solutions to local environmental issues. Our staff were able to offer this program to students in the TVDSB, thanks to generous funding provided by the school board and Start.ca internet company.

The students met virtually with Brad and Julie biweekly and completed a six-step process that took them from identifying local environmental issues through to taking civic action in their community. Students democratically selected one local environmental issue as a class. This year's issues included deforestation, litter, algal blooms, destruction of animal habitats, invasive species, misuse of storm drains, and water pollution.

Students could engage directly with local stakeholders as they researched their issues. Action Projects included creating education and awareness campaigns and engaging community members through websites, slideshows, posters, painted rocks, sidewalk chalk murals, public service announcements, virtual challenges, and by teaching younger students. Students also participated in media engagement, such as writing newspaper articles and creating social media posts, hashtags, and TikTok videos. Students led on-the-ground actions including litter clean ups, fundraisers, cleaning up a Westminster Ponds buffer zone, implementing waste reduction challenges, and adding PPE boxes in their community where people can safely recycle single-use masks. Lastly, some classes asked for change directly from policy-based stakeholders.

On June 10, the participating classes came together virtually for a Student Summit coordinated by Julie and Brad. The Summit was an opportunity for students to share their Action

Projects and celebrate their successes. During the Summit, students used the interactive platform Flipgrid to watch videos created by the other classes and record their own video feedback, enhancing their engagement and enabling them to connect directly to other GREEN Leaders. The classes also connected virtually with a local stakeholder via Microsoft Teams to get professional feedback on their Action Projects.

We hosted five stakeholder synchronous sessions throughout the day, with Andrea Boyer (London Public Library's Environmentalist in Residence), Leah Derikx (Operations Manager, London Environmental Network), Reta Horin (Parks & Forestry Supervisor, City of Woodstock), Darby Alderson (Administration and Engagement Coordinator, Thames Talbot Land Trust), and Pat Donnelly (Manager, Watershed & Climate Change, City of London).

We also offered video presentations for the students featuring TVDSB Learning Coordinator for Environmental Education Erin Mutch, Start.ca staff, and Earth Force president Vince Meldrum. To inspire and support students in continuing with environmental leadership, we featured a special interview with Youth Environmental Leader Ana Humphrey and provided resources prepared by the H^{3}ELP class outlining how they could engage in environmental leadership when they enter secondary school and beyond.

In the effort to make the Summit as engaging and interactive as possible, we prepared a Google Map with the locations of all participating schools and stakeholders, organized a collaborative art project so students could reflect on their GREEN Leaders experience, asked students to do a sit spot outside to connect to nature, and created a fun Kahoot Quiz.

The Summit was a very successful day of shared learning, connecting and celebrating, which is especially meaningful during these times of remote learning. We would like to express our gratitude to the funders, stakeholders, educators and, especially, the students for making this year's GREEN Leaders Program such a success!

Contact: Julie Read, Community Education Supervisor (Fanshawe)

Supporting Threatened Species

In 2011, the Dale family worked with UTRCA staff to plant an 8 acre prairie on their Norwich Township farm. Within a couple of years, Bobolink, a threatened species in Ontario and Canada, began nesting in the new prairie.

Bobolinks spend much of their time out of sight on the ground feeding on insects and seeds. They seem to appear out of nowhere and may be spotted flying high above the fields or low over the tops of vegetation, singing a bubbling musical song. The Dale family delays cutting their hay until after July 15 to ensure that the Bobolink nesting season is complete.

Barn Swallows, another threatened species, also nest on the Dale family farm. As Chair of the UTRCA Board of Directors, Alan Dale is an inspiration to staff with his leadership in conservation. We thank the Dale family for their efforts!

See photos from the Dale family farm.

Reclaiming Shoreline & Creating Lake Access

Conservation Services and Fanshawe CA staff teamed up to reclaim a section of Fanshawe Reservoir shoreline that was being lost to bank erosion. The erosion was also threatening a roadway used to access campsites, so something had to be done.

Two sections of wooden cribbing were placed along the eroded bank and filled with stone

to secure the bank and protect the roadway. A wooden staircase incorporated into the project will allow campers and other visitors to safely access the shore for better viewing of the lake and to launch their watercraft. The work was completed as part of our ongoing efforts to improve and protect the shoreline for future enjoyment.

Contact: Craig Merkley, Conservation Services Specialist

The one that didn't get away!

Five years ago, the UTRCA's Conservation Services team worked with Fanshawe and Pittock Conservation Areas staff and biology staff to install a series of underwater structures in the two CA reservoirs. Wooden cribs filled with stone were sunk into the lakes at strategic locations to mimic old remnant docks or piers. The structures were designed to provide critical habitat needed for small bait fish which, in turn, would hopefully attract larger predatory fish.

As evidenced by the photo, the underwater habitat is a success! Recreational anglers now catch and release fish that have never been recorded in the area. All of this adds to the experiences offered at our parks.

Contact: Craig Merkley, Conservation Services Specialist

Adding the Finishing Touches

Several trays of wildflower plugs, Big Bluestem plugs, and Serviceberry trees were planted along the north shore of Stratford's Lake Victoria last month. The planting completed the 60 metre long shoreline stabilization project that started in the winter.

The plugs and trees will provide the biodiversity component of the project. The roots add stability to the work in addition to keeping the weeds down. Lake users are already using the new boat launch that was installed as part of the project.

Contact: Craig Merkley, Conservation Services Specialist

Species of the Month: Dame's Rocket

Walking along riverside trails from mid-May to early June, you may notice stands of tall purple flowers. These pretty flowers are often mistaken for phlox but are actually Dame's Rocket (*Hesperis matronalis*), a non-native species.

Dame's Rock is a member of the Mustard Family (Cruciferae or Brassicaceae) and, like all mustards, has four petals (phlox has five). The four petals form a cross or crucifix; hence, the family name Cruciferae. Edible members of the family include arugula (called "rocket" in Europe) and broccoli. The leaves and seeds (sprouted and dried) of Dame's Rocket are edible. Domestic goats love the leaves but deer don't eat it, unfortunately.

The flowers are almost an inch across, and range in colour from deep purple to white. The flowers are very fragrant, especially in the evening, and are insect pollinated. Dame's Rocket is a biennial, which means it blooms in the second year of growth.

Dame's Rocket is an old-fashioned ornamental that was introduced into North America from Europe in the 1600s and, like many other introduced species, escaped from cultivation. Dame's Rocket produces a lot of seed and is an aggressive grower, allowing it to out-compete native plants. It is now common across most of North America in areas of damp soil. In some US states, cultivating this plant is against the law.

Hand pulling can be effective method to get rid of this invasive species, as the roots come out easily from moist soils. Put flowers and seeds in

garbage bags destined for the landfill. Repeat yearly until the seed bank is exhausted and replant the area with native wildflowers.
Contact: Cathy Quinlan, Terrestrial Biologist

On the Agenda

The next UTRCA Board of Directors meeting will be held virtually on June 22, 2021.

- 20 Year Flood Control Capital Plan
- Appointment of B. Dafoe as Officer Pursuant to Section 28 of the CA Act
- Investment Policy Review
- Administration and Enforcement - Section 28 Status Report – Development, Interference with Wetlands and Alterations to Shorelines and Watercourses Regulation (O.Reg157/06)
- Conservation Ontario Submission/ Consultation Guide Comments
- Environmental Targets Progress Report

Please visit the "Board Agendas & Minutes" page at **www.thamesriver.on.ca** for draft agendas, audio/video recordings, and minutes.
Contact: Michelle Viglianti, Administrative Assistant