

Friends of the Spit

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The Toronto Region Conservation Authority
is hosting its annual
Tommy Thompson Park Spring Bird Festival
May 10th from 7 am to 4 pm.
For details for this free event go to www.trca.on.ca
and click on the Events Calendar link at the top

If you have not renewed for the current year, a Renewal Slip is enclosed. Your prompt renewal is always welcome.

If you have renewed, you will find "REN/08" on your mailing label. Non-members who are mailed a newsletter for information will see "COMP" on their label.

NEWSLETTER

APRIL 2008

As an Editorial

Through benign neglect, deliberate neglect, minimal management, and through lack of funds for any "improvements" or "enhancements", the Spit has been able to develop remarkably naturally. Our group's mantra "let it be" has essentially ruled the day, and the natural processes have triumphed!

The Spit is man-made. As such, it has always been managed to some degree or another. In past decades, active management had been used to control and limit the Ring-billed Gull colony size. As well as protecting habitat by management, intervention caused the successful triangle pond vegetation, and created the marsh habitat of Cell One.

Now, in their role as site managers, the TRCA is confronted with a management dilemma: how to maintain and manage an ecologically sound balance between a thriving cormorant colony on the Spit and the preservation of forest canopy habitat. In all these discussions, Friends of the Spit have maintained that the least amount of intervention is the best course. When intervention must occur, where living species are concerned, the only efforts that are acceptable are humane efforts.

Factoids from 2007

Nesting Pairs · 2007 · numbers from TRCA

Common Tern	376
Caspian Tern	-
Great Egret	5
Ring-billed Gull	56,000
Herring Gull	30
Black-crowned Night-Heron	876
Double-crested Cormorants	7,241

(of which 1,500 were ground nests)

Lake Ontario Park planning continues...however, the canal/moat/channel is GONE!!! GONE!!!

At the February 21st Lake Ontario Park stakeholder meeting, Friends of the Spit were greatly cheered to see that WaterfrontToronto and its consultants had removed the canal/channel/moat from the Draft master plan for Lake Ontario Park. As you'll recall from previous newsletters, this channel would have bisected the Baselands from Ashbridges Bay through to the Outer Harbour. The consultants and WaterfrontToronto saw the logic of the arguments presented regarding soil and water quality, jet skis' invasion, and, most of all, accepted the rationale that the Baselands are an Environmentally Significant Area, and are important as they presently exist. Most heartening, the consultants used an image of their Baselands' photographs, with people Photoshopped in: their image might as well have been taken from the photo archives of our members: it showed the Baselands very much as they currently exist. This positive image, reproduced below, helps us to believe that the consultants are indeed understanding the Baselands.

Following that meeting, Friends issued a response titled "The Urban Wilderness Vision —" and submitted it to WaterfrontToronto. Believing that a picture was worth a thousand words, Friends illustrated the Baselands map but deleted an arbitrary circular boardwalk proposed by the designers, reduced the amount of habitat types to those which essentially exist or will evolve, and altered the deeper ponds and discontinuous channels to those of simply wet woods and ephemeral wetlands.

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Composite photo of Baselands photos, with people added by Photoshop;
from Field Operations Lake Ontario Park Stakeholder Advisory Committee Meeting February 21, 2008

Cormorants at the Spit: A success story!

Since their first nestings in 1989 (11 pair) on Peninsula A at the Spit, the colony of Double-crested Cormorants has increased to last year's total of 7,241 nesting pairs on Peninsulas A, B, and C. The trees of these peninsulas have provided excellent habitat: coupled with an abundant food supply of shiners and gobies (introduced fish), the cormorants have thrived.

Double-crested Cormorants are provincially protected. This colony is one of the reasons why the Spit was designated an "Important Bird Area" (IBA).

Cormorant guano is acidic: that, plus the damage caused by their nest material collection, ultimately kills the trees in which they nest. You probably have noticed on Peninsula B that many cormorants (approximately 1,500 pairs in 2007) have turned to ground nesting. Because of the thriving nature of this colony, the Conservation Authority became worried that continued colony expansion would kill more trees on Peninsulas C and D and would totally displace the Black-crowned Night-Heron colony on the Spit (another important colonial waterbird also recognized within the Important Bird Area designation of the Spit). In light of actions taken south of the border against cormorant colonies, the lethal shooting cull at Presqu'ile Park in Ontario, and the proposed cull at Middle Island at Point Pelee National Park, cormorant defenders and enthusiasts were justifiably worried about the nature of management proposed by the Conservation Authority.

To its great credit, the Conservation Authority, in an effort to solicit as wide a range as possible of expertise and opinion about cormorant colonies and how to manage them, hosted two stakeholder meetings, which culminated with a third public meeting early in April. The approaches set on the table ranged from "do nothing" to an ascending series of interventions. Emphatically, the Conservation Authority, and City politicians, have declared that there will be NO shooting of cormorants, i.e. NO lethal cull. The discussions were centred on how to humanely deter cormorants from expanding their colony's physical size and from nesting on Peninsula D, and how to encourage them to ground nest in greater numbers in areas where the trees have already died.

The issue has brought out many passionate opinions and ideas: currently, the TRCA is assessing these and will return with a strategy to attain their goals of maintaining a vibrant colony while also preserving the remaining tree canopy habitat of the Spit.

For years now, Friends of the Spit has actively opposed, by deputation and by letter, lethal culls of cormorants at the Spit, and is very pleased to see the TRCA reiterating its opposition to a lethal cull. Friends of the Spit's position would support the least amount of intervention necessary – passive management would be best – and, only if proven as required, selective active humane management measures, to deter the cormorants from increasing the geographic size of their colony. Friends of the Spit also endorse proposals to educate the public about cormorants, their nature, and their ecology. As this is an ongoing issue, further newsletters will detail progress.

Summer is coming (we hope)

After weathering one of the heaviest snowfall winters on record, Torontonians are ready for a dry warmer walk on the Spit. For those of you who did venture out in the winter, the scenery was fantastic: frozen expanses of snow and white, and on a sunny day, dazzling to the eye. Winter waterfowl were in good numbers, owls were in the woods, and most importantly, the peace and serenity that a long walk brings in a car-free urban wilderness was (and still is) attainable.

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This vision was circulated to the stakeholders, to WaterfrontToronto, to their consultants, and to many others, and has met with very positive feedback. This feedback culminated in a meeting with the consultants and WaterfrontToronto in late March.

Curiously, the consultants, while accepting the Friends of the Spit desire to keep the Baselands as they are, kept mentioning the possibilities of "improve and enhance", raising once again the issues of how much management and change is acceptable versus the amount that will irrevocably alter the character of the Baselands. Rest assured that your representatives will strive to keep the construction and management levels minimal and of the least invasive nature.

A public meeting, the first since January 2007, will be scheduled in June: as soon as we have date, time, and place we'll let you know.

Quotable Quotes

1. Kudos to all our members:

"...even before anything takes place, a strong sense of ownership already exists in the community.

Friends of the Spit, for instance, was formed in 1977. Its members advocate tirelessly for the place, largely unnoticed and unrewarded. It undertakes plant and wildlife inventories, and appears at any number of public meetings making deputations. These are the unsung heroes who have kept bureaucratic interference at bay and fended off endless "improvements."

– Christopher Hume, "Toronto's accidental treasure", The Toronto Star, 13 April 2008.

2. Imagine:

"Come, take a walk. Pick a spot. It's yours. You can keep it forever. Keep your eyes open for a soaring hawk, or a diving duck. Close them and the city disappears.

Then imagine what it could be in another 50 years."

– Greg Smith, "A world away", The Toronto Star, 13 April 2008.

3. Found: poetry:

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

– Gerald Manley Hopkins

(brought to a Tommy Thompson Park Advisory Committee meeting by a committee member)