

Willow Park Ecology Centre: Norval's best-kept secret

Snuggled in a small corner of Halton Hills is a haven for flora and fauna—and humans—stressed by the onslaught of development.

Willow Park Ecology Centre is located on five acres of land in Norval, tucked beside the West Branch of the Credit River (Silver Creek).

"There's a lot of sensitivities in nature," explains Tunde Otto, chair of the Willow Park Steering Committee, a volunteer-based group dedicated to improving the centre. Housing development is endangering the habitats of species as far ranging as frogs and butterflies to trees and wildflowers.

"But we're lucky, this is our chance to give back," she says. For example, some vegetation removed to make way for the Falling Water subdivision was transplanted at the centre.

A former trailer park, Willow Park was expropriated by Credit Valley Conservation after constant flooding. The town leased the land in the late 1990s to develop the ecology centre with the primary goals of outdoor education and passive recreation.

To get to the centre, residents can park in the Norval Park parking lot on Mary St. then walk along the trail to the centre's entrance marked by a kiosk, built by Georgetown High School students. (They also built four of the six benches along the trail system.) The kiosk is currently used for storage but will eventually be used as an information booth. In the mean-

time, look for small wooden boxes at the start of the trail and at other selected spots that contain explanatory guides.

"We're very excited about the education component," says Otto. A "perfect classroom", the centre teaches children and adults "that we're all part of the ecosystem and nature."

Already the centre has joined forces with the two school boards to develop ecology curriculum for elementary school field trips.

Ruth Kuchinad, the centre's co-ordinator, says the kids love the day and often return with their parents. She adds the elementary programs have become so successful the centre hopes to expand it to the high school level as well as translate the curriculum into French.

But, you don't have to be an elementary school student to reap the educational aspects of the centre. Using the guides, residents can learn about the centre's inhabitants and their importance in nature.

Crossing the bridge into the centre, a walker has three options: the Robert Noble Tree Trail on the left, the River Trail on the right or the Main Trail in the centre. (A map is located at this crossroads.)

Taking the Robert Noble Tree Trail, the

walk-er passes through the woodland restoration section where many trees seldom seen any more are thriving. Varieties include butternut, Eastern hemlock, American elm and American chestnut. At the midpoint, stop at the composting demonstration centre set up and managed by Wastewise. Walk on and you pass by the wildflower meadow and come

to the butterfly garden—one of the few public gardens in Ontario to exclusively use wild plant species. At the far end of the trail, a newly-built platform (accessible to wheelchairs and strollers) is perched over a wetland pond. (Look for the giant stone fish.) Wetlands are important because they provide critical breeding and feeding areas for many wildlife including snapping turtles, peeper frogs and birds and mammals.

Nearby is the snake hibernaculum, developed with the expertise of the members of the Halton/North Peel Naturalists Club. This pit in the ground provides a warm dry home for snakes to spend the winter.

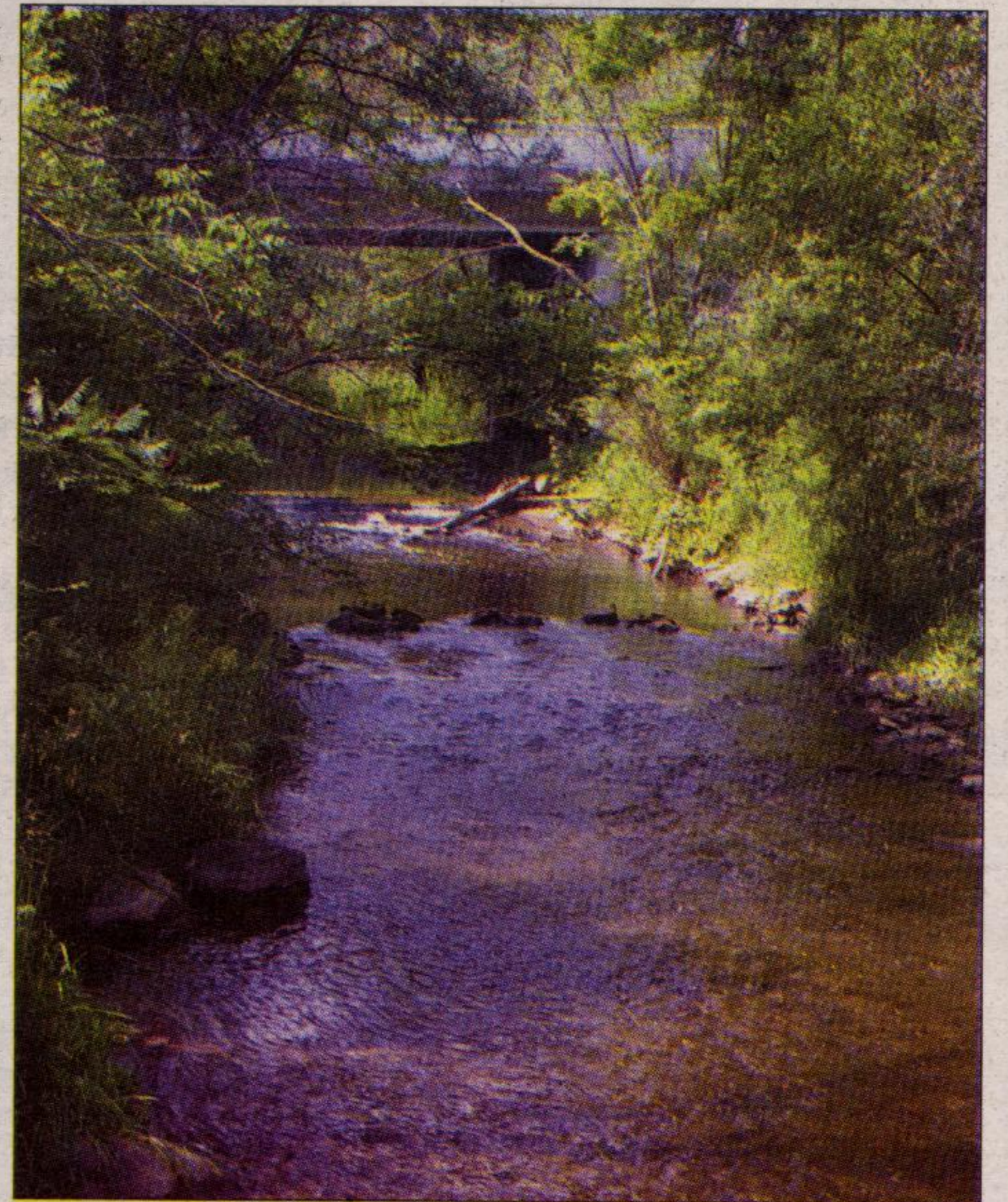
The River Trail follows the west branch of the Credit River and includes rehabilitation works such as wooden lunkers nestled along the bank to give fish a

protective place to rest, especially during spawning.

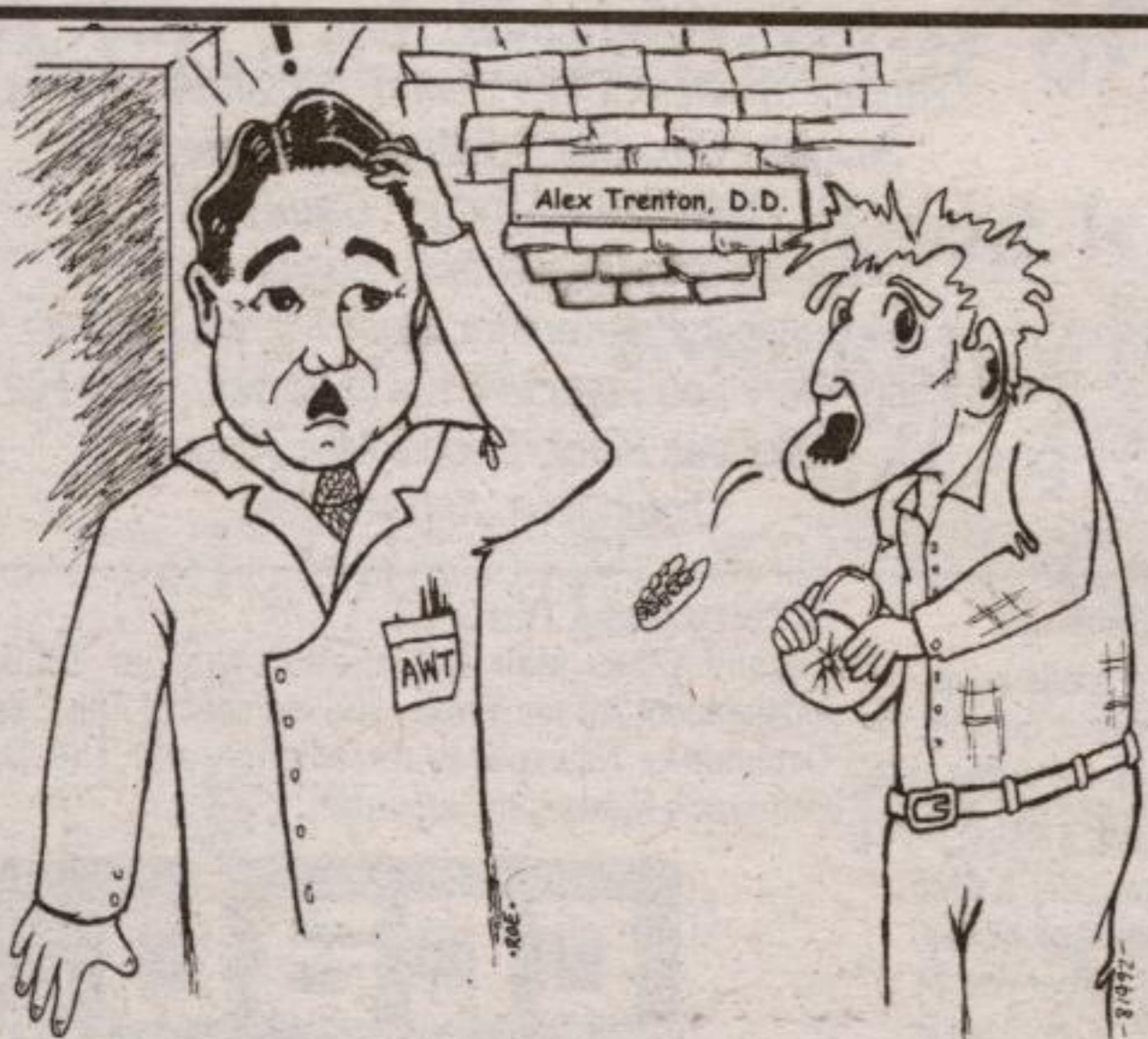
Residents looking for a place to rest themselves can walk along the Main Trail to the Interpretive Centre pavilion. Note that the pavilion is built on a north/south/east/west axis. Ideal for picnics or respite from the weather, it will eventually be ringed by four themed gardens. Future plans for this trail include a weather station to give students the basics in meteorology.

As you walk along also note the bat boxes (the ones with the slits) and bird houses built by the local scout-guide groups. While the homes have yet to attract animals, Kuchinad says that will take time, just as the completion of the centre will take time.

Every Sunday volunteers spend a couple of hours working on the centre. If anyone wants to become involved, give Kuchinad a call at 905-877-3676. And check out the centre's new Web site: www.willowparkecology.com



Story by: Cynthia Gamble,
staff writer
Photos by: Ted Brown



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