

ENVIRONMENT: Under cover of rocks, leaves and water, evidence of a once thriving natural habitat can be seen

ROUGE HISTORY

It's been 100 years since the first settlers started clearing the land, and the Rouge is now battling for survival.

1799: European settlers arrive in the watershed. Over the next century, they clear and farm the fertile lowlands and strip trees off the Oak Ridges Moraine.

1924: 5,000 acres on the moraine are seized and replanted by the Ontario government, forming the York Regional Forest.

1954: Hurricane Hazel hits the area. Floodplains south of the moraine are eventually under control of the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority.

1975: Save the Rouge Valley System forms from a handful of residents.

1990: Ontario Premier David Peterson announces his government will create a 10,500-acre Rouge Park.

The Ontario Liberals pledge to protect the Rouge system all the way to its headwaters in the moraine.

First planting by 10,000 trees for the Rouge Valley takes place in Richmond Hill.

1993: Ontario's New Democratic government promises to enlarge the park to cover 12,000 acres south of Steeles Avenue.

1995: Premier Bob Rae opens the 12,000-acre park and creates the Rouge Park Alliance, a management board for the park.

The alliance starts work on a management plan for Rouge Park North, which will extend along the Rouge and major tributaries Bruce Creek, Berczy Creek, and the Little Rouge as far north as Richmond Hill and Stouffville.

The future park includes Toogood Pond in Markham and the Bruce's Mill and Milne Dam conservation areas.

1998: Environmental groups celebrate when the Ontario Municipal Board orders a 30-metre buffer to protect the Rouge from a Markham subdivision.

1999: The 30-metre ruling is overturned.

Ontario Natural Resources Minister John Slobelen announces the Tory government will add 1,630 acres of provincial land along the Little Rouge and almost 79 acres south of Milne Dam Conservation Area to the park.

The province clears the Rouge Park North Management Plan to move toward completion.

Staff photos by Sjoerd Witteveen and Mike Adler. Aerial photo courtesy of Save the Rouge Valley System.



From left: Lawrence Ignace, of Ontario Streams, uses an Electro Fisher to stun a rainbow trout, and Kim Mandzy, and Anita Bacchus, both of the Little Rouge River Restoration Project, along with conservation officer Mark Heaton, try to land the catch in their nets as they wade in the Little Rouge downstream of the Milne Dam.

Volunteers help fish clear hurdle

BY MIKE HAYAKAWA
Staff Writer

The headwaters of the Rouge River and its tributaries offer plenty of suitable locations for rainbow trout to perform their annual spring spawning rites.

But these migratory fish, which work their way upstream from Lake Ontario, face a major hurdle when attempting to reach these areas.

The Milne Dam, located just south of Hwy. 7 and to the west of Hwy. 48, is 4.5 metres high and fish cannot successfully jump over it. Not helping matters is the absence of fish ladders at the dam site.

To remedy the situation, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, along with members of the Little Rouge Restoration Project and ardent anglers, conducted a manual fish transfer in early April.

This spring's transfer marked the sixth time in seven years the ministry and volunteers assembled at the Milne Dam site to move the fish

With several people electroshocking the waters below the dam in an attempt to temporarily paralyze the fish for capture, ripe females were stripped of eggs that will be reared at the nearby Parkview Golf Club hatchery in Markham and released as fry in the Rouge River watershed in June.

Mark Heaton, a ministry biologist from the Aurora District office, noted that close to 250,000 eggs were collected this year.

Working a five-day stretch for four to five hours a day, the group moved close to 150 fish

over the dam. Last year, Heaton said, some 170 fish were transferred over a six-day period.

Each fish collected was measured and weighed.

Heaton said the fish weighed anywhere from two pounds up to 16. The longest fish was 35.5 inches.

In an effort to monitor their year-round movements, the fish were also tagged with a white spaghetti-type marker. In past transfers, the fish were tagged with different coloured markers to identify a specific year, Heaton said. Of the fish

collected this year, three or four had tags from last year's transfer.

"This shows that the fish will flip over the dam and return to Lake Ontario and can survive."

Once the data was collected, the fish were manually transferred to the dam's upper reservoir where they were released to continue their upstream navigation towards suitable spawning locations.

Although Heaton's original target of moving 200 fish fell short, he felt the transfer was a success. "With our electroshocking below the dam, we were getting larger fish and more different types of species. We were getting pike, perch and big lake-run white suckers."

Heaton is optimistic that a fish ladder will eventually be placed at the Milne Dam. He noted public consultation on this matter is expected to take place this summer, and estimated the cost for such a structure would be in a range of \$200,000 to \$250,000.



Conservation officer Mark Heaton fertilizes fish eggs, captured in a plastic bag by Chris Weidenfelder, by squeezing the belly of the a male rainbow trout.

Croakers provide clues to wetland health

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer

The strange quacking sounds you may hear on warm nights aren't coming from a duck.

Those are amorous frogs calling — wood frogs. And Dan Casselman wants to know where you hear them.

Casselman has 80 people with clipboards out listening for five frog species and the only type of toad believed to belt out breeding calls in the Rouge Watershed.

Volunteers for his amphibian study learn a calling wood frog sounds a lot like a quacking duck. They're mistaken for ducks a lot of the time, Casselman said last Friday at a north Markham marsh.

Experienced frogwatchers know the leopard frog as the sound of a wet hand rubbing a balloon, and the chorus frog as noises like a finger drawing down the edge of a comb.

The differences between calls



LEOPARD FROG

stick in Casselman's ears instantly. "If you spend the 15 minutes listening, (it's) guaranteed you won't mix them up."

But not everyone sent to stand by a wetland on soggy nights or still days is so certain.

After listening to frog calls on cassette, Stouffville frogwatcher Kristina White logged a pair of spring peepers by the pond at Bruce's Mill Conservation Area, a future part of Rouge Park North on

Stouffville Road.

She's pretty sure she heard leopard frogs there, as well. "It's kind of hard to tell," White said.

Amphibians are sensitive to pollution in air and water, so frogs can be like the canary in a coal mine. In a river system besieged increasingly by suburban growth, their rising or falling numbers each year could help measure the watershed's general health.

But until Casselman's two-month survey began April 5, there has never been a proper head count of croakers around the Rouge and its tributaries, wetlands and ponds.

"We used to hear the frogs all the time and it is only rarely now that we hear them," said Lorne Smith, owner of an unclassified wetland in north Markham.

It's the shallow kind of marsh the northern leopard frog likes, but the weather this Friday afternoon is too cold. "Nobody's hearing them calling at night because they haven't



BLUE SALAMANDER

been active," Casselman added.

On a bridge over a flooded field of dogwood, he marks a call code of "0" — not a single frog.

Gerald McKeown of Scarborough, however, had already heard wood frogs and chorus frogs at Smith's marsh. "I just hope we're not the last ones to hear frogs out here," the volunteer said.

Steven Handy of Dixon Hill found the listening duties fun at another spot near his home, but had yet to hear his first frog. "I'm anticipating it. I don't want to go the whole time without hearing one."

Casselman assured him he will. Local frogs will call more as their breeding season heats up, though

green frogs and bullfrogs won't be heard until June or July.

This is the last weekend the study group, a project of the Rouge River Restoration Committee, can conduct a search for salamanders.

The elusive, lungless creatures are hidden in water and muck, and in a few days even their eggs will have hatched into tadpoles indistinguishable from immature frogs.

Casselman's earlier forays to catch red-backed salamanders still in winter hibernation were disappointing. "We have to uncover every rock and every log to find three in one morning."

But on Sunday, one of his volunteers found a species not recorded in the Rouge Valley for eight years. Encircling three submerged branches in a private wetland north of Bethesda Road, close by dozens of heaps of frog eggs, were jellied masses filled with milk-white orbs — the eggs of blue-spotted salamanders.