



Rouge Beare Pit Transformed

By Colin O'Neill

A scarred gravel pit becomes a significant wetland with the help of friends of the Rouge Watershed and City.

A new wetland is taking shape in a former sand and gravel pit. The Beare Wetland, is just a few minutes hike from the Toronto Zoo overpass at Meadowvale Road. To visit the wetland, park near the Rouge Valley Conservation Centre (east of the overpass) and follow the paved road leading east over the Little Rouge River and towards the large hill (the old Beare Landfill). Before you reach the railway, head north on the trail that loops around the wetland.

Between 1965 and 1985, the Beare Landfill received some 10 million tonnes of garbage from the citizens and businesses of Toronto. Now closed and being gradually restored by Friends of the Rouge Watershed and the City of Toronto, the top of the Beare Hill provides a spectacular vista of the Rouge Park all the way from Lake Ontario to the Oak Ridges Moraine. While the landfill was operational, all the soil, sand and gravel was removed from the nearby Beare Pit to spread on the garbage to reduce seagull and vermin foraging, decrease the smell and accelerate decomposition. After the landfill closed, the Beare Pit sat untouched for 17 years. It remained sparsely vegetated because all the soil had been removed, leaving a hard gray impermeable subsoil which was inhospitable for most plants and animals.

In 1998, the charitable group Friends of the Rouge Watershed (FRW) began a partnership with the City of Toronto to restore the Beare Pit. At first we planted trees with some success. However, a local naturalist suggested that the dish-shaped Beare Pit might be better suited to wetland restoration. A few small trial ponds held water and attracted frogs, turtles and birds. Then the City of Toronto assisted FRW to restore the entire site.

Once the ponds were excavated, volunteers joined us to plant thousands of native trees, shrubs and wildflowers. Wetland species were planted around and near the ponds and dry land plants were placed further uphill. Seeds from native wild flowers like black-eyed susan, sweet ox-eye, and bergamot were spread and given time to mature. These efforts were very successful and from there the rest of the six hectare (15 acre) site got a similar treatment. Each year new areas were excavated with equipment and dump trucks of sand and topsoil were brought in to ensure suitable planting conditions.

Over the last seven years, FRW, municipal, provincial and federal government partners, corporate sponsors like Unilever and Toyota Canada and thousands of dedicated volunteers have worked with Mother Nature to convert the Beare Pit from an “empty swimming pool” with little water, plant or animal life, to what could be considered a regionally (or perhaps in a few years, provincially) significant wetland. The wetland is composed of more than thirty ponds. Based on advice from Bob Johnson, an amphibian and turtle expert at the Toronto Zoo, the ponds vary greatly in shape and depth; some are as deep as three meters, and some will only hold 10 cm of water for a few months of the year. The irregular pond shapes maximize productive shoreline habitat and as the water levels change, different niches and microclimates are created.





The plantings involved only native species, many of which were grown locally. There are more than 100 native tree, shrub and wildflower species including, sycamore, arrow-wood, hackberry, dense blazing star, prairie smoke, turtlehead, gentian, fragrant water lily and wild lupine. This diversity of wildflowers and shrubs attracts many interesting butterflies and moths including monarch, viceroy, checkerspot, swallowtail, cecropia and polythemus.

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Trails meander around and through the wetland, and before long you should be able to catch a glimpse of the many species of birds that use the wetland to rest, nest or feed. Some of interesting birds seen include wood duck, eastern bluebird, black duck, trumpeter swan, woodcock, red-winged blackbird, song sparrow, tree swallow, barn swallow, kestrel and meadowlark. Many mammal species also use the site, including mink, muskrat, deer, beaver, fox, coyote, vole and deer mice. In the spring, many species of amphibians and reptiles can be observed or heard at the Beare Wetland including Blandings turtles (a species at risk), red spotted newts, grey tree frogs (FRW’s logo) green frogs, wood frogs, leopard frogs, chorus frogs, painted turtles, garter snakes and milk snakes. There has been no need to artificially re-introduce species to the site near the Rouge - if you build it, they will come. Remnant populations of wetland species from the Rouge Valley are rapidly finding and colonizing the new habitat. However, a few newts, turtles and tadpoles found nearby were transferred to the safe new ponds.

As you walk the trails in the wetland, you will notice man-made habitat structures. The cavity nesting boxes provide homes for swallows, blue birds, kestrels and wood ducks. The countless log piles are there for wildlife to hide beneath or raise a family, sheltered from predators. Several tall cedar posts provide a high hunting vista for hawks and owls in the winter and a great place for male birds to sing in the spring to attract a mate. The ponds and adjacent berms create a diverse topography and a dynamic ecosystem that changes from season to season and day to day depending on the weather. Many ponds hold water all year round, while others dry up (vernal) and are host to fewer aquatic predators and are the home of amphibians with short breeding cycles.

Many people enjoy walks at the Beare Wetland, a wonderful area for naturalists, biologists and nature lovers of all descriptions. FRW invites nature lovers and the broader community, especially those who have never visited this part of the Rouge Park, to come and enjoy it with us. Our wetland work at this site is nearing completion and soon Mother Nature will take over. The grand opening of the Beare Wetland will be in early June 2006.

Since European settlers arrived in the early 1800s, more than 90% of the Rouge’s forests and wetlands have been destroyed. It is our hope that with the creation of the Rouge Park and the restoration of sites like the Beare Wetland, we are beginning a new era in which we as a community will respect, protect and restore the ecological balance upon which all life depends.

You can be a part of future FRW efforts in the Rouge Park. Information about the Beare Wetland Grand Opening Ceremony and Friends of the Rouge Watershed is available on our website www.frw.ca, or you can reach us by phone at 416.208.0252.

