

McLeod Nature Reserve is 'Bio Blitzed' with Land Trust



By Brock Weir

Settling in northeast Richmond Hill, Aurora native Heather McLeod took a piece of Aurora with her.

Planning her garden, she dug up a few ferns from her parents' wooded land and transplanted them to her new place, where they flourish to this day.

Now Heather Emery, it was an emotional experience for her to walk on that land again on Friday.

A portion of her parents' property is now known as the McLeod Wood Nature Reserve. Now under the stewardship of the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust, the property, which on the west side of Leslie Street just south of St. John's Sideroad, was the subject of a 24-hour 'Bio Blitz.'

The Bio Blitz, funded through a grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, sent field experts and a rota of interested volunteers into the bush to do a complete inventory of every species of flora and fauna living in the four-acre reserve.

'The objective is to count every living species on the property,' said Susan Walmer, Executive Director of the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust. 'We have specialists who are botanists, specialists who are forestry guys, specialists who are looking at insects, aquatics and they will take a team of volunteers out with them, teach them, and they will learn as they go.'

'The reason why this property is so unique, and why we chose this land for a Bio Blitz in York Region is it will eventually be completely surrounded by development on three sides, and [Leslie Street] on the other side. What we want to do is determine a baseline of what we have here before everybody all moves in and there is an impact. We have already seen some impact with the adjacent trees coming down and the construction noise, but we still see signs of deer and other wildlife in here.'

When Heather called the land home there foxes, coyotes, and deer running through were part of everyday life. Development has changed things, but there is enough preserved to keep the memories flooding back.

'It was a playground for us as young children,' said Heather. 'We played in the creek and slid down the driveway that had a curve in it, making sort of bobsled runs. We did a lot of walking in here and rode through here, and my father spent hours in here selectively cutting trees to allow new growth to come up, instead of little spindles. This was his little piece of heaven.'

'Back then, you never would have had Bio Blitzes, or things like that, but it was always well preserved. It was a very quiet place and I have a little taste of the woods at home. This is a lovely opportunity to get us all here. This was my father's most treasured piece of

his 275 acres. He told me yesterday that the bush was just like any other crop. It had to be looked after.

?This was his pride and joy. He just didn't want it to be developed and all the trees cut down. I just hope the new neighbours will respect and cherish the bush and be honourable patrons of it. We are very grateful the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust will be the future guardians [of it] for years to come.?

Ensuring the new neighbours in the surrounding developments ?respect and cherish? the bush as it is today is a high priority for the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust. While Ms. Walmer said they are working with the Town of Aurora in finalizing a management plan, dedications under the Federal Eco Gift program lay down the specifics on what can be done on the land. It can only have the trails it currently has on it, she said, and they cannot construct new trails or cut down trees.

?What we're trying to do with our neighbours is some education with people who will be residing here how to be good forest neighbours and they're not traipsing through areas that don't have trails on them so we can protect the habitat for wildlife,? said Ms. Walmer. ?That is our goal.?

Friday's Bio Blitz was attended by MPP Chris Ballard, Mayor Geoff Dawe, and Councillor John Abel, all who welcomed the opportunity to take a look inside the reserve.

?We hear that green space like this is becoming rarer and rarer, especially in this neck of the woods, so to see a beautiful piece of property like this preserved and taken well care of, which it will be with the land trust, is heartening,? said Mr. Ballard.