

Case Woodlot draws volunteers to keep it beautiful with Homegrown Society

Julien Robertson grew up walking the trails of Aurora's forests. It instilled in him a love of nature, one that took him to British Columbia to work as a tree planter.

But, after enduring a spinal cord injury in 2019, he was forced to change fields and came home. Back in Aurora, he rediscovered his love for local nature and, in particular, the wonders of Case Woodlot in Aurora's southwest, near Henderson Drive and Bathurst Street.

"As part of my self-healing, I wanted to share the lessons I have learned in wanting this place to thrive into the future," says Robertson, who does just that through the foundation of The Homegrown Society.

The Homegrown Society, he says, is dedicated to delivering nature-based programs that engage communities in environmental stewardship. They want to deepen the relationship residents have with nature and their place within it, and do all of this through the lens of stewardship.

The initial seeds of The Homegrown Society were sewn on Facebook through a chance post to the Save the Henderson Forest group on Facebook where he asked if any members there would volunteer to help remove spongy moth egg masses from trees within the woodlot.

"A handful of people came out and then, over the course of several weeks into the spring, it kind of snowballed to get more youth to come out and now we have quite a few volunteers," and I think we have had over 170 volunteers come out for our events over the past four years."

When volunteers join up with The Homegrown Society and venture into Case Woodlot there's seldom a shortage of things to do. They root out invasive species like garlic mustard, plant new native species, and hold shoreline cleanups on the various streams and ponds.

Three streams spring out of the ground in this area that converge into the Tannery Creek, he says, which in turn flows into the Holland River and north to Lake Simcoe.

"I like to call it the Henderson Headwaters," says Robertson. "In 2022, we made a really big effort to remove garlic mustard from the eastern trail of Case Woodlot and since that series of events, I can say it works. Volunteer stewardship works and we have had a lot less garlic mustard in the area. This year, we continued with garlic mustard removal, except we're moving to different parts of the forest now. The seeds can stay in the ground for many, many years. It's just a matter of coming out every year, bringing people back to the forest to tend to this place so we can continue to enjoy it."

Ongoing work also includes biodiversity monitoring and brainstorming different events to introduce or refamiliarize people with forest ecology and why it is important to help maintain these environmental features.

"We have the habit of just letting others take care of those spaces," he says. "[For youth] it's a chance to apply lessons they have learned in school and actually see these things in real life. I am remembering a conversation with a volunteer on symbiosis and was able to point out some lichen growing on trees - it's one thing to experience nature through a textbook and it's another to have your hands in the ground, being in the forest, and seeing it firsthand.

"Anyone who wants to learn more about the natural species that exist around them is welcome [to join us]. Obviously there is a benefit to hiking in the woods and being out there, but I think there is a wide variety of interests and desires of why people come out - usually it is people who want to learn about nature and giving back to the community."

Whether you're a seasoned environmentalist or a resident just learning about what many of our local greenspaces like Case Woodlot have to offer, The Homegrown Society will host their next event on August 24.

This hike through Case Woodlot to the adjacent Anne Bartley Smith lands on Aurora's border at Bathurst will take place on August 21 with the intent to ?evolve our understanding of nature beyond our parks and building that understanding of what it means to be a citizen in a watershed. I would like to expand people's thoughts around this a little bit and invite people who are curious to come out and join us on our hike. We'll also definitely have some youth volunteer opportunities through the fall as well.

?Everyone should try to spend time outside if that's accessible to them and to build a relationship with their neighbourhood. When I was injured, I had this idea of nature being far away from home ? it was much too loud and busy in a Town for it to be called nature ? but that's not true. The moment we walk outside we're greeted with all this mix of beings and species around us.?

For more information on The Homegrown Society, including the August 24 hike and their Community Seed Initiative, which is funded in part by Ontario's Invasive Species Action Fund, visit www.homegrownsociety.org.

By Brock Weir