

Environmentalism begins at home for Nature Aurora



By Brock Weir

Having a positive impact on the environment doesn't always have to be a daunting task. In fact, some of the most important steps towards a greener future can begin in your own backyard.

This was the philosophy of the founding members of Aurora's Environmental Advisory Committee when it was formed just over 10 years ago, and it is a mandate which lives on through these members in Nature Aurora, a group of volunteer citizen scientists working on conservation projects right here in Aurora.

Now, after wild successes on local environmental projects ranging ground breaking work on the ecological impacts of stormwater ponds, to a complete inventory of all the breeding birds in Aurora, to laying the foundations of getting schools across Ontario to maintain and monitor bird nesting boxes, Nature Aurora is looking for your help on taking things to the next level.

This Saturday, March 4, Nature Aurora is holding a volunteer open house for people who 'love all things wild' and are interested in learning how to become 'citizen scientists.' Open from 2.30 ? 5 p.m. at the Aurora Seniors' Centre, this is an opportunity to find out how to become involved in monitoring and maintaining bird boxes, monitoring chimney swifts, surveying frogs, toads and owls in Aurora, and spearheading an inventory of the local mammal population.

'We want to expand,' says founding member David Tomlinson, the noted landscape architect behind the Ivy Jay Nature Preserve.

'We have the breeding birds and have almost mapped the frogs, amphibians, and reptiles, but we need to do the mammal population and insects. We need to start recruiting people. In the Nature Reserve, we have a complete record of every pair of birds that has nested there for 16 years, and how they have increased and decreased as development has progressed. [When we have complete data on what is happening] we have a base on what the effects are. It is critical because it is no good just improving things if you don't know whether you are or not. Aurora has an amazing base, but if not for our effort it would not be there.'

Nancee Webb has always had a love for nature close to home. Growing up with a mother she describes as a 'backyard birder' there is nothing more beautiful, she says, than birdsong.

'Being green and being environmentally conscious and a friend of nature starts in your own backyard and your own town,' she says, of why she joined the Environmental Advisory Committee and Nature Aurora. 'This is the way people can do it. Rather than the big picture, let's concentrate on the small. If everyone was to concentrate on their own town, there would be a lot of benefit.'

Volunteering with Nature Aurora is open to everyone. If you're a high school student looking for community service opportunities, this counts. If you are a citizen at large with a special skillset or interest, that is beneficial too. The most important thing, Tomlinson and Webb agree, is a passion and a willingness to help.

'Nearly everyone who comes out doesn't know what a tree swallow looks like, but we train them to do what we need done, and it would be great if we had people who were interested in mammals, snakes or butterflies to join us and pass that expertise onto us,' says Mr. Tomlinson. 'People understand that nature is in trouble. I think most people who have an interest in it realise that and, those who do not don't give a damn anyway. I don't think the ones who know there is a problem know how they can deal with it. 'One of the ways they can deal with it is on the local level and ensure they look after the birds on their own patch. If everyone did

that, it would greatly improve things. It is not just writing to your Member of Parliament, it is physical. If we didn't put those nesting boxes up, there would be 2,000 less swallows flying around.

?If people realise they are actually doing something that is practical, useful and not just wandering around admiring nature, they are dedicate when they get home and that is amazing. I am amazed at how they just get on with it and do it on their own when no one polices them ? and all they have to do is send the data into us.?

For more information, visit www.natureaurora.ca.