

Get out and explore as Regional Forest celebrates 100th anniversary

There are wooded wonderlands around us just waiting to be discovered ? and there's no better time to do it as York Regional Forests marks the 100th anniversary of its foundation.

Now boasting over 22 tracts of forests in five of York Region's nine municipalities, the first tract, the Hollidge tract in Ballantrae, was formally planted and designated in 1924 ? and, 100 years on, it's a community success story worth celebrating.

?The 100th anniversary presents a great opportunity to spread the message to more residents in the area that the forest exists and all the great benefits it provides by going outside and spending time in nature,? says James Lane, Manager, Natural Heritage and Forestry Services for the Region of York.

The celebration kicked off with a video recently presented at Regional Council, but, as 2024 rolls out, so too will a number of initiatives designed to mark the anniversary in a fun way.

?We purchased a property in 2019 in East Gwillimbury and we decided to name that property the Centennial Tract,? says Lane. ?It's a bit of an enduring legacy for our 100th anniversary and we're actually doing a public tree planting on that property in the spring that residents can participate in. We're also launching a photo contest [this week] for people to take their favourite photos in the Regional Forests and submit them ? the top photos will be selected and there will be prizes for them.

?We're also developing and launching an adventure challenge which will really encourage residents to get out and visit one of the 22 tracts of forestry that are open to the public. We've designed a patch unique to each tract and residents will be able to visit those and later get those patches. It encourages residents to get out onto the various tracts [and] see what they have to offer.?

One of the tracts of particular interest, says Lane, is the Nobleton Tract in King Township, which is one of the newer properties purchased in the last 15 years. It boasts a tall grass prairie ecosystem the Region has been working to restore.

?In 2023, we opened up an accessible trail that travels through that tall grass prairie,? says Lane. ?It's an opportunity for residents to go out; we always say go out and visit the forests and visit the different habitat types. It's fully accessible and it's a tract that's fairly new, so we're hoping to get residents out there. Likewise in King Township, there's the Happy Valley tract which actually goes through some of the oldest or the largest in-tact hardwood forests in York Region. There are other tracts like the Zephyr tract up in East Gwillimbury which has a really unique cultural heritage. It's bisected by a historic rail line that used to exist, so there is some neat history there.?

York Region's forests are open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year and there is no charge to access the forest.

Most people use the forest for walking and passive recreation like hiking, says Lane, and perhaps unsurprisingly has been an enduring hit with dog walkers and horseback riders. Some areas, like Brown Hill, are particularly suitable for mountain biking, he adds.

As much as a 100th anniversary is a time to look back, it's also a chance to look forward.

One of the goals of Lane's department for the Forests is to continue to preserve their ecological features and promote their use by residents.

?We want residents to experience nature,? he says. ?There are so many positive benefits in terms of your physical health and your mental health by spending time in nature. There is such a strong connection between human health and the natural environment and we want to get that message out there and see all residents get out.

?The Region, through its Greening Strategy, continues to add land to the Regional Forests. Regional Council approved the acquisition of another property in Georgina and we're hoping to finalize the purchase of that property in the next couple of months to add to the forest. That is something we will continue to do. As our population grows, maintaining access to greenspace is extremely important so I think we will see the forest continue to grow in the future.?

For more on the 100th Anniversary of the York Region Forests including locations, uses, and programs, events and celebrations associated with the Centennial, visit www.york.ca/newsroom/campaigns-projects/celebrating-100-years-york-regional-forest.

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