

Oasis of nature deserves new status

By Caroline Schultz

Rouge Park, North America's largest urban park and a sanctuary for plants, animals and people, may become a national park if Ontario Nature and other groups have their say. That designation would confer greater protection on this oasis of nature located at the east end of Toronto.

The provincial government first announced the creation of Rouge Park in 1990 in response to the lobbying efforts of local communities and environmental groups. Expanded twice since, the 4,700-hectare park is nearly the size of Point Pelee, St. Lawrence Islands and Georgian Bay Islands national parks combined. It acts as a classroom, a recreation area and a refuge for the communities around the park and beyond.

Despite its urban location, Rouge Park supports a surprising abundance of wildlife: 762 plant species, 225 bird species, 55 fish species, 27 mammals and 19 reptiles and amphibians. More than 100 nationally and regionally rare species and 19 species at risk inhabit the area. The park encompasses a variety of ecosystems, including regionally and provincially significant wetlands, the land surrounding the Rouge River and the Petticoat Creek and Duffins Creek watersheds.

The Rouge Park Alliance is the advisory body that oversees the protection and management of Rouge Park. The 15-member alliance board recently took the ambitious step of unanimously supporting a proposal to establish a national park.

Should this unusually large urban wilderness park gain status as a national park, it would offer exciting opportunities to implement innovative approaches to conserving and enhancing biodiversity through environmentally friendly farming practices, restoration and stewardship. It would also invigorate efforts to expand the park to create a more robust protected landscape that would link the shores of Lake Ontario to the Oak Ridges Moraine. The park and new linkages would facilitate the movement of wildlife across green spaces, an adaptation to a changing climate. Moreover, national park status would facilitate greater accessibility and deepen connections between surrounding multicultural communities and Carolinian forests – Canada's most endangered ecozone.

The people and communities that fought and worked so hard to establish Rouge Park have created a legacy for future generations. The next logical step being asked of Parks Canada is to build on this legacy by including the park in our country's national parks system to ensure the best possible protection for the park into the future.