



Nature in Como Park

Spring 2008 Educational Field Day at the Como Woodland

By **DEB ROBINSON**

Spring into summer from May to July – Field Day birding

Summertime had come to Como Park. The last light of a long summer day is brushing the treetops with a warm glow. American robins were singing their evening songs while swallows swooped and dove after swarms of flying insects. A concert band had just finishing up its last set at the Como Lakeside Pavilion with “Stars and Strips” accompanied by the audience clapping in time. A slight breeze was pushing off the heat and the cares of the day – that’s how I remembered the spring of 2008



Many of the nesting birds have fledged their first brood by early July. Their frenetic spring migrations and territorial displays have long simmered down to the serious business of feeding their recent fledglings and starting a second clutch of eggs. Summer is in full swing while the spring season fades into memory.

And what a cool, wet spring it was. The benefits of the long spring were the lilac and crab apple tree blooms lasted forever, lawns and leaves grew lush from amble rain, and the sightings of migrating birds were plentiful because of the extended

winter-like conditions further north (keeping the birds in the city as they waited for better weather).

On May 23 at the Spring Field Day, 82 Como Park Senior High School students and local volunteer mentors returned to the Como Woodland off Horton Avenue and east of Hamline Avenue. This 17.75-acre urban woodland was disused for decades, but it has recently received the attentions of local students, volunteers, and EcoPartners. The volunteers’ ultimate plans are to restore the woodland with native plants, build a few low-impact trails, and use the area as an outdoor classroom.

Under the careful supervision of environmental science teacher, Josh Leonard, the high school students have been monitoring 14 study plots in the woodland since the Fall Field Day last October. On the Spring Field Day this May, the students returned to their study plots again to identify species and densities of trees, forbs, lichen colonies, and earthworms. This is a long-term study, and the data the students collect will be used to monitor changes in the woodland during the restoration process. On this field day a new element was added – a bird survey. And the number of bird species sighted that morning was a pleasant surprise . . . at least to me.

St. Paul Audubon Society member, Chase Davies recruited and coordinated a bevy of top-notch birders to serve as tour leaders. Joan McKearnen, Holly Peirson, Clay Christensen, Bill Stjern, and Chase Davies divided the large, lively bunch into smaller groups, gave the 52 teenagers quick lessons in birding basics and binocular use, and started out into the woods for a 2-hour bird survey.

Between 8:30am and 11am, 42 species of birds were seen in this small woodland. There were plenty of warblers that had dropped into the woods to rest and feed before continuing on their spring migration. American redstarts, blackpoll warblers, orange-crowned warblers, and a stunningly colorful Blackburnian warbler were just a few species added to the list that morning. Three species each of flycatchers, vireos, and woodpeckers as well as an imposing-looking Cooper's hawk were also counted. Ten indigo buntings were sighted.

The birding experts on hand predicted that many of the buntings would set up territories and attempt to nest in the Como Woodland. However, an impediment to the buntings' nesting success was also spotted in the woodland (and all around Como Park). The second most frequently sighted bird species that morning was the brown-headed cowbird. Cowbirds are brood parasites, which means they do not build their own nests nor do they take any part in the raising of their own young; they simply lay their eggs in the nests of other birds and skip out.



On June 27, I saw an adult chipping sparrow being closely followed by three begging cowbird fledglings. The adult foster parent was small compared to the larger, demanding fledgling that he was feeding. Three different adult female cowbirds must have laid one egg each in this chipping sparrow's nest. I didn't see a chipping sparrow fledgling following with the cowbird fledglings, so it appears that this adult chipping sparrow's own young did not survive the competition for food with the cowbird young.

American robins and gray catbirds recognize cowbird eggs when they see them in their nests; they puncture the intruder's eggs and give them the heave-ho. Neither the indigo buntings nor the chipping sparrows have learned that trick yet, so they raise the cowbirds as if they were their own offspring.

It was a wonder to have seen so many birds on that May morning – especially considering that we had 52 not-so-stealthy teenagers walking in the woods. Field days are about education, but, hopefully, there will also be natural encounters that inspire stewardship.

On that fine spring morning, my inspiration came as a scarlet tanager. I saw a flash of flame red with velvet black wings in the treetops near the clearing around the Joyce Kilmer Fireplace. The tanager sat in the full sun just long enough to be counted before disappearing into the forest canopy.

By the time the Fall Field Day on September 19 rolls around, the scarlet tanager will have changed into his winter colors of olive and yellow. Hopefully the male we saw this spring will stop to rest again in the Como Woodland on his return migration. Then he will fly south across the open-water of the Gulf of

Mexico to the forests of South America, and, with luck, return to be counted next spring.

*To contact this writer: dmrobinson@bitstream.net

Illustration by Deb Robinson

Spring Field Day Photo by Matt Schmitt