Section 4: Birds / Turtles

Tree Swallows

As we exit the forest and enter the open area, let's explore Colonel Samuel Smith Park's significance for birdlife. According to eBird, a citizen science project that compiles bird tracking data, approximately 300 species of birds have been recorded at Colonel Samuel Smith Park at the time of this recording, making it a premier birdwatching destination, second only to Tommy Thompson Park in Toronto.

As we cross the road, we will enter a stretch of field known as swallow field. Here, you'll notice nest boxes managed by the dedicated volunteers of Friends of Sam Smith Park or FOSS for short. These volunteers are tireless advocates for conservation, focusing on preserving the park's natural flora and fauna. Each spring, FOSS volunteers clean, repair, and sterilize these nest boxes to prepare them for the arrival of tree swallows.

Tree swallows migrate from the southern United States and Central America to breed here in Ontario. They prefer nesting in cavities within trees, often created by woodpeckers, but as old trees are removed, suitable nesting spots have become scarcer. The nest boxes provide a vital substitute, helping to sustain the local population of these stunning birds.

Tree swallows are easily recognizable by their dark blue iridescent backs and white fronts. They primarily feed on flying insects, which they skillfully capture mid-air with their agile flight maneuvers.

Red-necked Grebes

As we continue towards the water, specifically the marina area, I'd like to draw your attention to another fascinating bird and conservation project led by FOSS. In the water of the marina are floating nest platforms designed specifically for Red-necked Grebes. These platforms provide a safe and accessible place for these birds to nest during the Spring breeding season.

Red-necked Grebes are distinctive with their yellow bills, pale white cheeks, and reddish necks during breeding. They primarily feed on fish and crustaceans, diving into the water to capture their prey. One intriguing behavior of grebes, including the Red-necked Grebe, is the ingestion of feathers. The purpose behind this feather consumption is not fully understood, but it's hypothesized to protect their digestive tracts from sharp bones and other indigestible materials. They also feed these feathers to their young as a part of their parenting behavior.

Whimbrels

As we proceed along this path, we'll take a left at the next intersection and then another left towards the parking lot. If we were to continue along the spit, we would arrive at Whimbrel Point, renowned as the best location in Ontario to observe Whimbrels. These large shorebirds pass directly over Colonel Samuel Smith Park on their annual migration to their breeding grounds in Hudson's Bay. You can often hear their distinctive calls before spotting them.

Whimbrels are characterized by their size and their long, curved beaks. The population that migrates over this area, typically flies non-stop for about 10 hours from the East Coast of the United States, arriving at Whimbrel Point in the morning. While they historically flew straight over, recent observations indicate they have started to land and rest. This shift has prompted volunteers not only to count their numbers but also to start focusing on protecting these birds during their critical migration period.

Burdock

One important conservation project in the area involves the removal of burdock and the planting of native shrubs like chokeberry or gray dogwood. Burdock, an invasive species, produces burs that can get easily caught in the feathers of birds, potentially causing them to become entangled and unable to fly, which can be fatal.

Throughout the year, efforts are made to remove burdock and replant native shrubs. This initiative is typically a collaboration between the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority and the City of Toronto. These plantings aim to restore natural habitats by replacing invasive species with native plants that provide food and shelter for local wildlife, contributing to the overall health and biodiversity of Colonel Samuel Smith Park and its surroundings.

Continue through the parking lot until you reach the path in the southeast corner.

Turtles and Wetland

As we continue towards the North Creek Wetland, you may notice wooden nest protectors scattered on the ground. These protectors are crucial for safeguarding turtle

eggs during their critical hatching period. This conservation effort is a partnership between FOSS and Turtle Protectors at High Park Nature Centre, an Indigenous-guided stewardship program.

Colonel Samuel Smith Park is home to a few turtle species. The snapping turtle, with its prehistoric appearance is the largest freshwater turtle in Canada, capable of living 30-40 years. Painted turtles, characterized by red and yellow stripes on their head and neck, often bask along the park's shoreline. One intriguing difference between these species is their egg survival strategy: snapping turtle eggs cannot withstand freezing temperatures and must hatch before winter, whereas painted turtle eggs can freeze solid and survive to hatch in the spring.

You might also encounter pond sliders, though they are not native to Ontario and are often released from home aquariums into park environments. These turtles have yellow stripes on their limbs and heads, as well as a red or orange band around their eyes.

As we approach the wetland viewing area, located straight past the Turtle Sign, I encourage you to take a moment to reflect on the diverse ecology that thrives in this park, supported by ongoing conservation efforts and community partnerships.