

Celebrating the Nature of the Bronx

In 1899 my grandmother left Romania at the age of 13 and moved to New York City's Lower East Side. Two years later her family moved from the tenements of the Lower East Side to the Bronx, which she told me was like moving to a garden. "It was so beautiful – trees, flowers, and parks everywhere!"

For over 100 years, the Bronx has certainly had its ups and downs. For decades a picture of a garden was the farthest from anyone's mind when conjuring up images of the Bronx. Yet lately that image is starting to once again be filled with visions of gardens, vast city parks filled with bird song, rivers and streams, deep woods and flowering meadows. An example of this rejuvenation can be seen on the Bronx River, which is now the home of an American beaver, an animal that, like the Bronx, once faced tremendous odds of ever thriving again.

The Bronx is built atop the oldest bedrock of New York City: Fordham gneiss. This light and dark banded rock was formed in the Earth over one billion years ago. Hornblend or biotite mica often gives color to the dark bands, and quartz and feldspar make up the light bands of minerals. Gneiss forms the ridge in Riverdale and the high rocky ridge in the Fordham, Tremont, and University Heights sections of the Bronx. Large outcrops of Fordham gneiss can be seen throughout Van Cortlandt Park and the New York Botanical Garden. These outcrops, worn and polished by glaciers, wind, and water, were once the tops of massive mountains. The gneiss ridges and, for most of their length, the Hudson, Harlem, the Bronx and East Rivers, all flow in a north-south

direction. Due to these ridges, many of the great parks of the Bronx are on land that was too steep and rocky for easy development and were, thankfully, preserved as parks.

As the glaciers moved through the area over 17,000 years ago, they carried and deposited immense boulders, known as erratics, throughout the Bronx. One of those, a massive granite boulder known as Split Rock, has a rich place in early American history. Another important erratic is the massive boulder that sits on the shore of Long Island Sound in Pelham Bay Park. Known as the Gray Mare, this boulder was sacred to the Siwanoy, a group of local Lenape Indians, who believed that the giant rock had been placed along the shore by their spiritual guardian.

Photos in *Surprisingly Natural* depict the wonderful changes taking place in the Bronx. With the Hudson River running along its western shores and the Harlem River and Long Island Sound lapping its southern and eastern shores, the Bronx has hundreds of community gardens, two major parks – Pelham Bay Park and Van Cortlandt Park – many smaller parks such as the Bronx River Park, Crotona Park and Riverdale Park, and two internationally renowned institutions that research and present the flora and fauna of the world: the Bronx Zoo, run by the Wildlife Conservation Society, and the New York Botanical Garden.

Throughout the decades of the 1960's and 1970's, when the Bronx was ravaged by economic and social devastation, abandoned lots filled with garbage and wreckage dotted the borough. Community activists worked to reclaim these lots and turn them into community gardens. With the help of organizations like The Bronx Land Trust, Bronx Green-Up, the New York Botanical Garden, Wave Hill, and the Green Guerillas, community gardeners have learned how to turn a rubble-filled empty lot into a gorgeous,

color-filled, sweet-smelling, shady garden. Working together to create these oases of peace and beauty helped the people of the Bronx come together to effect other positive changes that led to rebuilding entire communities.

2009 is the centennial of the Grand Concourse. Modeled after the Champs Elysées in Paris, The Grand Boulevard and Concourse was originally designed in the 1870's as a scenic pathway to connect Central Park to the great parks of the Bronx. Although this connection was not made, it does lead to the Mosholu Parkway, which links to Van Cortlandt Park, the New York Botanical Garden, Lehman College, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, the Bronx Zoo, Pelham Parkway and Pelham Bay Park. The revival of this historic boulevard is now part of the renaissance of the Bronx.

The waterways surrounding the Bronx are going through a revival as well. The Hudson has always been part of the life of the people of the Bronx who live near its shore. Looking at it every day gives us so much: beauty, peace, and a sense of wonder. 2009 is the Quadacentennial of Henry Hudson's maiden voyage up the river that would be named for him. Since the Clean Water Act of the 1970's, and the building of the North River Sewage Treatment Plant along the Westside Highway in the 1990's, the River has become clean and healthy for our native fish. Sturgeon, striped bass, white perch and American shad are once again migrating into and out of the Hudson each year. New Yorkers can swim in its waters.

Community activists, institutions and agencies, including Lehman College, the New York City Parks Department, and the Bronx River Alliance, have worked for over 30 years to reclaim the beautiful Bronx River and turn it into an active recreation area, and an outdoor classroom for students from the Bronx River Art Center. The river is now

home to an American beaver, an aquatic mammal that is on the Seal of the City of New York, but has not been seen in the city for over 200 years.

The beaver is not the only unexpected and magical animal living once again in the Bronx. Bees pollinate Bronx flowers in the Genesis Community Garden behind St. Augustine's Catholic Church, 167th Street and Franklin Avenue in the South Bronx. Beekeeper and St. Augustine choir director Roger Repohl not only tends his beehives, but also teaches children about the ecological relationship between flowering plants and pollinating animals. The taste of the bees' honey varies with the type of flower blooming in the Genesis Garden. In June the bees make honey from the heavenly-smelling linden tree flowers, and in July wild clover plants are the source of the sweet honey. The bees, Mr. Repohl, and the community garden provide local children and their families with beauty, knowledge, and delicious honey for food and for thought. He also leads beekeeping programs at Wave Hill.

Noted for its 28 acres of beautiful gardens, outstanding tree collection and spectacular views of the Hudson River and the Palisades, Wave Hill boasts a mansion that has been lived in by such historical figures as Teddy Roosevelt when he was a child, Mark Twain, and Arturo Toscanini. Now a public garden and cultural center, Wave Hill is a beloved place of peace and tranquility for many New Yorkers who enjoy the gardens and programs.

Another place to find amazing trees is the beautiful Woodlawn Cemetery at Webster Avenue and E. 233rd Street, a burial place for important American writers, musicians, actors, politicians, industrialists, and athletes such as Duke Ellington, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, Robert Moses, Miles Davis, Irving Berlin, Gertrude Ederle, Herman

Melville, Frank Winfield Woolworth, Joseph Pulitzer, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Woodlawn's grounds hold five of the city's "Great Trees": a weeping beech, silver linden, white pine, European cut leaf beech, and an umbrella pine. The New York Botanical Garden is known for its specimen trees, as is Van Cortlandt Park, where, along Broadway and 251st Street, you will see a line of large pin oaks near the border of the parade ground and the park. The trees of the Bronx support a wide diversity of wildlife, including a nesting pair of Great Horned Owls who make the forest of Pelham Bay Park their home.

The people of the Bronx have a lot to celebrate this year. The natural world is doing surprisingly well in this large and diverse borough. Its rivers, sound, parks, community gardens and educational institutions provide all New Yorkers with beauty, knowledge and outdoor recreation. Swim in the Long Island Sound off Orchard Beach; canoe down the Bronx River; bird-watch in Crotona Park or butterfly-watch in Van Cortlandt Park. Hike through the woods of Pelham Bay Park and watch for the nesting pair of Great Horned Owls. Surprisingly natural, nature is happening all over the Bronx!

- Leslie Day

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