



Oak Park's Outdoor Nature Museum: Austin Gardens

by Joyce Marshall Brukoff

Ray Pawley (left), curator of birds at Brookfield Zoo, and Dominick Meo, director of the Oak Park-River Forest Community Chest, make friends with a feathered resident (Muscovy duck) of Austin Gardens.

Preservation of plants and animals in a natural setting becomes akin to the preservation of artifacts in a museum when we watch the environment of many species crumbling before the encroaching machinery of civilization. With this in mind, the efforts of governmental, civic, and private agencies become vital to the survival of many species through

preserves and covenants instituted to protect some of the remaining wild areas supportive of life other than human.

Many of the larger preserves have been given well-deserved publicity, and the various organizations working to save our wilderness have received increased public and government support. Less noticeable and often unheeded are the smaller battles waged in urban and country locations to save postage-stamp remnants of nature. Some of these efforts should be counted as larger in importance than their physical limitations im-

ply, serving as they often do a segment of urban population and land which is starved for the blue of a delicate mertenstia blossom or the flashing wing of a purple martin.

One such project is Austin Gardens of Oak Park, a suburb on the western edge of Chicago. Located in the heart of town, at the juncture of Forest and Ontario Streets, Austin Gardens is a wooded sanctuary for plants, land birds, and waterfowl which are largely indigenous to the original Illinois prairie. How Austin Gardens came to be is the story

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of one town and its concerned citizens. Their concerted effort to create their own nature preserve was completely unsubsidized by state or federal moneys, and was formed without the aid of any large conservation organizations.

The square block area was originally bequeathed to Oak Park's Park District by the late Henry Austin, with funds for partial development made available through a trust fund. Instead of developing as a typical urban park with flower beds and large tracts of grass, the park evolved as a wildflower patch and, later, into a bird sanctuary. Now a waterfowl pond is being created under the guidance of Dominick Meo, director of the Oak Park-River Forest Community Chest, and Ray Pawley, curator of birds at Brookfield Zoo.

Meo, who contributes hours of volunteer time to the project, originally drew the interest of the park board when he outlined his plans for building bird shelters to protect as many as fifteen different species of birds during the winter. The wildflower area was already growing from a modest beginning in

1970, when Elizabeth Walsh and Julia Sears of the Oak Park League of Women Voters spearheaded the effort.

Agreement with the park district was achieved, and it assumed responsibility for development of a nature study program. Everything else was derived from the time and money of volunteers. The garden's wildflowers began with a few plants in 1970. Water was brought in plastic jugs from various ladies' homes to sustain the delicate group of plantings until they gained a foothold over Eurasian weeds.

Now, more than 100 varieties of wildflowers and ferns may be seen in Austin Gardens from early spring through November. They include: mertensia, red and white trillium, swamp buttercup, wild phlox, bellwort, celandine poppies, shooting star, spotted dead nettle, bloodroot, white baneberry, hepatica, dentaria, ginger, and many more. A "flower watcher" would have to travel hundreds of miles to see the numerous species that have been gathered together in this square city block.

The bird and waterfowl sanctuary

took more than earthly toil from a group of devoted ladies. Local architects contributed plans. Funds were raised locally to cover the entire cost of construction and maintenance, which responsibility rested completely outside the sphere of local government. A local artist created a bird poster and a patch which was sold by everybody from the Boy Scouts to the Rotarians; even local banks had donation boxes to attract contributions. In 1972, the first bird house was run up on a 25-foot pole, and Governor Ogilvie stopped by to officially open the gardens. *National Geographic* magazine took note of the effort in a special editorial for children, and publicity grew as the plan developed.

Meo, the man who started it all, commented, "It may be less than a block in size, but it seems much bigger when you have watched the people of this town work so very hard to implement the plan for a working nature preserve at Austin Gardens. We are all very proud."

And well they should be proud. According to Ray Pawley, the following ►

Elizabeth Walsh (left) and Julia Sears Babooska tend Austin Garden's expansive carpet of wildflowers.



birds have been seen in appreciable numbers at Austin Gardens during the first few seasons: resident birds—mourning dove, cardinal, bluejay, crow, black-capped chickadee, nuthatch, starling, rock dove, tufted titmouse, woodpecker, goldfinch, white-throated and Henslow's sparrow; of nonresidents—cuckoo, night-hawk, ruby-throated hummingbird, wren, brown thrasher, thrush, robin, cedar wax-wing, red-winged blackbird, Baltimore oriole, tanager, purple martin, owl, red-start, cowbird, and junco. The various genera have not been broken down into specific forms in most cases, because of the indefinite locality status of many groups. Therefore, the list is a conservative one, which includes numerous species within several of the above-named families, such as warbler, thrush, and sparrow.

The pond was completed in December, 1974. The water is constantly moving around a small island, and the area is surrounded by a solid redwood fence, broken in a few spots with wrought iron framed viewing areas. A feeder on the

island is stocked with food twice a week. For the twelve mallard ducks which pilot the project, this is 65 pounds of food each time the feeder is stocked.

According to Pawley, the mallard ducks were placed in the pond area first in order to establish the pond and lure other waterfowl to Austin Gardens. "The park lies along a heavy migratory path," he said, "and we anticipate attracting the more shy Canada geese when the mallards have become established." Pawley has been working with Meo and others on a voluntary basis for the past three years, aided in the bird feeder project by local ornithologist Isobel Wasson.

"We expect the pond to take a while to catch on with geese," he continued. "At present, no domestic species normally are resident in the area. Canada geese are more hesitant than the mallards in accepting a new locale. They have a greater problem in landing and lifting off in a water area and are generally much more conservative in their behavior patterns."

The location of the sanctuary is unique, just half a block from busy Lake Street and right next to the giant new Village Mall shopping center, which opened in November. Landscaping has been creatively designed to buffer the park from these activity areas. Children and adults attend nature study programs developed by the park district in a pool of quiet that seems miles away from the center of town.

Certainly this is an admirable illustration of creative and dedicated planning which changed what might have been just another urban green space into a shaded sanctuary for animals, plants—and humans. The environment in the shadows of our cities needs to be as thoughtfully cared for as does the stretch of Sierra wilderness. There is a simple lesson to be learned here. If each community of similar size in the United States were to establish its own "postage-stamp" wildlife haven, the total outlook for many plant and animal species that now seem threatened, could be much improved. □

Edward E. Ayer Illustrated Lecture Series

The theme for this season's Friday and Saturday Ayer illustrated lecture series is "Expeditions Unlimited 1974-75." Field Museum curators will present slides or films to illustrate their presentations. The Friday programs will begin at 7:30 p.m.; the Saturday programs will begin at 2:30 p.m. All programs will be given in the ground floor lecture hall. Attendance—which is free—is limited to 225 persons. To accommodate those who attend Friday evening programs the cafeteria will remain open on those dates until 7:30. Reservations are not necessary.



February 21, 22 **"The Changing Alaska Eskimo Culture"**
Speaker: James VanStone, curator, North American archaeology and ethnology

February 28, March 1 **"Natural History of Deep Sea Fishes"**
Speaker: Robert Johnson, assistant curator, fishes

March 7, 8 **"The Tunguska Explosion: Meteorite, Comet, or Black Hole?"**
Speaker: Edward Olsen, acting chairman, Department of Geology, and curator, mineralogy

March 14, 15 **"Wet Snails in Dry Deserts"**
Speaker: Alan Solem, curator, invertebrates

March 21, 22 **"Veracruz, Mexico: Green Grow the Lilacs"**
Speaker: Lorin Nevling, chairman and curator, Department of Botany

March 28, 29 **"Frog Ecology in the Congo"**
Speaker: Robert Inger, assistant director, Science and Education

April 4, 5 **"Collecting Mosses in Southern Chile"**
Speaker: John Engé, Richards visiting assistant curator, bryology

April 11, 12 **"Ancient Ecuador: Culture, Clay, and Creativity"**
Speaker: Donald Collier, curator, Middle and South American archaeology and ethnology



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