

Provincial Wildlife Park Celebrates 50th Anniversary

By Tanya Mackey Boehner



This is a special year for the Provincial Wildlife Park in Shubenacadie. We are celebrating 50 years of operation. Millions of people from around the world have visited and appreciated this special forest environment and the wildlife they find here.

The idea of the park came from Dr. G. W. I. Creighton, then Deputy Minister of the Department of Lands and Forests. He believed the park would be a valuable aid in teaching conservation to both adults and children. This philosophy has continued over the years with the original supervisor, Eldon Pace, and with the current manager, Bert Vissers.

In the late 1940s, part of Mr. Pace's duties with the Department of Lands and Forests included the raising of pheasants that were to be released into the wild. By the early 1950s, he was in charge of some live animals that the Department displayed at provincial exhibitions for the purpose of increasing public awareness about wildlife.

The Department had been collecting stray fawns, bear cubs and other wildlife that had been adopted by provincial residents. While some were being well cared for, others were not. The public wanted these 'backyard menageries' cleaned up, and as a result, laws were passed prohibiting the private possession of wildlife. Other

animals were orphaned or injured, and brought in for care. The park was born and people started coming. The permanent home of the wildlife park was established on the present site in Shubenacadie East, Colchester County in 1954.

What started out as a half dozen pheasants and a few white-tailed deer fawns in a chicken wire cage has now turned into the beautiful Provincial Wildlife Park. Deer and moose wander and browse through extensive woodland enclosures. People are often interested to see them while in the rut in the fall as they are active in their enclosures and their antlers are beautiful. Spring is also a popular time at the deer enclosure with park visitors trying to catch a glimpse of the fawns peeking out from the grass.

Not all of our visitors are people though. Many migrating birds stop to feed and rest in both spring and fall. Eagles, owls, hawks are always popular with our visitors, as are the black bears and cougars.

Some other residents here include reindeer, wolves, foxes, coyotes, snowshoe hares, bobcats, lynx, skunks, beavers, raccoons, martens, mink, otters, porcupines, and Sable Island horses. None of the animals were taken from the wild for display here. They are either permanently injured, captive-raised or captive born.

We have had several famous creatures living at the park. Joey, a caribou named after former Newfoundland Premier Joey Smallwood, was here for many years. Norma, a black bear cub, came to the park weighing less than a pound. She was fed night and day by Mr. Pace and his long-time clerk, Mrs. Alberta (Bert) Willis. Another great friend of Mr. Pace's was Lottie, the otter. Sable and Sandy, two Sable Island horses were airlifted to the park in 1974 and Sandy remains to this day. Bobcat Joe had been ensnared in the wild for several days before he was rescued. The couple who brought Joe to the park were sad that one of his legs had to be amputated, but they were glad he lived and thought he would enjoy the rest of his days at the park. Winnie, a young black bear, was a popular attraction in 1996 as not many people have the opportunity to watch a young black bear grow up from infancy. Bill the moose appeared in the movie "Saltwater Moose" along with his companion Edna. And of course, the most famous of all, Shubenacadie Sam, the ageless seer. Since 1997, this all-knowing rodent has been called upon every Groundhog Day to predict the remaining winter weather.

Over 100,000 visitors a year enjoy the two kilometres (1.25 miles) of wheelchair accessible pathways that lead to more than 33 species of mammals and 40 species of birds on 40 hectares (99 acres) of land. We also have a 10-hectare (25 acre) picnic area adjacent to the park which includes a playground for kids of all ages. We started charging admission to the park in 1994 to help offset maintenance costs.

Our summer season runs from May 15 to October 15, 9:00 am to 7:00 pm daily. As most of the animals need care year-round, it is only natural to have the park accessible to the public in the winter. From October to May, people can visit from 9:00 am to 3:00 pm on weekends. Of course, at this time of year you won't see the waterfowl, cranes, and vultures which are placed in a warmer indoor setting.

And remember, the woodchucks and bears are hibernating, but most of the "regulars" will be glad to see you.

As education was one of the main reasons the park was established, an extensive education program has been designed and implemented. Our experienced staff, Swampy Sue Penney, Boggy Barry McCarthy and Turtle Tanya Mackey conduct fun and interesting activities and tours in the park for school groups from September to May. A special Adopt-a-Class partnership with Ducks Unlimited for Grade 4s operates in June, and an exciting outreach program travels to provincial schools from December to April. *Parks Are For People* events take place throughout the summer, as well as many programs year-round for community groups. The park is also available to photographers who, for a fee, can enter the enclosures to 'shoot' the animals.

For current information on the Provincial Wildlife Park or inquiries about special events, check our website: <http://wildlifepark.gov.ns.ca> or call 902-758-2040.

Tanya Mackey Boehner is a Youth Educator at the Provincial Wildlife Park in Shubenacadie.



"Turtle Tanya" Mackey leads a class through the park.

Get the most out of your visit to the Wildlife Park...

- Bring your camera. Most of our residents are at ease around people, permitting the capture of good images.
- Visit in the morning or late afternoon when the animals tend to be more active.
- Binoculars are recommended to view animals in the larger enclosures.
- Interpretive signage on the enclosures describes the animal housed there.
- Visit the interpretive displays in the Creighton Forest Environment Centre at the park entrance.
- Feed dispensers, containing proper animal/bird diets, are placed throughout the park. The feeding of any other foods is not permitted.
- Don't forget to bring your own lunch though, and stop by our picnic park to enjoy it.