

Tails From The Garden
By Gerry Gibbens - talk given at Guide meeting Nov. 10, 2016

[Note: Gerry started working as a labourer for the Parks Board in 1973, then apprenticed for four years in several different parks. He had the good fortune to work under Alleyne Cook who arranged an internship for him at Windsor Great Park. In 1980 Gerry started working in the Sino-Himalayan Garden and stayed there until his retirement in 2015. He is a Sunday guide.]

Before the Garden came into being, there were probably animals on the golf course, but between pesticides and flying balls, not many of them called it home. However, as the golf course changed into a garden, the soil became healthier with greater use of mulches and other soil amendments, there was more shade, and many more plants created shelter for animals.

As early as 1980, we saw an influx of wildlife. Their presence became more noticeable as the squirrels took up residence. By digging up bulbs, eating bursting flower buds and nuts, these little creatures thrived. It was the increase in their population that was an invitation for the coyotes to settle in. Given the readily available food supply, they built dens and raised their young. You never really see them unless they are on the move; they can be laying down right in front of you, and you would not see them but for the twitch of the ear or a turn of the head. Rest assured they see you.

Since I was in the Garden regularly, they did not view me as a threat but rather as just another mammal. They would watch me, unseen, on my knees weeding. There were times when I thought my efforts were being observed either by the foreman or Roy, but it was a coyote doing the watching. One day out of the corner of my eye, I caught a movement behind me and found myself confronted by a young male with his hind quarters in the air and his muzzle lying in his front paws as if inviting me to play, though in reality I think he was wanting to play with his food.

Another time, I was completing a renovation of a bed and was watched for some time by a coyote, who continued past me, went behind a bush and picked something up in his mouth. At first I thought it a squirrel, then I thought maybe it was a pinecone. He passed ten feet in front of me, crossed the road and proceeded up the steep slope. A minute later, a bouncing florescent tennis ball appeared, followed by the coyote who pounced on the ball, and wrestled it to the ground. He then proceeded back up the slope to let the ball go and chased it until he caught it. This went on several more times until he became bored and carried on.

Numerous times after small renovations were completed, I would come by the following morning only to find that a coyote had left a sign of approval for a job well done. This deposit of feces let me know that this was his territory.

The coyotes den in the northwest corner of the Garden under years of brambles, and in late February as we arrived in the upper service yard, we would see steam rising from a compost pile which the mated pair had hollowed out to make their young pups comfortable and warm while mom and dad went hunting. Often the pups' heads could be seen above the compost pile as they watched the staff go about their work.

There are very few moles in the Garden, but once I saw a coyote waiting patiently for "lunch" at the end of one of their runs. I once saw two male moles fighting viciously under a pile of leaves. When moles do become a problem in the Garden, they are trapped and released elsewhere.

The population of squirrels was kept in check by succeeding generations of coyotes for many years until one year the mated pair produced seven pups. Unfortunately, the parents had mange, as did the pups, who were abandoned and died. The population of coyotes in the Lower Mainland collapsed because of the disease, and one of the results of this in the Garden was an explosion

in the squirrel population. It was several years before the coyotes returned, but it was interesting that during this time Cooper's Hawks arrived and took up residence. It was in early 2000 that the Barred Owls arrived. Both reduced the population of squirrels.

The Cooper's Hawk hunts throughout the day, but the Barred Owl comes out to hunt at dusk. And if you are walking in the garden at this time and your hair is in a ponytail, to the owl you are a squirrel! Several staff have been clawed in the head, but the owl soon realizes that this is a rather larger dinner than they can lift. A security guard whose hat was stolen by an owl resorted to tying a string through his hat and attaching it to his belt so it could not be taken again.

My first encounter with the Barred Owls was when I walked into the centre of a bed to check on a plant after work. While I was standing there, I caught movement behind me. As I turned, I was confronted by a mated pair of Barred Owls next to each other on a branch not ten feet away. In my imagination, as they turned to each other and then looked at me, I wondered if they were sizing me up for dinner, despite my lack of ponytail.

The parents wean the young Cooper's Hawks and eventually leave them to their own resources. Once, over several days, I worked in an area where three young hawks were calling to be fed, to no avail. They watched me intently, essentially surrounding me from above trying to figure out how to snatch me. They didn't get me, but later that day I watched them tear apart a young crow for food.

As for the crows, let me first speak about their larger relatives, the ravens. The raven is a much bigger bird than the crow, and the mated pair in the Garden was here long before I arrived. Often seen gliding through the trees, they do not make themselves obvious. Many visitors are puzzled by their call, which sounds like a hollow cluck, is quite distinct and carries a fair way.

The crows are noisy and feed on garbage; they often pick out the recently planted annuals looking for grubs. Do them a disservice, and they will remember you forever. Having once tried to capture a young crow who had fallen from the nest, I was returning across the Great Lawn at the end of the day only to be swooped by the parents who had armed themselves with good-sized pebbles and proceeded to dive-bomb me. In the mid 1980's, one early January, I heard a ruckus at the top of the Reservoir and found eight crows harassing a Snowy Owl, who did not seem too concerned. It was an amazing sight when the owl spreads its wings, which must have reached a seven-foot spread, and glided off, followed by the crows.

I used to see a mated pair of bald eagles in the Garden. At the end of one day as I crossed the Great Lawn, I saw five or six crows harassing a bald eagle. He hardly varied from his path as the crows swooped him, and his timing was impeccable - as the third crow dived towards him, the eagle turned upside down in the air, caught the crow in its claws and tore it apart. The rest of the crows flew off in every direction but that of the eagle. I think that the pair of eagles lived at UBC, but I hope that some day we will have our own nest.

We have a resident osprey in the garden who sits at the top of the alder by the pond closest to the Visitor Centre. One day I saw a guide leading a group. She stopped the visitors along the lake to show off the fish, at which point the osprey lifted off, dove silently into pond and emerged with a carp in its claws. Further evidence of their presence was found when a large carp too heavy to carry was dropped on the paths by the pond.

Also seen in the ponds are turtles. We have often found them wandering on the grass as they head off to lay their eggs. As a warning, I suggest that you not pick them up, as their first line of defence is to piss on you!

The current carp in the lakes are descended from colourful koi that were donated by the Japanese Garden Association. Those koi mated and produced colourful fry that collected in a small pocket of water by the zigzag bridge. The herons would eat the more brightly coloured fry

and leave the dull-coloured fry, so eventually the fish population lost its luster.

Also present in the early 1980's were frogs, but the use of pesticides and herbicides at that time saw their population decline to naught. I understand that small tree frogs have been introduced to the garden in the last year. [For more about the tree frogs, see the Gardener Walk notes for Sept., 2016.]

In the early years, there were raccoons in the Garden, but they were replaced by the coyotes. In 2010 I encountered large mature male skunk as I turned in to the Meconopsis Dell. He was easy to find because one could smell him from a long way off. The skunk was over five feet from snout to tail, at least two-and-a-half-feet wide, and it was not interested in me as it wandered slowly off.

Towards the end of October and into November, if you visit the *Sorbus* Collection, you may notice many robins about. As the weather cools and the berries ferment, the robins will feed on them. The effect is similar to that of alcohol, as the birds fly erratically, take off with some difficulty, and often fail to land normally.

It is nice to see the population of Canada geese reduced, along with the mess that follows them everywhere. The geese were a horrible nuisance in the early days of the Garden. They used to ship them away, but the birds who were born here always made their way back. Now there are other ways to manage egg hatching, and the population is greatly reduced.

There have been several attempts to bring swans into the garden, but, as their wings were clipped they were prey to the coyotes.

From the day I started at VanDusen, I have been aware of the numerous species of hummingbirds in the Garden and spent over 20 years searching for their nests. I even found a Peterson field guide on nests but had no luck until recently. Who would have guessed that the nests are hiding in plain sight? Even more wonderful than finding one is seeing the delight of both adults and children upon seeing a nest for the first time. It is an amazing feeling when, as the hummingbirds rush by, they stop abruptly at face level, with wings whirring as they inspect you, and then set off on their business, having dismissed you as a threat.

There are no heron nests in the Garden, as the smell would have made them obvious. The herons that fish here are either from Stanley Park or Jericho Beach.

Most of the ducks are migratory, but some species overwinter here.

Speaking of birds, the eagle, raven, and crow are integral parts of indigenous culture, and we should be pointing this out to visitors since the Garden is on native land.

You will have noticed the numerous birdhouses that have recently been placed in the garden. I am puzzled by this, as I think birds would best be suited to a natural form of nesting. This recent installation of birdhouses is not the only one. There are still remnants of the first attempt in evidence. On one of the conifers in the area where there were once *Cardiocrinum*, there still is a birdhouse. One afternoon I saw that the small entrance hole had been enlarged, and as I looked, out popped a squirrel who turned around and stuck its head back in, probably to let mom know he was going out to get supplies. Being occupied with other things, the squirrel neither saw nor heard the Cooper's Hawk lift off a nearby tree. It glided by the birdhouse, grabbing the squirrel for dinner. I realized that what were meant to be bird boxes were really lunch boxes for the Hawks.

One final story, this one plant-related: I planted two *Liriodendron sinensis* in the Sino Himalayan Garden near the *Cedrus deodorus*. On the open side of the *Liriodendron*, the branches grew straight out, but on the side facing the cedar, they first grew up, then out. If plants are allowed to reseed, they will find the right spot to do it in. If you've planted the parents in that area, then you know that it is a good spot.

As the Garden grows and climate change continues, we will be able to plant species that are not from this zone that will thrive and perhaps allow bird and other animals to inhabit this oasis in the middle of Vancouver.