

Green Scene: Colony Farm – a Park for whom?

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Colony Farm with its valuable old field habitat attracts approximately 200 species of birds is a delightful oasis of green in the midst of urban development. *Bruce Brandhorst photo.*

Colony Farm Regional Park has been in the news recently because of a controversial proposal to create fish channels in a field originally protected for its wildlife habitat values. This work, to be undertaken by the Transportation Investment Corporation will compensate for fish habitat lost through their construction of the new Port Mann Bridge. The controversy has arisen, in large part, because the project will convert one type of valuable wildlife habitat into aquatic habitat with a resulting loss of habitat for the wildlife species which rely on grassland or so-called old field habitat. Another problematic matter is, perhaps, the overall management of Colony Farm Regional Park in terms of meeting the public's wishes.

To my mind, it is unfortunate the creation of more fish habitat will be achieved by eliminating critical habitat for some birds when the real issue is people encroaching on the habitat of both. Colony Farm has already been the site of fish channel construction in the area adjacent to the Lougheed Highway in Coquitlam. This work, initiated in 2004 and

supported by both bird-watchers and fish stewards, took place in a low-lying wet area that was not old field habitat. In contrast, the 2.5 hectares of old field habitat that will be lost due to the new fish channel work is a rare type of habitat of which little is protected in the lower mainland. Several species of raptors depend on old field habitat because their main food source is the meadow voles which live in these fields. It has been estimated, depending on vole density and the presence of other raptor species, a pair of short-eared owls require anywhere between 6-75 hectares of old field habitat to raise a family. Thus, the loss of even 2.5 hectares could have a negative impact on their ability to successfully breed at Colony Farm. In contrast, the Coquitlam River already supports thousands of coho salmon. While more coho would be beneficial, their survival in the Coquitlam River will not be in jeopardy if the new fish channels are not constructed here.

Colony Farm became a regional park in 1995 several years after a campaign was launched for its protection by the Burke Mountain Naturalists and others. For 12 years prior to that, the land at Colony Farm had lain vacant after closure of the government-operated farm where labour was provided by patients from Riverview Hospital. During those dozen years, many species of wildlife came to rely on the meadows and berry-producing shrubs at Colony Farm for refuge. Colony Farm soon became known as a haven for wildlife and a delightful place for people to stroll, cycle or bird-watch on its dikes.

When Colony Farm finally became a Regional Park, it came with a Land Use Plan developed by stakeholders, a signature row of magnificent mature elms along Colony Farm Road, three heritage buildings which remained from its heyday as a provincial prize-winning farm and many hectares of so-called old field habitat which supported species at risk such as short-eared owls and barn owls plus dozens of smaller song birds. The Land Use Plan, although developed without the knowledge that Colony Farm would become a park, designated fields for various uses and highlighted the Farm's three outstanding values – fertile agricultural land, critical wildlife habitat and a network of trails for people to hike and enjoy nature.

Sadly, since the Park was protected, the row of elms was cut down because of rotting roots and has not been replaced. One heritage building has been lost through decay although the two remaining ones have been re-roofed but still await restoration. The community gardens are thriving but have a long waiting list which has many people wondering why similar community or allotment gardens cannot be developed in some of the other fields designated for agriculture. While a bridge across the river re-connecting the two sides of Colony Farm was installed in 2000 thanks to tremendous community and provincial support, a popular trail to Pitt River Road has since been eliminated due to erosion with no plans for a timely repair. As a consequence, the number of park visitors has decreased dramatically in recent years.

A draft “sustainability” plan for Colony Farm, which still awaits full public consultation, envisages commercial farming and institutional use on some of the agricultural fields at Colony Farm. This has alarmed some park supporters who feel this plan also fails to pay sufficient attention to enhancing public use in a public park. Other people have already raised concerns over a corporation being allowed to use land in a park for a compensation project. I can only hope this decision of Metro Vancouver Parks is not indicative of a trend to support more private projects in a public space that is such a vital oasis of green and source of enjoyment for so many people in the Tri-Cities.