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CREATURES TALLIED IN CENTRAL PARK: Scientists and CUNY Students Launch a 24-Hour Census

August 26, 2013 Central Park Conservancy officials want to know what the human influx has done to the park's permanent residents—the animals, fish and insects that call the 843-acre refuge home.

The number of visitors to Central Park has jumped 60% since 2003, to 40 million in 2012, boosted by a growing tourist base and everyday park-goers.

Now, Central Park Conservancy officials want to know what the influx has done to the park's permanent residents—the animals, fish and insects that call the 843-acre refuge home.

A team of about 500 scientists and students from the City University of New York on Monday afternoon began 24 hours of canvassing the park—wading into ponds, wandering paths and searching dark areas. The goal is to identify precisely how many species of animals and plants live in New York City's most famous park.

"I would love for people to realize how wild the park is," said Terri Carta, the conservancy's director of programs. "The park is a landscape, a work of art, and it's alive."

In the park's first census, conducted in 2003, officials found 10 types of mammals, more than 50 kinds of birds, 11 species of fish and almost 200 types of plants.

Various methods are employed to count the creatures. Fish are tallied by scientists who, wading chest-deep in ponds, place nets into the water and temporarily detain the fish before identifying and freeing them.

Turtles are counted similarly, but with cages instead of nets. For bats, teams play loud sounds on MP3 players, hoping the bats will call back. Insects are captured and put into boxes before being tracked and released.

Plants are a bit easier to survey.

"They don't move—at least as we know of yet," Ms. Carta said.

The census began Monday afternoon with what appeared to be a positive sign—a red-tailed hawk sailed across the sky as the count kicked off.

Dressed in T-shirts with "Bio Blitz" written on them, about a dozen students led by Dr. Amy Berkov, a tropical ecologist at the City College of New York, started out looking for beetles and larva.

Among the tools they carried were poles with nets, which some students waved in the air near trees in hopes of catching winged creatures.

"You got some bugs!" exclaimed Rajan Lala, 18 years old, a physics major, as colleague Gurasees Chawla, also 18, whacked the branch of a nearby tree.

To ensure the results are accurate, teams are assigned leading scientists in each field who examine the results.

Conservancy officials are primarily focused on the northern, more open stretches of the park, where they believe most wildlife reside. Conservancy officials have grouped students into specific teams, assigning them two-hour intervals in the park where they are most likely to spot creatures or plants.

Conservancy officials say they will use the survey results, expected this fall, to inform them on how the park is managed, comparing results to 10 years ago. They also plan to share results through public lectures, curriculum and conversations with the scientific community.

Marcia Bystryn, president of the New York League of Conservation Voters, said she hopes the project's findings don't limit the public's access to the park.

"I'm not sure whether the biodiversity of the park as a priority would trump anything else," she said.

The effort has led to considerable excitement among students of Macaulay Honors College at CUNY, many of whom scrambled for spots on the night teams—after the park has closed to the public and bats are likely to be seen. (They were escorted by security personnel at night, officials pointed out.)

“People tend to portray scientists as people who don’t smile, who lead solitary lives where they grimly work toward a eureka moment, but the reality of science is a lot of fun, it’s largely communal,” said Mary Pearl, associate dean of the honors college.

Conservancy officials and Ms. Pearl say they’re interested in how several factors may have changed the park’s biodiversity, including the sharp increase in the park’s human visitors over the past decade.

“My guess is the raccoons will be abundant and fat,” Ms. Pearl said, suggesting that the creatures are noshing on tourists’ food.

Scientists also wonder if climate change has prompted more creatures from down south to move north. Ms. Pearl, a wildlife biologist by training, says some animals have spread across the country, like honeybees.

And weather could have changed the park’s creatures. Events such as the 2011 blizzard and superstorm Sandy downed thousands of trees, possibly leading to more wood-eating beetles, said Ms. Pearl, the Macaulay associate dean.

“The attention was paid to the events themselves but no one has looked at how they might have impacted wildlife abundance,” Ms. Pearl said.

Additionally, several conservancy officials have unofficially spotted chipmunks in the park’s more rugged northern stretches, and they hope this survey will certify their findings.

Ms. Pearl, though, is hoping for a crazier find.

“My hope against hope is that I find a flying squirrel,” Ms. Pearl said. “That would make my day. I think the chances are maybe 2%.”

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Aria Feliciano uses an aerial net to catch insects on Monday during the 24-hour survey of Central Park.