



Science in the City and Critters in the Park

Marisa Wong | September 4, 2013 3:46 PM

For some kids growing up in the city, Central Park may just be as green as it gets. At an event co-hosted by [CUNY's Macaulay Honors College](#) and the [Central Park Conservancy](#) students, scientists and volunteers set out to discover how many species of animals, plants and insects call the man-made green space home.

As part of a required seminar called "Science in the City," more than 300 students from the sophomore class of CUNY's Macaulay Honors College descended on the park in 2-3 hour shifts over a 24-hour period. The event, known as a "bioblitz," aimed to survey the biological diversity of New York City's famed park. More than 40 participating scientists from the New York Audubon Society, the New York Botanical Garden, city universities and more led the student groups into the park, where they conducted various sampling and observation techniques to catalogue as many species as possible.

"Most of our students are city kids who've been told "don't step on the grass" for most of their lives," said Macaulay Honors College Associate Dean, Mary Pearl. "And I'm saying, just enjoy nature – step out into it." Pearl, a biologist, said the event was conceived to encourage students to experience "the pleasure of data collection." And to help with a much needed survey. The last time scientists counted Central Park's creatures and plants was in 2003.

Students helped identify a new species of turtle in the park, a Diamondback Terrapin, bringing up the turtle species count to 7 from 6 species ten years ago. They also found many species of fish and a wide array of bird species. But some were surprised to be counting insects as well as plants and animals. "I didn't know flies were pollinators so that was something new. Hopefully when we start to search with gloves under the logs I get to see some beetles," said Macaulay sophomore, Aria Feliciano.

Major storms and [gradually warming temperatures](#) may be affecting the park's ecosystem. Bioblitz planners hope the event will help them analyze how such climate shifts have affected wildlife diversity in the park over the past decade. According to Pearl, "when trees have gone down, it alters the architecture of the forest and it might result in some changes in species."

Scientists and students were looking for changes in one groups of species in particular. Rodrigo Medellin, an ecology professor from the University of Mexico, was flown in as the bioblitz's participating bat expert. Leading a small team of students, Medellin set up a series of thin nets and high frequency receivers to track bats. Nighttime visitors may be accustomed to seeing the small winged mammals in the park, but many may overlook the service this kind of biodiversity provides. "A single big brown bat can eat over 1,000 mosquitos in an hour," said Medellin. "Think about that the next time you are on the beach."

<http://www.thirteen.org/metrofocus/2013/09/science-in-the-city-and-critters-in-the-park/>