

Natural Places Shared Spaces

The Importance of Natural Spaces in Markham

Birds, bees and butterflies depend on the natural spaces in our community for food, shelter and general survival. What you may not know is that their presence is also vital to the preservation of these natural areas.

Bees and butterflies in particular, along with several other types of insects, are among the world's most important pollinators. Pollinators are the living things that move pollen to fertilize plants. They ensure the reproductive success, and thus the preservation of, rare and native species of wildflowers, grasses, trees, and many other types of plants on which wildlife depend for food and shelter.

DID YOU KNOW that pollinators are responsible for an estimated one out of every three bites of food that people eat?

Birds, bees, and butterflies are so important in their native environments that they are commonly referred to as **Keystone Species**. This is because their behaviour actively shapes the environment in which they live. Providing adequate wild spaces in cities for these species to thrive is extremely important. These spaces not only protect the variety of different types of birds, bees and butterflies found in them, but also further enhance the vitality of all other species found in these environments.

In recent decades, city planners and residents across Canada have increasingly begun to value natural spaces in urban environments, including not only parks, but also unmanaged sites like woodlots, ravines and valleys. As Canada and Markham become more and more urban, we increasingly appreciate that cities and wildlife spaces are not mutually exclusive. Although more than 80 percent of this country's population now lives in urban centres, and the boundaries of urban areas are expanding at ever-increasing rates, cities and natural sites **can** coexist to benefit a community's residents, plants and animals.

Natural spaces in Markham provide significant benefits to the animals like birds, bees, and butterflies that live here, by providing wildlife corridors in areas where urban development has resulted in the damage or loss of habitat. For example, common milkweed is a plant native to North America that has traditionally been seen as a weed by gardeners and landscapers. However, its presence in natural spaces in our City provides essential food for the monarch butterfly caterpillar, a type of butterfly currently under threat due to habitat loss. Also found in some of Markham's woodlots are endangered tree species, such as butternut and blue ash, which are not commonly planted in our parks or along our streets, but are a favourite shelter for many native birds.

Some rare plant and insect species are only found in natural, non-manicured spaces, so many types of native birds, bees, and butterflies find the specialized foods and shelter they need for survival in the same places.

In Markham, native tree species like basswood, American elm, eastern cottonwood, and ironwood can be found in numerous woodlots and ravines, but are not commonly planted along streets or in parks. Not only is species diversity in natural spaces important for bees, birds, and butterflies, but animals also thrive in these areas, including woodlots, where trees vary in size, age and structure. Some of our community's oldest and largest trees, including beech and oak, are found in the City's woodlots;

providing specialized shelter and food for migratory birds that annually travel to Ontario from as far as South America.

The unique urban environments provided by our wild, natural spaces increase Markham's quality of urban living in many ways. Preserving biodiversity, providing habitat corridors, and promoting sustainable communities not only help protect native plants and animals, but also offer a broad range of opportunities for residents to enjoy nature within our city limits.



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markham.ca/Pollinators

