

Prescribed Burning

Prescribed burning is a highly successful vegetation management technique in which fire is deliberately set and allowed to burn under strictly controlled conditions. The burn is a small grass fire that stimulates the germination and growth of suppressed savannah and prairie species. It aids the savannah community by controlling competing plants and improving the overall conditions for growth of prairie plants (e.g. reducing nitrogen availability). Restoration of prairie plant communities promotes a greater diversity of native plants, birds and other wildlife in Southern Ontario.



The prescribed burning program in High Park is part of the long-term management plan for the park. The first phase of burn management, to take place over an approximate 10 year period and starting in 2000, has been applied to different sections of the park's natural areas. The success of the management to date has exceeded all expectations. Prescribed burning has proven to be one of the most important techniques for improving the health of the black oak savannah in High Park.

High Park's Natural Resources

Prairies and savannahs are one of Canada's most endangered ecosystems. Today, less than 1% of Canada's original tallgrass prairie remains. About 1/3 of High Park's 79ha of natural environment is tallgrass prairie (also referred to as black oak woodlands and savannah), making it one of the most significant natural areas remaining in Toronto. Black oak savannah is an open, park-like landscape that contains widely spaced black oaks, scattered low shrubs and a rich variety of prairie grasses and wildflowers.



A Need for Action

The Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources recognised the significance of the natural areas in High Park by designating it an Area of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI). Their report, dated 1989, warned that the natural areas in High Park were seriously declining. Many of the older black oaks had reached biological maturity and were not regenerating naturally, that is, there were no young black oaks to replace the old ones.

Serious declines in plant and wildlife diversity had also occurred, largely as a result of human influences and the exclusion of natural fires from the park. Savannahs are dependent on periodic fire to maintain their open character and rich variety of plant species. The suppression of fire has enabled trees and other plants that are not part of the savannah community to invade and replace native vegetation and wildlife.



The High Park Management Plan

The City understood the ANSI report as a call for action and initiated further research of High Park's natural areas. As a result, projects were initiated to restore the shorelines of Grenadier Pond as well as to test various methods of restoring black oak savannah. Prescribed burning combined with the removal of invasive species and the planting of appropriate prairie and savannah species proved to be the best combination of restoration techniques for reviving the black oak savannah in High Park. The City has now developed a long-term Woodland and Savannah Management Plan that identifies goals, strategies and actions for restoration and protection of High Park's plant and wildlife features.