

Nature Notes, January 2023

Walking the South West Trail

By Bill Robertson

On the magnificent Thanksgiving Saturday my wife and I took a walk up the steadily and beautifully evolving South West Trail, which adds to the generous number of pathways the Meewasin Valley Authority has created along the South Saskatchewan River in and around Saskatoon.

If you've walked or ridden this trail, you know exactly what I'm talking about. If you haven't, you're in for a treat.

Down below the old Sanatorium grounds at the end of Spadina Crescent is the sumptuous new trail, really a perfect walkway, which opened in October 2021. You're already on Spadina West if you find your way to the riverbank just south of the newly expanded Water Treatment Plant, which, in turn, is south of Riversdale Pool on Avenue H.

You'll find it.

You can park along the residential part of Spadina Crescent, leave the car, and head south for a block. (of course, you can bike or walk all the way there if you're so inclined). There's a lovely big turnaround circle that seems officially to start the trail, along with garbage and recycling receptacles and solid wooden benches. As we got a few steps onto the trail, some American crows cawed at us from the trees and mallards laughed at us from the river. Beside them stood a few ring-billed gulls taking their leisure. Okay, bring on the birds.

A few more steps and we sighted two first winter Harris's sparrows huddling on a branch. Farther along we heard an American goldfinch and some dark-eyed juncos. This was the pattern: summer birds sounding their last goodbyes before flying south and year-round birds, such as red-breasted nuthatches and black-capped chickadees, letting us know they were here and staying. A few Vees of Canada geese went over honking, to be echoed by more of their kind out on the sandbars. Up ahead, nearer the Gordie Howe Bridge, we spotted a northern shrike and an American robin on neighbouring trees giving each other a good look.

As we walked and gawked we noticed recently-planted trees and shrubs beside the pathway as well as the benches added to give folks a rest from their jogging,



A Bohemian Waxwing: One of the many winter residents to be found on Spadina Crescent between the old Sanatorium site and Gordie Howe Bridge. The road has been closed to traffic and transformed into the all-season South West Trail.

Photo by May Haga

biking, skateboarding, or scootering - many of these types smiling or waving hello. They love this new pathway that once featured garbage trucks thundering out to the landfill. No walking down the middle of the road then.

In May I popped down after a visit to my nearby barber and encountered a veritable circus of yellow warblers darting in and out of two large trees near the turnaround. House wrens and song sparrows vied for attention, as well, and before that in March I found house finches, common redpolls, and blue jays in abundance, to say nothing of the hardy, black-billed magpies and common ravens patrolling their winter home.

Through the seasons we watch the ever-open river move through the city, partially iced for a while, soon to be alive with kayakers, belted kingfishers, and a few common mergansers for that all-too-brief but beautiful space we call our summer—a blessedly long one this year. Or we can peer up through the bordering wall of trees, past the calls of yellow-rumped warblers and the tapping of downy woodpeckers to another tapping, that of golfers on the Holiday Park Golf Course, with their laughter and their gentle cursing.

Down on the South West Trail we've got the best of all worlds as a fellow on roller blades strides by and we carry on our walk through the melancholy golden light of a gorgeous fall day.

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