

Bioblitz tackling 10 areas in 20 years

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They've already discovered a large beetle thought to be nowhere north of New Hampshire. Next, they hope to find the elusive and rarely seen yellow rail, the small, secretive marsh bird that makes a call like two stones being clicked together.

About 60 dedicated scientists and artists, some from as far away as British Columbia and Texas, have migrated to the Grand Lake area in south-central New Brunswick to participate in Bioblitz 2013.

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Laura Hunt, who works with the zoology department of the New Brunswick Museum in Saint John, shows samples of tiger swallowtail butterflies, along with other samples collected as part of Bioblitz 2013. Put on annually by the museum, the blitz encourages researchers to collect plant and animal specimens during an intensive, two-week period. This year's Bioblitz is concentrating on an area around Grand Lake. PHOTO: KEITH MINCHIN/FOR THE TELEGRAPH JOURNAL

Blitz base camp in Gagetown

BIOBLITZ ← A1

Put on annually by the New Brunswick Museum, the blitz encourages researchers to collect plant and animal specimens during an intensive, two-week period.

Now in its fifth year, the number of participants has grown, making the logistics of setting up base camp, arranging rides or finding the right boats a challenge in itself.

"It's a bit like herding cats," says organizer and biologist Don McAlpine, talking on a cellphone while trying to track down some dead turtles he had been promised by a local. "I'm trying to make sure everyone's well fed here."

The museum wants to study the province's 10 biggest protected natural areas over 20 years. Previous editions looked at the Jacquet River Gorge on the province's northern tip and the Caledonia Gorge near Moncton in the months of June and August, two different periods when the flora and fauna change significantly.

This year's bioblitz is closer to civilization and covers a different kind of protected natural area. The territory protected around Grand Lake just east of Fredericton is in 21 different parcels, split up between cottage and farmland.

It includes wetlands, meadows, animal refuges and forested land.

Base camp is in the village of Gagetown, where organizers have rented the Lazy Farmer Hostel as living quarters for people who don't want to tent and a church basement for scientists who need a laboratory to examine their findings under microscopes after dinner.

They put in long days, with no time off over the two-week period. Many of the researchers stay up until 11 p.m., and many more months of research will follow.

"We're still examining things we found in Jacquet River," McAlpine said. "If you like field work and discovery, it can't be beat."

The scientists are doing more work on fish this year, as Grand Lake offers a bigger abundance of aquatic species, not to mention the water is nice and high thanks to all the rain.

There are also collectors of small rodents, parasites, bees, molluscs, dragon flies, bees, grasshoppers and fungi — three researchers for the fungi alone.

Bioblitzes are carried out in many different places, but most of them are not as big as New Brunswick's, usually lasting only a couple of days.

They are a comprehensive biological inventory of a pre-defined area such as a park. New Brunswick's bioblitzes are more extensive because the land mass in protected natural areas is larger and the locations are remote, without the kind of infrastructure a national park might provide.

"There's quite a lot of logistics in getting the gear there, and a number of the people are coming from some distance, so to make it worthwhile, we run it a couple of weeks."

This year's troop includes four visual artists and a poet from Grand Manan, who come along to help fulfil the blitz's dual purpose.

"Our focus is collecting scientific information, but we're also interested in trying to instill a sense of stewardship for these conservation areas. Part of the way we do that is interacting with the public."

People are welcome to see some of the scientists' work at a special open house being held Wednesday from 4-8 p.m. at the Queens County Court House at 16 Court House Rd. in Gagetown. Look for the big beetle.