

# TENAFLY NATURE CENTER NEWS

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THE WAY WE WERE, by Michael Bevans, Wildlife Illustrator and Writer

Tenafly in the early 1930's had barely half as many houses, over twice as much open space, and by "guesstimate" about one-eighth as many resident-cars as it has now. Not every family had a car in those days; most of the town shops delivered, and people walked more--to the commuter trains, to schools (of which there were only three), or simply to visit a neighbor or take a walk!

These sketchy statistics, however, tell little of what the town was really like then. For whatever interest it may hold, here are a few personal recollections from someone who has lived here for more than a half-century--having come here in 1933 at the age of 15.

Much of Tenafly and the surrounding area were "country" in those days. Even near the built-up parts of town, there were sizeable areas in more-or-less natural condition, like the Lyle estate between Riveredge Road and West Clinton Avenue, the region northward along the Erie railroad tracks--and of course the East Hill forest, which came down almost to Engle Street, and extended virtually unbroken from Palisades Avenue, Englewood to the "notch" at Piermont, New York! Whatever was not large, second-growth forest was in one stage or another of orchard or pasture "going back to nature"--a condition highly favorable to birds and other wildlife.

Another thing you'd notice if you could "time-travel" back 50 or 60 years would be the amount of water on the land--the forest swamp, flooded meadow or stream, and the sometimes-spring-fed mulch and leaf-clutter on the ground--a great advantage to various forms of wildlife, includ-

ing frogs and toads. In one small pasture-pond on what is now Peter Lynas Court, there were once seven species of frogs--breeding or in residence, four species of snakes, two species of herons, swallows skimming on the pond's surface, and many other birds who came to drink, including bluebirds!

The area where the high school, ball field and town dump are now was a mix of flat-woods, forest, and open wetlands, likewise inhabited by a variety of birds and small animals. The great East Hill forest (which we have so valorously managed to save a large part of) was in the process of returning to its original condition. The forest was so large it was difficult to determine what creatures might be living there.

Deer moved in the area with great frequency. Red and grey foxes were there, and I saw the tracks of what could only be bobcat (red lynx) on two occasions. Puma, black bear and timber rattlesnake had been killed off earlier by the European "invaders," along with fur-bearers like the marten and mink. There wasn't enough water for beaver, although muskrat could still be found in some abundance.



A pre-1912 view looking northeast from the corner of Tenafly Road and Washington Street. (Photo courtesy of Tenafly Public Library.)

In what's now the Nature Center, Pfister's Pond had huge choruses of wood frogs-- a beautiful wine or buff-and-chocolate colored species--calling in early spring. Five species of turtles lived there or in the nearby woods, while in the waters of the pond an abundance of small fish, polliwogs and newts could be found--creatures now greatly reduced in numbers. (The newts now are apparently absent.) We had both visiting and resident waterfowl, but as some hunting was still allowed then, they are probably at least as abundant now as they were then, especially the mallards and Canada geese.

Overall, with the exception of gray squirrels and racoons, our wildlife population is far less numerous than it used to be. In earlier days, for example (with a somewhat wetter environment), frogs would show up in summer in almost any garden within reach of a passing stream. Now we seldom see a frog or even a toad from one year to the next. Even as late as the early 1950's, dawn in spring or summer would break with a glorious cacaphony of bird songs, celebrating the coming of a new day. Now, such dawns have become comparatively quiet. And where we used to see--and hear--half a dozen species of bees in an enthusiastic hum around the apple blossoms, now we find two or three--or none!

Question: What are the reasons for this comprehensive decline?

Answer: Much, no doubt, has to do with forest and field being reduced to "well drained" suburban lawns and buildings--resulting in a loss of space, refuge, forage and water. But there is another pervasive influence that has proved deadly to a host of once abundant creatures. That is the unceasing use of insecticides, pesticides and herbicides on the privately held properties that now make up the bulk of our land area. Virtually every commercially prepared tree spray, fertilizer mix and lawn treatment system employs substances that over the long haul prove fatal not only to insects (including bees and other necessary pollinators), but to the birds and other creatures that eat these insects. These substances are also toxic to creatures that live in the water or have permeable skins (like frogs and toads)--and to all the predators that eat them. Directly stated, the effect is one of disablement, disadvantage and death.

In those earlier days we've been talking about, peregrine falcons used to nest on the Palisades, and would cruise over the East Hill. In the winter one could often see bald eagles sitting on the ice floes in the Hudson River. No more, though. Both species, victims of DDT, are now effectively extinct in this area where they used to range. A veritable flood of spring-migrating warblers, too, that used to frequent our apple trees, have now been reduced to a trickle. Some are no longer seen at all.

A concluding statement: It's all very well to have a few sacrosanct acres "set aside for Nature," but in a way this is well-intended tokenism. Ninety-five percent of our state is in private or corporate hands, and on this we build and pave, pollute and poison. This could hardly be more damaging if it had been so planned! Most of this, of course, is inadvertent, a happening born of unawareness, shortsightedness or uncaring. If it seems difficult to grasp the idea that every family's yard is part of it all, consider this salient question: Considering that all surface waters indeed run downhill, are you surprised that the chemicals you put on your lawn eventually end up in your drinking water?

CHILDREN'S NATURE CLASSES - A weekday only four-class series of spring nature classes open to all children ages 3-10 will begin on Monday, April 27. Classes will meet according to the schedule below. During these outdoor sessions children will experience the wonders and beauties of spring, such as blooming wildflowers, migrating songbirds and the opening of tree buds.

The fee for each session is \$15.00 for members and \$18.00 for nonmembers. Siblings receive a 20% discount. To register, please circle the class in which you wish to enroll your child, fill out the form below and mail the entire page with your check, to: CLASSES, Tenafly Nature Center, 313 Hudson Avenue, Tenafly, New Jersey 07670.