



Dear members of the Infrastructure and Environment Committee:

Re: Item IE15.2: Toronto Island Park Master Plan

Toronto was one of the first 4 cities to receive Bird Friendly City designation by Nature Canada in 2021. The Bird Friendly City program was created because bird populations are in steep decline, and the goal of the program is to make cities better and safer places for birds. Habitat loss is by far the greatest threat that birds face, and it is the major cause of the current global biodiversity crisis. Toronto is home to many species of birds year-round, and it provides vital habitat for millions of migratory birds because it is located at the confluence of two major migratory flyways. More than 300 species of birds have been seen on the Toronto Islands and one that stands out is the piping plover. These adorable ground nesting birds were extinct in Ontario for 30 years and returned here to breed in 2007 after extensive recovery efforts. They are classified as endangered and there are less than 200 in the Great Lakes population. But they have nested on the Island recently, in 2018 and in 2022. Piping plovers have a strong tendency to return to the same nest site year after year, but if they find it disturbed by a strong human presence, or by practices such as raking, they will leave and search for a better and safer place to nest.

Six Environmentally Significant Areas have been designated on the Toronto Islands, as well as a Provincially Significant Wetland, reflecting the quality and importance of the habitat that the Toronto Islands provide. The natural areas on the Islands are what make it a unique place, but they are fragile, and they face intense pressure with nearly 1.5 million people visiting the Island every year.

The Masterplan has been created with many groups in mind. There is reference to nature, and to using a "light touch" but there is also reference to increased access and to year-round use. There is no clear wording about whether and how natural spaces will be protected. It should be stated that on Toronto Island ESAs, "Activities will be limited to those that are compatible with the preservation of the natural features and ecological functions" (as stated in Toronto's Official Plan). In keeping with the COP15 Biodiversity Agreement, there should be a target to restore 30% of the Island to a natural state. All proposed activities and infrastructure should be permitted only if the natural environment is protected or enhanced.

We have a rare opportunity to protect bird populations, and to support biodiversity in general, by prioritizing the protection and enhancement of natural spaces in the Toronto Island Masterplan. I encourage you to take advantage of this opportunity by making nature the main focus of the plan.

Thank you for considering this.

Diana Turchin  
Co-chair, Bird Friendly City Toronto