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'Bioblitz' in Elmwood Park

ESF scientists, students will record species for 24 hours

May 23, 2003

By **Mark Weiner**
Staff writer

A Syracuse park will be transformed into a living laboratory this weekend when scientists conduct a "bioblitz" to catalog every species of plant and animal they can find in 24 hours.

Elmwood Park, viewed by scientists as one of Syracuse's natural gems, will be poked and prodded by up to 50 scientists, graduate students and alumni from the State University College of Environmental Science and Forestry.

From noon today to noon Saturday, the scientists want to catalog every species of plant, tree, animal, fish, insect, worm - even up to 100 species of fungus - that they come across, said Donald J. Leopold, the SUNY-ESF forest ecologist who is organizing the effort.

The idea is to document and focus public attention on the biological diversity of the 68-acre park, which includes a wooded area, open land and a stream surrounded by steep valleys and slopes in the southwest corner of Syracuse.

"There are many unique species of plants and animals over there that are not very well documented," Leopold said of Elmwood Park. He thought the bioblitz would be the perfect start.

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"These studies are being done around the country," Leopold said. "They're called bioblitzes because everything that is biological is accounted for."

The bioblitz also will allow SUNY-ESF scientists to showcase their skills, while marking the 25th anniversary of the college's Faculty of Environmental and Forestry Biology. It is the college's largest academic department. Many alumni will be in town for the weekend.

As part of the project, the college will raise money through pledges of contributions for each species counted. The money will be used for scholarships and educational outreach programs in Central New York schools.

Faculty members are asking college alumni and friends to pledge "Dollars for Diversity" by making a pledge ranging from 1 cent to \$10 per species. The blitz teams expect to inventory 500 to 1,500 species in the park.

Among the living things that will be examined by the blitz are:

The park's big earthworms. Roy Norton, a professor who specializes in mites and soil biology, will lead the search for both native and exotic earthworms and other soil creatures.

All of the fish and aquatic organisms in Furnace Brook, which runs through the park. The brook is home to native brook trout.

Neil Ringler, a professor who specializes in fish ecology, will electric shock the stream. The process creates a low-intensity electric field that temporarily stuns fish within 6 to 10 feet. Fish turn on their sides and passively float downstream as they are counted by scientists. The fish are not harmed.

The park's night creatures, including bats, owls and some rare moths. Some scientists will camp out in the park to work the night shift.

"There's going to be some pretty neat stuff going on then," Leopold said. "A lot of the species only come out at night."

The event is open to the public, including those who would like to volunteer or tag along for an educational experience. Birders can help by recording bird species they see in the park, Leopold said.

Those interested in joining the blitz should meet at the park pavilion near the parking area next to the Elmwood Park entrance.

By 1 p.m. Saturday, every group taking part in the blitz must hand in a list with the number of species it found. The results will be posted on a Web site.

Leopold said nobody should expect the blitz will uncover every living organism in the park.

"It's not meant to be a 100 percent inventory," he said. "It's meant to be what you can find in 24 hours."

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