

Compliments to Royal Lake Park!

By Greg Sykes (greg@grsykes.com)

Royal Lake Park had two amazingly successful [English ivy](#) removal days this past December! The mild, sunny weather and soft, moist ground provided beautiful working conditions. Everyone had a great workout, enjoyed the outdoors, helped push back the ivy plot, and couldn't believe we didn't reach the full 20-person capacity for this site! Some out-of-town recruits, who have never before been to Royal Lake, had high praises for this park, which I would like to convey to our community and all of the park's volunteers. The new recruits complimented the ambiance of the park, saying that, "it looks like somebody actually cares about this place." Some of these people were Invasive Management Area (IMA) volunteers for different Fairfax County parks and praised Royal Lake's cleanliness relative to other IMA sites. I explained how, in addition to the IMA program, we have spring and fall park clean-ups sponsored by the KPW Civic Association.

Royal Lake has also received accolades from non-human admirers: a river otter (*Lutra canadensis*) recently took up residence within the park! The otter's presence is considered such a high compliment because they are sensitive to pollution. In fact, the otters—evicted by decades of contamination—are only now returning to Northern Virginia after water pollution controls and remediation began. These otters are fantastic Animal Kingdom ambassadors as they are energetic, fun to watch, and generally are no threat to humans or pets when left alone. The first time I spotted one, I was walking on the path and it was a few yards away, looking back at me from the water. Then, it swam underwater, "porpoised" out, dove back under, hopped on a log, dove back into the water, and rolled on the surface! These weasel relatives eat any aquatic animal they can catch, including fish, crayfish, frogs, turtles, and mussels. From a distance, you can tell otters from beaver because otters are faster and more slender animals. Otters are also larger and more graceful swimmers than muskrats.

I hope all of you who have helped clean the parks share a sense of accomplishment in helping this river otter feel at home! Let's hope the otter also encourages everyone to be more conscientious about cleaning up litter and chemical contaminants--or better yet, don't pollute in the first place!

Otters are elusive critters, but you might spot one if you quietly walk along Royal Lake's trails. After the December IMA workdays, I led a small nature walk around prime otter habitats, but we did not see him. Like the zoos, just because you know he is there doesn't mean he will be out! My permit was renewed for all of 2008 and more winter workdays will be scheduled in January (dates to be determined and weather permitting), and I will lead more nature walks for anyone who is interested. In the meantime, even when he cannot be seen, I am tracking the otter and reporting his activity to the Park Authority staff, who is also thrilled by this news!

If you would like to join an IMA winter workday, please contact me greg@grsykes.com. I love working in cool weather, but if you sign up and then decide the temperature that day is a bit too nippy, I'll understand. For more otter information and its return to Fairfax County, check out the article, "Welcome Back Otter," at <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/resources/resourcessu06.pdf>.

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