

The Claremont Field Centre:

PART OF YOUR BIG BACKYARD By Rob Caldwell

In a gently rolling landscape of farms, creeks and forest lies the Claremont Field Centre, an oasis of natural calm just north of downtown Pickering. The Field Centre, which encompasses 399 diverse acres, was established way back in 1970 but is still one of Durham's best kept secrets. That's all changing now, though, as Claremont becomes a more visible and involved part of the community.

Since its creation, Claremont, which is overseen by Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, has been a favourite place for school visits and Girl Guide groups. But it wasn't really a destination outside of those parameters. "People would come and have these great immersive experiences but then not have an opportunity to come back with their families or on their own later and continue that excitement and learning," says Natalie Harder, the centre's supervisor.

Harder was previously Director of Toronto's High Park Nature Centre and was hired late in 2015 to help transition Claremont to a more engaged role in the community. "The transition is, I think, very exciting. We'll still be running the same programs we've run in the past, but we're adding a whole new roster of programs and we're changing how we view the space, how it can support the community and how people can have a longer-term relationship with it," she says. Some of these new programs include a March Break camp, a summer camp and a summer series of Nature Walk Wednesdays, as well as family nature events [see sidebar].

The centre's land offers a lot, including mixed hardwood forest, meadows, trails, agriculture, a pond, and the fast-flowing Duffins Creek. In addition, a magical cedar grove on the property has been the location of a few movie shoots. "It's quite a unique spot," says Harder. "When I'm there, I feel like I'm going into a J.R.R. Tolkien book – it's beautiful, there's lots of ferns and moss."

Duffins Creek is the centrepiece, and is home to a variety of fish including brook trout, brook lamprey, the endangered redbreasted dace, and even salmon. Each spring, in partnership with the Ontario Federation of Anglers & Hunters and Ontario Power Generation, up to 20,000 Atlantic salmon fry are released into the cold, clean water of the creek as part of the province's Bring Back the Salmon program, which aims to reintroduce this native fish, absent from our waters for over a century.

Because the Claremont Field Centre building is equipped with classrooms, a kitchen, a lounge with a wood-burning fireplace and overnight dorms, groups and businesses can use it for team-building activities and training sessions. Sports teams can also now utilize the space when they're in the area for tournaments. With the centre's overnight accommodations, the teams can all be together in a fun space,



and in off-time can participate in family-friendly activities organized by the centre.

Harder sees Claremont as a welcoming place for all, no matter their background. She recently visited Windreach Farm, which provides educational outdoor activities for the disabled and those with special needs. She says, "One of the things we're interested in is increasing accessibility. The building itself is already accessible, so we can accommodate a variety of groups based on their different needs, and we'd like to get the trails more accessible as well. Windreach gave us some good ideas."

Claremont held a consultation meeting with local citizens' groups in September so they could get more feedback on what kind of programming the public would like to see and how the space can be most effectively used for their own programs. "We'd like to get people to think of this as their space, as part of their backyard," says Harder. With its new role as a popular family destination, the Claremont Field Centre has a bright future indeed.

For more information, visit
<https://trca.ca/learning/facilities/claremont-field-centre/>