

## **My Concerns About Western Park Development**

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We are lucky to have one of the best wildlife habitat areas in this part of Virginia. I have personally seen 152 avian species in Old Trail, and when combined with avian species seen by others, the Old Trail avian species list currently stands at 189. With the development of homes in Old Trail, most of the wildlife habitat has been destroyed, and the remaining wildlife species have either moved to Western Park, or use Western Park as their primary area for food. And it's not only birds. There are deer, foxes, sometimes bears, frogs, snakes, insects, and many more animal kingdom species. Some additional species are most likely not known as residing there, and some may even be rare or endangered.

Wildlife habitat is not a simple concept. Each species, whether bird or other animal kingdom species, requires both food and shelter that may be different from that of other species, as well as security from predators.

For example, the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, now almost certainly extinct, required about 10 square miles of continuous and suitable habitat to support food gathering for each mated pair of birds. When human development moved in and forced separations in these contiguous areas, there was no longer any suitable place for this species to nest.

The Kirtland's Warbler, the rarest North American warbler, winters in the Bahamas and breeds only in a small area of Michigan. Furthermore, this species will only breed in jack pine trees between 10 and 30 feet tall. With the push to prevent forest fires in the mid-1900s, there was little burning and re-growth of pine trees to support this species. By 1970, there were only 200 birds of this species left. When the cause for the species decline was determined, the timber companies agreed to let 30,000 acres burn and re-grow, with the burn areas changing in a 50 year cycle so that no one timber company had to bear the brunt of the loss. There are now about 1500 Kirtland's Warblers, thanks to this habitat preservation protocol.

And finally, animal species need security from predators that are higher in the food chain. Noise, motion, and vibrations trigger instinctive flight and hide mechanisms in all animals, thereby disturbing shelter (nest) building, foraging for food, and mating. If there are too many of these disruptions, animals will leave the area and seek other habitat. If the disruptions occur after migrating species have already established breeding territories, there will be no place to go, and the disturbed animal is likely to perish.

Understanding the above comments should help to appreciate my concerns about the development of Western Park. Consider the following image and discussion based on my observations.



#### Western Park

Area #1 (red): This is the most critical wildlife habitat area in Western Park. It is almost always wet from rain and drainage. There are large areas of reeds and other tall grasses, as well as a few scrub trees. A variety of frogs, snakes, small rodents, insects, and other small animals live and breed here. There is a narrow path through this area, but as it is usually very muddy or has standing water, there is very little human traffic through the area. Deer, foxes, and bears are also seen here.

During the summer months (April through October), a variety of avian species breed here, such as Common Yellowthroats, Yellow Warblers, Red-winged Blackbirds, White-eyed vireos, and Brown Thrashers. For the first time that I am aware, Yellow-breasted Chats are breeding here this summer.



Common Yellowthroat



Yellow Warbler



Yellow-breasted Chat

During the winter months (October through April), Area #1 is home to several other species such as Swamp Sparrows, Song Sparrows, and Ruby-crowned Kinglets.



Swamp Sparrow



Ruby-crowned Kinglet

A good number of avian species, such as Northern Mockingbirds reside in Area #1 year round. In addition, Area #1 is the primary foraging area for other Old Trail avian species that reside outside of Area #1. For example, we are fortunate to have Red-shouldered Hawks breeding in Old Trail, and Area #1 is their primary source for food.



Red-shouldered Hawk chicks



Red-shouldered Hawk carrying snake from Western Park



Red-shouldered Hawk Carrying frog from Western Park

Area #2 (blue): This area is also used as a foraging area by avian species that are living in Area #1. In addition, it is the winter home for several avian species such as White-crowned Sparrows, as well as a stopover and foraging area for migrating species, such as Nashville Warblers.



White-crowned Sparrow



Nashville Warbler

Areas #3 (yellow) and #4 (magenta). These areas are the slopes leading down from the plateau and along the gravel trail on the west side of Western Park. They are primary foraging areas for many species that reside (summer, winter, and temporary migrating) in Old Trail. In addition, Area #4 protects wintering species from the cold northern winds. For example, secretive Winter Wrens can be found here during the winter months. Although Chipping Sparrows are common here during the summer months, they are rare in Virginia during the winter, and Old Trail has a winter flock of 30-50 of them. While they forage throughout Old Trail, they seek shelter from the winds in Area #4.



Winter Wren



Chipping Sparrows in Western Park (January 2018)

Area #5 (cyan): These wooded areas are breeding areas for several species including Field Sparrows and Carolina Wrens, as well as foraging areas for many of our Old Trail birds. Although not endangered, Field Sparrows are an avian species of concern as their numbers have been declining steadily over the past few decades.



Field Sparrow



Carolina Wren

Area #6 (natural color): I haven't explored this area very much, but when I have, I always see birds foraging here.

Migrating species can be found anywhere in Western Park, and some of them can be quite rare. For example, there have been only two verified sightings of an Alder Flycatcher east of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia in the past decade, and one of them was in Western Park.

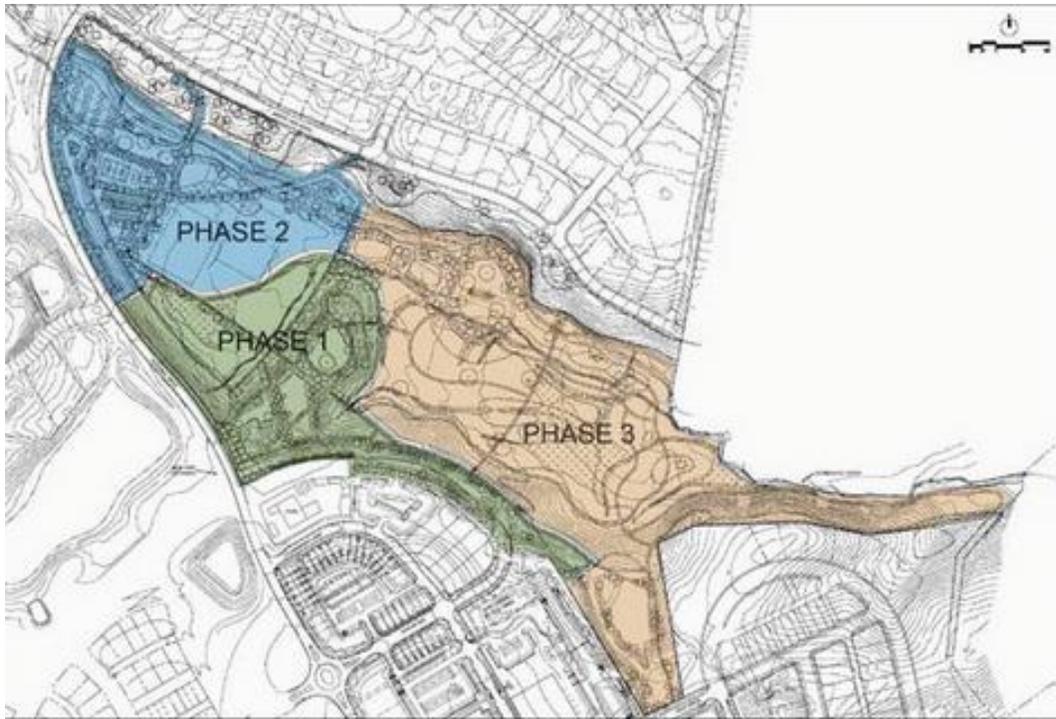


Alder Flycatcher (May 2020)

Now consider what impact the development of Western Park might have on the wildlife that call it home. Consider the following Western Park development graphic.

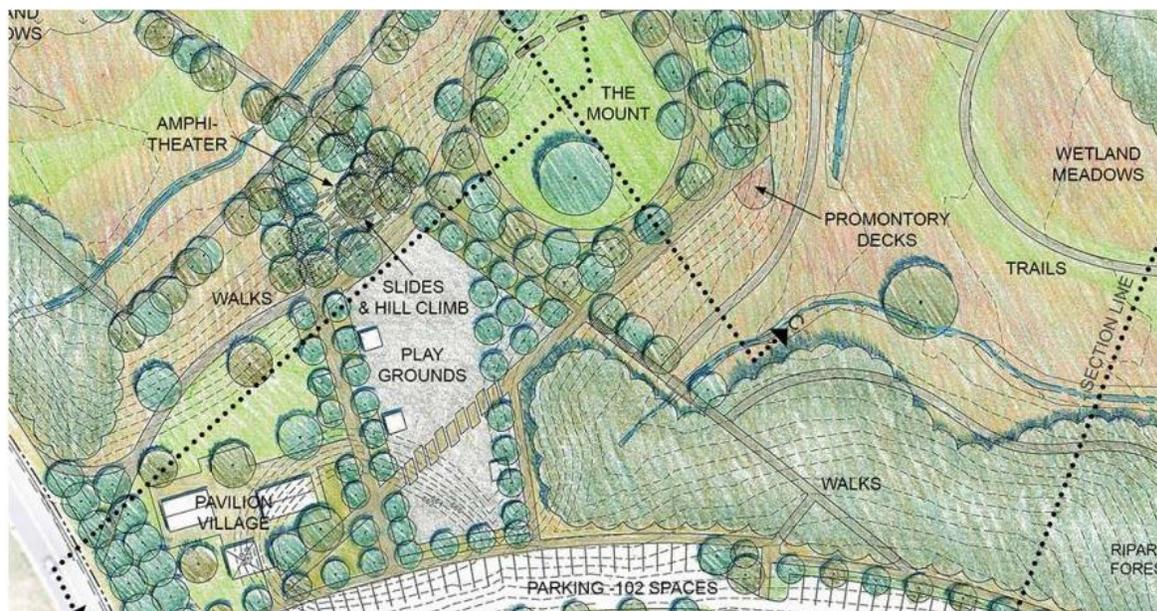


Western Park Development Plan



Western Park Plan Phases

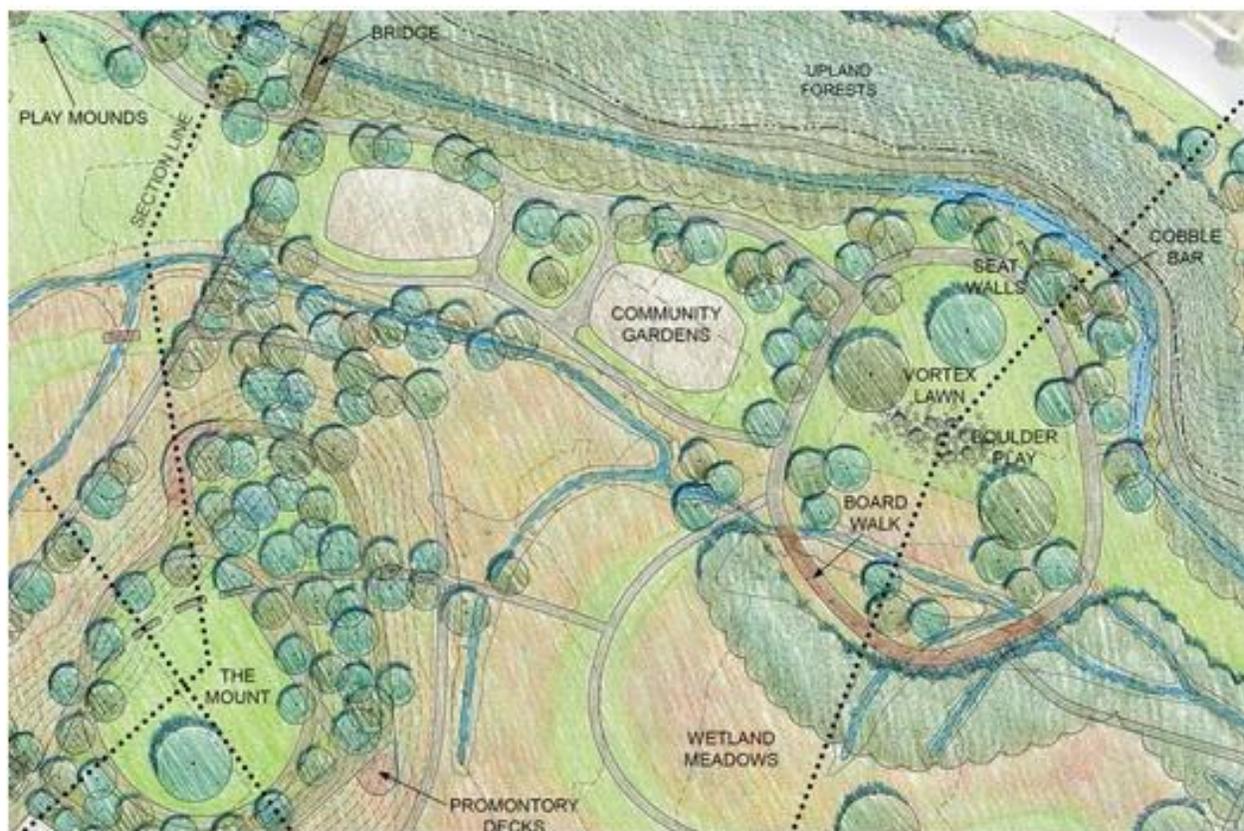
Phase 1A is already approved and scheduled to proceed. Other than the noise from construction and usage after completion, the playground equipment up on the plateau shouldn't cause too much of a problem for the wildlife in Western Park. However, details of the complete Phase 1 plan show sliding boards coming down from the plateau and into the wetlands. This would require brush on the slopes (Areas #3 and #4) to be cleared, as well as some of the wetlands habitat at the bottom (Area #1). Also shown are an amphitheater, promontory decks and walks through wildlife habitat.



I believe that infrastructure changes planned for this Phase 1A include changing the drainage in the park for follow-on development. I am concerned that prohibiting drainage into Area #1 will result in many forms of wildlife, such as frogs, dying there, loss of wetlands vegetation, and resulting loss of avian species that depend on this food and habitat for survival.

Of equal concern are the planned walking paths through Area #1. As shown in the plan, these paths will break up the wetlands area, and would destroy continuous breeding and foraging territory. Also, the noise created by walking on either rough or smooth gravel would be a continuous noise threat near breeding areas. If such paths are created, it would also bring lots of walkers, joggers, bikers, people talking loudly, and similar disturbances that would severely disrupt wildlife. If any sort of pathway has to be constructed, it should be a narrow raised boardwalk, so that water and ground-based animals can pass freely underneath. Signage at each end should state that the area is sensitive for wildlife, quiet should be observed, and it should be limited to foot traffic only (i.e.; no bicycles, scooters, baby strollers, etc.).

The planned “natural” playgrounds (boulder play and others) in Area #5 would destroy breeding grounds for species such as Field Sparrows, and would reduce the foraging area for all the wildlife in the park.



Proposed ball fields/courts in Area #2 would reduce foraging area for many avian species, and eliminate wintering grounds for some of the species.



The “30 acres of the park are still reserved as a natural area with the express purpose of protecting birdlife and wildlife and helping Albemarle County residents enjoy and learn about nature” is a misleading statement in the development plan. Given the current development plans for Western Park, I believe that we will lose most of the wonderful and numerous wildlife species we currently have, and they will be replaced with common park species such as Robins, Blue Jays, and Crows.