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Alexandria's tiny Monticello Park gains a big honor



Perspective by John Kelly Columnist

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Bill Young in Alexandria's Monticello Park. The small suburban park is a stop for warblers on their annual migration, drawing birders such as Young. The park was recently celebrated as a Community Forest by the Old-Growth Forest Network. (John Kelly/The Washington Post)

“There are houses there, there and there,” **Bill Young** said, pointing all around us as sunlight filtered through numerous trees and dappled the ground beneath our feet. “It’s a very small park.”

It is indeed. Monticello Park in Alexandria is barely seven acres. But if ever a park punched above its weight, it's this one. The park — west of Russell Road, with an entrance on Beverley Drive — attracts a variety of birds, who in turn attract a variety of birders. Dog-walkers and their dogs also enjoy the park, as do dogless, bird-indifferent people who live nearby and just want a quiet oasis.

And last month, thanks to the efforts of a 15-year-old named **Tate Commission**, Monticello Park was designated a Community Forest by the [Old-Growth Forest Network](#).

Tate lives within a mile of the park and reckons he first visited it when he was in the first grade. It's set in a neighborhood of single-family homes on curving streets that follow the topography — except in Monticello Park, which is nestled on a ridge that falls steeply to a ravine and stream. That geologic diversity appeals to Tate.

“Even though it's so small compared to other parks, it contains hills, it contains a stream, it contains so many different types of plants,” Tate told me over the phone from Michigan, where he's at Interlochen Arts Camp. “It's crazy how diverse it is.”



Tate Commission, a 15-year-old from Alexandria, was instrumental in getting tiny Monticello Park named a Community Forest by the Old-Growth Forest Network. The designation will protect the Alexandria park from development. (Bridget Farrell)

A teacher at Tate's school, St. Stephen's & St. Agnes, put him in touch with **Brian Kane** at the Old-Growth Forest Network. Among the nonprofit's aims is designating a protected forest in every county in the country.

Monticello Park isn't a true old-growth forest, untouched by human axes. “There is no virgin forest left in Alexandria and Arlington,” said Brian. “It's all been cleared at least twice for agriculture.”

But it displays some characteristics of those important natural areas, as both a habitat and a place where harmful carbon is stored in the roots of aged trees. Red oaks, white oaks, chestnuts and tulip trees thrive there.

“There are trees over 200 years old there, believe it or not,” Brian said.

Other regional Old-Growth Forest Network areas include Glencarlyn Park in Arlington County and the Gold Mine Tract in C&O Canal National Historic Park in Montgomery County.

Tate said nominating the park for designation required compiling a lot of paperwork. He also made a little documentary about the park and its history.

The park has many boosters, including **Rod Simmons**, natural resource manager at the City of Alexandria. Bill Young, the birder who led me around on a recent morning, works with **Ashley Bradford** on a website devoted to the park: MPNature.com. During spring migration from 2012 to 2017, Bill posted daily bird-watch observations.

It’s in spring — when songbirds make their long voyages from south to north — that Monticello Park really comes alive. Look at a map and you’ll see it’s the only sizable patch of green for miles around. Birds are attracted to it, especially the stream at the park’s lowest point.

More than 30 species of warblers have been spotted in Monticello Park, along with orioles, finches, wrens, flycatchers, owls and raptors. Birders call one side of the park Thrush Ridge for the birds — wood thrush, hermit thrush, gray-cheeked thrush and more — that seem to like it there.

The park’s postage-stamp size can be a benefit to birders.

“From one end of the park to the other is an eighth-of-a-mile,” Bill said. “If you do a loop around the stream, it’s a quarter-of-a-mile. It’s a tiny park. That’s one thing it has going for it. You can go to Rock Creek Park and find a lot more birds, but they’re so spread out they’re more difficult to find. Here, they’re all concentrated in one small area.”

The main benefit of becoming part of the Old-Growth Forest Network is protection from development.

“All [protected] forests must be permanently restricted from any commercial logging, no matter who owns it,” said Brian of the Old-Growth Forest Network. “And there must be public access. The public can go and see this forest. It’s not a private forest.”

Tate knows what he wants Monticello Park to be and why its new designation is important: “One of the things it shows is that it can serve as a place for everyone.”

John Kelly writes John Kelly’s Washington, a daily look at Washington’s less-famous side. Born in Washington, John started at The Post in 1989 as deputy editor in the Weekend section.