

Walk the wild side at urban greenway

Birds, fish, plants and animals returning to Little Sugar Creek

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The newest stretch of Little Sugar Creek Greenway is drawing lots of visitors to the surrounding Kings Drive park, many of them feathered, furry or scaly.

To help the birds, fish, plants and other wildlife settle in along this half-mile area near uptown, park officials say it's better to look but not touch.

And there's no need to share your food. Creatures living in the outdoors can get their own.

"Any time you modify the habitat, it can create impact," said Chris Matthews, a Mecklenburg County natural resources manager. "We recommend observing and taking pictures and taking a book along to help identify the birds."

Little Sugar Creek has seen hard times, but today it's on a comeback.

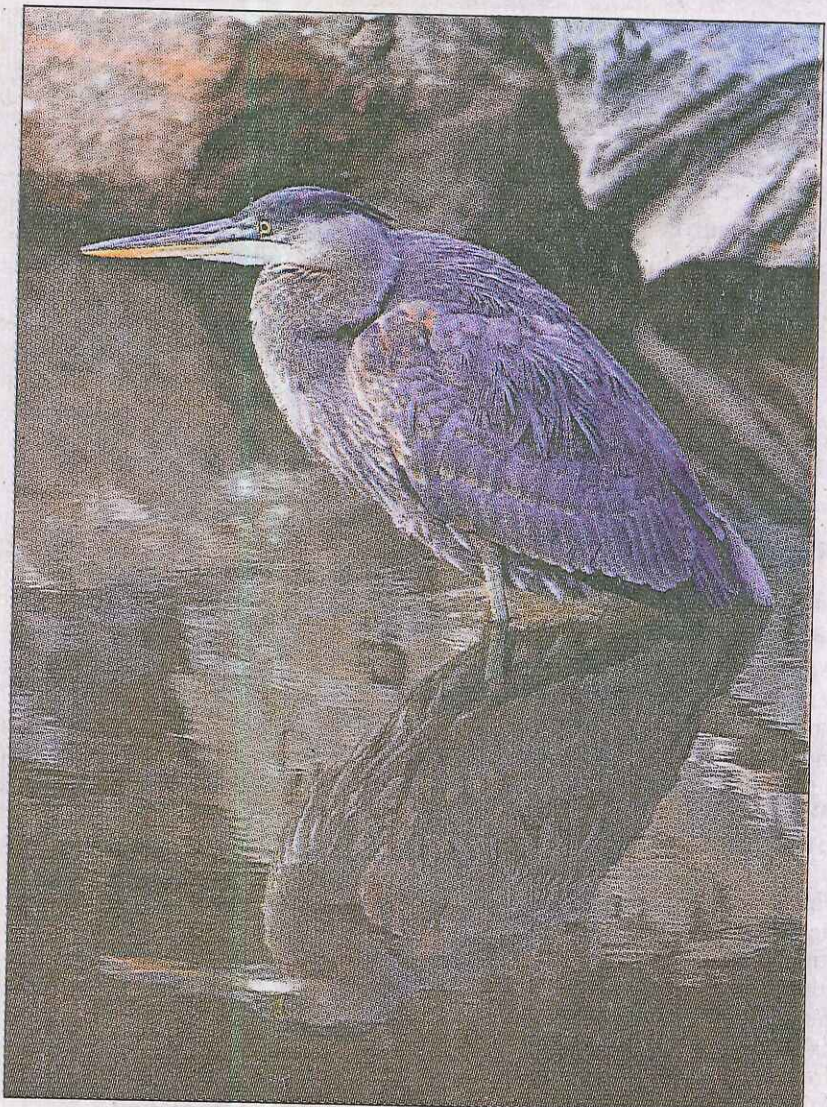
It was so polluted in the 1930s and 1940s that crews would hang 55-gallon drums of deodorizer underneath bridges to fight the smell of sewage and garbage in the stream, Matthews said.

Midtown Square opened in 1959 as the city's first enclosed shopping center at what is now Kings Drive and Charlottetowne Avenue.

Outside the mall, a sea of concrete sprawled and snaked down the street over the creek, creating parking areas and driveways for fast-food chains and offices.

But the mall was mostly empty by

SEE GREENWAY, 3B



PHOTOS BY JOHN D. SIMMONS - jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com

Mecklenburg officials say great blue herons are regular visitors at the recently renewed stretch of Little Sugar Creek greenway.



Jacqueline Marcil walks her dog Gigi while Canada geese hang out along Little Sugar Creek between Charlotte-towne Avenue and Morehead Street.

GREENWAY

■ from 1B

2005, idled by suburban competition. More recently, the site was redeveloped with offices, national retailers, restaurants and residences.

Little Sugar Creek still ranks among the most polluted creeks in the state, said Crystal Taylor, project manager for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Storm Water Services.

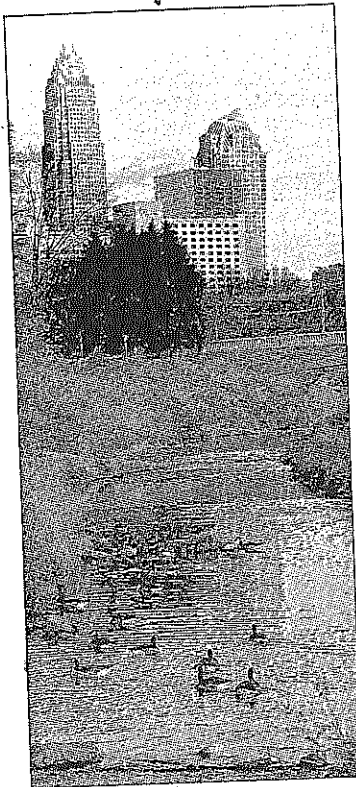
It starts near Hidden Valley in northeast Charlotte and flows to Pineville, passing through industrial and residential areas along the way.

The creek also collects most of the stormwater runoff from uptown and, ultimately, becomes a drinking water source in South Carolina.

Mecklenburg County Storm Water Services is trying to improve water quality in the stream by uncapping it, removing flood-prone homes, adding plants to control erosion and reshaping creek paths and banks.

Work has been started or completed on nearly five miles of creek areas, Taylor said.

Once the concrete was removed near Kings Drive, sunlight started the process for bringing back wildlife, Mat-



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Uncovering Little Sugar Creek has allowed sunlight to begin the process of bringing back wildlife, including these ducks and geese.

ONLINE SLIDESHOW

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thews said.

Sunlight stimulates growth of algae and other plants. Small fish species feed on those plants and on insects that live near the water. Larger fish, birds and other species feed on the smaller fish.

"When you take out sunlight, you lose all the stuff up the food chain," Matthews said.

Of course, people are also drawn to sunlight, so wildlife and people are closer together on the greenway - skaters, cyclists and joggers with ducks, geese, turtles and a stately blue heron that can be seen in or near the water most days near Kings Drive.

Matthews admits that he was fond of skipping rocks over the water as a child. He frowns on it now.

If you want to get closer to the water and the wildlife, he said, check out tours and other programs at Reedy Creek, Latta and McDowell nature centers.

At the greenway, be on your best behavior.

"It's OK to look under a rock, but put the rock back," he said. "Tread lightly and be respectful. You wouldn't want someone coming into your house and taking your couch and throwing it out back."