Riverwood Conservancy: 150 Acres of Urban Nature in the Heart of Mississauga

Nestled along the winding banks of the Credit River, **Riverwood Conservancy** is a 150-acre oasis where the stillness of old-growth forest meets the pulse of Mississauga's suburban sprawl. It is a place where 200-year-old pines stand sentinel over a valley that has witnessed glaciers, homesteaders, and the quiet return of native wildlife. For anyone seeking a pocket of wildness without leaving the city limits, this is the destination—a living, breathing classroom that has been 420 million years in the making.

A Landscape Carved by Ice and History

The story of Riverwood begins not with its gardens or its trails, but with a chunk of ice. Roughly 10,000 years ago, as the last continental glacier retreated, a massive block of ice broke away and was buried in the sediment. When it finally melted, it left behind a depression that filled with water—a pond whose glacial legacy can still be read in the sand patterns around its edges. That ancient hollow is now the heart of Riverwood's wetland system, a quiet mirror for herons and a nursery for amphibians.

Human history arrived much later, but it left its own distinct marks. The property passed through numerous owners before being purchased in 1913 by W. R. Percy and Ida Parker. The 1919 Arts and Crafts-style **Chappell House**, built from local stone pulled from the Credit River valley, now serves as the home of The Riverwood Conservancy. Nearby, the MacEwan Field Station—believed to have once been a pickle-processing facility—stands as a reminder of the land's agricultural past. In 1985, the Mississauga Garden Council was founded to guide the property's transformation into a public garden park and nature reserve; in 2009, it was renamed The Riverwood Conservancy to reflect its broader mission of conservation and education.

One of the Most Diverse Ecosystems in the Credit Valley

What makes Riverwood remarkable is not simply its size, but its ecological density. Within its 150 acres, the conservancy harbors **422 different types of plant and animal species**, making it one of the most ecologically diverse communities in the entire Credit River watershed. The landscape rolls through woodlands, meadows, ravines, wetlands, creeks, and floodplain, with pockets of Carolinian forest and oak savannah adding to the botanical richness.

Wildlife thrives here. White-tailed deer move quietly through the underbrush, red foxes slip along the ravine edges, and red-backed salamanders hide beneath fallen logs. The Credit River itself is a corridor for salmon and trout, and in the autumn, the spectacle of spawning salmon draws visitors to the riverbanks. For birders, Riverwood is a year-round destination: over 150 species of resident and migratory birds have been recorded, including owls, Cooper's Hawks, Ospreys, Red-tailed Hawks, and Turkey Vultures. Some visitors have even had the rare privilege of a chickadee landing in an open palm, a moment that captures the conservancy's magic more eloquently than any statistic.

Four Trails, One Unfolding Story

Riverwood's trail network is designed to let visitors move at their own pace, whether that means a gentle family stroll or a longer riverside ramble. The **Green Trail** offers an easy, roughly one-kilometer loop suitable for all

ages. The **Red Trail** stretches about two kilometers through more varied terrain, while the **Yellow Trail** and the connecting **Culham Trail** open up longer routes along the Credit River. The Riverwood Trail itself forms a 3.1-kilometer loop that many visitors use as an introduction to the property's woodlands and river views.

Accessibility is woven into the visitor experience. The **MacEwan Terrace Garden** features paved pathways, and accessible parking and washrooms are available near Chappell House and the Visual Arts Mississauga building. It is worth noting that the woodland trails themselves are unpaved and may not be suitable for wheelchairs, though the garden areas provide a fully accessible taste of Riverwood's beauty.

Gardens, Art, and a Sanctuary for the Senses

At the entrance to Riverwood, where Burnhamthorpe Road West meets Riverwood Park Lane, stands **Pine Sanctuary**—a public art pavilion installed in 2017 by MARC FORNES / THEVERYMANY. Described as an enclosure "at a scale between sculpture and architecture," its double-layered skin creates a shifting moiré of color and speckled light, inviting spontaneous play and quiet contemplation in equal measure.

Just beyond lies the **MacEwan Terrace Garden**, a two-acre perennial garden opened in 2012. With terraces overlooking native plantings, a viewing deck aimed at a wildlife-rich vernal pond, and an **Enabling Garden** designed specifically for people of all physical abilities, it is a gateway to both the cultural and natural landscapes of Riverwood. In summer, the garden's blooms attract butterflies and hummingbirds, while the surrounding heritage gardens offer a softer, cultivated counterpoint to the wilder ravines below.

A Classroom Without Walls

The Riverwood Conservancy is not a passive park; it is an active charity with a mission to connect people read more of all ages and abilities to nature. School groups from kindergarten through grade eight engage in hands-on research and conservation activities, using the property as an outdoor field station for studying wildlife, plant life, and geological features. Programs are innovatively designed for children, youth, and adults living with physical, cognitive, or mental health challenges, ensuring that the wonder of Riverwood is available to everyone.

Public events run throughout the year, from guided birding walks with local experts to nighttime nature explorations that introduce visitors to owls, bats, and other nocturnal neighbors. In the summer, the **Culture at Riverwood** concert series brings world music and live performance to the MacEwan Terrace Garden, blending art with the open sky. Volunteers are the backbone of this work: in 2024 alone, 850 volunteers contributed 9,750 hours to gardening, wildlife monitoring, education, and stewardship.



Planning Your Visit

Riverwood is open daily from **7:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m.**, and both admission and parking are free. Some conservancy-led programs carry a registration fee, but the trails and gardens themselves are open to all. Visitors are asked to stay on designated trails, observe wildlife from a safe distance, and carry out any litter. Dogs must remain leashed, drones are prohibited, and commercial photography requires a permit. If the main parking lot is full, additional parking is available at the nearby Erindale GO Station.

The conservancy acknowledges that the land on which it operates is within the Treaty Lands and Territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and the traditional land of the Wendat Nation and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy—a recognition that the story of this valley is far older than any garden or trail.

For those who come, Riverwood offers something increasingly rare in the modern city: a place where the pace slows, the noise fades, and the ancient rhythm of a river valley can still be heard. It is 150 acres of urban nature, yes—but it is also a reminder that wildness, when protected and cared for, can flourish in the heart of even the busiest place.