



*Amis de la
Forêt La Blanche*

Annual Report 2023-2024

1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents the activities that took place at the Forêt-la-Blanche Ecological Reserve during the period from April 1, 2023 to March 31, 2024. It includes the main achievements of Friends of Forêt-la-Blanche during the year, as well as a report on number of visitors, an overview of the organization's finances, a presentation of our employees, volunteers and Board of Directors, and the challenges we face in managing the ecological reserve.

2. ACHIEVEMENTS

2023 marked the 20th anniversary of the creation of the Forêt-la-Blanche Ecological Reserve, which we highlighted by organizing a celebration day during which over 250 visitors were able to discover the ecological reserve's trails. It was undoubtedly one of the highlights of the year.

During the fall and winter seasons, weather conditions were not very conducive to visitors using the trails. Heavy rains, high winds and light snow cover meant that we had to close the trails for several days during the year.

Educational Materials

- The booklet of **fact sheets on the flora and fauna** of the ecological reserve has been finalized. Copies are available at the Interpretation Centre and can be borrowed for consultation during trail walks.
- A booklet on animal footprints, ***Read the tracks***, is also available in several copies for visitors to borrow.
- **A virtual tour of trails 3 and 4** is currently in production. The tour will be hosted on the ONDAGO platform. Visitors will be able to download it using a QR code from Friends of Forêt-la-Blanche website or at the interpretation centre. The virtual tour will allow visitors to listen to audio messages describing a dozen points of interest on trails 3 and 4.
- A **photo exhibition** of various Forêt-la-Blanche beautiful viewpoints.

- We worked closely with the MELCCFP to finalize the **educational panels** that will be installed in 2024. A total of 66 educational panels (33 French & 33 English) will be installed.
- We received the final report on the **dendrochronological study** carried out by Arnaud Lalanne, researcher and doctoral student at ISFORT. The study determined the age of 14 trees located along the trails (see figure #1). We plan to install signage in 2024-2025.

| Tree # * | Trail# | Species | Estimated age |
|----------|--------|--------------|---------------|
| 1 | 3 | White Pine | 100 |
| 2 | 3 | Maple Sugar | 170 |
| 3 | 4 | Maple Sugar | 215 |
| 4 | 4 | Aspen | 154 |
| 5 | 4 | Red Oak | 160 |
| 6 | 4 | Maple Sugar | Rotted inside |
| 7 | 4 | Hemlock | 206 |
| 8 | 4 | Cedar | 204 |
| 9 | 5 | Basswood | 145 |
| 10 | 5 | Hemlock | 157 |
| 11 | 3 | Maple Sugar | 268 |
| 12 | 6 | Maple Sugar | 197 |
| 13 | 6 | Maple Sugar | 258 |
| 14 | 6 | Yellow Birch | 189 |
| 14 | 6 | Yellow Birch | 189 |

Figure 1 – Trees that were dated as part of research project

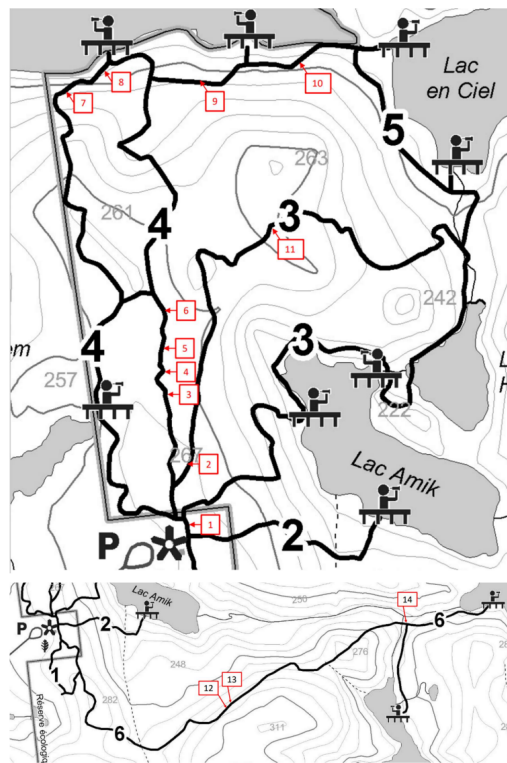


Figure 2 : Position des arbres étudiés le long des sentiers pédagogiques (©Robin Stolba).

Construction and maintenance

- The small pavilion at the entrance to the trails was stained and used for an exhibition of trail photos in the fall.
- Most of the trail infrastructure in poor condition was repaired or rebuilt to ensure visitor safety.
- An inventory of all Forêt-la-Blanche infrastructures was carried out, along with an assessment of their condition.
- Dangerous trees near the trails were pruned or cut down. Unfortunately, this has left visible marks in many places, but time will soon erase those.
- Our staff and volunteers maintained the trails throughout the year.
- The parking lot lights and the lights in the reception area and library were repaired by an electrician thanks to financial support from the MELCCFP.

Educational Program

- June 14: A class of special-needs students from École St-Laurent (10 students + 3 accompanying adults)
- June 18: collaboration with COBALI (<https://www.cobali.org>) for an educational activity on wetlands - 17 people took part in the activity
- July 26: 6 children (+3 accompanying adults) from the Lac Long day camp
- October 4: 24 seniors from the Centre Action Génération came for a guided tour
- The Direction générale de la gestion des forêts du sud-ouest du Québec organized a day for its 20 employees in December: a team-building session in the meeting room in the morning, and a guided tour by Robin in the afternoon. Most of the team were forestry professionals.
- We had no school visits this fall, due to the strike and bad weather.

3. 20th ANNIVERSARY OF THE ECOLOGICAL RESERVE

- The 20th anniversary celebrations held on October 14 were a great success. We welcomed over 250 people to our open house day (which included an observation game and BBQ).
- In the evening, we welcomed around 40 people, including Mr. Benoit Lauzon, the préfet of the MRC Papineau. Minister Mathieu Lacombe sent a video, shared during the reception and on our social networks.
- The open-house event gave us excellent visibility in the region, and the evening enabled us to reconnect with people who have played an important role in the development of the territory and its protection.

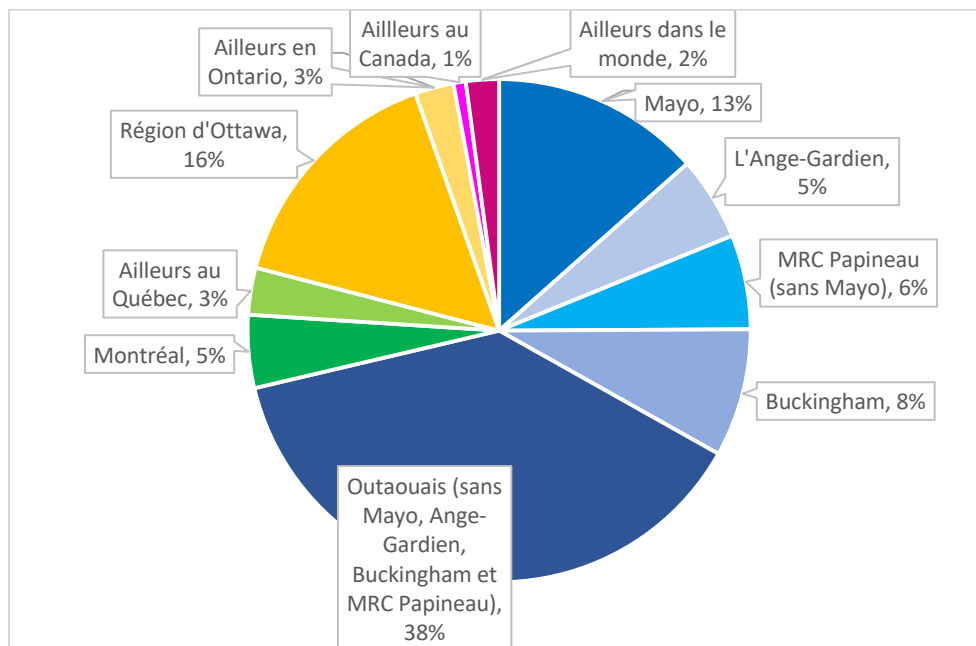
4. NUMBER OF VISITORS

There was a slight drop in the number of visitors in 2023, compared with the previous year, due to poor weather. It rained heavily over Thanksgiving (our busiest period of the year). Also the Centre and the trails were closed for almost 4 weeks in December and January because of dangerous conditions.

| MONTH | 2022 | 2023 |
|-----------|--------------|--------------|
| January | 240 | 240 |
| February | 151 | 280 (52)* |
| March | 186 | 270 |
| April | 215 | 67 |
| May | 250 | 176 |
| June | 233 | 174 (30)* |
| July | 284 | 291 (9)* |
| August | 368 | 423 |
| September | 395 | 417 |
| October | 1,124 (123)* | 769 (24)* |
| November | 423 | 491 |
| December | 177 | 121 (20)* |
| TOTAL | 4,089 (123)* | 3,719 (135)* |

* # educational program

Where visitors come from :



5. FINANCES

Over the past year, our financial situation has remained stable and we have been able to continue all our activities, despite the end of the MELCCFP 2020-23 grant. Thanks to this grant we were able to save

revenues from admission fees, which enabled us to cover our operating costs and maintain the full-time position of education coordinator throughout 2023-2024. We were also able to hire weekend reception staff, two students for an 8-week period during the summer and a worker to repair trail infrastructure.

- By the end of March 2024, we had collected a total of \$15,240 in admission fees, and \$864 for educational days. Sales of membership cards and annual passes totalled approximately \$1,200. We received \$3,250 in donations and \$50,716 in grants (Summer Jobs Canada, Community Services Recovery Fund, municipalities of Mayo and L'Ange-Gardien).
- Our thanks to Cindy Burke, who has been offering yoga classes at the Interpretation Centre for the past ten years, a source of revenue from September to June. We're always happy to support local and community initiatives (such as yoga and the library).
- We organized two snowshoe night walks in January and February, but the weather was not ideal and only 16 people participated.

Government Grants

- Canada Summer Jobs: a grant of \$9,234 to hire two students for a period of 8 weeks.
- Community Services Recovery Fund: this grant of \$38,032 to implement 4 projects:
 - Redesign of the website, including online store
 - Development of a philanthropy plan and tools
 - Implementation of a system to improve the efficiency of our administration
 - Development of a virtual guided tour

Rental of rooms at the Interpretation Centre

This year, we rented out the large meeting room for a few events and for yoga classes. We also reorganized one of the small offices so it could be rented out to consultants.

- Ministère des Ressources naturelles et des Forêts – December 13
- Yoga classes (one day per week)
- Office (2 consultants for a total of 6 days)

6. STAFF

Once again this year, we managed to keep the Interpretation Centre open 7 days a week. We were able to have one permanent employee on staff (the Education Coordinator). Last June, our Director of Finance, Heidi Dionne, retired after many years of valuable service. We thank her for the excellent support she has given us over the years. We would also like to thank Michael Marcyniuk, who built the new pavilion and maintained the trail infrastructure for a number of years. We wish him every success in his new career. We welcome Joanne Lagacé and Jim McEachern.

Here is the list of employees and contractors who worked at Forêt-la-Blanche in 2023-2024

- Robin Stolba, Coordinator
- Jim McEachern, Maintenance and construction

- Michael Marcyniuk, Maintenance and construction
- Heidi Dionne, Finance Director
- Joanne Lagacé, new Finance Director
- Ginette Lauzon-Brassard, Reception desk (weekends)
- Eloi Lafrance, Reception desk and trail maintenance (Canada Summer Jobs)
- Kaylee Whipple, Reception desk and trail maintenance (Canada Summer Jobs and weekends)
- Sara Moreno, Reception desk (weekends)
- Trinity Covey, Reception desk (weekends)
- Abby Rose Cameron, Reception desk (weekends)

Over the past winter, Robin, Trinity and Abby took the "100% welcoming" training course offered by the Institut de tourisme et d'hôtellerie du Québec, and paid for by Tourisme Petite Nation. The aim of this training was to develop the knowledge, skills and know-how needed to optimize the customer experience.

7. BOARD OF DIRECTORS

As per the founding document of Friends of Forêt-la-Blanche, the Board of Directors may consist of up to 15 members. Board members, who must be members in good standing of the organization, are elected annually by the members at the annual general meeting. In 2023-24, the Board members are:

- Renée Giroux (President)
- Kathryn Ann Maloney (Vice-President)
- François Lambert (Treasurer)
- Line Laporte (Secretary)
- Hélène Goulet
- Robbie Ryan
- Mike Marcyniuk
- Christine Vallières

During the year, we started reorganizing our way of working as a Board of Directors by forming five committees which focus on various management aspects of the ecological reserve, in order to be more efficient and to ensure the sustainability of our actions. The five committees are responsible for: 1) Educational programs; 2) Philanthropy and fundraising; 3) General public activities; 4) Maintenance; and 5) Administration (internal policies, Bill 25, job descriptions, etc.).

8. PARTNERSHIPS AND NETWORKING

- We renewed our partnership with Réseau BIBLIO de l'Outaouais. Their 48 member libraries have two family passes each for lending to the public. Many families used those days passes.
- A partnership was set up with the Chutes de Plaisance in 2023 to sell packages allowing visitors to visit both sites at lower cost. A total of 135 day passes were sold. Unfortunately, this partnership will not be renewed, as SÉPAQ now manages the Plaisance Falls site.
- We collaborated with COBALI (<https://www.cobali.org>) on a wetlands education activity involving two educational walks.
- We had formal discussions with the president of the Parc régional de la Forêt-Bowman to establish a partnership like the one we had with Chutes de Plaisance.

- We renewed our membership with the following organizations:
 - Tourisme Outaouais
 - Tourisme Petit-Nation
 - Rando-Québec
 - Our Kéroul membership, which allows us to advertise that our facilities are accessible (building, toilets and trail #1), is still valid until 2024.

9. COMMUNICATIONS

- The website has been updated. The text has been simplified and reorganized to make it more user-friendly. An online store service has been integrated (operated by Zeffy, that also gives us access to a database (visitors and donors).
- A Tourisme Petite Nation banner was installed near the parking lot, signalling our participation in the MRC Papineau's tourism activities.
- We had great media coverage for the 20th anniversary and for the trail clean-up day (Tourisme Outaouais and Tourisme Petite Nation, Chambre de commerce de la Petite Nation, Info de la Basse-Lièvre), and there were many "likes" on our social networks during this period.
- Media tour - organized by Tourisme Outaouais from October 3 to 6. As part of the tour, two Canadian content creators (Derek and Carine from We did it our way) hit the trails on October 5. They published information about the Forêt-la-Blanche on their blog: <https://wediditourway.com/things-to-do-outaouais-travel-guide/> (see #13)
- A journalist and a photographer from France's National Geographic visited the trails on October 8, at the invitation of Tourisme Outaouais. They visited 3 regions of Quebec as part of their tour. The project involved producing a series of photos for an exhibition that ran from January 15 to March 15 at Bercy Village (Paris).
- We signed an agreement with Tourisme Petite Nation to be part of their fall contest, in which people could enter online to win a weekend in Petite Nation, accommodation and activities included. The contest was advertised in late August-September in the Montreal and Laurentian regions, giving us great visibility. The winners came for their guided tour on September 23.
- A new logo was developed to better represent our current mission. We will officially launch it in 2024 to mark the installation of the educational panels and to celebrate 25 years of Friends of Forêt-la-Blanche.
- All information about the ecological reserve's trails have been updated and can now be found on Balise Québec (website on trails listed by Rando-Québec).

10. OUR VOLUNTEERS

Here is the list of our volunteers in 2023-2024 :

H. Auclair, Sandy Banner, Marsha Bougard, Gabriel Brun, Nancy Carrière, David Chernushenko, Jean-François Davignon, James Donnelly, Maia Donnelly, Pablo Farago, Mireille Gagnon, Renée Giroux, Véronique Harrington, Sharon Ivall, Marie-Odile Junker, Don Kearnan, Alix et Dominic Laimite, François Lambert, Line Laporte, Danielle Ledoux, Chantal Lorrain, Kathryn Maloney, Michael Marcyniuk, Jim McEachern, Aimé Morin, Emmanuel Morin, Véronique Paré , P. Renaud, Suzanne Roeder, Robbie Ryan, Lisa-Marie Serafin, Anne-Marie Simonson, Christine Vallières.

We thank them for their invaluable collaboration and dedication!

11. CHALLENGES FOR 2024

Condition of the trails

The trails were laid out in the 1980s. Some trail segments have deteriorated over the years due to erosion and use. These segments should be resurfaced to ensure visitor safety and to extend the life of the trails. In addition, trail #1 (Le Chablis), which is accessible to the mobility-impaired, is now covered in moss, making wheelchair travel much more difficult. Work needs to be done on this trail to ensure that the ecological reserve can maintain its status as an accessible site.

Interpretation Centre

The building, which was renovated over 10 years ago, needs to be inspected to determine what maintenance work needs to be done more urgently. In fact, we feel that the roof, the siding on the north side of the building, some windows and the floor coverings need to be replaced as soon as possible.

12. CONCLUSION

Although the weather posed challenges in terms of visitor numbers, the year 2023-2024 saw the completion of a good number of educational tools. In preparation for the ecological reserve's 20th anniversary celebrations, we put a lot of energy into the maintenance and the cleaning up of the trails and the building. The cutting and pruning of problem trees on the trails also helped to ensure visitor safety. We have also put in place new administrative tools (centralization of files, website, etc.). In short, everything is in place to welcome a wide variety of visitors in the coming year.

We would like to thank the Ministère de l'Environnement, de la Lutte contre les changements climatiques, de la Faune et des Parcs (MELCCFP), as well as the municipalities of Mayo and L'Ange-Gardien for their generous financial support. We would also like to thank the Canada Summer Jobs program and the Community Services Recovery Fund for the grants they awarded us in 2023, as well as the GiftFunds foundation. Without this financial support, it would have been impossible for us to have a continuous presence seven days a week at the Interpretation Centre, to continue our educational mission and to maintain the trail infrastructures.

Once again this year, we would like to acknowledge the unfailing support of the municipality of Mayo, which, in addition to its generous annual contribution, continues to support us with snow removal for parking lots, insurance and advertising. We're delighted to be able to count on this close collaboration.