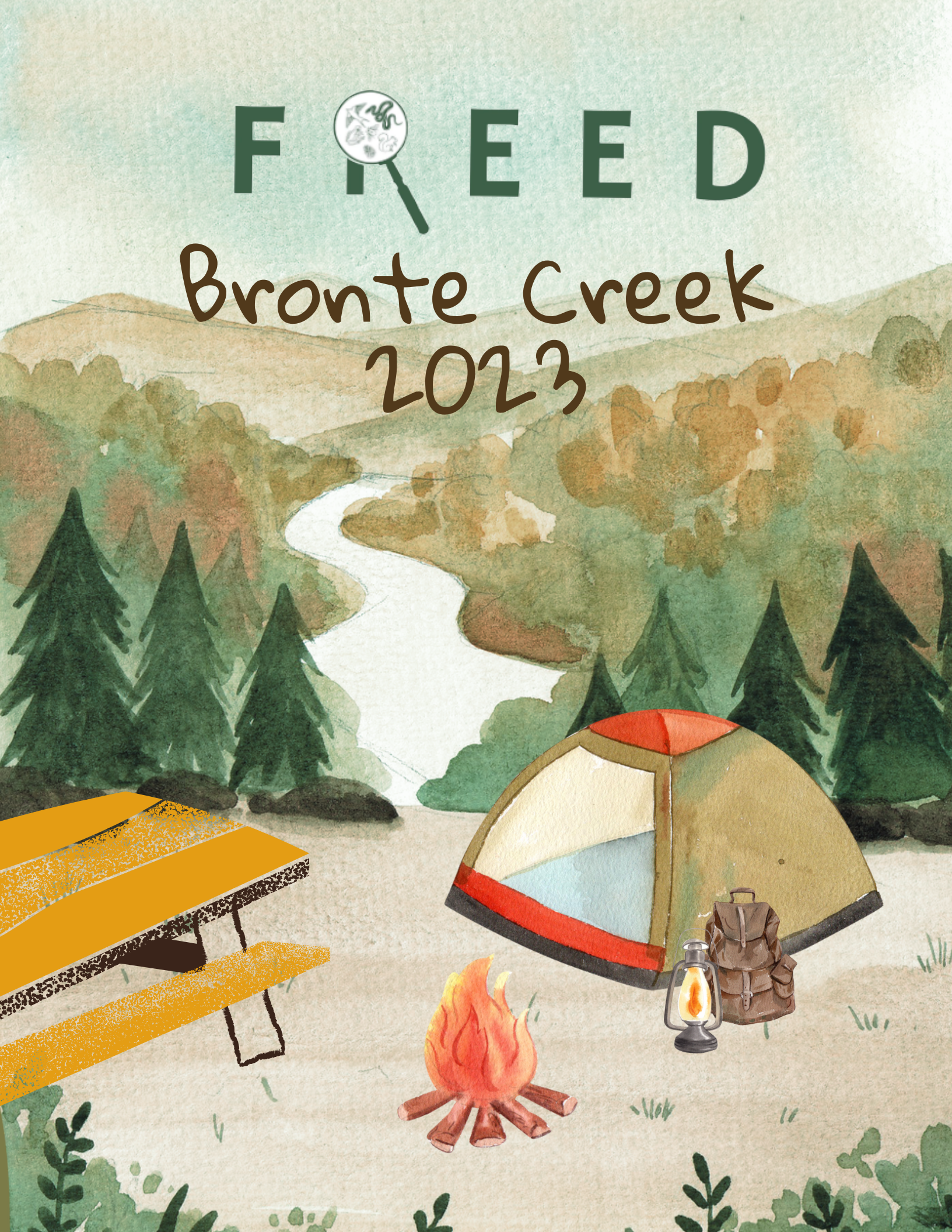


F R E E D

Bronte Creek 2023



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In fieldwork, pivoting is the rule, not the exception. This much was clear (though the skies were not) on June 23-25th, 2023 when we hosted our third ever FREED event at Bronte Creek Provincial Park. This three-day, two night overnight camping excursion was packed with many firsts – sleeping in tents, sampling a wide range of fieldwork skills, discovering different careers in conservation, and instantly making new nature-loving friends. Though it poured for most of the weekend, nothing could rain on our FREED parade.

For this, we have primarily our participants to thank – we have yet to see another group of individuals who connected so quickly over setting up tents in the first hour of the weekend, to having post-campfire chats, to helping each other get into waders, to truly listening to others' perspectives, and to saying “see you again” as plans were made to connect during the upcoming school year. The excursion may have only lasted a weekend, but the connections seemed timeless!

We would like to take a moment to thank you for making this weekend a reality. With your support, we were able to:

- **Host** 11 Black and/or Racialized undergraduate students and 9 instructors and allies across four gorgeous camping sites, multiple day-use sites, and hikes at Bronte Creek Provincial Park.
- **Reduce** barriers to fieldwork by covering all accommodation and transportation costs alongside providing equipment subsidies.
- **Provide** camping equipment from tents, sleeping mattresses, canopies, tarp, rope and more for everyone to have a safe and (mostly) dry first overnight camping experience.
- **Equip** each student with a fieldwork kit including backpack, headlamps, long socks, rain gear, hats, field notebooks, and more!
- **Successfully run and provide** materials for five workshops covering a wide range of topics including long-term data collection and surveys for birds, mammals, and invertebrates; land stewardship; and science communication.
- **Nourish** everyone with delicious food and drinks throughout the weekend including a warm, pancake Sunday breakfast – yum!

Our time at Bronte Creek was short but packed with surprises and overflowing with a sense of playfulness and gratitude. This weekend showed us how far small acts of kindness and large helpings of laughter can make even the rainiest of times bright with hope for the present and the future. We are so grateful that you continue to support us and allow us to do this meaningful work – it is always a dream come true and we could not be happier to support the next generation of scientists, learners, and wanderers.

Aranya, Mariel, and Lauren

EVENT SUMMARY

Students arrived on Friday evening to the campground-side of Bronte Creek Provincial Park from as close as Burlington and Toronto and as far as North Bay and London. Upon arrival, students received their tent assignments, day packs, and camping gear. Once a small group of the early arrivers were instructed on how to set up a tent, they went over to their neighbours to help with their assembly. Barring a few comical mishaps along the way, all students had a chance to set up large 8-person tents. These campsites and gear were donated by **Ontario Parks**, who provided us with tremendous and generous support to execute this event successfully! **Jessica Stillman**, a **Discovery Project Program Coordinator at Bronte Creek PP**, was also an excellent facilitator and resource throughout the weekend.



A delicious, homemade dinner was ready by the time the students had settled in. Throughout the weekend, **Carolene and her team at Vic Caters and Bakery** filled our bellies and hearts with healthy meals from warm breakfasts, to packed lunches, to hearty dinners. For dinner, students munched on their jerk chicken, roasted vegetables, and coconut rice dinner.

All photos taken by our lovely and talented photographer [Alexander Abdel](#) (Instagram).

FREED co-directors Aranya Iyer (WWF-Canada) and **Mariel Terebiznik (Ontario Parks)** gave a safety talk covering the basics of fieldwork safety alongside what fieldwork for individuals with different identities entails. At the end, instructors shared their infamous ‘fieldwork fails’ and provided humorous insight on how fieldwork is nothing if not full of surprises. This was timely advice as in just a few moments, the sky would break open, cut our campfire short, and shuffle everyone to their tents for their first night.





There, safely tucked into in sleeping bags, we overheard many students in their tents having their first conversations with each other and becoming excited about the weekend. Our designated ‘snack car’ was also frequented both nights. We heard later that this experience of sleeping outdoors in a tent, munching on chips, talking to strangers, and listening to the pitter-patter of the drops on the plastic was an entirely unique and special experience.

Students rose early the next day to have breakfast and head over to the day-use side for the first round of workshops. In the slow drizzle, one group got to learn about different small mammal tracking and camera tracking practices from **Lauren Witterick, a PhD student from University of Western Ontario and FREED organizer**. Students learned how to set up small mammal trapping grids using a compass and marked ropes, along with how to operate a longworth live trap. They then pivoted to learn about the automated behavioural response systems, a combined camera trap and speaker system that allows researchers to explore the behavioural response to a variety of audio cues in animals of all sizes. Students ended the workshop by checking the traps set out earlier to find some surprises that Lauren had hidden inside and took some fun videos on the camera traps.

Our second group got a chance to go on a birding hike at the Trillium Trail with **Samreen Munim, a Forest Birds Specialist at Birds Canada**. Students got to practise using binoculars, field guides and popular naturalist apps like Merlin and Seek to identify the curious creatures they encountered on their hike. Samreen introduced skills like birding by sight and sound, and how to conduct a census. She touched on how current projects, such as [Anishinaabe Bird Names](#), were actively working to decolonize the field of avian research. On the hike, the students also had a chance to get a rare glimpse of a bald eagle nest with an adult and juvenile in it!





Saturday afternoon was an exciting time. As we enjoyed a delicious taco lunch, the instructors nervously watched the sky turn from blue to grey with heavy rain, keeping a close eye on the radar apps, and anxiously discussing alternative plans for the afternoon workshop of benthic macroinvertebrates (small invertebrates that live on the floor of rivers and lakes) led by **Chantalle Jacob-Okorn and Sherwin Watson-Leung from Credit Valley Conservation**. The participants seemed unbothered as they all squeezed together into a single picnic table and laughed as they delved into the funny icebreaker questions that were included in their welcome package (the favorite was "What is one lesson you think earthworms can teach us?")



With some incredible luck, the rain completely cleared up by the time that Chantalle and Sherwin finished introducing themselves and their stories to the FREED participants. We all eagerly rushed down to the titular Bronte Creek under a gorgeous blue sky ready to learn. In a manner emblematic of the camaraderie and collaboration we saw the students exhibit throughout the weekend, everyone chipped in to carry the many materials down the path to the creek. Once there, everyone put on waders, many for the first time, as Chantalle and Sherwin went over the safety protocols of working in water.

In a jam-packed workshop, Chantalle then showed off the YSI Water quality meter, with students going in groups of 2, while Sherwin encouraged the rest of the group to explore by flipping over rocks in the creek to find benthic macroinvertebrates. Students also learned how to take quantitative and qualitative measurements of the habitat, from river width to descriptive drawings. The highlight of the workshop was when each student got a chance to practice the 'kick and sweep' standardized technique of sampling benthic macroinvertebrates, followed by instruction on how to identify the different taxonomic groups, and a discussion of what work can be done with that kind of data. As the workshop wrapped up, everyone was excited for dinner and the final workshop of the day back at the campground.



However, the rain had other plans for us. As we arrived to campsite, the rain reared its thunderous head, and we decided it was best to make our way back over to a recently vacated picnic shelter on the day-use side (thanks to the Bronte Creek staff for the tip!) for a much needed dinner of warm pasta. Even though students had lost their free time in the afternoon shuffling back and forth while trying to wait out the rain, they all attentively listened and engaged with the discussion on science communication led by **Anika Hazra, a Research & Communications Officer at the University of Toronto**. With bellies full, students learned best practices of science communication by writing elevator pitches to introduce themselves, followed by 2 minute summaries of papers based on nothing but their abstract. Anika then used this experience to lead a thoughtful discussion on what makes good and effective science communication, and what makes it so important in current events.



By evening, it was dry enough to host our second campfire around which we made s'mores. During this time, students got a chance to freely interact with all the instructors and have informal chats about careers in conservations and the realities of fieldwork. There was no grumbling as we shuffled around the sleeping arrangements to make sure everyone had a dry spot to sleep. We all went to sleep exhausted but satisfied after a busy day of learning, bonding, and running from the rain.

The next morning, students packed up their belongings and got ready for their final day of activities. In the morning, the groups swapped so that Lauren and Samreen ran the same workshops for a new batch of students.



After lunch, students learned about land stewardship from **Jenna Siu, wildlife habitat biologist from the Canadian Wildlife Service**. Jenna started with introducing the students to the different perspectives involved in land stewardship, with students working in teams to outline the priorities of different stakeholders. She then took them on a guided hike, teaching students how to identify the wildlife we encountered along the way such as the aptly named dog vomit slime mold and different defining characteristics of old growth and younger forests. She ended with a group discussion about conservation where students could share what conservation meant to them.

Back at the campground, students were greeted with a pizza picnic to round off the event and prepare for the travels home. Before leaving, students shared their best moments of the weekend with many citing how this experience was exactly what they needed to better understand how fieldwork functioned in the real world. Similarly, there were many nods when students highlighted how the overall setting and feeling of the weekend made them feel welcomed and accepted. We even heard a “I think I can see myself doing this as a job for the first time!” This is all we ever imagined FREED to be and we are thrilled to have the chance to keep being part of these moments again and again.



THANK YOU!

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