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I'll take Manhattan's creatures

By Tim Friend, USA TODAY

NEW YORK — Sixteen intrepid scuba divers vanish beneath the green frothy surface of 'the Lake' in the heart of the world's most famous park. Onlookers whisper jokes about bumping into Jimmy Hoffa's cement overshoes.

But this is no *CSI* search for clues. For the divers, it is the first and arguably most hazardous mission of the 24-hour Central Park BioBlitz, an ambitious effort to survey and record as many non-human life forms as possible for the first time in the park's 150-year history.

New York is showing the nation that people living in one of the most urban environments on the planet can still connect with nature and learn to become better stewards for their animal neighbors, says Richard Wiese, president of the Explorers Club, which organized the event. The club is a non-profit organization that promotes exploration and field sciences.

"We are attempting to catalogue every organism, plant and animal that is living in the park," Wiese says as he joins a team of divers in the Lake, which lies next to the Bethesda Fountain. "The BioBlitz is a celebration of life. What we will be setting is a benchmark, an inventory of Central Park's many species."

Honorary Explorers Club president and ocean advocate Sylvia Earle hopes the event inspires other cities to conduct BioBlitzes.

"This is something people in any city can do. Exploration doesn't have to be about going to the Amazon or the North Pole," Earle says. "We can find amazing things in our own backyards."

From noon Friday to noon Saturday, 350 citizen and scientist volunteers searched from the tops of trees to the mucky bottom of the Lake for all things that fly, hop, crawl, wiggle and swim.

By 1 p.m. Saturday, scientists had logged nearly 850 species, not including the tens of

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thousands of flagellating microorganisms collected by the scuba divers in a single, inevitable gulp of the tangy-tasting liquid that the locals call "lake water." Scientists weren't sure how many species they would find and consider this catalog of species a starting point for future studies rather than a comprehensive list.

Instead of taking pocket field notes, scientists recorded their finds on lightweight computer notebooks from different manufacturers, using specially designed software created by volunteers from Microsoft. The prototype software allowed scientists to make entries in the notebooks and transfer data immediately to a central database, says Joe Versace (yes, a first cousin of the late designer Gianni) of Microsoft.

Wiese said similar software and lightweight computer notepads will become the tools that explorers and scientists use to take field notes in the near future. Within 15 minutes after BioBlitz ended, Ron Gill of the New York State Museum had the tally from the computer notepads: 393 species of plants, 102 species of invertebrates, 78 species of moths, 46 species of birds, 12 species of fungi, 10 species of spiders, nine species of dragonflies, seven species of mammals, three species of turtles, two species of frogs and two species of a truly bizarre microscopic critter known as a tardigrade.

Tardigrades are caterpillar-like creatures that resemble teddy bears and live in almost every region of the world. Very little is known about them, except that they can withstand cold temperatures of -273 degrees centigrade (absolute zero: the temperature at which molecular motion stops), dry up into little balls when there's no water, and reconstitute themselves after decades with a drop of water.

When professor Randy Miller of Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia, one of the few tardigrade specialists, heard about the event this weekend, he left home at 5:30 a.m. Saturday, drove to Central Park and found two species in moss and leaf litter by 10:30 a.m.

"New York is the epitome of urbanization. But here nature still is waiting to be discovered in the park," says Michael Novacek, senior vice president and provost of science at the American Museum of Natural History.

Last year, AMNH scientists discovered a new genus and species of centipede in Central Park called *Nannarrup hoffmani*, which was the first new species reportedly discovered in the park in more than a century. Novacek says New Yorkers 'went crazy' for the tiny centipede. Its discovery helped inspire the idea of the BioBlitz.

"If you want to really know about nature, you have to fall in love with it and be exposed to it, Novacek says. "For us, Central Park is the first step."

Central Park was the first major public park constructed in an American city. After a competition for the park's design in 1858, it was built on a mosquito-ridden marsh over a 16-year period using nearly five million cubic yards of stone, earth and topsoil. More than 500,000 trees, shrubs and vines were planted during those years in the 843-acre park. City officials estimate that more than 20 million people from the USA and other countries visit the park each year.

Central Park illustrates that if you give nature an inch, it will eventually take a mile, or more. Planners did not have to bring animals here. More than 270 species of migratory birds stop by each year, along with all of those human visitors. Flying squirrels came from upstate decades ago and made the park their home.

"I bet most New Yorkers have no idea that there are flying squirrels — they actually glide — living up in the trees. They (the squirrels, that is) are very secretive and strictly nocturnal," says Fred Koontz, executive vice president of the Wildlife Trust, which is one of the event's co-sponsors. Wildlife Trust also sponsors New York Bioscape, a 44-

county exploration of plant and animal ecosystems in human-dominated landscapes.

Koontz says that taking species surveys is about more than just connecting with nature. Mosquito-borne West Nile virus and tick-borne Lyme disease originated in the New York and Connecticut urban landscapes. "The health of all living things is connected in ways that people have never appreciated until recently. Bio-blitzes, wherever they are conducted, help communities learn about the health of the species that live next door."

A new field, known as reconciliation ecology, is teaching people how to share space with wildlife, not just in places like Central Park, but in all the nooks and crannies between houses and neighborhoods.

Michael Hollander, a local software developer, says that for him volunteering for BioBlitz is simply good for the soul. He saw an ad for BioBlitz on a Web site and came down at 7:30 Friday evening to join a group searching for bats.

"This gave me a legitimate reason to come into the park at night when it is quiet. It is so easy for people to get overwhelmed in the city," Hollander said.

By nightfall, several families have gathered in an area known as the "ramble." On other days, this spot has a reputation for being a meeting place of a different kind. But tonight there are only a handful of people in search of bats and screech owls. They divide into teams. The owl group follows Chris Nagey, a 25-year-old student from New York's Fordham University who is working on a project to introduce screech owls into the park. So far, the park service has released eight of the owls, which seem to be enjoying their new digs. Nagey sets up a boombox with CD recordings of screech owl territorial calls. Sure enough, when he begins to play it, the owner of the territory flies nearby to warn off the potential intruder.

Meanwhile, the bat people have found four brown bats by 9:30 p.m.

Central Park after dark has not always been a place where families can gather to search for wildlife. Perhaps it's still not quite there. At about 9:40 pm, the crack of gunfire is heard off in the distance: a well-recognized sound associated with that dreaded species *Homocidalmaniacus*.

One visitor asks, "What was that?" Peter Burrow, a BioBlitz volunteer familiar with the ways of Manhattan, says, "Oh, that's just the signal that means it's time to leave the park."

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