

Volunteers pull hundreds of pounds of trash from Wolf Run Creek

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A front-end loader donated by Modern Property Management dropped off a shopping cart full of refuse that had been pulled out of Wolf Run Creek during a clean-up Saturday.

Dozens of volunteers took to Wolf Run Creek on Saturday with one simple motto: "If we don't clean up our mess, no one will."

Of course, none of the 135 volunteers was personally responsible for the thousands of broken beer bottles, crumpled soda cans, discarded food wrappers and other refuse that clogged the creek. But they attacked the job with vigor, clearing hundreds of pounds of debris from the 3/4-mile stretch meandering through Lexington's Cardinal Valley Park in three hours.

Among the piles of water-logged junk was a sub-woofer from a car stereo, a set of truck tires and two fully functional shopping carts, which were recycled for trolleying bottles and cans to a garbage truck provided by the city.

Compared to other clean-ups the haul was pretty tame.

"The worst we have ever had to get out was a mattress," said Paul Gregory, former president of Cardinal Valley Neighborhood Association. "It was heavy, it was wet, and it stunk. It was nasty."

Volunteers of all ages turned out: 10-year-old boys staged sword fights using pieces of PVC pipe pulled from the water; a young mother hauled trash to the dumpster with one hand while pushing a stroller with the other; and an elderly couple took a rest on a fallen tree after each hauled their third bag of trash.

The event was sponsored by the Keep Lexington Beautiful Commission and organized by the nonprofit group Friends of Wolf Run and District 11 Councilwoman Peggy Henson.

During the Great American Cleanup event, a nationwide grassroots effort that runs March 1 to May 31 each year, neighborhoods all over Fayette County organize to clean up streams, roads and wooded areas.

But special attention is paid to Wolf Run Creek, recognized as one of the most polluted streams in the state, said Bruce Hutcheson, president of Friends of Wolf Run. The creek drains a large, densely populated watershed bordered by Alexandria Drive on the north and Nicholasville Road on the south.

Kevin Franklin, 52, a captain with the University of Kentucky police department who grew up in the neighborhood, said he remembered fishing for bass, which were plentiful in the creek in the 1960s.

But by the 1980s, after years of neglect and urban growth, the creek was so polluted that the fish all but disappeared, replaced by mosquitoes, flies, leeches and other pests.

"It was filthy," he said. "It smelled like a sewer."

Thanks to volunteer clean-ups like Saturday's, fish — mostly bluegill and chub minnows — have begun to return.

"It'll never be like it was," Franklin said. "But it's changed a lot. It's a lot cleaner, it's a lot nicer, and we'd like to keep it that way."

Volunteers included neighborhood association members, UK police officers, Lexington police officers, members from the Alpha Phi Omega co-ed fraternity at UK, and several girls from STARS, the community service group for teen girls who discovered a sewage pipe leaking into the creek last August.

Paula Singer, president of the Hamilton Park Neighborhood Association, praised the group's hard day's work. But she worried the stream would quickly become polluted again without more volunteers, more awareness and help from the city.

"Events like these are Band-Aids," she said. "We need long-range planning, and we truly need more participation."