

Conservation group preserves native Manitoba orchids

Wed, Jan 29, 2003

By Bob Armstrong, Winnipeg Free Press

(as printed in the Winnipeg Free Press January 29, 2003)

BENEATH the snow, some of the most beautiful and endangered plants in Canada are waiting to show themselves.

People who love those plants have gathered together in the group Native Orchid Conservation Inc., which is holding its second annual members' night on Jan. 29 at the Dakota Lawn Bowling Centre, 1212 Dakota St. About 200 Manitobans are members of the group, which works to preserve both the flowers and their habitat.

"The habitat is the important thing," says Doris Ames, a St. Vital resident and president of the organization. "In order to protect the orchids you need to protect the habitat."

Manitoba has about 39 species of orchid, some of which are endangered, like the western prairie fringed orchid. Even those that aren't endangered seem to be declining in population, says membership secretary Peggy Bainard Acheson, noting that it's not known whether the decline is a result of global warming, habitat disturbance, competition from other species or a combination of causes.

The January 29 meeting will give members and people curious about orchids the opportunity to see photos of the flowers, taken by Ian Ward, a photographer and member of the group. They'll also find out about the Nature Conservancy of Canada's work to maintain habitat for orchids and for other endangered and threatened plants and animals. A representative of the Manitoba branch of the NCC will discuss that organization's work to preserve habitat in the Duck Mountain area.

The Native Orchid Conservation group is also actively involved in conserving habitat.



Photo: Linda Vermette, WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Doris Ames, Peggy Bainard Acheson and Eugene Reimer (from left) from Native Orchid Conservation Inc.

"We're looking at projects to conserve habitat, not just for orchids but for other endangered plants," says Acheson.

The orchid group surveys Manitoba government timber sales in the southeast of the province, says Ames. Members identify forest lands that are particularly rich in plant life and plot these areas using GPS technology. They then pass this information on to the government so that when logging rights are being sold, areas that contain important habitat will be kept intact.

The organization is also working to establish an ecological reserve at a site near Lake Winnipeg that is particularly rich in orchids. The site near Gull Lake, in the sand ridge area east of Lake Winnipeg near Patricia Beach, is home to 28 orchids as well as eight species of carnivorous plants.

The Winnipeg Foundation has provided the organization with funding to support salvage work, transplanting native orchids from locations where they are about to be destroyed by construction, notes Ames.

However, Acheson says, transplanting orchids is no easy matter. Many of them have very specific needs and will only grow in certain soils with just the right pH or with certain species of fungus.

"You just can't put them in your garden and expect them to grow," she says. In fact, discouraging people from digging up wild plants is part of the organization's message.



Photo: John Neufeld, NOCI

Dragon's mouth Orchid

In addition to the conservation projects, the group is involved in education and organizes field trips for members who enjoy visiting sites where the beautiful, delicate flowers can be found. Depending on weather conditions, the society offers about six field trips per year.

A field guide to Manitoba's native orchids is in the planning stages and should be available next year, says Ames. The book will depict the province's orchids and describe the habitats in which they can be found.

One noted hotspot for orchids is the Nature Conservancy of Canada's Tall Grass Prairie Preserve in southeast Manitoba, near Gardenton.

"In southeast Manitoba, where ecological zones come together, we have a lot of biodiversity, so we have a lot of species," notes Ames.

You don't necessarily have to hit the highway to see wild orchids, says Bainard Acheson, who has spotted them in Transcona and in Charleswood along the Harte Trail, an abandoned rail line that is used as a hiking and biking trail. Orchids were also transplanted in the Bishop Grandin Greenway, a natural area being reclaimed in the power line right of way immediately north of Bishop Grandin Boulevard.