

An ecological wonder to explore

BY PAUL TURENNE

While many of us may not be able to tell a carnivorous sundew from a dragon's mouth or grass-pink, most of us know a beautiful plant when we see it.

From brightly coloured and delicate rare orchids to bug-eating brutes, the flora that inhabit the Brokenhead Wetland, located just north of Patricia Beach near Lake Winnipeg, are enough to impress just about anyone.

To make those impressions easier, a new boardwalk was recently constructed in this wonderland, allowing visitors non-intrusive access to an area that's sure to become a new favourite for many cottagers and beach-goers.

The Brokenhead Wetland – despite the fact it's more than twice the size of Winnipeg's Assiniboine Park and located in the well-travelled corridor between Brokenhead Ojibway Nation, Gull Lake, Grand Beach and Victoria Beach – is likely unknown to most Manitobans. Yet, the wetland is unique in Manitoba in that it contains more than three-quarters of the orchid species found in the province, including the spectacular ram's head, yellow and showy lady's slippers.

The area is also home to a rare spring-fed community



After the Brokenhead Wetland Interpretive Trail officially opens, likely next spring, interpretive guides hired by the Brokenhead Ojibway Nation will run tours for the public. PHOTOS ON THIS PAGE BY JUDY OWEN.



of white cedar trees and nearly every species of carnivorous plant that grows in the province, including the lime green-and-purple pitcher plant.

"We don't know of anywhere else where there's this kind of concentration (of species)," said Peggy Bainard

Acheson, president of Native Orchid Conservation Inc. (NOCI), and as treasurer of Debwendon Inc., one of the people who helped get the new boardwalk trail off the ground.

The trail is, literally, off the ground. That's the point. The 1,240-hectare Brokenhead Wetland Ecological Reserve is just that: wet. It contains several different wetland habitats, including the calcareous fen, which is rare in North America and is characterized by a fluctuating water table. But the same ecological characteristics that allow for the growth of curious and colourful plants also make for some fairly touchy terrain.

Hence, a new boardwalk, a little more than one-kilometre long, that can introduce shutterbugs and nature lovers to the area without having them trample the delicate earth and flowers they've come to see. Some sections of the boardwalk were even brought in using a



Many orchids such as the showy lady's slipper grow near the boardwalk. PHOTO BY JUDY OWEN.

special sled this past winter in order to avoid damaging the sensitive ground.

"It's surprising how sensitive things are, especially some of the orchids that grow in there," Bainard Acheson said.

"You have no idea how excited we were when we walked out on the trail (for the first time). Nobody has to go off the trail to get a good picture of an orchid. We're very pleased about that because that was the whole purpose."

Although the official public opening isn't likely to occur until next spring, the boardwalk was installed earlier this year and is accessible to most, though it still lacks some amenities such as wheelchair access, washrooms and waste disposal. Interpretive guides hired by the Brokenhead Ojibway Nation will likely begin running tours for the public next year, but in the meantime the rudimentary boardwalk that winds through forest and fields, with benches along the way, is usable.

The development of the trail is the culmination of a push to preserve the area that began in earnest in the late 1990s, partly in response to concerns about the effect of water usage by Gull Lake cottagers on the area's water table. The importance of the wetland, however, was recognized long before that.

"We've been living in this area for about 300 years. We've always collected medicines there," said Carl Smith, a Brokenhead band

member and chair of Debwendon Inc., an organization founded to spearhead the trail-building project.

Smith said plants such as Seneca root, Labrador tea and cedar have long been collected from the area, adding he and many of his fellow band members are eager to educate people about the value of the wetland.

The area was declared an ecological reserve in 2005, and Debwendon was founded in 2007. But what really tipped the boardwalk-building scales was the surprise contribution



The carnivorous pitcher plant has long petals, which drop to expose a round, lime-green face. Its tube-like leaves grow nearby in the ground and kill insects that crawl inside. PHOTO (TOP) BY EUGENE REIMER. PHOTOS (LEFT, RIGHT) BY JUDY OWEN.

of Eugene Reimer. A nature lover and photography buff, Reimer was a board member with NOCI who became ill with cancer and decided to donate \$600,000 to the Winnipeg Foundation to provide an endowment fund that would perpetually fund the trail's ongoing maintenance.

"It was a natural fit for Eugene's interests. He enjoyed exploring, photographing and learning about nature," said his sister, Iris Reimer.

"While Eugene was living with cancer, he realized he would not get to see the completed boardwalk and interpretive trail, but that he

Where is it?

There isn't yet signage, but access to the Brokenhead Wetland Interpretive Trail is located on the west side of Highway 59, north of the Brokenhead Ojibway Nation and south of Highway 12.

The parking lot is not quite two kilometres north of Stead Road, opposite the gravel pit that's located on the east side of the highway. There's a RM of Alexander sign beside the gravel pit entrance and a pile of large boulders at the opening to the trail's parking lot.

For more information and updates on trail amenities, visit www.debwendon.org.



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could make a contribution to ensure that this fragile ecosystem would be protected, but would be accessible for future generations.”

“He always talked about it. He really liked it up here,” Smith said. “It was one of his

favourite spots.”

Just a few days before Reimer’s death in 2011, the province announced it would provide \$1 million to build the trail, with Reimer’s contribution funding its ongoing operation.



1. Indian pipes
2. Scarlet waxy cap mushroom
3. Ram's head lady's slipper orchid
4. Round leaf orchid
5. Yellow lady's slipper orchid
6. Purple dragon's mouth orchid

PHOTO 1 BY ASHLEIGH BEAR. PHOTOS 2-6 BY EUGENE REIMER.



Before his death in 2011, Native Orchid Conservation Inc. board member Eugene Reimer (top) made a \$600,000 donation to set up a fund to pay for ongoing maintenance of the Brokenhead trail. PHOTO BY DORIS AMES.

Debwendon Inc. chair Carl Smith (left) said Brokenhead band members have lived and collected medicinal plants at the wetland for 300 years. PHOTO BY PEGGY BAINARD ACHESON.



Peggy Bainard Acheson (above), president of the Native Orchid Conservation Inc., believes the Brokenhead Wetland Interpretive Trail can be an eco-tourism destination. PHOTO BY JUDY OWEN.


“It never would have gotten off the ground if Eugene hadn’t set that up,” Bainard Acheson said.

Manitoba Conservation Minister Gord Mackintosh said his department was happy to help fund the project.

“Through this trail adjacent to the ecological reserve, we will give the public a chance to experience the wetland without disturbing or disrupting this delicate habitat,” he said.


The best time to see the area in full bloom is the late spring and early summer, up until about mid-July, Smith said. But even in the fall visitors can see plants and fungi such as the chlorophyll-less Indian pipe, colourful mushrooms, mosses and more.

“It’s really an interesting area even without the orchids,” Bainard Acheson said. “I think it can definitely be an eco-tourism destination, especially for people who are interested in plants.”




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