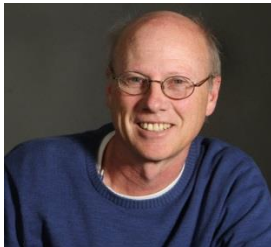


Local

Walk on the wild side

Boardwalk adds new dimension to Brokenhead Wetland Ecological Reserve



Open Road By: [Bill Redekop](#)

Posted: **07/5/2014 1:00 AM** | [Comments: 0](#)

- Tweet 18
- Post 246
- Reddit 0
- ShareThis 435
- Print
- Email 8



Wetland reserve blooming with rare plants

Photos by: Wayne Glowacki / Winnipeg Free Press



A tour of the Brokenhead Wetland, at the corner of Highways 59 and 304. A boardwalk was recently built to allow greater public access, but the trail has not been officially opened yet. (Wayne Glowacki / Winnipeg Free Press)

More pictures by Wayne Glowacki (WFP photographer) may be found at:

<http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/walk-on-the-wild-side-265877761.html>

NEAR STEAD -- Carl Smith of Brokenhead Ojibway Nation sticks his finger into the leafy tube at the base of a Pitcher plant to see if any insects are inside.

It's great fun. Pitchers are carnivorous plants. You poke your finger into its leafy tube, which is like the gut, and the plant almost sucks your finger off. Not quite, but it's like slipping your finger into one of those rubber thumbs the posties use to sort mail.



Peggy Bainard Acheson and Richard Reeves,
both with Native Orchid Conservation Inc. and Debwendon Inc.

WAYNE GLOWACKI / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

At left, Peggy Bainard Acheson, president and Richard Reeves both with the Native Orchid Conservation Inc. by showy lady's slippers (orchid) while on a [tour](#) of the Brokenhead Wetland, at the corner of Highways 59 and 304. A boardwalk was recently built to allow greater public access. However, the trail has not been officially opened yet. [Purchase Photo Print](#)

If there's nothing inside, you may feel little bristles at the bottom. But Smith finds a mosquito on his second try. Bon appétit, Pitcher plant!

The Pitcher is one of eight insect-eating plants, 28 wild orchids and 23 other rare plants found in this exotic wonderland an hour's drive north of Winnipeg. The Brokenhead Wetland Ecological

Reserve is like some weird Shangri-la in our backyard, if you're willing to brave the mosquitoes that inhabit a bog, er, wetland.

It's actually not a bog. A bog has stagnant water but here water is moving, usually below the surface through gravel and limestone, on its way to Lake Winnipeg. That makes it a fen.

The terrain is potholed with standing water everywhere, like little mirrors. It's forested with cedar trees and their reedy barks, which you don't see elsewhere in Manitoba because cedars require so much water.

The fen was granted ecological status in 2005. Last winter, the province laid down one kilometre of boardwalk, which is not officially open yet because some levelling is still required. Washroom facilities and signage are also still to come, possibly by the fall.

However, the boardwalk is very usable. For lay people, you should probably go now to see the Brokenhead Wetland at its finest. In the next week or so, the big show-stopper orchids are out, such as the Yellow lady's slipper and Showy lady's slipper. Not all the different orchids are in bloom at once.

"It's been quite a saga to get this boardwalk built," said Peggy Bainard Acheson, president of the Native Orchid Conservation Inc., who led a tour that included fellow NOCI member Richard Reeves, Smith of Brokenhead and student tour guide Ashleigh Bear from Brokenhead.

The NOCI has been trying to get a boardwalk for at least 15 years. The province finally agreed to build it but didn't want to be stuck with future repair bills. The breakthrough was a \$600,000 donation from late naturalist and photographer Eugene Reimer, to be held by the Winnipeg Foundation for trail repairs.

The boardwalk creates a different dimension. The previous trail was through tall grass and bushes made by people's footsteps, and you would stir up insects as you went. On the boardwalk, you are not brushing grasses or shrubs -- you are also higher up so you can see more.

Our first sighting on the interpretive trail was coral fungus, no big deal to our guides but very cool looking: a spiked haircut, bleached blond, growing out of deadfall.

Other notable sightings included the pink Dragon's Mouth orchid, butterwort (purple), bladderwort (yellow), wild potentilla, cotton grass (they look like hoary Q-tips), Green Bog

orchid, wild comfrey and coral root. Interestingly, there is almost no cattail overrunning this fen. The water is too alkaline.

As for the Pitcher plant, with its aubergine flower and its insect-eating maw at the base, the fen is thick with them but not enough to dent the mosquito population. The Pitcher emits a sweet nectar that attracts insects.

Once inside the maw, the rustling of the insect causes the plant to release a digestive acid that kills and dissolves the insect into digestible food -- it can dissolve within days. Other carnivorous plants spotted were yellow sundew and butterwort.

Many of the orchids are not just small but tiny, and it helps to keep handy the Orchids of Manitoba, published by Native Orchid. Unfortunately, the book is out of print and a second edition is a ways off. Tours guided by nearby Brokenhead Ojibway Nation are planned for next year.

Smith said Ojibway people have been visiting the site for more than three centuries. The area is still used for harvesting Seneca root, Labrador Tea and cedar for aboriginal ceremonies, he said. Brokenhead Ojibway Nation was originally part of the St. Peter's Reserve under Chief Peguis that assisted the original Red River Settlers. The reserve split into seven bands with the signing of the treaty in 1871.

Smith is president of Debwendon Inc, which is charged with interpretation and signage of the trail, as well as its maintenance and repair. Native Orchid is also a member, along with Manitoba Model Forest and Brokenhead Ojibway Nation.

Entrance to the Brokenhead Wetland is about two kilometres north of Stead Road, on the west side of Highway 59. There's a little gravel area to park on the west side, with boulders across the start of the trail. You walk a gravel trail before reaching the boardwalk.

There is no signage yet.

bill.redekop@freepress.mb.ca