

An Urgent Mission for the Rangers

Peninsula Rangers continue Sunday walks in Avondale area woodlands

BY JEN SCOTT

Our leisurely Sunday walks – normally full of stories and news as we get to know each other and welcome new people – have started to take on

a more urgent tone. Some people come on the walks to socialize, some to get exercise. Others want to explore the interior of the Peninsula – the spongy, forested area

of the watershed. But the ones we have to keep an eye on – the ones who are really serious – are the orchid hunters. I will get to that story in a moment.

On May 21 we started our walk at the Malcolms' place in Poplar Grove. At the top of the hill was a stellar view of surrounding farms. Our eyes travel to the Poplar Grove church and beyond copses of trees to the dykelands and rivers.

In the forest, the ground is mossy and we found a wee little toad (or is it a frog?). Smaller than a person's thumb.

We saw violets, bunchberry flowers, red berried elder flowers, starflowers, red trilliums, goldthread, clintonia, and the sarsparilla was just about to bloom. The horsetail has emerged. Although it doesn't get taller than your knee now, it was once a prehistoric giant tree. As we rounded the beaver pond near the Ferry Rd., with its beaver dam layers, surrounded by blueberries, and cattails fully green now, we enjoyed the stunning pink rhodora and the silver poplar with its soft little leaves.

By May 28, determina-

tion had set in among the orchid hunters. The rangers who showed up for the walk were a little grouchy. One only wanted to walk for one hour, and another was complaining that the timing was not good for her as it broke up her day. But we had a mission: to find the rare yellow lady slippers, and the even more rare Ram's Head orchid. We'd been keeping our eyes peeled for weeks. And they only bloom for a very short time. Raymond Parker, who has been leading many of the Rangers walks, chided us: "We've been walking for twenty minutes, and we haven't seen a bloody orchid!"

We continued our walk, and the very act of walking seems to melt away any tension. The day was stunningly beautiful and we were all distracted by the beaver pond, the swimming hole, the iridescent blue and green insects. Quite a natural wonder up close. After

the buffaloberry lookoff, Raymond ducked into the woods off the path. Yellow lady slippers! We followed them. They are right in their prime now. The first ones bright and shiny. So plentiful it was hard not to step on them. We had not meant to go this way. But it was so nice in the hilly network of ravines. We walked along an animal track at the top of a hill, looking down into a swampy area on our right, and a cool hemlock area on our left.

We were off our planned route. We'd been lulled into a new area. We were a bit reluctant to go down the hill. But we found ourselves drawn to a spring in the hillside... Suddenly, one of the orchid hunters got very very happy. "Come right now!", she exclaimed, dancing, singing, laughing.

She'd found them, the little buggers. They are only 15 cm tall and wispy. Hard to see from a distance. They blend in to their surroundings. But we were meant to find them. They called to us.

The Ram's Head orchid was in its prime – splendid, delicate white flowers with wine-coloured vein markings. The opening has white hairs – "like my cat's chin". It is truly a rare jewel. Even Raymond, who is not a flower person, was enchanted. And they

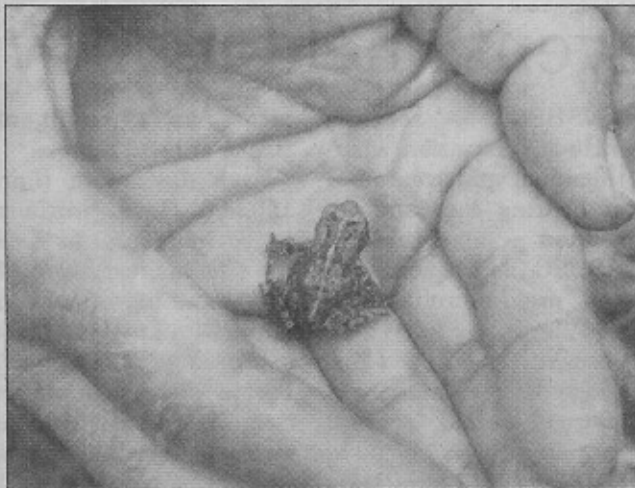
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not a flower person, was enchanted. And they were hanging out under the witch hazel tree. A huge one. With its scalloped leaves and spiral trunks. These rare and beautiful plants all like to be near... you guessed it. Water.

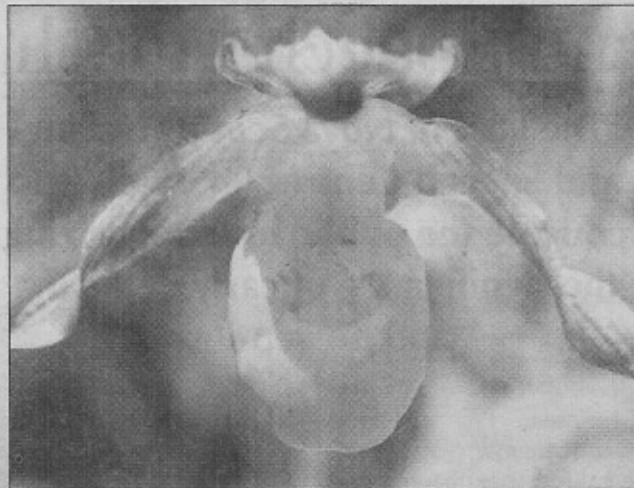
These little flowers only bloom for a few days. All of the ephemerals – so brief, so precious, so splendid, so rare – and then they are gone.

INTERESTED?

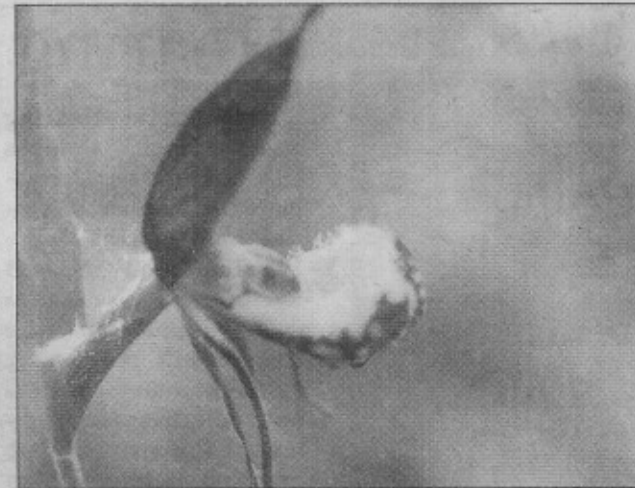
Anyone is welcome to join in on the Rangers walks. We meet at the Avon River Heritage Museum in Avondale at 11 am on Sundays. The walks are guided and take about two hours. Call 792-0272 if you are interested in joining in, or just show up Sunday morning.



A tiny toad found in the moist, mossy forest floor.



A Yellow Lady Slipper found along the trail.



The elusive Ram's' Head Orchid found the group.