

IN AN ALIEN LAND

A VOLUNTEER FOR NATURE GROUP EXPLORES THE OTHER-WORLDLY LANDSCAPE OF MANITOULIN ISLAND'S QUARRY BAY ALVAR ON ONE OF ONTARIO NATURE'S BIGGEST NATURE RESERVES *Text and Photography Graeme Stemp-Morlock*



On a cool August night, I stare into a thick midnight fog off the western tip of Manitoulin Island in northern Lake Huron. I cast my eye over waters that conceal a graveyard of ships, including the fabled *Griffon*, which many believe sank off these very rocks in 1679. ¶ The captain of the *Griffon*, a fur-trading ship, and his barebones crew were sailing across vast Lake Huron when a storm erupted. They were never seen again. More than 200 years later, local farmers and fishermen collected iron and lead from a beached wreck resembling the *Griffon* at the western tip of Manitoulin Island. The Mississagi Strait lighthouse keeper and his assistant found the skeletons of six sailors in a nearby cave. With the moist air heavy around me, I appreciate the lighthouse that still flashes, even if it couldn't save the *Griffon* from foundering. ¶ The next day, I feel as though I am on a modern-day version of the *Griffon*, as I and my fellow travellers on an Ontario Nature Volunteer for Nature (VfN) trip search for the island's Quarry Bay Nature Reserve (QBNR). We had set out from the Mississagi Lighthouse Campground and headed for the reserve several kilometres away, but we quickly discover that the vague, handwritten directions we received are confusing, and the logging roads we take are as treacherous as the shoals and islands that capsized so many ships. We make several wrong turns into hunting camps and dead ends, and our Jeep bounces along the rough road. ¶ Unlike the *Griffon's* crew, however, our small group of explorers finds safe passage to our destination, thanks to our trusty compass and a Department of National Defence map from the 1960s.

Adozen nature lovers and a handful of Ontario Nature staff have assembled at the Mississagi Lighthouse Campground on the western tip of Manitoulin Island for this five-day excursion. At 2,766 square kilometres, Manitoulin is reputed to be the largest freshwater island in the world. Most of the island's 12,600 people live at the eastern end, near the highway that leads to the *Chi-Cheemaun* ferry and the mainland.

Ontario Nature owns and manages 21 nature reserves, but the QBNR that we've come to explore is the organization's second largest, at just under 400 hectares. In 1999, Ontario Nature, along with the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC), the Nature Conservancy in the U.S. and Ontario Parks, spent over \$5 million in the largest conservation land deal at the time, to acquire not just QBNR but another 6,600 hectares now owned by NCC. "The uniqueness of the Quarry Bay Nature Reserve – it's part of the largest amount of protected alvar in Ontario – makes it a really important site to preserve," says Mark Carabetta, Ontario Nature's conservation science manager. "It's exciting to go there. It's so remote – there are even wolves on the island." Few Ontario Nature staff have visited the site before, due to its out-of-the-way location. During our time here, we hope to identify a wide variety of plants, animals, birds and rocks, as well as get a good look around the place.

Our group is an eclectic assortment of young and old, from recent university graduates to retirees. A few have been on VfN trips before, but for most of us this is our first time. Held in common is our collective desire to experience and help protect nature.

The nature we have come to experience and protect on Manitoulin Island is a highly unusual ecosystem and geological formation known as alvar (see "Endangered ecosystem: alvars," page 22). Alvars – "alvar" is a Nordic word

meaning "limestone pavement" – are large areas of exposed bedrock that do indeed resemble pavement.

The plant life that manages to survive on this parking lot is equally intriguing. Because soil does not accumulate on the rocky surface, plants are forced to grow in the cracks and fissures patterning the rock. For the same reason, junipers, which grow low to the ground, are plentiful while larger trees are almost non-existent. The harsh alvar ecosystem possesses a feast or famine quality. Spring rains result in pools of water on the rock surface, creating a boggy wetland, while the hot, dry days of summer roast everything that has the misfortune to live here.

The first morning I wake up to what sounds like rocks hitting my tiny tent. It makes sense, in my fuzzy-brained state, because I had asked Don McLeod, my long-white-bearded neighbour, to wake me if I slept in.

"Okay, okay, I'm up," I say with a loud laugh. The rain of rocks continues, however. I crawl out of my tent to show McLeod that I am truly awake, but he is nowhere to be seen. Instead, I find an angry squirrel dropping cones from his treetop perch above my tent. It seems I have an alarm clock and an arch nemesis.

Karen Saarkoppel, an Ontario Nature conservation intern, makes us a delicious breakfast of berry pancakes with banana sauce. After my third helping, we pack up our day-tripping equipment to visit the 860-hectare Misery Bay Provincial Nature Reserve, whose slogan is "misery loves company." (Folklore has it that when government surveyors came across a man cutting hay in the sweltering summer sun, they asked him the name of the bay. The man replied, "Sure is a misery bay.")

After walking through patches of short, twisted junipers, we emerge onto a wide beach checkered with alvar and marsh. John Geale, a retired math teacher, and Carabetta, both keen birders, have their small birding telescopes out and are searching the skies and shoreline intently for avian travellers.

Left Habitat for the hardy: Volunteer for Nature participant, Don McLeod, sits on the Quarry Bay alvar shoreline, one of Ontario's most unusual ecosystems



Above Soraya Peerbaye makes her way through the fog-filled alvar, which stretches along Manitoulin Island's western coast. Right What you need to find the Quarry Bay Nature Reserve: compass, map and patience

Geale soon spots an adult bald eagle. He watches the eagle until it settles back in the trees, then moves on with the rest of us in tow. Over the next few days Geale spots about 80 different species of birds, from the rufous-capped, yellow-undertailed palm warbler to the brown and white ruffed grouse.

In the clear sunny afternoon, I stumble over the uneven, dried-out marsh. Between the patches of open alvar, tall rushes and bladderworts grow. I stop to notice a dead plant because of its oddly shaped leaves that look kind of like jars. I call over Maria Papoulias, Ontario Nature stewardship coordinator and a botanist, who tells me that it's a pitcher plant, a type of insectivorous plant.

The tiny bladderworts that peek out of the sand are also insectivorous. "Normally," says Papoulias, "the leaves are underwater and they have hairs that, when contacted by an insect, close in on it and gulp." In this case, the water must have receded, leaving the bladderworts stranded and partially covered in sand.

In the warm flicker of the campfire that night we share stories. Mark Toma, an infantry officer in the Canadian Forces, tells us about field kitchens and the pleasure of receiving warm doughnuts in a wet foxhole. Geale and his wife, Dorothy, recount how they met at the magnetic North Pole and about exploring South America with their bird expert son.



Ian Choi, who left Hong Kong over a decade ago when he was just 12, tells us how, on his arrival in Canada, he filled his apartment with salamanders. As an adult, Choi decided to pursue his interest in nature by studying ecology at university. "Rather than capturing life in an aquarium, I wanted to treat it as a whole ecosystem and help tend it."

The night's highlight is a poetry reading by poet Soraya Peerbaye. She reads some nature-themed works by John Steffler, Canada's Parliamentary Poet Laureate. Moose, owls, rocks, trees – the images flicker in our minds after a day of hiking along the scraggy Manitoulin shore.

As the campfire burns lower, I offer to show people the stars through my telescope. About 10 people join me in gazing at the brilliantly shining Jupiter; we can see the four Galilean moons easily. We stare up at star clusters and nebulae – the highlight is the "E.T." cluster with its uncanny resemblance to the gangly-armed Steven Spielberg character.

The next day we head out to Mac's Bay, where two dozen members of the Manitoulin Nature Club meet us before traipsing off to their regular shore-bird observing grounds. The VfN participants and nature club members set up bird scopes and binoculars along the bay's fog-filled muddy shoreline. By now I've discovered that bird watching is quite an exciting hobby – normally I would never dream of using a telescope to stare at a



Top Maria Papoulias, Ontario Nature's stewardship coordinator, is surprised to stumble across a street sign without a street. Above A campfire is the perfect setting for story telling and star gazing

beautiful pair of legs, but here that kind of behaviour is encouraged. We spend the better part of the morning hiking through mud and swamp, sighting spotted sandpipers, yellowlegs and an assortment of plant species, including ladies'-tresses, a type of orchid, and the wonderfully named grass of Parnassus, a delicate off-white flower.

That afternoon, the entire group converges on the QBNR. For many it is their first visit to the remote reserve, and we all stop dead in our tracks as we pass a road sign proclaiming a wide stretch of alvar as "George Street." People disappear into the dense fog as we set out to explore the shoreline and adjacent coniferous forest. Carabetta and Toma stake out the perimeter of the sprawling nature reserve.

Papoulias spots the rare lakeside daisy, a short plant with rubbery leaves (hence its other common name "rubber weed"). In spring, the alvar will be carpeted in beautiful little yellow flowers, but on this August day the flowers have turned to white puffballs.

She also points out the slender blazing-star, a spiky plant with several purple flowers emerging along the long stalk. These flowers are scattered across Manitoulin, but, outside of the island, they are restricted to alvar regions along the Great Lakes. "Alvar vegetation is unique," says Papoulias. "The flora is adapted to an extreme environment where it needs to survive flooding, drought, intense heat and a number of other challenges."

By the end of our stay, we will have seen a long list of

TEN YEARS OF TEAMWORK

Every summer for the last decade, Ontario Nature has been sending small teams of passionate nature lovers into unique environments to participate in conservation projects. Groups may find themselves removing invasive species, improving trails or collecting data on a variety of animal species. In 2007, some 200 individuals joined in a dozen trips. Trips range in duration from a day to a week, and the only cost is for meals and accommodation.

The inspiration for the program can be traced back to a U.K. program called the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, which sends volunteers around the United Kingdom and beyond to join conservation efforts. In 1998, Ontario Nature (then called the Federation of Ontario Naturalists) decided to initiate a similar program with a provincial focus, and so Working for Wilderness came into being.

In 2001, Ontario Nature and the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) joined forces and, with funding from the Trillium Foundation, Working for Wilderness became Volunteer for Nature (VfN). Not only has the name of the program changed: the trips run under it have also evolved. In the early years, outings lasted several days and were usually located in provincial or national parks. Now, single- and multiple-day trips are offered, and often they are to Ontario Nature's nature reserves, allowing volunteers to play an important role in the stewardship and healthy maintenance of the organization's sensitive protected areas. This year, VfN will be holding events geared to kids and families, such as a freshwater shellfish and insect larvae inventory at the Cawthra Mulock Nature Reserve, located within the Greater Toronto Area, and a crayfish survey along the St. Lawrence River.

The main goal of the program is to connect ordinary people with extraordinary natural environments. "People love it because they are doing something good for the natural environment, which is in turn good for themselves," says Lisa Richardson, Ontario Nature's Volunteer for Nature coordinator. "There are no specified skills [needed], and we take everyone – from university students to retirees to city people who have never camped before. They all get a chance to contribute to protecting biodiversity and natural areas in the province."

Join VfN on the next trip to Manitoulin Island in August 2008 and explore the eerie beauty of Ontario's most spectacular alvar coast. To find out more about all of Ontario Nature's VfN trips, visit our website (www.ontarionature.org) or call or e-mail Lisa Richardson 416-444-8419 ext. 222, lisar@ontarionature.org).

birds, including several species of warblers, kingfishers, woodpeckers, hawks and, of course, waterfowl such as mallards and blue-winged and green-winged teal.

As I leave the reserve and walk along the logging road, I hear the soft wind in the trees and the odd bird call. At the end of our trip, we have left behind only a small QBNR sign to mark where to turn to find the reserve. The remote and undeveloped location makes this alien landscape the perfect nature reserve – a protected area containing one of the province's most unusual habitats. 🐦

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