

Ridges Sanctuary, an Exciting Story Untold

By Paul M McMahon, A Vagabond's Bench

RIDGES SANCTUARY In Door County, the best wild LX flower area in Wisconsin could become an exceptional tourist attraction if certain difficulties could be resolved. We were in a group of 60 persons recently escorted over the strange, secluded Ridges near Baileys Harbor by William H. Beckstrom of Sister Bay, a nursery farm operator, and a director of Ridges Sanctuary, Inc., a nonprofit group organized to administer and preserve the park.

The vagabond's knowledge of flowers is just adequate to distinguish between a rose and a dandelion — assuming that each is in full bloom. Yet, the story Beckstrom told as he pointed out flowers which devour insects, plants like reindeer moss which normally grow only in the arctic, and lovely wild orchids fascinated us more than a swiftly moving novel.

Outdoor Museum

More rare, wild plants are found there than anywhere in Wisconsin, according to Albert M. Fuller, curator of botany at the Milwaukee public museum. This unplanted, outstanding wild flower sanctuary was created mainly because of climate, a wide range of habitats and the geological history of the area. Twenty- five species of orchids alone grow there.

The Ridges are a series of receded shore lines, separated by swamps, which follow the contour of Lake Michigan. There are nine prominent ridges. Covering them is a most unusual growth of trees, flowers and plants.

As we strolled through this peaceful, natural outdoor museum we wondered whether there wasn't a way for thousands of other visitors to see this botanist's paradise and to thrill to the marvelously human story recited by Beckstrom. We thought of the vast, and steadily growing, number of new home owners of recent years who have a genuine, but possibly inexperienced, interest in flowers, trees and plants.

While a botanist can see a multitude of things on a walk through the Ridges, the average visitor lacks the required knowledge. He must be told what he is seeing. Why not, we asked Beckstrom, lay out paths through the Ridges, mark the flowers and plants more carefully, and conduct regular tours — for a fee Beckstrom recoiled as though slapped in the face. Charging a fee smacks of commercialism, he explained patiently, something which Ridges Sanctuary members want to avoid. Anyone may come and see the Ridges, stay as long as they like, and no charge will be made, Beckstrom added. All that Ridges Sanctuary asks is that people look but do not “take,” that they enjoy nature's bountiful display without damaging it in any way.

It's sad to admit, but there is a real danger in opening Ridges Sanctuary as a major tourist sight. Some travelers can't be trusted to permit even a pretty flower to bloom untouched or an unusual plant to grow. They must “take.”

No one can find fault with a group as unselfish as Ridges Sanctuary. They have added several hundred acres to the original 40 acquired from the federal government a little over 20 years ago. They have kept the area open, without charge, to anyone desiring to enjoy it. Members have given time and effort to their project.

And, yet, we keep wishing that sometime, somehow, the exciting story of nature's remarkable show can be told to the multitude of uninformed told, while still preserving the purity of the Ridges.

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