

The Ridges... in pause between seasons

By **Peter Geniesse**, Post-Crescent weekend editor

BAILEYS HARBOR — The colors are muted, the wildflowers are gone. So, too, are the thousands of visitors who flocked to witness a preserved, natural phenomenon along the shores of Lake Michigan over the summer.

The Ridges is at rest.

Naturalist Roy Lukes has given his last tour of the season of the boreal haven or flora and fauna fed by the chilly mist and ever-shifting sands of the great lake.

Now he can get down to the business of identifying, cataloging and probing into the wonders of the 910- acre sanctuary. He hopes to have time for some writing. And, of course, there are those chores before winter sets in, like rerouting a path trod by tourists to resurrect a fragile terrain. There are cedar post railings and boardwalks to repair and more footbridges to build. Soon cross-country skiers will traverse the gentle mounds and grassy swales. Not too many venture onto the Ridges Sanctuary in winter, though. That's OK with Lukes, who'd probably prefer fewer visitors in the summer, too.



Post-Crescent photos by Peter Geniesse

Naturalist Roy Lukes conducts his last tour of the season.



Roy Lukes has guided The Ridges for the past 23 years.

The Ridges is not your average walk-in-the-woods nature area. For a half-century, the unique landscape, created from a receding lake, has been off-limits to defilers and developers. A group of nature-lovers made it a private preserve back in 1937 and have kept it private — if not a secret — ever since then.

In 1966, it was designated by the U.S. Department of the Interior as the first National Natural Landmark in Wisconsin. But that's about as public as it's ever likely to get.

The Ridges is owned by its members, almost 3,000 of them, representing 46 states and five foreign countries. It's supported by their dues and tour fees and donations, with no tax money or public funds involved. It started out as just 40 acres on the north ridge of Baileys Harbor, land owned by the U.S. Lighthouse Service, and has grown into one of the country's largest corporately owned sanctuaries.

After the navigation range lights were constructed, the land was turned over to Door County, which, for awhile, flirted with a proposal to put up a trailer park skirting the beach sands.

There were 10 people, however, who found that proposal abhorrent. They knew of the unique vegetation embracing the swales, sandwiched by sand mounds. One of the leaders to preserve this piece of prehistoric lake bottom was Jens Jensen, a noted Chicago landscape architect, who later was to establish The Clearing, a school devoted to such pursuits in Door County. He got together with Dr. Albert Fuller, botanist with the Milwaukee Public Museum, and eight others to wrestle the land away from developers, forming a private, nonprofit corporation in the fall of 1937.

They wanted to preserve native plants, including more than a dozen species on the endangered and threatened list, in a near-natural state. That philosophy is followed today. Nothing is planted by man. Sometimes, however, the birds do seed new vegetation.

Lukes subscribes to the natural tenet. "When a tree dies, it lies where it falls," he says.

Lukes, 57, a native of the region, has guided The Ridges for the past 23 years. It started out as a summer respite from his teaching job at the old Door-Kewaunee Normal School and has grown into a fulltime passion for nature.

He recalls looking out over Lake Michigan back in 1964 and seeing more than 300 feet of sandy beach. It's all under water now, as record high tides erode shorelines throughout most of the Great Lakes.

It's nature at work, he acknowledges. Just a grain of sand in the scheme of things. He lectures on the formation of the ridges, stretching back to when 10,000 feet of glacial ice covered the region, when the ice melted, when the earth rebounded and the shorelines were formed.

That's when Baileys Harbor was born, the only fully southern exposure on Lake Michigan. "It became a catchpocket for waves and winds and shifting sands," Lukes says. That led to sandbars and to the formation of the ridges, now a half-mile inland.

Baileys Harbor is slowly filling up with glacially deposited sand at the rate of a foot or more per year. In another millennium, there'll be another ridge. There are more than a dozen now, lined up like giant waves or verdant sand separated by troughs of watery vegetation, all within earshot of Lake Michigan.

Only five ridges are open to the public, however. The trails follow the crests and cross the swales on foot bridges and boardwalks. There are 50 stations to observe nature at work and at rest. There are gnarly, coniferous specimens two centuries old, scarred by the great fire of 1872. And there are lots of tender plants along the paths, like 150 species of lichens, including reindeer moss, the kind that absorbed Chernobyl's radiation and endangered the Laplanders' sustenance.

There are balsams and hemlocks and black and white spruce in abundance in The Ridges' boreal forest, the same kind that grew on the leading edge of the glacier. They thrive in the cold mist of lake-level land, growing slowly but surely.

Most visitors care more for blossom than for bogs, however. They feel the best time to experience nature is at full bloom, in late spring when the arctic primrose, the marsh marigold and the lake iris are in their glory. In summer they can witness another 50 species of wildflowers in all their glory, along with a variety of snakes and salamanders and shrews on the ground and grosbeaks and gulls and goldfinches in the air.

Lukes concedes that the early growing season, "from mid-May to Memorial Day," is the best time for tourists. But one suspects he prefers late fall, the quiet season, when the Ridges returns to nature.

The Post-Crescent – October 25, 1986