

[Home](#) > [Restoration Project](#) > **If the Bog Has Its Way**



If the Bog Has Its Way

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At one time there were three bogs in the capital region. Now there's just one - Rithet's Bog. With luck and planning, it will return to its old self.

An August afternoon, hot enough in this hollow below Broadmead that the path around Rithet's Bog is largely deserted. I hear birds and broom, the latter crackling ominously as the sun splits open its seed pods. The wasps and I compete for blackberries.

The path winds around the foot of the Broadmead subdivision off Chatterton Way, past bullrushes and a newly planted collection of Garry oaks and into the shade and tall trees of the tonier part of the neighbourhood.

It's three kilometers in all, and by the end of it I'm sorry I wore such silly shoes. But no matter, I'm glad for the break. Even the roar of the Pat Bay Highway just over the hill is barely a hum by the time it makes it here.

The bog itself is in the middle of the Saanich park, a good distance away from the perimeter path and not often frequented by the casual stroller. Those who know it well say it's changing, again. But with luck and a little planning, this time it might just end up changing back into its old self.

A bog is a rare thing in this dry climate, and an urban bog is even rarer. Of Greater Victoria's three bogs, only Rithet's remains. The Blenkinsop Lake Bog was destroyed in 1956 and the Turner Bog, 20 years later.

The point where things start to go wrong for bogs usually involves us, the humans who unfold our big plans for the future with little thought for what that will do to the ecosystem we're about to alter.

In the case of Rithet's Bog, it was farming that changed everything. Richard Hebda, curator of earth history at Royal British Columbia Museum, has seen photos of the bog at the turn of the last century that confirm it as a classic bog at that time: "There were no trees on the landscape, no trees on the bog."

Look now and you'll see pine trees and cottonwoods growing straight out of the middle of the bog, and marsh plants around the edges. They took hold in the years when the land was still routinely drained for farm purposes, and when the nutrient-rich runoff from neighbouring farm fields still flooded into the bog and fuelled a new kind of plant growth.

"Nutrients are like toxins to a bog, feeding other kinds of plants that shade out bog plants," says Hebda. "And with the summer water tabled (sic) lowered, the mineral rich water started running through the bog instead of around the edges. Pretty soon, it began turning into a lodgepole pine forest."

But the farms are gone now, replaced by houses and office malls. The water table is higher. There are signs that the pine forest is starting to die, the trees' roots unable to withstand this new spongy dampness. All of it points toward a recovery of the bog.

It isn't likely to be as easy as that, though, as simple as just letting nature take it from here. Too much has been altered over the years: ditches dug, creek access tampered with, storm drains installed. The water flow into the bog is still too little to sustain it well, and too quick to drain away.

And every action, there continues to be an equal and opposite reaction, even if it starts with something as inconsequential as a dying pine tree.

"With the big trees toppling over, there's an invasion of dogwood into the middle of the bog because the canopy has opened up from all the dead pines," says Hebda. "What has been created is something different than before."

Rithet's Bog is part of a 42-hectare basin created when the last of the ice age glaciers retreated from Vancouver Island 10,000 years ago. As the centuries passed, sphagnum and peat mosses filled up the basin, and the acidic and nutrient-poor conditions of a bog took hold.

A "coniferous treed-type basin bog," of which Rithet's Bog is a fine example, is a magnet for plants and animals. The deer, raccoons and squirrels share space in the bog with more than 80 species of birds, 50 kinds of herbaceous plants, 15 shrub varieties, and an array of mosses and lichens.

Robert Patterson Rithet bought the area in 1893 as part of a 364-hectare farm. Those who remember the bog in the years when it was surrounded by farming recall it looking much more like a wetland, popular with ducks, geese and winter skaters.

Once during an ill-conceived plan to drain the bog, conditions were so watery that a piece of heavy equipment nearly sank out of sight when workers tried to set it up. It took four tractors to pull it out.

Frank Burdge bought the bog portion from the Rithet family in 1954. Ten years later, Broadmead Farms Inc., a holding company of the Guinness brewing family, bought the rest.

Development was not unwelcome – there had been talk for years of building as many as 2,000 homes in the area – and covenants ensured the bog would not be used for anything but agriculture. Nonetheless, Burdge's decision to put the bog up for sale the following year triggered a small panic among local bog aficionados, who feared the end was near. Saanich council was lobbied to buy the bog as parkland.

Burdge was asking \$50,000. Saanich's offer of \$15,000 was quickly rejected. In the end, Broadmead Farms bought the land for an undisclosed price, protecting itself against something unexpected happening with the land that might not fit with its own development plans.

And so it remained for much of the next 30 years. The company made good on its word to leave the bog alone and eventually even built a public walking trail around the perimeter. The bog was put in the Agricultural Land Reserve in 1973, and the golf-course proposal a decade later was mercifully short-lived.

But the bog was never far from the headlines, and by 1990 it was in the news again. Murray Coell, mayor of Saanich at the time, struck a task force that year to figure out, among other things, how to acquire the bog as parkland. People were sent off in pursuit of funds and there was the usual rounds of finger-pointing and blame-laying as others lamented previous councils' lack of foresight in not acquiring the land long before.

And once more, Broadmead Farms stepped to the plate. When its subdivision was completed in 1994, the Guinness family donated the bog to the municipality. Guinness heirs Lord Boyd of Merton and the Earl of Iveagh were said to be less than thrilled about it initially, but presumably got over it. A plaque along the perimeter path commemorates their donation.

That Rithet's Bog has survived its many trials is testament to the sheer will of several generations of bog lovers. From Catherine Cumberland's 1960's-era Save-Our-Swamp Committee to the members of the modern-day Rithet's Bog Conservation Society, the Broadmead bog has had a lot of friends.

There are 20 scientific experts on call should the conservation society need advice, and UVic graduate student Karen Golinski has just completed her doctorate on the bog, much of it funded by the Municipality of Saanich in exchange for a three-part report on its health. Now, the time has come to decide what, if anything should be done.

"The problem with Rithet's Bog, at least since the beginning of the last century, is that it has always been managed by man," says conservation society member Diane Mothersill. "We'll hear people talking about returning to the days when there was more water to attract birds, but that period was managed too."

So perhaps the area will have to be managed again if it's to recover as a bog. Mothersill has been to the centre of the bog five times in the past five years, and each time she worries that there's a little less sphagnum underfoot, a few more willows encroaching around the edges.

There are two big problems if the bog is going to remain as bog: Water quality and water quantity," She says. "What's needed is to keep the water levels from fluctuating so much throughout the year and allow more to percolate into the bog."

More work needs to be done to reconnect the bog to the Colquitz Creek system, and the last of the old farm drainage ditches – one of them right through the middle of the pine forest at the heart of the bog – will have to be dealt with.

With that in mind, the society has been feeling out Ducks Unlimited, a wetlands-conservation group that has both the money and the expertise to restore the bog. But it is too early to gauge whether there's a genuine interest, says Mothersill. As well, the group typically likes to partner with the municipality, which could require some political lobbying if Saanich is to be convinced to ante up.

And depending on what's required in reconnecting the basin to the salmon-bearing Colquitz system, Fisheries and Oceans Canada might have to be involved too. Any restoration project is a long way from anywhere just yet, notes Mothersill.

Hebda cautions against pining for the way things were. Things change, and there is no way to have both a bog and the fondly remembered period when Rithet's was a marsh and covered in birds.

"Bogs aren't open-water communities," he says. "People are recalling what they remember from past decades, which is high water in the winter and low in the summer. That's not what a bog does. It breathes in the water in the winter and exhales it in the summer, like a sponge."

If the bog has its way, the trees that have grown on top of it will slowly die. So many of the plants currently thrive around the bog edges, and the choked-out Labrador tea and bog cranberries will return.

But that's only if nothing happens to get in the way. And as decades of change have proven for Rithet's Bog, that's a lot to wish for.

[Top of Page](#)