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## **Rithet's Bog - Where Has all the Water Gone, and What is Being Done About It?**

**BARA Bugle (Broadmead Area Residents Association Newsletter),  
Spring 2001 - Sharon Hartwell**

The changing appearance of Rithet's Bog is a source of concern and frustration for many Broadmead residents. Extensive areas of open water used to lie along Chatterton Way, providing habitat for abundant waterfowl and a place where skating was often possible in winter months. Now, that open water is almost gone, the area overgrown with shrubs and willows. Yet the Bog has been protected as a Nature Sanctuary since the Guinness Family donated it to Saanich in 1994. Shouldn't it be looking better, not drying up?

### ***Where the open water went - the changing nature of the wetland***

Unfortunately, much of what people admired about the 'old' Rithet's Bog was not natural. The flooded areas formerly seen along Chatterton Road were artificial, the result of shrubs having been cleared so that crops could be planted. Each fall, when crops were removed, the open area flooded with the winter rains, until it was pumped out the following spring. It was a situation very similar to what still occurs at Panama Flats on Interurban Road.

When the Nature Sanctuary was established in 1994, all agricultural activity in the fields ceased. But Nature is not static. Willows immediately began to reclaim the abandoned fields, consuming large amounts of water as they did so. After seven years of this natural succession, a shrub wetland has developed and very little open water remains.

### ***Should we concentrate on restoring the open water?***

The Bog and its surrounding catchment area have been drastically altered by agricultural practices and urban development, and much more than open water and waterfowl habitat are at stake. A series of scientific studies have indicated that the rare Sphagnum community lying in the heart of the Bog is threatened by a combination of low water levels, excessive fluctuation in the water table, and the poor quality of incoming water. Extensive agricultural ditches still transect the Bog, serving as conduits for weeds and withholding large volumes of water. The perimeter ditch, which intercepts contaminated run-off water from surrounding developed areas, also isolates the Bog from the Colquitz watershed and prevents it from functioning as a natural cleansing agent and buffer area for downstream waters. All of these issues must be addressed if the overall health of the Bog is to be restored.

### ***Striking a balance***

The only way to recreate extensive areas of open water would be to clear the old fields and re-introduce farming. This would be inconsistent with the status of the Bog as a Nature Sanctuary, and it would do little to address other problems that have been identified. Likewise, concentrating exclusively on protecting the rare Sphagnum community in the center of the Bog would not address the issue of diminished open water on the outskirts of the Bog. The ideal solution would be to strike a balance, which satisfied both the ecological necessity to restore and protect the Bog, and the public's desire to see more open water.

### ***The plan - enlisting the help of Ducks Unlimited***

In an attempt to find this solution, the Rithet's Bog Conservation Society and Saanich Parks have enlisted the help of Ducks Unlimited Canada, a private, non-profit charitable organization dedicated to the conservation of wetlands for the benefit of North America's waterfowl, wildlife and people.

Using information gathered in previous studies, and new data generated by their own work, the scientists at Ducks Unlimited will relate water levels in the Bog to vegetation and water control features (culverts, ditch depth, outlets etc). They will then develop a plan for maintaining the optimum water level, quality and range of fluctuation in the Bog to restore the central Sphagnum community, while creating areas of open water to improve waterfowl habitat and provide greater opportunities for wildlife viewing by the public.

The most exciting aspect of this project is that Ducks Unlimited will be taking a landscape or watershed approach, addressing the entire Colquitz watershed. The ultimate goal will be to re-integrate the Bog into the watershed as a functioning wetland, to the mutual benefit of the Bog and the watershed.

Because the Colquitz is a salmon-bearing stream, there is hope that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans will become involved in this project, along with Saanich and Ducks Unlimited, as funding partners in a multi-disciplinary team. It will also be crucial for the many conservation groups already involved with the Colquitz watershed to work together in a coordinated restoration of the entire watershed.

***When will this happen?***

This project is still very much in the initial planning stages. Ducks Unlimited must assess the level of input and funding required, and confirm partnerships with both Saanich and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans before a final commitment to the project can be made. If all goes well, volunteer work on minor restoration projects at the Bog can commence in the fall of 2001, the overall plan will be finalized in 2002, and major work by the funding partners will be undertaken in 2003.

***Opportunity for public input***

Public support will be crucial for the success of this project. A series of meetings is therefore planned for 2002 to enable members of the public to voice their concerns, and provide feedback on the draft action plan developed by Ducks Unlimited.

***In the meantime***

It is imperative that restoration work at Rithet's Bog be carried out in a scientific and coordinated manner, with appropriate monitoring and controls. Unfortunately, this means that areas of open water at the Bog will continue to decrease over the coming year. But the long-term outlook for the Bog is very exciting. We can look forward not only to the reappearance of areas of open water, but a healthy, dynamic Bog, returned to its role as a functioning wetland in a restored watershed.

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