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Something to Chirp About – Hard work revives Rithet's Bog, a once dying ecosystem

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It's the birdsongs that you first notice in the newly healthy Rithet's Bog. A naturalist can pick out redwing blackbirds, sparrows and long-billed marsh wrens.

To the rest of us, it sounds like an old Disney movie. The diversity of chirps, warbles and whistles evokes a time when we were surrounded by more green space than grey. "We've got birds that haven't been here since 1993," observes Sharon Hartwell, looking across the watery expanse.

Hartwell, of the Rithet's Bog Conservation Society, is one happy birder these days. And why not? This spring, she witnessed the revival of a drying, dying ecosystem, thanks to the work done by her group, Saanich Parks and Ducks Unlimited Canada.

Rithet's Bog is in a low-lying basin, 42 hectares of marshes, wet meadows and other gumboot bits, crowded between the upscale homes of Broadmead and the hum of the Pat Bay Highway. It has been squeezed by a century of agriculture and development, a victim of the days when wetlands were viewed as wastelands, places to be drained in the name of productivity.

The health of the bog kept declining after it was donated to Saanich in 1994 by Broadmead Farms, the development company owned by the Guinness family. (Yes, that Guinness family, the one whose product looks like bog water.) The drying trend continued as thirsty willows took over what had been farmland and open water, and runoff was diverted to storm sewers. A ditch ran through the centre of the bog like a knife through the heart, altering plant life with nutrient-rich water.

All this, as we now know, is bad. Bogs provide key habitat for wildlife and, because they suck up so much atmospheric carbon, are believed to fight global warming. They also moderate water supplies between times of storm and drought. "The bog acts as a reservoir and a sponge," says Hartwell.

This last point is a particularly big deal in urban areas, where a combination of culverts and pavement has conspired to screw up the natural drainage. When it rains, contaminant-laden water is washed straight to the salt chuck. When it's dry, well, the water police won't let you wash your car. Bogs, because they store water for so long, help even the flow, sustaining life year-round.

In the case of Rithet's Bog, that affects the entire Colquitz River system. It may surprise you – OK, it surprised me – to learn that two-thirds of Saanich drains into the Colquitz watershed. Elk, Beaver, Swan and Blenkinsop lakes, Quick's Bottom, Rithet's Bog area all connected – though the connections are often masked by culverts. All feed to the Colquitz River, which empties into Portage Inlet near the Tillicum Mall.

Hartwell says it was Ducks Unlimited that pointed out the broader consequences of restoring Rithet's Bog. "We were concentrating on the Bog itself. It was a revelation that this is part of the Colquitz watershed."

Anyway, last year Ducks Unlimited brought in what was essentially a giant blender to munch the willows and open water to wildfowl. A weir was installed to help maintain water levels and control the flow to Colquitz River. The ditch through the bog was plugged. Willow and cattails in perimeter trenches filter out contaminants and sediment, helping both the bog and the salmon-bearing Colquitz. (The waters around the bog itself once saw salmon, but that was years ago, before the stream that led to the river was replaced by an 800-metre culvert.)

The results of all the work show. About 50 pairs of nesting mallards have been joined by green-winged teal, shovellers and a mess of other dabbling ducks (the ones that dunk their heads under water and waggle their butts in the air, as opposed to diving). There are mule deer, muskrats and great blue herons. Last week, the sight of a yellow-headed blackbird sent ornithologists twittering.

The open water is good habitat for insect-eaters: Frogs, bats and the violet-green swallow, which swoops open-mouthed through bug buffets. Hartwell says that will help control mosquitoes, which prefer smaller pools of standing water.

The municipality of Saanich encompasses 147 parks, but Gerald Fleming, the co-ordinator of design and development, seems particularly proud of this one. May be that's because it's more than just another pretty space. Although Rithet's Bog is ringed by a pleasant walking path, there's a greater focus on conservation than recreation.

Plenty of work remains. Ducks Unlimited has signed a 30-year maintenance agreement. Members of the Rithet's Bog Conservation Society will continue to wage a war on willow debris. "The project wouldn't be happening without all those volunteers working," notes Fleming.

But it is happening, thanks to political will and elbow grease.

"It could have been another golf course," says Hartwell, "but enough people stood up and said 'no.'"

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