

Sun-Gro Peat Plant Tour



Conserve Native Plants Society Inc.

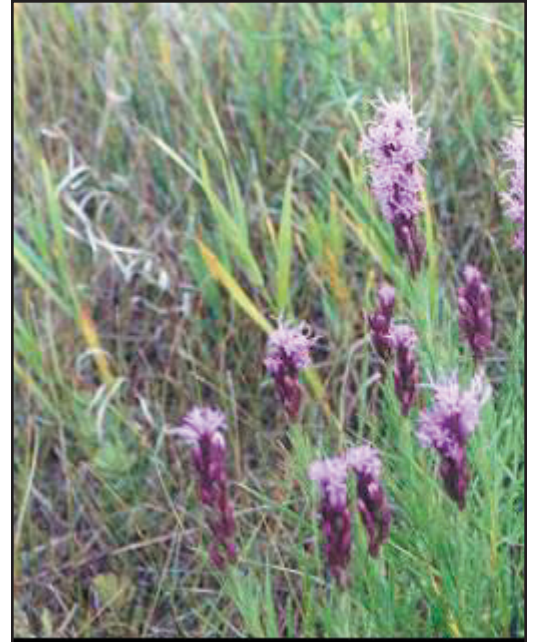
The summer of 2004 was a good year for the Yellow Lady's Slipper, Showy Lady's Slipper, Bergamot and Northern Blazing Star. The Western Fringed Orchid had an unusual summer as there were very few seed pods produced on the plants although the pollinators were plentiful. Bud Ewacha reports that he failed to see any Monarch caterpillars on Milkweed plants.

The visit to the Sun-Gro peat plant at Elma MB took place on August 4, 2004. The group assembled at the Hadashville Motel for breakfast prior to the tour.

After breakfast we drove the final portion of the trip north on provincial highway 11. I noticed a number of black birds circling high in the air. As we approached the birds, I pointed out the strange gliding flight pattern of what appeared to be crows. The birds turned out to be majestic black buzzards sharing a meal of road kill on the highway shoulder. To me this was a bonus of the trip because this was only the second time that I had seen buzzards and the first time I had seen them actually eating carrion.

A few minutes after the buzzard sighting, we arrived at the gravel road that led to the Sun-Gro peat plant and harvest field. The facility consists of an office building, a large loading yard designed for semi-trailers, and a large building for processing and packing peat products.

Three representatives of the Sun-Gro peat facility, Walter Amerongen, Connie Proceviat and Bruce Leochko, led the tour and discussion. The tour began at the south end of the building where the peat harvested from the fields is brought in for further processing. In the large dimly lit room the air was per-



Northern Blazing Star; photographed by Bud Ewacha on Bishop Grandin..

Time to renew your membership

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meated with the heavy feel and smell of peat. The airborne peat particles came from the screening machines and from conveyors that move peat to other plant locations. At the tour guide's instruction we kept our heads tilted down slightly to enable our eyes to clear of any peat particles.

North of the screening room was a room used for adding minerals, perlite and composed bark to customers' specifications.

Upon entering the next room, we encountered a huge red hot steel cone used in the production of perlite. The cone was kept at a temperature between 1200 and 1700 degrees Fahrenheit. Special volcanic rock gravel from the western United States was drizzled down into the cone where the heat made it expand 20 times its original volume. The room also held the equipment, manual and automated, to bag the peat moss. The automated equipment could make 4000 bales per day, while the manual system could produce about 2000 bales. Each stack of bales on a pallet was wrapped with shrink wrap plastic by automated equipment from Italy and Sweden. The piles of bales were stored in the warehouse or outdoors.

After the tour of the processing plant, the group was taken out into the peat field. The field was intersected by a series of drainage ditches and covered a total of four square miles. We had to drive only the gravel roads because the peat fields could not support a vehicle with narrow tires and because the heat of the muffler could ignite the peat fields.

Out in the fields, tractors loosened the peat with harrows. Next, sun heat and wind were allowed to dry the fluffed up peat field surface.

When the peat was sufficiently dry, huge peat harvesters rolled out on very wide tires. Each harvester is a giant vacuum cleaner with a 20-foot canister behind the cab. Each harvester has four mouth pieces held in front just above the peat field. The vacuums was used to pick up dry material off the field surface. When the canister of a harvester was full, the driver would pull up to the road and empty the contents through the rear door on to a pile.

The company maintains very stringent fire and weed control policy out in the fields. Their main concern was with the wind carrying weeds from afar which they could not control. With respect to fires, they maintains firefighting equipment out in the fields at all times. The company also checks the piles of peat constantly with thermometers for heat build-up . Each

pile showing heat build-up is turned over to cool the inside.

On the way back to the office, we passed a small five-acre parcel of land that used to compose lumber bark. The company uses bark from Manitoba and Ontario. The bark is composed in windrows.

Back at the office, we were informed that they only take off approximately one inch of peat from the soil per year. When they go down another three feet, the company plans to reseed the area so it can regenerate itself. A restored field has already been completed.

Thanks to Sun-Gro for the interesting tour.

by Henry Kotyk, a member of Conserve Native Plant Society Inc.

trees all winter with occasional short flights for a drink of water on warm days.

Unfortunately, conflicting demands are endangering these overwintering sites in Mexico. The growing needs for wood and farmland threaten the trees where the Monarchs roost. The federal and two state governments in Mexico have all legislated protection for the sites. Private groups such as World Wildlife Fund, the Mexican conservation group Monarca A.C. and the Manitoba Model Forest Network are also working to preserve and manage sites.

A lot of work is being done to help preserve and to educate the public about Monarch migration and its

habitat requirements. What can we do? There is one simple thing that all of us who own a patch of ground can do to ensure survival of this amazing insect.

Plant Milkweeds! Their perfume is intoxicating, they are beautiful and they allow a fascinating glimpse of nature in action. Just think of the boost it would give to local Monarch populations if everyone had a few milkweeds in their garden!

Shirley Froehlich of Prairie Originals

Upcoming Field Trips

Sat. May 22 - This is the time to see Fairy Slipper Orchids, Early Coral Root and possibly Moccasin Flowers in bloom. With luck we should also be able to see the beautiful, pink Bog Laurel along the #308 and the shy Goldthread flowers as well.

Sat. June 19 - Out to a cedar bog near Woodridge, this time to see the Ram's Head Lady Slipper, Yellow Lady's Slippers and Small Round Leaf Orchids. Paintbrush and other interesting plants are blooming at this time.

Sat. June 26 - Our first trip of the year to the Gull Lake Wetlands to see the early orchids, sedges and insect-eating plants there. The Showy Lady's Slippers should be blooming at this time as well as many other orchids. We can make a side trip to see the Moccasin Flowers in Belair Provincial Forest.

Sat. July 10 - Vita and Buffalo Point to see the Western Fringed Orchid and the Purple Fringed Orchid.

Sat. July 17 - Back out to the Gull Lake Wetlands to see more orchids including the three little pink ones: Dragon's Mouth, Rose Pogonia and Grass Pink. The carnivorous plants should be at their bug-eating best.

Sat. July 25 - to Falcon Lake to see Ironwood, wild onions, Whitepine and Water Lilies.

Wed. Aug. 04 - Sun Grow Horticulture at Elma, MB, to view peat moss production.

There will be a \$10 charge to cover the costs of the field trip and you will be asked to sign a liability waiver. Please dress suitably for the weather. Hats and drinking water are recommended. You will be notified if a trip is cancelled. If interested, please contact Morag Belliveau at 477-1046.
