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Bruce Peninsula Reserves: From Everyday to Extraordinary

By Bob Barnett

Conservation, like life, is filled with quiet moments of delight and accomplishment and dramatic highpoints that inspire and linger. For me one of those highlights happened on the Escarpment Biosphere Reserve (EBC) Alvar Bay property on the Bruce Peninsula. The shrubby cinquefoil along the road was moving about in a most peculiar way, so I went for a closer look. Two Massasauga Rattlesnakes were smashing away at each other. Every 20 seconds or so they would rear up into the air, crash heads and coil their necks together. I watched for 20 minutes, taking photo after photo, until the loser slithered away. I suddenly realized that the female had been quietly enjoying the show in the shrubbery at my feet, which were thankfully clad in stout boots. Amazingly, that very day we'd taken our grandchildren out with Bruce Peninsula National Park naturalist Tony Abbot on a snake watch when he mentioned the dominance dance phenomenon and showed us pictures. He'd never seen it himself and our photos have created a buzz in the snake community.

Walking along the 1½ km gravel track to the Alvar Bay shoreline is again a study in the everyday and the extraordinary. Undulating pitted limestone formations, 400 million years old, stretch into Lake Huron but a closer look shows segments of a globally rare alvar. Boulders that are several billion-year-old glacial erratics from Sudbury and much farther north, are deposited on the shore. The limestone



▲ Two Massasauga rattlesnakes battling for dominance at Alvar Bay on Bruce Peninsula: very rarely seen, let alone photographed.

shore itself is augmented with skeletal deposits of an ancient tropical sea.

Cape Hurd is a jumping-off point for birds migrating across the Great Lakes and in the fall Monarch butterflies use the area as an important landing area. Five of our contiguous properties have created a 400-acre bulwark against development. You can continue south along our shore for over two km keeping an eye out for the Massasauga rattlers or for the Queen snake, thought to be extirpated until it was spotted a few years ago on our reserve. Fringed gentian, columbines, sticky tofieldia, harebells, and kalm's lobelia grow in abundance in the rock clefts while ancient cedars dot the landscape, twisted by the wind and ice over decades.

Further south on the Cape Hurd Road is our 300-acre Barney Lake Reserve which contains a sheltered inland lake for birds. A rocky trail allows you to access 50-acre Barney Lake. A close look will reveal that ordinary rocky ridges are in fact glacial striations, not scoured clean as they are on the shore of Alvar Bay, but filled with rock deposits and humus. This allows the growth

of lady's slippers, Indian paintbrush, trilliums, Canada lilies, cardinal flower and white camas lily. Each season creates a new carpet of colour. The lake itself comes into view after a brief hike: a mirror of tea-coloured water with the flat alvar formation clearly visible on the lake bottom.

Help Preserve

Our extraordinary dream is the preservation of the entire tip of Baptist Harbour. EBC already owns the Welch Hackney and Meyer reserve with exposed bedrock, wooded areas, fens and Dwarf Lake Iris and Lakeside Daisy, both provincially threatened species. But we are missing a vital link between this area and Barney Lake.

With the proposed acquisition of the 94-acre Hobson property we could preserve 1200 feet of Lake Huron shoreline within a provincially significant Area of Natural and Scientific Interest with hill's thistle, dwarf lake iris, limestone oak fern, Massasauga and the eastern ribbonsnake. We have visions of a new five km-long hiking trail loop past Barney Lake, through the fens and alvar meadows to the

limestone formations at the shore of Baptist Harbour. And these are truly astounding: right-angled ridges that seem to be engineered, they are so perfect in their wind-sculpted geometry. At the moment the access is somewhat fraught: the wetlands of Barney Lake at one end and impenetrable thickets of balsam fir and spruce on the other.

We have applied to Nature Conservancy/Environment Canada and Mountain Equipment Co-op for funding and the owner is ready to make a very generous donation. EBC will attempt to cover the appraisal costs, stewardship funding, legal costs, etc. but this still leaves us with a shortfall of approximately \$15,000. Can you help? We have maps of the area, we have species lists, we will happily lead nature walks. Get in touch with us. Help us create a lasting legacy for our grandchildren as well as preserving a natural wonder that all of us can enjoy and explore.

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