

WAGNER NATURAL AREA NEWSLETTER

Volume 18 Number 2 October 2004

Newsletter of the Wagner Natural Area Society, Management Committee
and Volunteer Stewards of Wagner Natural Area, Parkland County, Alberta



Members and guests are invited to Wagner Society's
Annual Members' Night, November 24, 2004
Room 327, Earth & Atmospheric Sciences, University of Alberta

Mike Jenkins, B.Sc., and member of the City of Edmonton Pest Control team, will give a talk entitled:
"The Much-Maligned Mosquito: Why It Finds Wagner Natural Area Prime Real Estate!"



Everyone who has been to Wagner has been enthusiastically greeted by our little winged friends. Learn about their biology and life cycle, and discover the difference between the many different species that exist in Wagner and the Edmonton area. We will also touch on the biology and ecology of West Nile Virus, and what it could mean to the Wagner Natural Area.

Doors open at 7 p.m.~ Program begins 7:30 p.m.
President's Report ~ Treasurer's Report ~ Membership Report
Refreshments to Follow ~ Please Renew Memberships ~ Admission Free

Wagner Natural Area Consolidated – Society Holds its 200th Meeting! – New Lease in the Works!

Wagner lands to the south and east additional to those previously OC'd, and lands that were transferred from the Department of Transportation on the east side were officially consolidated by government Order-in-Council 346/2004 on July 24, 2004. This latest OC officially increases the size of Wagner from 124.59 hectares to 218.878 hectares! Along with our expanded natural area, our volunteer steward committee, Wagner Natural Area Society, is still going strong in its 22nd year, and on September 9 celebrated its 200th management meeting with a dinner at the West Harvest Inn in west Edmonton. A sampling of committee members' reminiscences are provided on subsequent pages. As well, the Society's 21-year recreation lease to the property matured this year, and we are in the process of acquiring a new one (for 10 years).

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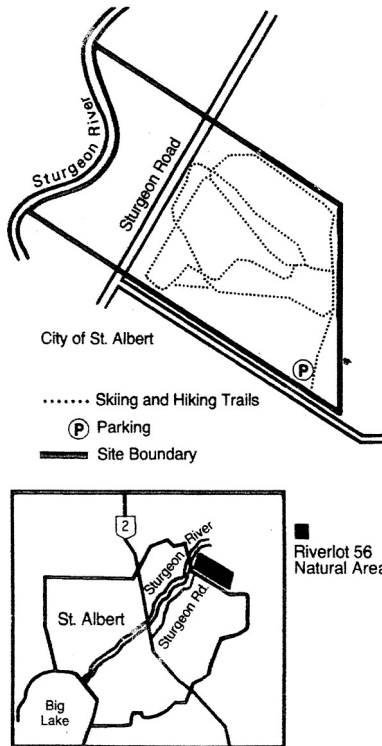
Nota Bene:

In this issue we are pleased to feature a guest article by **Dan Stoker** of nearby Riverlot 56 Natural Area and we invite other stewards to tell us about their natural areas in these pages. Also mycologist **Markus Thormann** treats us to a guest column on the oyster mushroom, a candidate for provincial mushroom emblem.

Bouquets to our own **Jasper Keizer** for clearing the Marl Pond Trail after the September snow storm, as well as to **Pat and Dick Clayton** for extraordinary dedication as monthly monitors during the summer. Their work included weed-pulling duties, bird-box maintenance, litter collection and more...

"Stoic Interpreters" – The Riverlot 56 Natural Area Signage System

by Dan Stoker



Back in the early 1980s, the Wagner Natural Area (WNA) gained its official status and so did Riverlot 56 Natural Area (R56NA) not so far away. Both have persisted to this day. Both have societies (management committees) that strive to steward them. Both natural areas are constantly under threat. Both are used for recreation and education. Both have interpretive signage. It's on this last point that some slight differences may be noted and some sharing is in order. Learning from one another is the name of the game.

First some background. R56NA to most people in St. Albert is simply 'Riverlot'. It is located on the eastern edge of St. Albert bordered by Sturgeon Road and Poundmaker Road. It is predominantly treed with mixedwoods of aspen, poplar, pin cherry, saskatoon, white birch and a smattering of white spruce here and there. There are some open fields that yield a crop of hay yearly and this offers the R56NA Society some working funds. The site has no special significance vis-à-vis rare plants, but it hosts small populations of wildlife including a few moose annually, deer, coyotes, porcupine, beaver, muskrats, owls and snowshoe hare. It harbours hundreds upon hundreds of bohemian waxwings at various times each winter, which feed on its rich supply of berries and gradually deplete them by spring.

The area is criss-crossed with trails. (A recreation lease was granted to the Society in 1985.) The trails have two primary purposes and uses. In winter, the predominant use has been cross-country skiing. Many, if not most, of the trails are groomed for this purpose. Snowshoeing and hiking may also

take place at this time. The uses generally coexist well. In the snowless months, walking, hiking, jogging and bird-watching are the activities that attract a certain group of outdoorsy types.

Along the trails signposts became our "stoic interpreters"! In November, 2001, the R56NA Society gave consideration to expansion of a trail signage system that up until then had been focussed on the historical aspects of the land. It had been important to establish the origins of the land especially for the growing population of newcomers to St. Albert who were unaware of its historical roots. The focus shifted in 2001 to the larger tract of natural area south-east of Sturgeon Road. It had received no interpretive signage up until then.

The experiment that was envisaged was to come up with a signage system that would **INVOLVE** passers-by. Involvement had to go beyond just reading facts and figures about the life-forms and features close by. Involvement meant **DOING** something as part of a learning experience.

Signposts were then to be viewed quite differently — as "interpreters" that were somewhat "stoic" in their resolve to persist with their interpretive skills in rain or shine or sleet or snow!. Being dynamic interpreters they would ask questions. They would point to things in various directions! They would pose mental challenges to engage skiers and walkers alike! They would offer samples of things to view like moose droppings or a coyote's jaw to illustrate a point or to capture attention. They had to be able to answer the questions they posed. They even had thermometers to illustrate and compare different mini-climates in different parts of the area. And of course, they would offer some valued facts and figures and assist in identifying key species of plants and animals, as part of their traditional role.

The experiment is now in full swing. Installation was completed in the spring of 2002. It involves 16 numbered posts placed strategically throughout the larger south-east section. Walk on any trail a relatively short distance and you come across an "interpreter" ready to challenge you with a question, point out a tree or shrub for identification or show you something novel like an owl pellet. If you have trouble figuring out a question or task like finishing a crossword challenge, you simply have to step behind the "interpreter" where an answer sheet is hidden. The "interpreter" is no slouch, it has answers too.

How are our "interpreters" standing up to the task themselves? Vandalism, thankfully, has not been a problem. The rugged design for the posts may be part of the reason. The type of people who use the trail system is probably the main reason. The area is somewhat self-selecting; it's not really a place to 'party'.

Since some of the signs provide aerial photographic maps, first-time walkers/visitors probably feel more secure in understanding where they are relative to their cars back at the parking lot. Thus, they can enjoy going further to explore confidently under the guidance of our "stoic interpreters."

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“Stoic Interpreters...” continued from page 2...

After over two years exposed to the elements, our “interpreters” have aged only slightly. Unlike the human interpreter, ours have not developed a healthy tanned look from the constant solar input. They have actually faded just slightly and might need a makeover within the next year or two. None of our thermometers, nature specimens, directional indicators or answer sheets has been disturbed. They’re a bunch of good workers.

The signage system at Riverlot was developed after visiting many other outdoor interpretation sites including Wagner. It is appropriate, now, with the experiment well in place, to offer an invitation to the membership of the Wagner Natural Area Society to come and see. We certainly have learned from your efforts and if there is anything to be learned from ours, sharing is what it is all about. Your expert feedback would be awesome.

Dan Stoker designed and installed the interpretive nature trail at R56NA, his second such interactive trail. Dan is well known locally as a teacher of environmental education and an interpreter. He is proving to be a keen member of the provincial government’s volunteer stewards program. Note Dan’s invitation to Wagner lovers to visit R65NA and check out the trail. Visitors may wish to consider that a half-day in Wagner and a half-day in R56NA would make an excellent day out with plenty of variety – the two natural areas encompass very different habitats!



A “stoic interpreter” at Riverlot 56 Natural Area

Wagner Natural Area Society

26519 Highway 16, Spruce Grove, AB T7X 3L4 Visit our website at <http://www.wagner.fanweb.ca>

Executive 2004-2005

President	Alice Hendry (962-4836)	Directors:	Pat Clayton (456-9046)
Past President	Irl Miller (455-3866)		Leota Cummins (447-4256)
Vice-President	Ben Rostron (434-3839)		Beth Jenkins (458-1794)
Treasurer	Tom Sherwood (435-6065)		Derek Johnson (436-8231)
Secretary/Ed/Membership	Patsy Cotterill (481-1525)		Edgar Jones (436-5327)
			Pat Webb (458-3477)

Mike Jenkins (Webmaster) (481-8695) Jasper Keizer (Fire Warden) (962-2745)

The Wagner Family

A big welcome to our new and relatively new members, for example, Dolores Berlin, A.T. Blades, Jan Bloomfield, Matt Cohen, Ted Enns, Ann and Charles Grant and Mary Hicks, as well as our old faithfuls, and to our donors (sometimes one and the same), including of course those who have made unusually large donations for the purpose of land acquisition. A big thank-you from our executive for these contributions.

We are still in the process of raising money for land purchase to make Wagner bigger and safer! If anyone would like a brochure indicating what the land purchase is all about and how to make a contribution – perhaps to pass it on to family, friends, or an organization – please call Alice, Pat or Irl (above) and they will be happy to send you one in the mail.

Our Relationship with Wagner Natural Area: Reflecting on 20-plus Years and 200 Meetings... by *Wagner Society Members and guest Cathy Mowat*

September 9th, 2004, West Harvest Inn, Edmonton

by *Alice Hendry*

Since this, the 200th meeting of our Wagner committee, is a celebration of meetings, I offer some information about those 200 meetings that we have held:

- The first meeting, an organizational meeting, took place on Nov. 5, 1982.
- The 1st board meeting took place on Jan. 20, 1983.
- The 100th meeting was held at Emery's restaurant in November, 1992.
- The 150th meeting was at the Ginger Beef Restaurant in March of 1998.
- The January 2005 meeting will mark the beginning of our 23rd year.
- We average nine board meetings a year; 50 board meetings every six years.

Our board meetings are usually four hours long. For one board member, 200 four-hour meetings would add up to 800 hours or 33 24-hour days, or 100 eight-hour work days (without time off for breaks or lunch). The hours of six board members per meeting (a conservative average) add up to 4800, or 200 24-hour days, or 600 eight-hour days, or 20 months of free labour (union-free and strike-free)!

And what do we do at these meetings? We usually have a big agenda, and we usually get through most of that agenda. We engage in lively debate. We learn interesting bits of information from other board members. We decide to fight roads and fish ponds. We laugh. AND we all anticipate the treat that comes at the end of the meeting. I think we could say that Pat Seymour started the tradition in December of 1988, with his big bowls of trifle – two BIG bowls. We enjoy syllabub at Pat & Dick Clayton's house, custard at Pat and Irl Miller's house, more trifle at Patsy Cotterill's house, brownies at Derek Johnson's house and Leota Cummins' cinnamon buns at nearly every meeting.

And who can forget those who forgot they were hosting the meeting? Terry Thormin forgot. We all gathered at his apartment door to no avail. We finally retreated to Pat Seymour's apartment – the closest location – but we missed out on the big bowls of trifle. Dale Vitt forgot, but *he* was home. He had a look of shock and horror on his face when he opened his door and saw us all waiting to come in. He quickly ushered us downstairs and then ran back upstairs to vacuum the dog hair off the living room furniture. Sandi Vitt made the famous Vitt brownies for us that night, so at least we got our treat.

At this point I could list our accomplishments, awards, battles fought, but that has been done before (and will be done again). I think it would be more appropriate at this gathering to have those present relate some Wagner moments that each person remembers as being special, in

one way or another – humorous, poignant, warm and fuzzy, or even frightening.

Picking just a few examples, I found, is hard to do. Here are just a few moments from my book of memories.

My first task for the Wagner society was that of assembling a Wagner history. It occurred to me that Mr. William Wagner might still be alive and that he might be a source of just the sort of information I was trying to find. The government had purchased the land from him in 1971 and apparently no one had talked to him since. Was he still alive and functioning?

Finding Mr. Wagner was not difficult; he was listed in the phone book. To make things even simpler, he lived just a mile west of Wagner Natural Area. I interviewed him in January of 1983, in his dining room. We sat at a table covered with an ancient oilcloth. There was a wood stove in one corner of the room and a bed in another. Obviously, it was one of the few rooms in the house that was heated and used in the winter. Mr. Wagner was very pleased to talk about Wagner Natural Area. Maybe that is putting it mildly; he was thrilled that someone was finally asking him about "his" natural area. That interview gave us information we could not have gotten any other way – the flowing wells on the Villeneuve extension, and the battle to make marl a surface mineral¹, for instance. Once he had been "located," Mr. Wagner was happy to attend a few Wagner functions, and to receive well-deserved attention, before he passed away in 1991.

Then, there was the May Count Day Murderer. That year, 1986, Patsy and I and our summer student, Terry Freidrich, met at the main gate at 10 a.m. We had all noticed a car, parked against our fence, a bit west of the northwest corner of the Villeneuve field. By the time we had worked our way down to the vicinity of the car, it was early afternoon and it was hot. Patsy and I asked Terry to check the car for a license plate number. Terry came back to tell us that there was a person, a person covered in blood, in the car. The person was alive and asking for water and did not appear to be seriously injured. The three of us conferred and decided that someone had to notify the police about the car's driver. Patsy suggested that Terry and I notify the police while she continued to look for flowering plants. Patsy disappeared into the woods, near the location of the car, and Terry and I hurried back to the parking lot. If we were to be in a similar situation today, one of us would whip out a cell phone, dial 911, report the situation, and we would be done. But this was 1986. Terry and I drove into Spruce Grove and knocked on the door of the police station. No answer. It was a Sunday and the station was closed. Just then, a police car

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¹ As a surface mineral, marl could not be "mined" without the permission of the owner, and Mr. Wagner was opposed to its extraction. – Ed.

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drove down the street. We ran after the car, waved our arms, and finally caught the officer's attention. Terry talked to the officer and explained the situation. We then got back into our car and drove back to the Wagner parking lot. By the time we had walked back to the vehicle, there were several police cars and an ambulance in attendance. BUT where was Patsy? If we had known the history of the blood-covered driver, we would have been very concerned about Patsy's safety. A few minutes later, Patsy wandered out of the woods. She was very surprised to see all the activity and people around the car. She had been concentrating so hard on flowers that she was oblivious to sirens, doors slamming, and people yelling. The bloody driver was later charged with the murder of a woman in St Albert. The murder had happened the previous night. He was trying to drive west to B.C. when he wandered off the paved road and got stuck in the famous Wagner mud.

Another difficult task is to select just a few Wagner locations that have special meaning for me:

I choose Jones's pond – for its serenity in every season, for lunches on May count days, for the time Aileen Rhodes, a tiny, slender person, invited me to ride in her little raft, out on the pond, while she gathered diatom samples.

The marl pond view from John Maroziuk's bench – for its beauty and tranquility, for the wonderful, warm frog and toad evening when we listened to the boreal toads and chorus frogs, watched geese and ducks land on the pond, and heard a coyote calling, and for the many quiet moments I have spent there.

Chris Miller's study site for the buckbean blooms, the undisturbed marl ponds, and the cow and calf moose I saw there one spring.

And the cabin site for its glorious orchid displays, for the day we found the first Calypso orchid, for the day when we finally cleaned up the last of the years of bush party refuse, and for the memories of Barry and Janice when I sit on their bench.

by Beth Jenkins

Many happy memories of walks with family and friends blend into one another, distinguished from one another by the background of the seasons and the plants in bloom at the time. One memory in particular stands out: a family walk on Mother's Day in the spring of 1995. The marsh marigolds were in full bloom. A cousin's 5-year-old granddaughter was part of the group, and once I'd shown her a clump of golden blossoms beside the path near the main gate, she eagerly and joyfully called out "There's one" and "There's another!" and "There's some more" at every golden patch of bloom she spotted along the full length of the Marl Pond Trail. Every spring, when I see marsh marigolds, I hear her voice and I smile.

Favourite places in Wagner:

- the Cabin Trail when the Sparrow's Egg Orchids are in bloom
- a spot beside the Marl Pond Trail, between posts 20 and 22, where the twinflower blooms among the mosses, and I think "This looks like a fairies' dancing ground" when I see them
- the view from the bench dedicated to the students from Niel M. Ross school, when the tamarack is golden yellow in the fall

by Derek Johnson

My first visit to Wagner was in October of 1982 after I'd resided in Edmonton for six years, hearing a lot about the area, but never having found the time to visit it. The reason we went to Wagner was to do some peat cores to add the site to the peatland ecology study the Canadian Forest Service was conducting across AB, SK and MB at that time. We selected Jones' Pond as a sample site because we thought it might have some of the deeper peats in the natural area. We got to 235 cm before hitting mineral soil at the edge of the pond, but the peat was only 160 cm deep back in the forest some 10 m away. Our estimate for the basal age of the peat at Jones' Pond was 4700 years. The other remarkable thing about our sampling was that we found five tamarack "trees" over 300 years old. (We had to core over two dozen trees before we could get cores that were intact enough to age, so there are probably more trees than this over 300 years old.) Tamarack of such advanced age are rare; they are usually consumed by a forest fire or larch sawflies before they get to this age. The oldest black spruce we found was less than 250 years old. The culmination of this work was the inclusion of the Wagner Natural Area as an example of a boreal spring fen in the book "Wetlands of Canada" that was published in 1988. Another publication that has a Wagner touch is *Plants of the Western Boreal Forest and Aspen Parkland*¹ which has 13 photographs in it that were taken in Wagner.

Spring and fall cleanups are always good for memories. I remember one spring cleanup when I had the responsibility for cleaning out the bluebird boxes in the Villeneuve field. Most of the boxes were empty, but I came to one in the southeast corner of the field that was full of moss. I thought this was a bit strange because most birds that nest in boxes don't use moss to build or line their nests. I proceeded to reach into the box and pull out the moss. No sooner had I gotten the ball of moss out of the box then it started to wiggle. Startled, I dropped the moss onto the ground, at which point an equally startled Northern Flying Squirrel burst out of the moss and ran about 20 feet up into the aspen tree to which the nest box was attached. The squirrel didn't make a sound. It just sat in the tree staring down at me while I stood there staring up at it. This went on for a

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¹ Derek co-authored this book with local botanist Linda Johnson and B.C. botanists Andy MacKinnon and Jim Pojar.

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couple of minutes until I decided to move on and continue my cleanup tasks. I went back to the box later in the day, but the squirrel was nowhere to be found.

One more recent activity of interest was trying to track down the reason some white spruce trees along the parking lot access road at Wagner were dying. After eliminating drought or flood as possible causes, herbicides became the next logical choice. This proved difficult to prove since only white spruce trees were affected (not tamarack or balsam poplar), but after three years, some chemical analysis of plant samples, tidbits of information from the County of Parkland about their roadside spraying program, and some time spent searching the internet for information on specific herbicides, it appeared that the likely cause of death was a herbicide called Garlon, probably applied in spring before full leafout of the deciduous species, which meant they were less affected by the herbicide than were the white spruce.

Field trips were always good for memories. I remember the trip which I led around the Marl Pond Trail in conjunction with a Climate Change conference that was being held in Edmonton at that time. I received many comments on the cow moose I had conveniently got to pose in the bush about midway around the trail. The fact that almost everybody got a good look at it without the animal moving off made me wonder if it had been hit by a vehicle on Highway 16 and that its injuries kept it from moving. No chance to check this out with the field trip group, but I came back three days later to find the animal dead in the same place we saw it earlier. Coyotes had already begun to scavenge the body. Alice took some bones from the animal for analysis and I believe it was a disease rather than a vehicle hit that led to its death.

My most memorable summer student at Wagner was Tara Mercier (nee Normand) who worked in Wagner in 1992. At the ripe old age of 19 she already knew that to get anywhere in this world you have to work for it. During her interview for the job she expressed interest in getting into "wildlife enforcement." I think she achieved her goal. She is now a constable with the City of Calgary police force! (Too bad she wasn't around for the "May Count Murderer.")

Patsy, I was surprised neither you nor Alice mentioned the Saturday when you, Alice, Pat McIsaac and I sat around the table at Alice's house agonizing over the Watchable Wildlife plant checklist for Wagner. I'm surprised we were still speaking to each other by the end of the day!¹

¹ Actually, Derek, I remember those checklist meetings as a fun time. At one meeting at my house, we would erupt in gales of laughter periodically. My young son, who was elsewhere in the house at the time, asked me afterwards: "Why were you all laughing all the time? I said, "Because that's what grownups do when they get together!" – Ed.

As we all know, Wagner meetings can get a bit feisty and I forgot to mention the time when we had a meeting at Eddie's and the first thing I did when the "goodies" part of the meeting began was to demolish one of Jeannie's prize heirloom tea cups. That's almost as bad as pulling the Matt Fairbarns*² when I caused the demise of a large Round-leaved Orchid along the cabin trail on one of our field trips by stepping on it.

by Pat Clayton

When I feel harried or rushed I take a moment to remember one calm and quiet evening when I sat on the Morozuk bench by the marl pond and listened for toad song. It was still sunny, calm (no traffic noise) and so peaceful. It has remained my "quiet moment" ever since.

by Ben Rostron

– The first public meeting I ever made a presentation at, one of the Open Houses at Winterburn Hall (sometime in 1989?), I spoke against the development and mentioned the difficulty of transplanting the orchids, and a number of other technical (road/marl/stability) issues. That was the first time I ever got interviewed for the CBC!!

And a "funny" story. At the time of the interchange battle, I had just finished a 1-year term as the VP of the Graduate Students' Association. One of the staff secretaries at the GSA was a woman I'd got to know fairly well, and her name was Kate. She was due to take off on maternity leave. After the above public meeting, I was invited to participate in a workshop at the Winterburn Hall. There, we were divided up into groups, and I was in a group with a young Civil Engineer who had worked on the design of the proposed bridge/road. It was an "all day" thing, and quite "adversarial." Anyway, the funny part was, here is this young graduate student (me) arguing with the road designers (all day) about how it was such a stupid idea to put the road where they were proposing. During the lunch break, I realized that one of the engineers was Kate's husband (my former secretary at the GSA). I had heard that she just had her baby, like two days before. So I walked up to this young engineer at lunch and asked him straight out... so how's Kate doing??!! You should have seen the look on this guy's face!! He couldn't figure out who the hell I was, nor where I would know about his newborn baby!! I still remember the look on his face! He calmed down a bit after I explained that his wife had worked for me at the GSA! The whole rest of the day, though, he kept pretty close tabs on me. (As a follow-up, it just goes to show how small the community of geotech/hydro people is!!) *continued on page 7*

² Botanist Matt Fairbarns, now in B.C., has never lived down the fact that he accidentally picked a specimen (the only one then known at the site) of the rare bog adder's-mouth orchid at Clyde Fen Natural Area. However, he is credited with first finding good populations of this species at Wagner, and his report was used as important evidence to argue for the relocation of the road interchange further east than proposed, thereby protecting Wagner's sensitive east end. – Ed.

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- I also remember seeing Alice Hendry for the first time at one of those meetings, and thinking to myself: "What conviction!!" and.... "Man! that is one fierce woman!!" She scared me then, and I think I'm still afraid of her!!

Finally, as a "Johnny-come-lately" to the Management Committee, I'm always awed by everyone else's lifelong commitment to the WNA. It is a true honour to work with a group of people with such conviction and dedication to the cause.

by Cathy Mowat

I wasn't sure what to say after listening to everyone else speak.

Working with the Wagner Group was a great professional experience. It is hard to recall one favourite memory of the time I spent working on the development of the management plan for Wagner as a Master's student. I recall a number of things. How intimidated I was by the Wagner Management committee when I first met them. That I was even more intimidated! when I got to know them better and realized that they knew 10 times what I knew and could know about the Wagner Natural Area... If I have to identify just a few favourite memories of the Natural Area itself, I think I'd say they were of the boardwalk over the fens and of the silence and stillness of the area in winter – the pleasure of being able to explore the hidden corners when the snow was deep, without worrying about damage to the site.

I was really happy, when the project was finished, that both the Wagner Management Committee and the (government) Natural Areas Program felt the Wagner Natural Area Resource Management Plan was what they needed. If the plan is still useful, after all this time, I can only say that I am delighted and that I think that, ultimately, the credit for the ongoing relevance on the plan has to go to the collaborative approach the Wagner Management Committee took to the development of the plan. Their ongoing active involvement, and the unfailingly open and sometimes difficult discussions that took place about the objectives for the site, and about the practicalities of implementing and managing them, were fundamental to the success of the project. I think, based on my professional experience since that time, that although I appreciated the value of that even then, I still underrated its importance. The Wagner Management Committee's informed stewardship, commitment, and professionalism were critical to the success of the resource management planning project. It was a great experience and an extremely valuable one.

by Patsy Cotterill

I first heard about Wagner soon after I came to Edmonton in 1981, from Julie Hrapko, botanical curator at the Provincial Museum, where I had temporary employment. (Julie did much towards developing the first list of vascular plants in Wagner.) However, I didn't actually visit the site until February 1982, when I was lucky enough to be invited on a

bryology field trip with Dr. Dale Vitt of the University of Alberta and his students. Then began what I call a "year of revelation." This was my first acquaintance with a rich calcareous fen, as I had previously lived in Winnipeg and then for eight years prior to that on the Canadian Shield in northern Manitoba. So this particular community of plants was quite new to me, and what a revelation it was. I admit I collected specimens, taking the sedges home, at different stages of maturity, to pore over and identify under the dissecting scope at will. This is exactly the kind of botanising I like, not parachuting in and out again to a site, but visiting the same place over and over again throughout the seasons, observing all the changes. By the end of the season, I thought I had a pretty good handle on Wagner's vegetation, and this experience was to stand me in good stead, for rich fens are common in boreal Alberta and the foothills and mountains, and the same components keep cropping up all over. Of course, there were many more revelations to come, in company of people such as Alice and Derek (from whom I even learned some of the mosses). And much, much later, I began to understand something of Wagner's very interesting hydrogeology...

June 23, 1990 stands out as being the date of a field trip to the southeast corner of Wagner when I suddenly noticed a host of tiny white flowerheads sticking up like pins above the fens, looking a bit different from the heads of the common spike-rush. These proved to be the flowers of the slender spike-rush, which had been recorded by a team from the International Biological Programme in the late 1960s, but not reported since. A little bit later in the same vicinity I found the equally rare slender beaked-rush, also previously recorded by the IBP in Wagner. What had happened to these populations in the interim? Wasn't it most likely that I had just failed to observe them? This sort of enigma certainly keeps one humble as a botanist!

Favourite spots?

- the southeast end, where all the rare sedge-family members are, as well as the heart-leaved twayblade and that beautiful little moss, *Paludella squarrosa*
- the northeast side, where the old-growth spruce forest is. That's where we spent one lovely cleanup day, piling up old, rusty metal, and then afterwards just relaxing in perfect, tranquil, mosquito-less camaraderie
- Jones's pond, of course. The clear amber colour of that shallow water, framed by conifers to the west and twisted, stunted, old-growth tamarack to the east, has to be seen to be believed

Finally, a nostalgic nod of recognition to all the excellent summer students we've had in times past, particularly Andrew Hendry (more recently of salmon fame!) for his excellently observed natural history reports, Natasha Page with her butterflies and dragonflies and orchid pollination – her energy and keenness were infectious – and Mike Jenkins, mosquito expert, who's now on our board, but is still dabbling in pond life and bug life of various sorts. Hats off to the younger generation!

Wildflowers of Wagner No. 23

***Pleurotus ostreatus* (Jacq.: Fr.) Kummer**
Tricholomataceae, Basidiomycota, Fungi

Oyster mushroom



Oyster mushrooms on log
(http://botit.botany.wisc.edu/toms_fungi).

After several years of drought in western Canada, 2004 has been a banner year for fungi. It was difficult, if not impossible, to go for a walk anywhere and not see any fungi. A very common and widespread fungus in Alberta is the oyster mushroom, *Pleurotus ostreatus*. The common name comes from the white shell-like appearance of the fruiting bodies, not from the taste. It is characterized by a white spore print, attached to decurrent white or yellowish gills,



Gills of oyster mushrooms
(http://www.fcps.k12.va.us/StratfordLandingES/Ecology/mpages/oyster__mushroom.htm).

often with an off-centre stem, or no stem at all. The semi-circular caps can be up to 20 cm wide and often occur in clusters.

In Alberta, oyster mushrooms grow abundantly from early June to August on dead and decaying aspen (*Populus* spp.), and sometime birch (*Betula* spp.), logs and stumps, which they decompose to obtain nutrients. Sometimes they

are found growing on living trees. In these cases, *P. ostreatus* is parasitic, rather than saprobic, in nature.

Since these mushrooms can look different at different times of the year, it is easy to confuse them with other mushrooms, even poisonous ones. One of them is *Lentinellus ursinus*. It also has white spores, but it has serrate (saw-toothed) gill edges. If you look at the basidiospores under the microscope, they are small and amyloid (blue) in Melzer's reagent (the active ingredient of which is iodine). In addition, the flesh of the gills has many amyloid hyphae in it. Other common mushrooms that can be confused with *Pleurotus* are *Crepidotus* spp. They also lack a stem; however, they can easily be distinguished based on spore colour. Spores of *Crepidotus* spp. are brown rather than white as in *Pleurotus* spp. Neither of these two look-alikes is deadly poisonous; however, they should not be eaten.

Oyster mushrooms are edible and a favorite among wild mushroom collectors. The taste of the oyster mushroom varies from very mild to very strong, sometimes sweet with the smell of anise (licorice). It varies in texture from very soft to very chewy, depending on the strain and what time of the year you pick it. Some people are allergic to oyster mushrooms and have a bad reaction when they eat them. Like other fungi, oyster mushrooms are good food and habitat for many animals, including fungus gnats, horned fungus beetles, springtails, some turtles, white-tailed deer, and squirrels.

So, next time you go for a walk, keep your eyes open for oyster mushrooms. However, keep in mind the need to be absolutely certain that what you have collected really are oyster mushrooms. If in doubt, throw them out!

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