The Ridges Sanctuary – A living Museum

by Albert M. Fuller, Curator of Botany

“Another year has passed and the Ridges Sanctuary has again fulfilled its promise of perpetual beauty. The dwarf iris flowed like a royal blue carpet over the ridges and yellow lady’s-slippers, pink moccasin and the showy lady’s-slippers made bold splashes of color along the trails. The trailing arbutus sent up its heady perfume from hidden places; the arctic primrose twinkled along stony ridges and the rare ram’s head orchids raised their delicate heads in secret shaded places.”

The above vivid description of the Ridges sanctuary in its spring glory is excerpted from the letter written by Murl Deusing, president of the Ridges Sanctuary, Inc., to the members.

The Ridges Sanctuary is located at Baileys Harbor, Door County, Wisconsin and is about 180 miles north of Milwaukee. It is on the Lake Michigan side of the Door county Peninsula. The late John T. Curtis in his book, The Vegetation of Wisconsin, in discussing the lake shore communities of Wisconsin, wrote the following about the beaches of Door county:

“No discussion of the lake shore communities of Wisconsin would be complete without at least a mention of the beaches of Door County. At the Ridges wild flower Sanctuary near Baileys Harbor, at Peninsula State Park, and elsewhere in the county, there exists a number of very wide beaches with a gradual transition from the upper beach to the adjacent low dunes. These dunes are frequently linear, paralleling the shore line, and are separated by strips of moist or submerged meadows and sloughs. The variations in moisture and organic matter content are great enough to allow the development of a rich mixture of species which is almost startling in its beauty at many seasons. Perhaps the acme is attained in late May or early June when the ground is literally covered with mats of the bright blue lake iris (Iris lacustris) studded with the pink umbels of Primula misfassinica and the blossoms of the brilliant purple gaywings (Polygalo paucifolio). In the opinion of many People of wide experience, no other wild flower display in the entire Middle west is the equal of this.”
Many years ago the Federal Government had established a range light reserve, consisting of forty acres, on the southwest portion of the area known as “The Ridges.” A considerable number of private individuals owned the remaining forties which comprised “The Ridges” area. Most of the private owners were holding their “forties” for woodlots. Several of the owners had clean-cut their holdings.

In 1936 the Federal Government gave its land to Door County to be used as a park. Immediately pressure was exerted on the Door County Park Commission to build a rather extensive campsite for tourists on the area. The campsite Project had been approved and work on the project had actually started in 1936. The land was being cleared of trees and sloughs were being filled.

On March 5, 1937, the writer gave an illustrated talk, “Preserving the Ridges at Baileys Harbor” at a meeting in Sturgeon Bay which was sponsored by the Woman’s Club of Sturgeon Bay. Members of the Door County Park Commission were present as well as a few residents of Baileys Harbor. The Park Commission, not long after this meeting, decided to have the Baileys Harbor area set aside as a wild flower sanctuary. It was realized that in order to give the “Range Light Forty” permanent protection, additional land should be included. On October 4, 1937, a group of people from Baileys Harbor, Ephraim, and Ellison Bay, interested in permanent wildlife conservation for Door County, met at Baileys Harbor for the purpose of forming a corporation under the name, “The Ridges Sanctuary.” The purposes of the corporation were stated as follows:

“1. To acquire by gift, purchase or otherwise, part or all of the real estate in the area in the town of Baileys Harbor, Wisconsin, known as “The Ridges” or “The Bog” and to protect the native plant and animal life on the same and to preserve the same in its natural or aboriginal state: to erect fences, place signs and make other improvements necessary to protect the property of or deemed desirable to advance the purposes of the corporation.

“2. To acquire and hold other pieces of real estate in Wisconsin and elsewhere, and to protect and preserve the native plant and animal life found thereon.

“3. To carry on educational and scientific activities which will promote the cause of the conservation and preservation of wild plant and animal life and natural scenery, and to use and transfer its moneys and properties for these purposes.”

"... and the rare ram’s head orchids raised their delisoe heads in secret shaded places."
The organization of The Ridges Sanctuary, a corporation whose sole purpose is to preserve the habitats of plants, received wide publicity. The Milwaukee Journal published the following editorial about The Ridges Sanctuary in its issue of October 18, 1937:

“Forty Acres in Door County”

“There isn’t much limit to what people can do if they have enthusiasm and core enough. Witness the movement now growing to make a park in Door County that will preserve a living growing record of geologic ages.

“The peninsula that is Door County, with the rugged and beautiful islands around it, is so attractive and so ‘different’ that yearly it attracts more and more visitors. The casual visitor would say that it is good enough as it is. And that is true. But things don’t stay as they are—not in these days of gasoline.

“Near Baileys Harbor is a region of lowland and highland which has plant and flower and tree varieties seldom found together—a natural museum, a natural botanical garden, a natural arboretum. The Federal Government relinquished 40 acres of this; the county kept it going a few years as a park. And then it was proposed to make a tourists’ campsite of it.

“Whereupon a few persons who knew about it began to tell what they knew. A. M. Fuller, botanical expert of the Milwaukee Public Museum, said that in this region are 30 of Wisconsin’s 45 kinds of native orchids. Here are the birdseye primrose and the fringed gentian that has so nearly disappeared from this state. Here are all except two of Wisconsin’s varieties of evergreen trees.

“Some counties in the nation,’ Mr. Fuller said, ‘would spend millions of dollars to reproduce artificially what nature has formed at Baileys Harbor.’

“Others listened and helped, among them Jens Jensen, famous creator of natural landscapes in Chicago’s west parks and in many other cities of the country. ‘Here is something we have,’ they said. Let’s save it, instead of leaving it to future generations to spend 50 years trying to re-create it.’ So there is a corporation known as ‘Ridges Sanctuary, Inc., Its members are giving their time and effort and some of their dollars.

“Not wealthy, not ‘influential,’ but lovers of the beautiful, wanting those who come after them to find such beauty to enrich their lives, these ‘people who care’ have not waited for wealth to make their start. And others who care will help them. Once this project becomes known, we cannot imagine that any garden club or nature-lover group will fail to help. And some who have the means and would like to give something intelligently must be attracted. We spend hundreds of millions trying to ‘restore’ what could have been saved for very little, as this Door County park can be saved, if it is done now.”
The Ridges Sanctuary has had from its beginning the generous support of people and organizations throughout Wisconsin and from other states. The garden clubs, especially, have been interested in the Ridges. Mrs. Alfred J. Kieckhefer of Milwaukee, past president of the Green Tree Garden Club of Milwaukee, has been extremely active on behalf of the Ridges. She gave numerous illustrated lectures on the Ridges Sanctuary before garden groups in various parts of this country. In 1940 and 1941, Mrs. Kieckhefer submitted the Ridges Sanctuary as a conservation project to the Garden Club of America. At the annual meeting of the Garden Club of America in New York, in March, 1942, the Ridges Sanctuary was voted the founders' fund award of twelve hundred dollars.

The land acquisition program of the Ridges was started in January, 1938 when the late Ferdinand Hotz of Chicago, Illinois, gave forty acres. In 1944, Mr. Hotz gave an additional two hundred acres. Miss Emma Toft of Baileys Harbor, who has been indefatigable in her zeal for the Ridges, has contributed at least a forty. Through land donations and land purchases the present acreage of the Ridges Sanctuary is now 726 acres.
One of the purposes of the Ridges Sanctuary organization is to promote conservation education. Since its founding, the Ridges Sanctuary has sponsored a series of summer conservation lectures. These lectures have been well attended and have been very effective in stimulating interest in conservation. The Ridges group has also sponsored conservation essays in the schools of Door County. Conservation books and periodicals have been placed in the local library and in the schools of the township. Conservation motion pictures have also been provided for the schools.

Thousands of visitors have explored the Ridges Sanctuary since it was founded. Numbered among these visitors are amateur photographers, botanists and naturalists, and professional writers. Edwin Way Teale, literary naturalist and photographer, visited the Ridges several years ago and was so impressed that, in his book, Journey into Summer, which was published in 1960, he has a chapter titled “The Orchid Ridges” in which he gives a most vivid description of the area. Virginia Eifert of the Illinois State Museum, Springfield, Illinois, a fine naturalist, illustrator, and a noteworthy writer, has visited the Ridges a number of times. Rutherford Plaft, a botanical writer, is also to be numbered among the eminent personalities who have followed along Sandy Ridge, Deer Lick Ridge, and winter green Ridge.
The writer, for two score years, has maintained that, in order to give permanent protection to plants and animals, it was imperative to preserve their habitats under natural conditions. The Ridges Sanctuary is living proof that habitat preservation is essential for permanent protection of fauna and flora.
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