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IN OTTER NEWS

June 2020

Edition 1



Yellow Lady Slipper

now blooming at Grass River Natural Area

Photo by Daniel Layton

WEIRD, WONDERFUL, WETLANDS PLANTS AT GRNA

by Arlene Westhoven, Naturalist

Plants at Grass River Natural Area develop unique ways of adapting to the wetlands, acidic soil, and competition from other plants. Here are some of the most unique ones that are visible in the spring and early summer.

SKUNK CABBAGE (*Symplocarpus foetidus*)



Skunk Cabbage is related to the Jack-in-the-Pulpit, an Arum Lily. It bears its pollen on a spathe that is sheltered by a greenish-purple hood. It grows in wetlands and often appears before the snow melts. Skunk Cabbage generates its own heat by digesting

starch stored in its root. This allows the plant to warm its environment and get an early start on growth. The scientific name describes the skunky smell.

The next group of plants are carnivorous. The adaptation of capturing and digesting insects provides nutrients lacking in the acidic, wet soils of bogs and fens.

BLADDERWORT (*Utricularia vulgaris*)



Bladderwort is an aquatic carnivorous plant. The digestive structures are underwater sacs with hairlike structures to open the bladder. Water, along with aquatic organisms, enters the bladder and are digested there. The bladders act like Pac-man to capture nutrients.

PITCHER PLANT (*Sarracenia purpurea*)



Downward-pointing hairs line the inside of the vase-like structure. Insects, especially flies, are attracted to the odor of the stagnant water. They fly into the 'pitcher' and are unable to crawl out because of the hairs. They drown and the plant enzymes digest them.

SUNDEW (*Drosera rotundifolia*)



Sundew plants have a pair of paddle-like structures hinged on one side like a clam shell. Each 'paddle' is edged with sensory hairs that exude a starchy droplet. Insects are attracted to the sticky liquid for food and become stuck, which triggers the hairs to slowly close the paddle. The insect is trapped and digested in the 'jaws of death'.

The following spring blooming plant has a unique pollination strategy. It is often mistaken for an orchid because of its brilliant fuchsia color and tube-like structures.



FRINGED POLYGALA (*Polygala paucifolia*)

The plant is also called Gaywings because of the two opposite petals at right angles to the tube. Two petals are joined to form a tube like a pendant. At the end of the tube is a bright yellow fringe which attracts the pollinator. When the insect triggers the fringe, it drops like a drawbridge so the insect picks up the pollen as it enters the tube to reach the nectar. The insect then carries the pollen to another bloom.

I hope you have enjoyed learning about these plant adaptations that allow them to thrive in the wetlands here at Grass River Natural Area. Take a walk on our trails and see them for yourself.

NEXT TIME: PLANTS – THE WEIRD WAYS THEY SPREAD

NEW! ROVING NATURALIST AT GRNA

In the interest of creating programs that can be enjoyed at a distance outside, we are adding a "roving naturalist". For now, she/he will be located near the cabin by Finch Creek. The Dole Foundation provided funding for a new tent, table, chairs, and signage, so we can take the roving naturalist on the road in the future. We are very grateful for these new elements that will make it easier to adapt our programs to various natural area locations, festivals, and gatherings.

Saturday, June 13 is the start of this new program. Each naturalist will have a different topic to present and you can stop by any time from 10:30 am - 1:30 pm to listen to the presentation or ask questions. The current programs are:

Saturday, June 13
10:30 am - 1:30 pm
Naturalist Franny Bluhm
Program - Edible Wetlands

Sunday, June 14
10:30 am - 1:30 pm
Naturalist Emily Burke
Programs - River Otter Adaptations

Saturday, June 20
10:30 am - 1:30 pm

Naturalist Arlene Westhoven
Program - More about Weird Plants

Sunday, June 21
10:30 am - 1:30 pm
TBA

The port-a-potty near the cabin will be open beginning Saturday, June 13. It will be cleaned often during the day, but we ask that you help us keep it clean for everyone.

After these four presentations, we will evaluate the best days and times for this program to take place and we will announce that when we have a decision. We are really looking forward to seeing you at the tent and out on the trails.

SUMMER CAMP BECOMES AN OTTER P.A.C.K. FOR 2020

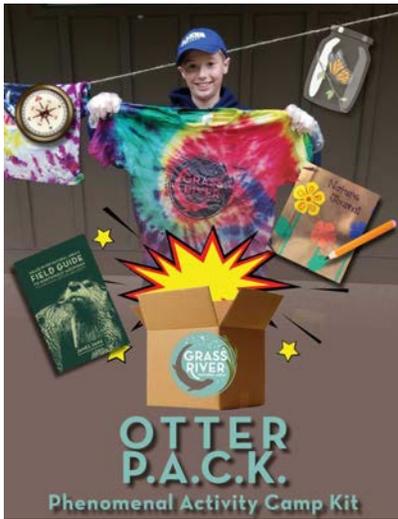
A MESSAGE FROM JAMES DAKE, GRNA'S EDUCATION DIRECTOR

The Grass River Natural Area is proud to provide safe and educational opportunities for our community to explore and appreciate the wonders of nature. While much of our work is focused on preserving and protecting the natural space for our wild inhabitants, we work just as hard to ensure our guests and staff have safe spaces to interact and explore. Our first priority in all of our programming is safety.

So, after much deliberation, it is with sadness we announce that we decided to cancel in-person camp for this summer. As our small education Center serves as both a program and a public space, it would be difficult to ensure safe separation between the two and would thus risk the safety of all participants. To say that we are disappointed is an understatement. We had high hopes of the summer of 2020 being a big year for summer camp – but we will be back greater (and safer) than ever in 2021!

In the meantime...

Thanks to the creativity of our education staff, we are developing an exciting new program called **Otter P.A.C.K.** (Phenomenal Activity Camp Kit), which is essentially a "remote summer camp" option. We are still working out a few of the details, but these kits will be chock full of all the supplies and instructions your camper will need to do many of our favorite camp activities and crafts at home, including an owl pellet dissection kit, Grass River T-shirt tie dye kit, hard cover nature journal, insect collecting jar, and much more. We are even working on ways in which our 'campers' can interact virtually with our naturalist



staff throughout the week.

Otter P.A.C.K.s are priced at \$75 and can be shipped directly to you, or they will be available for pick-up at the Grass River Center starting in July. Scholarships are available for those in need.

Purchase of the Otter P.A.C.K. is available on our [website](#).

If you have questions please contact me at james@grassriver.org.

WHERE THE WILDFLOWERS GROW

Wildflowers are blooming like crazy right now at GRNA, and even though our weekly Birds and Blooms tours have been canceled thus far due to COVID-19, we still have you covered for all things wildflowers and birds!

Virtual Birds and Blooms

with your guide, Julie Hurd

Julie begins this edition's virtual walk with one of her favorites.

Twinflower

Linnaea borealis

This dainty little wildflower is easily overlooked, so search carefully in the conifer swamps to find it on nursery stumps and amongst the sphagnum moss. As its common name suggests, the flowers appear two per stem, resembling a tiny lamppost. The blossoms are pink, bell-shaped, and fragrant.



The Latin name is as beautiful as the twinflower itself and honors Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778), a Swedish botanist who developed the systematic nomenclature for living species that is still used today. "Borealis" refers to the boreal forests of the northern hemisphere with their spruce, pines, and larches where twinflowers flourish around the globe.

Labrador Tea

(Aka Hudson Bay Tea)

Rhododendron groenlandicum

This small shrub grows along the Grass River boardwalks of the Fern and Sedge Meadow trails. If its leathery green leaves resemble those of azalea to you, it's because they are related, although our native plant lacks the large colorful flowers of its cultivated cousin. Labrador Tea blossoms at the ends of its stems in clusters of delicate white five petaled flowers. Look closely and admire the showy stamens rising above the petals. The

undersides of the leaves are covered with woolly hairs that turn brown as they mature. The leaves contain an aromatic resin.

As its common name implies, Labrador Tea can be used to brew a drink. Both colonists and Native Americans used it as a beverage and for numerous medicinal purposes, including as a tonic and to treat indigestion as well as externally to soothe burns and stings. A visitor to Grass River related his use of the tea in college as a low cost alternative to No-Doz. Be sure to forage for some before that all-night study session.



Your virtual walk won't be complete without a bird. Naturalist Emily Burke thinks you might like to learn more about the...

Green Heron

Butorides virescens



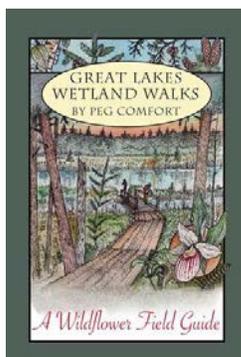
Photo by Manjith Kaniekara

The Green Heron is a relatively secretive bird, often skulking in tangled vegetation at the edges of marshes and swamps instead of standing prominently in more open wetland areas like its conspicuous cousin, the Great Blue Heron. And while all herons fly with their necks tucked in, the Green Heron almost always hides its long, graceful neck, even while on the ground. This behavior, combined with the fact that they often keep to the shadows, creates an overall impression of a clunky, drab, and dark bird. But when seen in the sunlight, the beautiful green back and cap, chestnut body, and bright yellow legs and feet are revealed.

Like other herons, Green Herons patiently wait at the water's edge until an unsuspecting fish swims by. Then, they lunge suddenly to snatch it with their dagger-like bill, sometimes even spearing the fish. But Green Herons have extra tricks up their sleeves; they are one of the world's only tool-using birds. They will use bits of twigs, insects, or even their own feathers as bait to lure curious fish to within striking distance.

Look for Green Herons along Grass River from a kayak or from the observation platforms on the Sedge Meadow Trail.

Great Lakes Wetland Walks



If you're looking for a more in-depth resource to help you identify all of the wetland blooms you may encounter throughout the year, we suggest checking out *Great Lakes Wetland Walks*, written by local expert Peg Comfort and published by GRNA. This book is an easy to use guide on wetland plants of the Great Lakes region, featuring a forward by Jerry Dennis, cover and section artwork by Glenn Wolff, plant diagrams by Heather Shaw, and photographs by James Dake. Get yours today!

[Order Great Lakes Wetland Walks](#)

June is the last month we will publish *In Otter News* every other week to keep you informed, educated, and entertained since you can now come out and enjoy the Grass River Natural Area more easily. We hope the extra *In Otter News* editions made your Stay at Home experience more enjoyable.

CONSIDER A DONATION

Our financial wellbeing is dependent on programming dollars and donations, and with the former sidelined for the time being, donations are of paramount importance. Your generous support is always greatly appreciated, but in these difficult days, your willingness to help us continue our mission with a personal donation promotes you to Nature Warrior status at GRNA.

Grass River Natural Area is a nonprofit organization that has flourished for fifty-one years because of the generous support of people who value our mission "to manage the Grass River Natural Area, conserve and protect its watershed, and provide opportunities that increase knowledge, appreciation and community-wide stewardship of the natural environment".

If you believe in our mission and want to help us fulfill it for many years to come, please click on the Donate button below. Your support is greatly appreciated.

DONATE



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