

OAK HAMMOCK MARSH

NATURAL WONDERS

Connect with nature at Oak Hammock Marsh



BY KRISTIN MARAND

On a patch of open prairie just north of Winnipeg, a breeze sways tall grasses and rustles bulrushes while insects hum and an array of songbirds call.

A bright yellow bird lands gently in a tall net and is carefully removed by resident naturalist Paula Grief. She measures, weighs and examines the delicate animal before placing it in your hand. You can feel the tiny creature, surprisingly calm in your cupped hands, its head peeking out between your fingers. You open your hands and the bird flies up and away, leaving you buzzing with a connection to nature that you can't experience anywhere else. This feeling of connection is what Oak Hammock Marsh strives to achieve every day.

Comprised of 36 square kilometres of restored prairie marsh, aspen-oak bluff, waterfowl lure crops, artesian springs and tall-grass prairie, the Oak Hammock Marsh Wildlife Management Area is criss-crossed with 30 kilometres of inviting trails along wooden boardwalks, gravel, earth and grass paths.

"There's lots of different habitats encompassing this area; we have a wet meadow, we have a bit of a tall-grass prairie, and what's kind of cool is people can just explore at their own leisure. They can walk the trails, they can explore the marsh and walk on the boardwalks and see the nature for themselves," says Jacques Bourgeois, Oak Hammock's marketing and communications coordinator.

The marsh is a sanctuary, providing habitat and resources for over 300 species of birds and many more creatures.

"It's a nursery for wildlife, for birds as well, so many animals will come and nest here, fish will come and spawn here and if we catch some bugs in the marsh you'll see how much food there is in the water. It's just incredible," Bourgeois says.

The mission here is to encourage people to connect with nature, to become "citizen scientists." Oak Hammock offers hands-on exhibits and hosts experiences such as butterfly, dragonfly and frog surveys, critter dipping and the award-winning Bird In the Hand bird banding program.

In the summer months, it's abuzz with activity — summer camps, workshops, birthday parties and cornerstone events such as the Dragonfly Festival (July 20-21). This year, for the first time, Oak Hammock Marsh is teaming up with FortWhyte Alive to combine their signature experiences, the Bird In the Hand program and FortWhyte's Bison Safari in a day-long adventure that includes break-

fast, lunch and transportation between the parks (Aug. 6 & Aug. 13).

Fall is high season at the marsh, with extended hours and special migration centred events, including the popular Birds and Beer Flights, which pairs local craft beers with migration viewing.

"In the fall at night, from the rooftop, you watch all along the horizon and you see clouds of birds just coming from every direction for a resting place for the night," marvels Bourgeois.

Hundreds of thousands of birds congregate because the marsh is a perfectly positioned rest stop on the Mississippi flyway migration route. Birds come from as far west as the Yukon and as far east as northern Quebec, down Hudson Bay and along the Red River, which eventually feeds the mighty Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico.

"There's four main highways in the sky for birds to migrate," Bourgeois explains. "Oak Hammock Marsh is right smack in the middle of the Mississippi flyway and it's actually kind of like a big service station along the way for them. They stop at the marsh for a couple days to replenish their fat, their energy and eventually make their way south."

While the marsh teems with life today, wetlands were once looked upon as wasteland. Originally a region of roughly 470 square kilometres, much of the original wetlands were drained for agricultural use and development. At one time, Winnipeg's water came from the marsh via a route that is now the aptly named Pipeline Road. Eventually, the marsh was reduced to an area of less than one square kilometre.

However, wetlands perform essential ecological functions, such as flood protection, replenishing groundwater and filtration. The need to save the remaining wetland area and rebuild it was realized and championed by the Province of Manitoba and Ducks Unlimited Canada.

Restoration began in the early 1970s and the Conservation Centre was opened in the early 1990s. Designed to blend in with the surroundings by using local limestone and landscaping with native grasses, shrubs, trees and flowers, the centre houses the national headquarters for Ducks Unlimited Canada, the Oak Hammock Marsh Interpretive Centre, a café (with binoculars on every table), meeting rooms and a 120-seat multimedia theatre.

Roughly 100,000 people, including 30,000 school children, visit the marsh every year, and year-round activity offerings are ever changing.

"We want people to learn that wetlands are indeed important, that they're not a wasteland, that they're something that has a really primordial role in keeping the health and balance of the environment in place, not just for wildlife but also for us as a species. We need wetlands," says Bourgeois.

To learn more, visit the website at oakhammockmarsh.ca.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF OAK HAMMOCK MARSH INTERPRETIVE CENTRE

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