

Huron County's best kept secret

Hullett Wildlife area just west of Clinton a natural gem

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SPECIAL TO THE BEACON HERALD

Nestled in the heart of Huron County along the South Maitland River are nearly 5500 acres of what could be regarded as one of the region's best kept secrets, the Hullett Provincial Wildlife Area (HPWA), one of the most spectacular wildlife habitats in Eastern Canada.

HPWA's forests, fields and wetlands are home to a wide variety of wildlife species, a major attraction for nature photographers, hikers, and hunters alike, not to mention the fact that it is strategically located on the paths of two major waterfowl flyways, the Atlantic and Mississippi, giving birdwatchers a unique opportunity year round.

On a mid-afternoon in July, I was hiking the Bluebill Pool Trail, one of several trails which amble over dykes, skirt waterways or snake through forests. My two dogs were off-leash having the time of their lives in and out of ponds and marshes while a red winged blackbird circled above, complaining at our presence. Twenty minutes into the trail, we came across a rise of high grasses that renders a 360 degree panorama, an endless vista of wetlands accompanied by the distant cries of waterfowl.

Standing there, it is not unusual to feel completely alone with nature. In that expanse of time and place I didn't spot another human being. You wonder, do so few people know this exists? But then your second thought is, leave it the way it is, why risk an excess of human traffic on an area so pristine?

"Not so," says Friends of Hullett

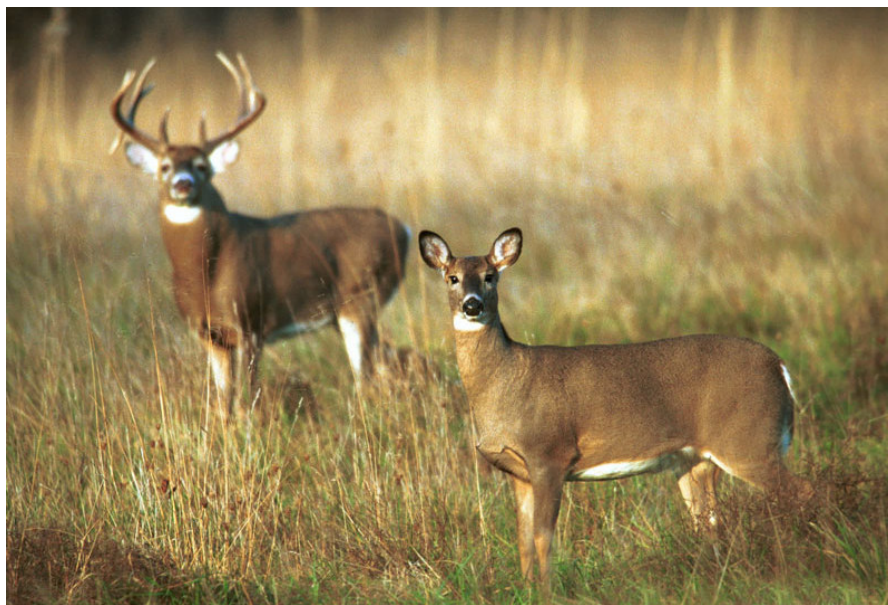


Photo: Peter Blush

Manager, Mathew Shetler. "The more people know of the HPWA, the better for all involved. Here, the public has a chance to see wildlife management at its best. That interest creates an increase in participation through volunteers and donations, something we need that will keep the area on strong footing."

Still, the idea of a lot of feet stomping over vegetation such as native tall grass, isn't that detrimental to an endangered ecosystem?

"Not really," Shetler counters. "The vast majority of visitors adhere to the rules. The trails are clearly marked and signs are posted marking off-limit areas."

Tallgrass once flourished throughout the central U.S., southern Ontario and Manitoba, covering an area the size of British Columbia. Sadly, only 1% remains, about half the size of Vancouver Island.

But studies show that ever so small percentile, that is, those folk who believe the world is their playground, reek havoc on crucial habitats such as this.

"Yes, we have a concern with certain owners of ATVs. They ignore the postings and ride the trails. These vehicles can cause serious damage. Of course, we get complaints from adjacent landowners as the violators use their properties for access. The problem is, by the time our volunteers arrive the ATVs have disappeared."

That aside, HPWA remains a work of beauty and has become a model of maintenance and management since it was originally developed in the early 1980s by Ducks Unlimited and the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources.

Prospects turned gloomy in the 1990s when government cutbacks forced a private organization to step in and manage the area. In 1998, The Friends of Hullett were incorporated to do just that, a volunteer group of dedicated men and women from Southern Ontario who spend hundreds of hours of their own time maintaining day-to-day operations.

"We're quite happy with the level of support and donations we receive," Shetler said. "It shows a level of the

community out there that understands the necessity of maintaining an important wetland area.”

HPWA has received donations from the Toronto Dominion Friends of the Environment, The Shell Environmental Fund, Union Gas, Ducks Unlimited, among others and this past April was awarded a grant from the prestigious Ontario Trillium Foundation.

Many residents from the Kitchener-Waterloo corridor and from London to Stratford are unaware of the wildlife reserve.

“I must admit it surprises me sometimes,” continues Shetler. “I’ve talked to people in nearby communities. You mention Hullett to some of them and they get a puzzled look.”

HPWA would be a solution to many families’ weekend plans. With so many cutting back on travel due to the rising cost of gasoline, a day trip to Hullett would fit neatly into their pocket books. A forty minute drive from Stratford and an hour’s drive from either Waterloo or London offer the chance to view nature at its best. Deer, beaver, mink and muskrat are abundant.

From the dykes or viewing stands surrounding the wetlands you can easily spot majestic fishing birds such as the Great Blue Heron and the Sand Hill Crane while ponds and marshes host a variety of ducks like the Northern Pintail, the Canvasback, the Ring-necked Duck and Hooded Merganser

among others.

Two of the most thrilling seasons of the year are the migratory months of early spring and late summer when the skies and water-ways are filled with traveling birds, among them countless Canada geese, their constant honking at times deafening.

If you own a horse, the HPWA is for you. Horse-back riding is free and access is permitted through-out the area except in Zone A from October 1 to May 1.

Hunting enthusiasts are well served. There’s wild turkey, rabbit, waterfowl and deer. A couple of months back I stopped by their main office on Hydro Line Road. There were rows of cages back in the trees, populated by ring-necked pheasants. Right off I noticed something queer about the birds and ambled up for a closer look. Each bird had a tiny contraption that rested in front of their eyes.

“They’re called specs,” said a middle aged volunteer next to me. “Keeps them from fighting and pecking at one another, something they do naturally when they’re confined like that.”

He turned and smiled into the cage. “They can eat and drink and the specs don’t hamper their vision which is primarily peripheral. They stay nice and healthy and their tails grow long and beautiful.”

There was a gleam in his eye and I

figured he was more than a bird watcher.

The birds attract hundreds of visitors throughout the year. In the fall, selected birds are fitted with leg bands and released into the fallow fields, woodlots and hedgerows for the hunt.

HPWA has something called a Pheasant Challenge. It costs each participant \$10 and if he or she returns the leg band the \$10 is redeemed along with a prize worth between \$20 to \$150.

“It’s a pretty good deal for everybody,” said the smiling volunteer. “All the money we earn from the Challenge goes right back into purchasing new birds and feed for the next year.”

The next year is four seasons away and the interim has something for everyone. There’s cross country skiing and snowshoeing, canoeing in the warmer months and you can drop by the main office anytime and check out the display of stuffed birds and wildlife paraphernalia.

I reached the end of Bluebill Pool Trail and began my return loop, traversing the dykes of high prairie grass dotted with yellow hawkweed, lemon lily, and waning milkweed. To my right and below bur oak surrounded a swamp clustered with sedges and ferns, to the left a waterway under open sky, the sunlight turning spectral on its surface, like floating diamonds, while a small duck, a Goldeneye, paddled close to shore, diving underwater at my approach.

Further along the way, two vehicles resembling refurbished golf carts rolled along the dyke paths and stopped at a damn. Four men wearing red vests emblazoned with the Friends of Hullett initials, climbed out, unloaded their equipment and began testing water levels. They remained silent, tending to their work as I passed.

An hour later I returned to that crest of high grass where the sun was sitting low in a reddening sky and a distant savanna was so rich in color it looked afire. All seemed silent except for the murmur of a zephyr that brushed my ears, like a soft, reassuring whisper from nature renewing itself.

