

CATRIONA MORTIMER-SANDILANDS

CALYPSO TRAILS: BOTANIZING ON THE BRUCE PENINSULA

It seems wonderful that so frail and lovely a plant has such power over human hearts. This Calypso meeting happened some forty-five years ago, and it was more memorable and impressive than any of my meetings with human beings excepting, perhaps, Emerson and one or two others.

John Muir, “The *Calypso Borealis*”

JOHN MUIR ARRIVES AT DORCAS BAY

IN 1864, JOHN MUIR EMBARKED on a botanical expedition to Canada West and found himself in what is now Simcoe County, north of Toronto. As Donald Worster writes in his biography of Muir, the area “was then a vast—and in the eyes of the pioneers, a useless—swamp punctuated by thickets of tamarack, white cedar, balsam fir, pine, hemlock, beech, birch, and maple, crossable only by wading or by jumping from root to root.”¹ At the end of one especially boggy day of trekking during which he “began to fear that [he] would not be able to reach dry ground before dark, and therefore would have to pass the night in the swamp,”² he came upon a small Calypso orchid (*Calypso borealis*, *Calypso bulbosa*):

But when the sun was getting low and everything seemed most bewildering and discouraging, I found beautiful Calypso on the mossy bank of a stream, growing not in the ground but on a bed of yellow mosses in which its small white bulb had found a soft nest and from which its one leaf and one flower sprang. The flower was white and made the impression of the utmost simple purity like a snowflower. No other bloom was near it, for the bog a short distance below the surface was

¹ Donald Worster, *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir* (New York: Oxford U Press, 2008), 94. See also William Frederic Badè, *The Life and Letters of John Muir [1924]* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).

² Muir cited in Worster, *A Passion for Nature*, 71.

still frozen, and the water was ice cold. It seemed the most spiritual of all the flower people I had ever met. I sat down beside it and fairly cried for joy.³

According to Worster, Muir, deeply impressed with the Calypso “and hoping that there would be many more ... kept walking. He trudged for weeks, making a sweeping circuit through Simcoe, Dufferin and Grey Counties,”⁴ although only the one orchid encounter made it into official history. Muir stayed in Canada for nearly two years, living largely near Meaford, Ontario on the south shore of Georgian Bay and working in a mill and woodworking operation owned by the Trout family. During this period, however, “he was forced to put botany aside, allowing himself only one brief excursion along Owen Sound during the duration of his contract.”⁵

For historian W. Sherwood Fox, the question of whether or not Muir traveled to the Bruce Peninsula during his stay in Ontario was a matter of some importance. Although it is unlikely, on balance of evidence, that Muir took a trip to the northern Bruce any time after his Calypso epiphany, Fox thinks he may have trod there on his way *into* Canada, as he likely crossed with his brother Dan from Michigan at Sault Ste. Marie, from there traveling to Manitoulin Island before arriving, in April, in Simcoe County. “It is absurd to think,” writes Fox, “that at that time of the year they tramped all the way around the east side of Georgian Bay—a formidable journey of over three hundred miles—to enter the Peninsula from the south.”⁶ Still, if Muir did take that route, he did not record any orchids. Fox notes that “the label on the first plant the Muirs took on the south side of the Georgian Bay” was dated April 20 in Simcoe County,⁷ and given that the earliest-blooming orchid species in the region is the Calypso (mid-May onward), we would, I think, have heard about it if he saw one on the Bruce.⁸

³ Muir cited in Worster, 71.

⁴ Worster, 94.

⁵ Worster, 97. Fox offers that this sole expedition in July 1865 may have taken him north of Wiarton, where he would have reveled “in the spruce and cedar jungles where the rare Alaska orchid hides; or amid the damp dark-shaded limestone cliffs that are host to the still rarer Hart’s Tongue fern.” W. Sherwood Fox, *The Bruce Beckons: The Story of Lake Huron’s Great Peninsula*. (Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1952), 142.

⁶ Fox, *The Bruce Beckons*, 137.

⁷ Fox, 137.

⁸ Fox notes that there is “no positive word ... stating that the Muirs crossed the fifteen-mile strait from Manitoulin to the northern tip of the Bruce Peninsula” (137), leaving the issue of whether or

But apart from the fact that it is clear that Fox really *wants* Muir to have traveled on the Bruce Peninsula, is it really important whether he spotted a Grass Pink Orchid (*Calopogon tuberosus*) on a walk north of Wiarton or east of Owen Sound? An interpretive sign in Bruce Peninsula National Park (BPNP) indicates that someone in Parks Canada might think so. Specifically, in the Singing Sands section of the park, on the shore of Lake Huron not far from the Peninsula's northern tip, there is an interpretive plaque off the parking lot at the entrance to a small network of hiking trails into the woods and fen, dated July 18, 1992. It is titled "John Muir's Walk on the Bruce," and it reads:

John Muir was the father of parks in North America and one of the first naturalists to recognize the richness of the Bruce. He made several explorations here to find new plants for his studies in the two years he lived in Ontario. Inspired by these visits he wrote:

"Are not all plants beautiful? Would not the world be poorer for the banishment of a single one?"

His enthusiasm for the understanding of nature led him to realize the need for the preservation of wilderness. The parks and reserves on the Bruce were established for the same reason. The profusion of wildflowers here at Dorcas Bay lures naturalists to the Bruce today, several generations since John Muir's visits in the 1860's (sic).

Influenced by Fox's geographically optimistic account of Muir's explorations, Parks Canada stretches the evidence a bit to invoke Muir's presence at Dorcas Bay.⁹ It may or may not be the case that Muir botanized on the

not they actually *did* travel down the Peninsula on this trip a matter of conjecture (the Canadian Friends of John Muir website contains an entire essay by Scott Cameron devoted to the question of "How John Muir Got to Meaford," http://www.johnmuir.org/canada/how_did_jm.html). Fox does relate a further piece of evidence from a blend of Peter Trout's story, "What I Know of John Muir," and William Trout's self-published *History of the Trout Family*, which indicates that Dan had told Peter that the Muirs "had botanical specimens from ... the peninsula between Lake Huron and Georgian Bay" (138).

⁹ I underline, here, that Parks Canada was neither ignorant nor deceptive in its choice to erect this sign. BPNP naturalist Scott Currie stated that "the sign ... was meant to be ambiguous. There is no official account of John Muir poking this far north on the Peninsula. However, there are many who believe that, given the unique geography and ensuing biophysical characteristics of the Peninsula, it is highly unlikely that Muir would have passed up the opportunity to come here—especially in consideration of his affinity for the Calypso orchid ... which doesn't occur in Owen Sound, but does at the northern tip of the Bruce." Interview with the author, July 18, 2008.

Bruce, but the “here” of his inspired prose was almost certainly somewhere considerably to the south. So the question arises: especially if the Bruce may not bear traces of Muir’s actual footsteps, why go to the trouble of invoking him? First and most obviously, the idea of his appreciative presence on the Bruce Peninsula gives historical legitimacy to the preservationist intent of Singing Sands. If someone as important as Muir recognized the value of the wildflowers in 1864, and if he bothered to found entire national parks to protect them from “banishment,” then there is no question of the value of Singing Sands: it becomes part of Muir’s legacy even if he had nothing to do with its creation (and even if he was never actually there). Second, the invocation of Muir as the first in a long line of naturalists to appreciate the botanical value of the Bruce/Dorcas Bay positions the reader of the sign, the park visitor, as an inheritor of Muir’s tradition of botanical knowledge and preservationist wisdom. In among the array of brown and yellow, overtly disciplinary Parks Canada signs with circled-and-slashed silhouettes of ladyslippers (“don’t touch the orchids”), Muir becomes an added normative presence. If someone as important as Muir believed that the appropriate response to nature-inspiration was a lifetime of work toward environmental preservation, then perhaps the visitor can at least pay attention to where s/he is stepping so as not to destroy Muir’s beloved flowers.

As I have described elsewhere, there is a tendency in some Canadian national park interpretation (and in the public imagination of Canadian parks more broadly) to consider park-spaces as always already permeated with preservationist or other ecological desires, despite the fact that many of the national parks were created for economic, political, and/or other reasons having almost nothing to do with the protection of habitats or species.¹⁰ BPNP is no exception to this rule. In 1967, the Province of Ontario established Cyprus Lake Park (including 3.2 kilometres of spectacular Georgian Bay coastline) primarily to meet the recreational needs of Southern Ontario residents. After some intergovernmental wrangling (in addition to negotiation with the Chippewas of Nawash and the Saugeen Ojibway Nation), that land was transferred to the Federal Government in 1987 to form the core of the new Bruce Peninsula National Park.¹¹ As was fairly common in the period, recre-

¹⁰ Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, “The Cultural Politics of Ecological Integrity: Nature and Nation in Canada’s National Parks, 1885–2000,” *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 39/40 (Summer 2009): 161–89.

¹¹ The islands that are now Fathom Five National Marine Park, originally protected by the Province to preserve the 22 shipwrecks that lie within its borders, were also transferred to the

ational and economic concerns were at least as important as preservationist ones, and although the fact of the Park's position on the Niagara Escarpment certainly contributed to its creation,¹² the attractiveness of the Bruce Peninsula as a camping and hiking destination, conveniently close to major Southern Ontario urban centres and the ferry crossing to Manitoulin Island, was higher in the mind of Parks Canada than were its botanical treasures.

The Singing Sands portion of the park, however, physically removed from the Cyprus Lake section and on the other side of Highway 6, was created with the intent of preservation. Reserved by the Federation of Ontario Naturalists (Owen Sound Field Naturalists) in 1962, it did not become part of BPNP until 1996. And it is, as the sign tells us, a rich site for wildflowers, especially orchids. Although different species of orchid appear in different places in BPNP depending on, among other things, the micro-habitats particular species like best, Singing Sands includes a number of spots in which some fairly beautiful orchids are easily visible in profusion from the walking trails. Perhaps the most awe-inspiring of these sites is a cluster of Ram's Head Lady-Slippers (*Cypripedium arietnum*) right on the main forest trail; visible from late May to mid-June, the flowers are protected from careless trampling by a well-signed split-rail fence. In addition, dozens if not hundreds of Rose Pogonias (*Pogonia ophioglossoides*) are visible in late June and early July along the park-constructed boardwalk into the fen. (I have not seen a *Calypso bulbosa* there—I have seen them in several other places in BPNP and on Flowerpot Island in Fathom Five National Marine Park—but I am not expert enough to know if that is a question of habitat or happenstance.)

So Singing Sands is, Muir or not, a special sort of place for orchids. And that's a good thing: the swamp where Muir actually had his Calypso epiphany is long-since drained and part of the industrial agricultural plain that is Holland Marsh, now known for its immense production of chemically-

Federal Government at that time, in addition to parcels of land at Little Cove and Cabot Head. See Gerald Killan, *Protected Places: A History of Ontario's Provincial Park System* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1993) and Parks Canada, *Bruce Peninsula National Park Management Plan* (Hull: Department of Canadian Heritage, 1998).

¹² Leonard Gertler's *Niagara Escarpment Study—Conservation and Recreation Report* (Toronto: Province of Ontario, 1968) recommended preserving lands along the entire 500+ km length of the Escarpment in Ontario. The Bruce Trail Association, founded in 1960, also organized the construction of a public hiking trail along the full length of the Escarpment (Niagara to Tobermory, now over 800 kilometres of trail). The Niagara Escarpment was designated as a UN Biosphere Reserve in 1990, which also contributed to a wider recognition of its geological and botanical uniqueness.

exaggerated carrots rather for than the tiny, spiritual “flower people” of the “useless” swamps of the 1860s (there is no plaque to Muir’s presence in this place where we know he really was). As Mitchell noted as early as 1910 in Oxford County, “to look back it does not seem so long ago when ... [a portion of the county was] the ideal home of the orchids.... In the cool hemlock woods *Goodyeras* [Rattlesnake Plantains] of three species flourished, and even *Calypso borealis* could frequently be met with. And it so it was with all the other native orchids; for all there was some suitable place, but axe and fire, and drainage have done their work, and now but few places remain where orchids can exist.”¹³ It is, of course, not only agriculture that is to blame for the destruction of orchid habitats. In particular, the Bruce Peninsula’s recreational opportunities are not limited to the park and, especially on the Lake Huron side, cottage developments have expanded rapidly since the 1960s, devouring a variety of orchid habitats in the process in those places not suitable for agriculture. *Cypripedium arietnum* should be thankful, then, for the Owen Sound Field Naturalists.

But as (now) part of the national park system, and specifically of the fairly well-touristed BPNP (at least in July and August), Dorcas Bay/Singing Sands is not only or even primarily a plant refuge. Reflecting Parks Canada’s sometimes-conflicting tripartite mandate of preservation, education and recreation (it wasn’t until 1988 that “preservation” came first in the National Parks Act), Singing Sands includes areas that are obviously recreationally-attractive, such as the eponymous beach that, as a relatively warm, shallow and beautifully-swimmable expanse of mostly weed-free lake and sand, is in high demand in the middle of the tourist season. Even the trails that lead from the beach and parking lot through the less-heavily recreational forest, fen, alvar and dune areas of the reserve—complete with the signs that point out and identify the flora (and a few fauna) on which one should not step—lead people into human-plant relations that are, in most cases, not primarily designed to be of benefit to the orchids. It is fair to say that some species, most obviously, *Cypripedium calceolus pubescens*, Large Yellow Ladyslipper, which also grows up and down Highway 6, clearly don’t mind the human (and dog and stroller and camera equipment) company. It is

¹³ Cited in R. Emerson Whiting and Paul M. Catling, *Orchids of Ontario* (Ottawa: CanaColl Foundation, 1986), 7. *Orchids of Ontario* includes mention of a report of *Calypso bulbosa* in the Don Valley in Toronto in 1894 (103). It also includes a map of stations of *Calypso bulbosa* in Southern Ontario prior to and after 1950, a predictably depressing picture of regional extirpation (9).

possible that some even benefit from the soil disturbance, locally-increased sunlight and decreased competing vegetation caused by frequent pedestrian traffic: *Epipactis helleborine*, a non-native species, seems to have thus thrived. Others orchids surely do mind, however (hence the fences), and others may have minded so much that they are no longer there.¹⁴ As with all public parks, then, there is a mandate in Singing Sands with a potentially dual edge: preserve it and they will come.

CATTLEYAS, COMMODITIES AND CLIMATE CHANGE

I never intended to fall in love with orchids. I have never owned one, and I find the waxy *Phalaenopsis* hybrids on sale at Wal-Mart fairly depressing; they hint at an ancestral botanic elegance but reek of a chemically-intensive global floral industry that turns plants into the living equivalent of IKEA furniture. And I have to confess: such was my ignorance that I had no idea, until I first went to Bruce Peninsula National Park in the mid-1990s, that there were native orchids to be found in Ontario. Like many Canadians, I imagine, I associated orchids with humid, tropical locales; I could not put together the overt, lush sensuality of (what I now know to be) *Cattleyas* and *Dendrobia* with the relatively barren, wind-scoured shores of the northern Great Lakes. In fact, there are about 25,000 species of orchid (they form one of the world's largest plant families), and although most of them are to be found in the tropics (like much of the world's biodiversity), they exist almost everywhere, including the Himalayas. Many orchid species are temperate and terrestrial (like all of the native Ontario ones); there are, according to the Owen Sound Field Naturalists, 46 species and two varieties of orchid in Bruce and Grey Counties alone, all but one of which are indigenous.

Orchids are fascinating creatures on several levels. Biologically, they share some distinctive characteristics, the most obvious of which is that their flowers always have three outer sepals and three inner petals, with a pronounced median petal forming a lip or labellum—sometimes a slipper, as in the *Cypripedia*—that gives the otherwise symmetrical flower a distinctly asymmetrical, orchid-like appearance despite the enormous variations apparent within the family. In addition, orchid seeds are extremely small, with

¹⁴ According to the Owen Sound Field Naturalists, seven species and one variety of orchid on the Bruce are considered rare in Ontario. Small White Lady's Slipper (*Cypripedium candidum*) is listed as endangered in both Ontario and Canada, and even its continued presence on the Bruce is doubtful as there has not been a confirmed report since 1930. See *The Orchids of Bruce and Grey* (Owen Sound Field Naturalists, 1999), 4.

almost no stored food reserves; they rely on insects for pollination (Darwin wrote an entire book on the “almost endless variety of beautiful adaptations” through which orchids are uniquely structured to suit the physiologies of the various bees, flies and moths on which they rely for pollen-transfer¹⁵), and are also dependent on symbiotic fungi, mycorrhiza, to digest the stored energy in the soil and make it available to the young orchid plants.¹⁶ Orchids are, in other words, fussy: in addition to their reliance on site-specific mycorrhiza, their “germination must occur under the proper conditions of soil, moisture, temperature and light if the plant is to flourish and continue. Many orchids have very precise requirements and only a very few can thrive in diverse environments.”¹⁷ They are, as a result, almost never the dominant plant species in their chosen habitats; they are also extraordinarily difficult to transplant and especially susceptible to habitat loss.

Culturally, orchids are also more than usually interesting. As garden historian Luigi Berliocchi demonstrates, almost everywhere they grow they have been invested with larger mythical or supernatural meanings, many of which have to do with sex. The word orchid has at its origin the Greek Orchis, who in myth was a libidinous youth who attempted to rape a priestess and was dismembered for his crime, but whose testes were transformed into the tubers of a plant. Orchids have been used widely as aphrodisiacs, including by Europeans (the theory of signatures held that specific plants were good for the parts of the human body they resembled) and by aboriginal North Americans,¹⁸ and their appearances in Western art and literature often include overtones of decadent sexuality. The most obvious example of this sexualization is probably from Marcel Proust. In the first volume of *À La*

¹⁵ Charles Darwin, *The Various Contrivances by Which Orchids are Fertilised by Insects* (London: John Murray, 1904), 282. As Berliocchi recounts, in the sixteenth century, long before Darwin’s recognition of the mutual dependency between orchids and their pollinators (indeed, long before it was understood that orchids were pollinated at all as their seeds are virtually invisible), Hieronymus Tragus proposed a theory of resemblances between orchids and animals in which orchids were thought to grow in areas where, for example, the birds they resemble had mated and spilled their sperm. See Luigi Berliocchi, *The Orchid in Lore and Legend*, trans. Lenore Rosenberg and Anita Weston (Portland: Timber Press, 2000), 36.

¹⁶ Joseph Arditti documents that the role of mycorrhiza in orchid propagation was not understood until Noël Bernard figured it out in 1899; see *Fundamentals of Orchid Biology* (New York: Wiley, 1992), 47. Prior to this discovery, orchid cultivation, which now includes clonal propagation as well as germination from seed and hybridization, was hit-and-miss.

¹⁷ Whiting and Catling, *Orchids of Ontario*, 8.

¹⁸ According to Whiting and Catling, “young girls of the Haida [Nation] ... wishing to increase their bustlines, used to eat the raw corms of the calypso ... when they found the plants in the woods,” *Orchids of Ontario*, 6.

Recherche du Temps Perdu, Swann's first overtly erotic gesture to Odette is to rearrange the cattleyas she has pinned to her dress, and throughout the earliest days of their sexual relationship, "indulging in [his] little rearrangements" is Swann's pretext for his "fumbings with fingers and lips at Odette's bosom": thereafter, "do a cattleya" is their coy lovers' shorthand for sex.¹⁹

Not coincidentally, Proust wrote just at the end of an historic orchid mania in which the flowers' highly-perfumed aura of decadence was articulated with, and inflated by, their rarity as colonial commodities. Orchids were deeply implicated in European conquest from the mid-eighteenth century onward, hunted and hoarded from Southeast Asia to the Amazon as exotic treasures for wealthy patron/collectors. As rarities, they were status symbols, and so with the rise of a Victorian bourgeoisie eager to share in the aristocracy's cultural capital, their rarity was soon eroded as an organized orchid industry developed to satisfy middle-class botanical demands in the latter half of the nineteenth century (which is why Odette was able to have so many cattleyas rearranged). The development of a basic understanding of orchid reproduction at turn of the twentieth century thus led directly to industrial orchid cultivation and trade, and as orchids became increasingly mass-produced commodities, they lost some of their exotic edge. Still, orchid hunting continues, and passionate, obsessive botanical thieves – such as John Laroche, the subject of Susan Orlean's book *The Orchid Thief* (and part of the subsequent Hollywood film *Adaptation*)—remain prominent romantic characters in popular orchid culture.²⁰ But there is clearly a divide between the Wal-Mart *Phalaenopsis* and the CITES-protected ghost orchid (*Dendrophylax lindenii*) of Laroche's now-infamous poaching and smuggling operation: some orchids are just more charismatic than others.²¹

Charismatic orchids form the basis of another growing industry: orchid tourism. Advertisements for organized orchid tours to Hawaii, India, China, Nepal, Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, Mexico and Central and South

¹⁹ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Vol. I: Swann's Way (À La Recherche du Temps Perdu: Vol I: Du Coté de Chez Swann)*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 331. Berliocchi writes that "if orchids had not existed, one feels Marcel Proust ... would have had to invent them"; *The Orchid in Lore and Legend*, 91.

²⁰ Susan Orlean, *The Orchid Thief* (New York: Ballantine, 1998); Spike Jonze, dir. *Adaptation* (Columbia Pictures, 2002).

²¹ "Charisma" is, of course, how the botanical fetish works, as the rarer and more exotic the species, the more people will pay to have it. Berliocchi explains that orchid hunters therefore sometimes intentionally destroyed the habitats in which they found newly-discovered species (79).

America are all over the internet. There is a month-long orchid festival in Sikkim every March: “a great attraction for orchid lovers,” according to India Vacation Package, and even more reason to visit the orchid sanctuary in the capital city of Gangtok on a tour that can also include the “orchid paradise” of Arunachal Pradesh. NEI (UK) Tours promises that “orchids will be seen growing in the wild, in national and private collections; commercial growers will be visited where this is possible and botanical collections made available for study.” And my favourite: for \$1595 per person, Costa Rica Orchid Tours (“No Artificial Ingredients!”) houses its clients in four- and five-star hotels and promises 800 species of orchids in the University of Costa Rica Gardens as well as farm tours (“We Can Buy!”) and a “Golden Orchid Evening” at the Pre-Columbian Gold Museum, complete with a souvenir, artisan-crafted golden orchid.²²

But the poster-children of orchid mania and orchid tourism are not *Calypso bulbosa*. For one thing, small Canadian orchids are not the lush, scented creatures of extended literary metaphor. Catharine Parr Traill mentions Calypsos in her 1894 *Pearls and Pebbles*, but only as part of a typically-precise list of plant species in a bog near her home near Peterborough.²³ Marilyn Simonds has more room for botanical literariness in “Taken for Delirium,” but the single *Cypripedium acaule* (Pink Lady Slipper) that plays a central role in the short story is a survivor, not a seducer:²⁴ it is a botanical kindred spirit to (and metaphor for) the protagonist, a woman who has weathered isolation, fire, marital separation and degenerative disease. (When she leaves husband and home for the city, she will “remember the orchid ... [and] that I liked her so well because she survived on so little.”²⁵) Further, as Muir’s rapturous 1864 account indicates, even though their sex organs and reproductive habits are every bit as fascinating as those of their tropical cousins, temperate orchids like *Calypso bulbosa* have often tended to signify the opposite of carnal desires: purity, frailty and clarity. Muir’s Fairy Orchid is thus as pure as the snow out of which it has recently emerged. Indeed,

²² India Vacation Package, “Orchid Special,” <http://www.india-vacation-package.com/orchid-tours.html>; NEI (UK) Tours, “Orchid Tours,” <http://www.neiuk.co.uk/Orchids.html>; Costa Rica Orchid Tours, “Central America Orchid Show,” http://www.costaricaorchidstours.com/central_am.html (October 15, 2009).

²³ Catharine Parr Traill, *Pearls and Pebbles* (1894), ed. Elizabeth Thompson (Toronto: Natural Heritage Books, 1999), 125.

²⁴ Marilyn Simonds, *The Lion in the Room Next Door* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1999). According to the story, the infused root of the plant is an herbal remedy when “taken for delirium.”

²⁵ Simonds, *The Lion*, 164.

fellow environmental luminary Henry David Thoreau writes that “the *cool* fragrance of the swamp-pink” in the valleys of Massachusetts ... *restores* [the woodland walker]” should he feel faint from the heat “when he is climbing the bare hills.”²⁶ No “doing a cattleya” in these woods.

Directly because of Thoreau, it is as virgins rather than whores that temperate orchids have entered into recent environmental discourses. Drawing on his extensive (1851–1858) notes about the species distribution and seasonal growing habits of the plants around his home in Concord, a team of Boston University biologists has compared current species abundance and spring flowering times to those recorded in his journals. Of the 21 species of native orchids recorded by Thoreau, only eight remained in the study period of 2003–2007;²⁷ habitat loss is a primary culprit, as orchids are profoundly dependent on very particular habitats. In addition, the flowering time of many of the remaining orchid species is a matter of serious concern. Their dependency on particular insects for pollination means that some species, the ones that do *not* respond to temperature in their flowering times, are susceptible to serious adaptive problems in the midst of global climate change. Among other things, unchanging flowering-times means that flowers may not bloom in the presence of the necessary pollinators that *are* sensitive to temperature and therefore arrive earlier as local temperatures rise.²⁸ As so we can, perhaps, surmise some of the same for the Calypsos of the Bruce: “habitat loss due to succession and development (e.g., loss of wetlands ... and construction of homes and roads) has contributed to decreases in abundance for some species, [but] climate change may also help to explain the seemingly nonrandom pattern of species loss among certain plant groups” such as orchids.²⁹ The perceived purity of the flower may not nominate the Calypso for an obvious starring role in the global orchid-sex trade, but its “spirituality” is scant protection against global warming.

²⁶ Henry David Thoreau, *The Natural History Essays*, ed. Robert Sattlemeyer (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1980), 38, my emphases.

²⁷ Richard B. Primack, Abraham J. Miller-Rushing and Kiruba Dharaneeswaran, “Changes in the Flora of Thoreau’s Concord,” *Biological Conservation* 142.3 (March 2009): 503.

²⁸ Charles G. Willis et al., “Phylogenetic Patterns of Species Loss in Thoreau’s Woods are Driven by Climate Change,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* 105.44 (2008): 17029.

²⁹ Willis et al., “Phylogenetic Patterns,” 17029.

THE MYSTERY OF THE PURPLE-FRINGED ORCHID³⁰

The Bruce Peninsula Orchid Festival was the brainchild of Parks Canada employee and wildlife photographer Ethan Meleg. In 2002, with the assistance of the Friends of the Bruce District Parks Association, he “started the festival to celebrate this unique and appealing natural feature of the park, in a way that would increase conservation awareness of orchid species.”³¹ Most certainly, the Festival has brought the BPNP orchids into the limelight of park interpretation: issues affecting orchids and their habitats in the park and its surrounds (e.g., shoreline cottage development) are now much more visible, and conservation remains a primary message in all Festival-related activities. But the Orchid Festival is also part of a larger economic web in which national parks and adjacent communities cannot help but be enmeshed. First, in the wake of the massive cuts to national park budgets during the 1980s and 1990s, many parks were forced to take creative steps to increase their visitorship and coffers: BPNP was no exception. Second, Tobermory (to which BPNP is adjacent) has become increasingly reliant on tourism as other economic possibilities, especially commercial fishing, have dwindled to near-zero. So the Festival is certainly about conservation education, but in the words of Janet Johnston of the Friends, it is also about revenue: “we had two goals in establishing this event—firstly, to provide education to those seeking to find the rare and unique orchids and wildflowers of our areas; and secondly, to increase tourism in our shoulder season (spring).” The Festival, although intentionally quite small, is an important source of publicity and funds both for the park and for Tobermory; as Johnston remarked, “this time of year is slow up here, so even this little bit helps quite a bit.”³² Thus the Festival demonstrates a new, neoliberal orchid reality: even on this small scale, their conservation is tied to their commodification.

The Festival organizers capitalized on existing circuits of global orchid tourism in their plans, and the event was designed to attract both hard-core orchid fanciers from remote locations (during one Festival, I met a

³⁰ I am very grateful to Parks Canada’s Ethan Meleg and Scott Currie, both of whom talked to me at length about the park and the orchids in the summer of 2008 and later commented very helpfully on a draft of this article (I am also grateful to Janet Johnston for her correspondence). I have tried to honour their justifiable enthusiasm for, and commitment to, the Orchid Festival here, but it is clear that I am more skeptical about tourism as a conservation strategy than they are.

³¹ Ethan Meleg (Parks Canada), correspondence with the author, November 11, 2009.

³² Janet Johnston (Friends of the Bruce District Parks Association), correspondence with the author, June 24–25, 2008.

couple from Australia who had flown to Ontario primarily for that purpose), and nearby visitors with a general interest in natural history that might be piqued by the unusual density of species in the area (people like me). Meleg, acknowledging that orchids are the “superstars of the flower world,” is clear that there was a convenient convergence of needs involved in the germination of the Festival: a themed event outside the prime July-August season made sense for both park and community, and orchids happen to bloom on the Bruce beginning in late May. But he is also clear that he thought an Orchid Festival would bring in tourists who were already interested in the kind of conservation message the Park was trying to embody and promote. Given recent concerns in and outside Parks Canada about “flat” visitor numbers, this choice was important: “Parks Canada is ... faced with the fact that recent immigrants, an aging population and a younger generation of people that prefer to surf the internet, play video games and have a hot shower at the end of the day are not all that interested in national parks.”³³ In the midst of pressure to re-brand the parks to appeal to a larger range of tastes, orchids were a good bet: visually charismatic, full of global attractive potential, but still part of a strong preservationist agenda.

The Festival has been a definite success, drawing in an estimated 100 to 200 visitors per year. Partly because the Festival organizers have intentionally kept visitor numbers low in order to ensure a high-quality experience and manage potential impacts on the orchids, partly because Calypsos and Striped Coralroots (*Corallorhiza striata*) are not quite as sexy as tropical orchids, and partly because there are no five-star hotels and gold museums in Tobermory, the Festival has retained much of its original character, in which orchids are, according to BPNP naturalist Scott Currie, “flagship species” that draw attention to “why habitat is important” rather than simply spectacles for photographers and other orchid-consumers.³⁴ Although Currie notes a) that several other plant species in the Park are more ecologically significant than the orchids, and b) that there has been, in recent Festivals, an increased tendency to focus on the superstar flowers rather than the habitats of which they are a part, he is clear that the Festival “is effective at promoting habitat protection.”³⁵ Meleg concurs, and argues further that the more sustainable economy enabled by appropriate shoulder-season tourism is itself beneficial

³³ Ed Struzik, “Wardens in Arms,” *Canadian Geographic* 129.4 (July/August, 2009): 60.

³⁴ Scott Currie, interview with the author, July 18, 2008.

³⁵ Currie, interview.

to conservation: the Festival demonstrates to locals, cottagers and tourists alike that people can get an economic return from conservation rather than resource extraction, and from preserving rather than building on orchid habitats.

One issue for the Festival is, however, that even conservation-minded tourists have an impact on the natural environments to (and through) which they travel. Despite the Festival's clearly and repeatedly articulated protocols for photographers (stay on the trails, use longer lenses for distance, no ground sheets), gardeners (never transplant orchids from the wild, buy them from reputable sources that do not harvest from the wild) and everyone else (look with binoculars from a distance, do not trample around the plant, do not touch the plant), the fact remains that some photographers ignore the rules and trample many sensitive plants in order to get the best shot (I would not want to be a Calypso growing near a marked trail), that some people still do not know better than to pick the lovely flowers that they are being encouraged to admire, and that poaching happens. Certainly, as Meleg and Currie are both quick to point out, these impacts were occurring prior to the Festival and, indeed, the increased surveillance of orchid stations occasioned by Festival and other attention has helped "to create a self-policing ethic among orchid enthusiasts."³⁶ But it is still the case that Parks Canada is secretive about the locations of some of the area's rarest orchids, including one of the last patches of the endangered Eastern Prairie White-Fringed Orchid (*Platanthera leucophaea*). Festival tour activities only involve easily accessible locations near roads and main trails. And although there have been discussions about increasing visitor opportunities for self-exploration, BPNP staff members are clearly aware that any published map of orchid locations could easily become a poacher's itinerary.³⁷ Still, organizers are justifiably pleased with the result: as Meleg notes, "in terms of orchid conservation, I think the Festival helps us to gain two steps forward for every one step backward."³⁸

A different issue for the orchids is that, Festival or no Festival, they are not the only attraction in the Park: the July-August tourist season is, despite an effective year-round conservation message, oriented far more to

³⁶ Meleg, correspondence, November 11, 2009.

³⁷ Ethan Meleg, interview with the author, July 14, 2008. As the *BPNP Management Plan* explains, "some focused-interest users [e.g., orchid fanciers] can ... have an extremely high impact on specific resources such as orchids. Publication of information on rare, endangered and sensitive species must be undertaken with caution" (29).

³⁸ Meleg, correspondence, November 12, 2009.

camping, scenery, and warm-weather recreation than it is to the many species of orchids that bloom in the summer months (especially July). Increased year-round attention to the orchids increases the possibility that visitors may come to the park for other reasons and discover the orchids while doing other things: certainly, that is my story, and I would be a hypocrite if I didn't point it out. But it is still the case that most visitors hiking to the Grotto – a truly remarkable geological formation on Georgian Bay that is not far from the main Cyprus Lake campground—have no idea that the unassuming spindly green plants along the path to get there are Menzies' Rattlesnake Plantain (*Goodyera oblongifolia*); once, for example, I watched a small child, with parental consent, pick one to try to make the sound from its thin stem that one might otherwise achieve by blowing on a blade of grass. Without a great deal of intervention from BPNP staff—and without the sort of spatial regulation and warden surveillance that, in an ideal world, wouldn't be part of an experience of walking on the Niagara Escarpment—the fact is that the orchids, as part of a place that is specifically oriented to tourism, will get overlooked and trampled, both metaphorically and physically, en route to more spectacular or recreational experiences. Parks Canada manages these visitor impacts in a variety of ways because, as Currie observes, “the risks to our natural heritage posed by visitation are outweighed by the risks of keeping people out of parks.”³⁹ But that fine balance has its casualties.

Take the story of the Small Purple Fringed Orchid (*Platanthera psycodes*). On July 6, 2008, my partner and I took a leisurely Sunday morning walk into the woods at Singing Sands and saw a magnificent, pinky-purple cluster of orchid blooms on the top of a tall stem off to the side of the trail. According to Currie in an article published in the local paper soon after, “given the average length of time that it takes wild orchids to grow from seed to maturity, and its robust size,” the orchid was probably ten years old. We took several pictures of it and, like Currie, inhaled “a hint of its sweet fragrance, without ever leaving the path.”⁴⁰ I had never been to BPNP in July before, and had thus never seen a *Platanthera psycodes*: I was thrilled. So when I spoke to Currie later that month and he told me that the plant had been poached, completely removed, some time between July 5 (when he had last seen it) and July 7 (when he discovered its absence), I was devastated. On the very day of my moment of orchid-elation, someone had come along—come

³⁹ Scott Currie, correspondence with the author, November 12, 2009.

⁴⁰ Scott Currie, “Purple Fringed Orchid,” *The Bruce Peninsula Press* (July 16, 2009).

past the sign marking John Muir's presence, along the well-marked and frequently-fenced trail, past the signs warning not to touch the plants—and taken out that entire, magnificent plant. Goodness knows what happened to it then: perhaps some collector tried to put it in her greenhouse next to the *Phalaenopsis*, or perhaps some aspiring Canadian Laroche tried to sell it to the highest bidder on eBay. As Currie wrote, “it won't survive transplanting. It was ripped out at the base of the flower stalk leaving a small, inconspicuous hole in the sphagnum. Perhaps the most insulting thing is that the individual responsible probably thought that no one would miss it.”⁴¹

Well, I miss it.⁴² I understand Muir's elation at seeing the *Calypso bulbosa*: I never intended to fall in love with orchids, but I did. Unfortunately, loving them doesn't necessarily protect them. Muir's Calypsos are gone from Simcoe County. And maybe loving them can even make it worse: the commodification of orchids through trade, mass propagation and tourism may have increased their economic and cultural value, but the process has globally, both directly and indirectly, contributed to their destruction almost as much as it has highlighted the importance of their conservation. Despite its considerable successes at conservation and education, BPNP is part of the web of commodity relations in which orchids are thoroughly enmeshed. Meleg rightly said to me that the orchids of the Bruce Peninsula have far more to lose outside the park from the development that threatens their habitats (and now apparently also from climate change) than they do from the odd, now much-more-visibly-policed poacher inside it, but the irony remains. In this place where John Muir may (or may not) have walked, this park that prides itself on the protection of orchids and their habitats facilitated the death of this one specimen by providing easy trail access, a parking lot, and a set of signs proclaiming “this way to the orchids.” There is ample reason to be enthusiastic about the Orchid Festival, and about BPNP's larger efforts to both “protect and present” the ecosystems of which *Calypso bulbosa* and *Platanthera psycodes* are a part. But still: as far as the orchids are concerned, tourism is a mixed blessing.

⁴¹ Currie, “Purple Fringed Orchid.”

⁴² So will Currie and, judging by the BPNP staff to whom I spoke casually about it the following year (including the warden who was clearly a bit alarmed that I was taking a strong interest in what looked like another, not-quite-blooming *Platanthera psycodes* near the boardwalk in the fen at Singing Sands), so will a lot of people. Most destroyed plants are not mourned; the Calypsos that were trampled during the 2008 Festival, and this particular Small Purple-Fringed Orchid, most certainly were. The fact that so many people actually care about these plants enough to miss them when they are destroyed is an ironic testament to the Festival's success.