

12 months in Buchanan County Parks and Natural Areas

September – Rowley Fen <http://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Buchanan/Park/Rowley-Fen.aspx>

Directions: Near Rowley, IA - ¼ mile north of D47 on Lucas Ave

If you go: Fens are damp to wet and have many ruts and anthill bumps. Good shoes that can get wet are recommended. Poison ivy and wild parsnip are present in localized patches. Mosquitoes and flies may make insect repellent useful. Hunting is allowed – Wear bright colors during open seasons.

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One of Buchanan County Conservation's most unique natural areas is at its showiest in September. Bright Blues are not common among wildflowers and the fen is currently dressed in the sapphire colors of three of the showiest. Great Blue Lobelia (photo) is starting to fade as both fringed and bottle gentians are reaching their peak.



These three flowers are among those that prefer “wet feet” and do well in soil conditions that stay or are often wet. A fen is the very definition of that soil type.

Fens are wetlands that form most often on slopes. Many Iowa fens, including the Rowley Fen, are fed by groundwater flowing to the surface from the limestone bedrock. The water becomes basic (opposite of acidic) due to the lime and plant matter soaked with this water takes longer to decompose. Over hundreds of years the plant material eventually forms mounds of peat. The peat mounds essentially “float” on emerging groundwater and as a result, you often notice a springy feel to them – similar to walking on a big bed of firm Jello. The South Fen section at Rowley fits this characteristic very well and if you go with a friend, be sure to have one person jump on the fen mound while the other stands – the whole mound will quake beneath you.

Rowley Fen also has a north fen section that is less characteristic in appearance as it is not mounded, but it also hosts fen plant species. Between the two fen sections is a restored prairie that is buzzing with activity among the goldenrods and asters.

The wet and basic character of the fen soil results in a microhabitat that supports plant species that are considered indicators of quality fen habitat. Rowley Fen hosts several of these plants; many of them are blooming now.



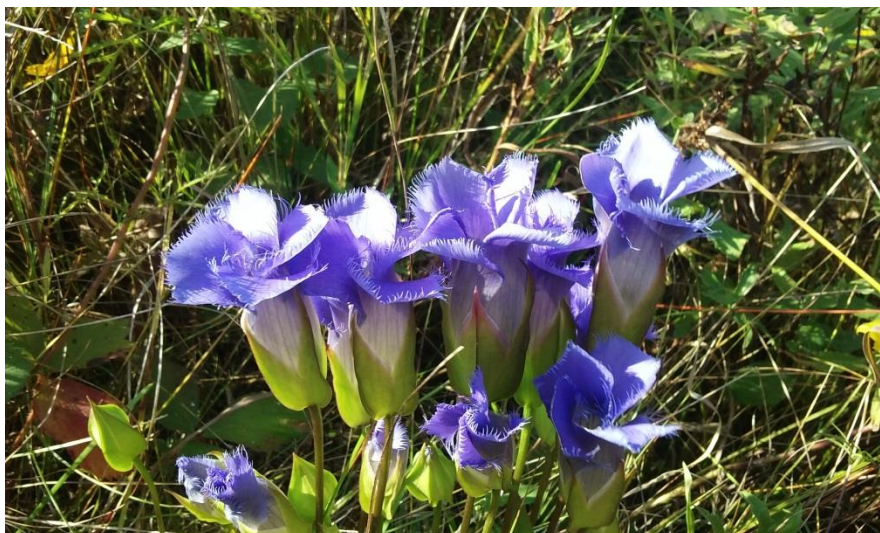
Bottle gentians' blue flower (photo) appears like an un-opened bud on a stalk about one foot tall. The flower corolla does not open and thus it is difficult for most pollinators to reach the nectar and pollen. Bumblebees are one pollinator that can force open the flower petals to reach the nectar, but you will often see flowers with holes near the base – often the bumblebees find it easier to chew through the petal than to force it open. The hole allows the bumblebee to get the nectar, but the shortcut bypasses the pollen and the flower is unable to form seed without the pollen transfer.

White turtlehead (photo) is an indicator species that is just ending its bloom period. It is the only host for the Baltimore

Checkerspot butterfly. While the butterfly has not been documented at Rowley Fen, it has been in Linn County and late June-early July visitors might want to bring a camera and search. Turtlehead flowers are cream colored and like the gentians, this plant is a short 12-18 inches tall.



Fringed Gentian (photo) depends on seed production as it is a bi-annual and not a perennial. Clumps of flowers with four blue petals open on sunny days to reveal the reason for its name – the edges of the petals have a delicate fringe. There is some speculation that the fringe is to discourage ants from obtaining all the nectar in the flower as they do not effectively move the pollen. Whatever evolutionary benefit there is, it is certainly a beautiful result. Most of the fringed gentians are found on the lower northern edge of the south fen mound.



Riddell's Goldenrod(photo) is one of the plants that prefers wet, basic soils. Blooming at the same time as the non-descript ragweeds, goldenrods have gotten a bad rap as allergens. Their heavy pollens are not the cause of most fall allergies but are a very important late season food source for bees, beetles and other pollinators.

You will certainly become familiar with the reason tussock sedge is so named if you walk onto the fen mound. What appears to be a smooth mound of grass is actually dense clumps of this sedge. Where the plant material dies each year around the base of the plant, it builds up a mound or tussock that makes walking an up and down experience requiring good ankle strength. Between the clumps, you can easily bend down and poke a finger knuckle deep into the peat. Many of the sedge clumps are infertile and do not produce any flower/seed heads, but those that do are a ½ inch to 3 inch spike like head. The edges of the leaves are sometimes rough and walking through the fen with shorts can be a cutting experience.



Amongst all the unique vegetation, don't forget to look and listen for the wildlife. On my recent visit, I heard a barred owl call from the pine windbreak on the eastern edge of the fen, what I assume was a rabbit scuttled quickly away as I topped the prairie,



Perhaps the most interesting wildlife, however, was the insect life among the flowers and plants. A close look at goldenrod flower revealed beetles, bumblebees, native bees, honey bees, hover flies and a hidden pair of ambush bugs (photo). Jumping ahead of me as I walked were numerous grasshoppers and one very curious katydid that thought she was well hidden among the grasses(photo). At least one of the grasshoppers didn't watch where it was going and was caught in the web of a gorgeous black and yellow

garden spider – she quickly wrapped it up for dinner (photo). Hundreds of painted ladies joined dozens of monarchs and a few crescent butterflies on the boneset, goldenrod and joe pye weed.

