

# NATURAL HISTORY



6/95

tain tree size, some being about twenty feet tall. Bog birch and western river birch are found here and there: the first is a dwarf species by nature; the second is apparently stunted by the oxygen-poor soil. Seven different species of willows can be identified, from the common flat-leaved willow and barren-ground willow to others that are unexpected for this part of the country, notably the myrtle-leaved willow and the hoary willow, whose leaves are backed by a dense, woolly white coat. These last two species represent isolated populations of arctic and northern Rocky Mountain plants that remained after the last ice age ended, ten or twelve thousand years ago. The nearest populations of these species lie 450 miles away.

One other shrub at High Creek Fen is the shrubby cinquefoil, common to many wetlands in the northern United States and adjacent Canada. Its yellow, inch-wide flowers are so attractive that this species is now a popular plant available in nurseries.

The fen's scattered pools of clear, standing water contain true aquatic plants. Among these are two kinds of bladderworts, whose intricate underwater branches bear dozens of tiny bladders that can be triggered to suck in and digest microscopic animal life. Other aquatic plants are the much-branched (but not carnivorous) hornwort, at least two kinds of pondweeds, and an aquatic sedge. Wilson's phalarope, a sandpiperlike bird, may be seen flying around in circles over the fen and then swooping down to stir up the rich bottom of a pool for invertebrates.

Our summertime visit to the fen was marred only by the deerflies, which began to take an interest in us as soon as we stepped into the wetland. At first only a few of these biting flies accosted us, but as we went deeper into the fen, more flies attacked us. Soon the swarm became unbearable, and we decided to retreat, running as best we could over the hummocky ground. I reasoned, or at least hoped, that as soon as we crossed into the dry plains, the deerflies would leave us alone—but no, they pursued us all the way to, and even into, our car. As I drove down the gravel road toward U. S. 285, the deerflies kept pace outside our windows and only gave up after I was able to "open up" on the paved highway.

*Robert H. Mohlenbrock, professor emeritus of plant biology at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, explores the biological and geological highlights of the U. S. national forests and other parklands.*

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