

Lauder Hills Crocus Hike, Sunday, 18 April, 2021

Low-hanging steel-grey clouds, a stiff northwesterly breeze, an occasional snow shower and temperature hovering around zero. Typical mid-April weather in southwestern Manitoba. Despite the ominous forecast, Jude, Di, Kerri and Ron heeded the call of the crocus.

An hour-long drive toward Hartney and the Lauder Wilderness Area serves to remind the vigilant observer of the sometimes rolling and sometimes flat but never boring landscape that encompasses southwestern Manitoba. A countryside sprinkled with ponds teeming with black-billed snow geese, green-head mallards and restless Canada Geese, rust-covered pastures struggling to loosening spring-green grasses, and cross-stitched gatherings of aspen bluffs and willow-patches. Finally, the white-steeped church at Grande Claireire, a beacon directing wonderers to the unspoiled wilderness and reminding them of its historical connection to earliest travellers – First Nation and Metis – who frequented and made their home here.

The Lauder Wilderness Area is marked by an abrupt elevation change as ridges of low-lying hills rise topped with dark-gnarled bur oaks then drop into coulees filled with aspens, shrub willows and deadfall. Interrupting the west-to-east flow of hills and coulees is an ATV-trail and a hydro line which also serves as the entry point into the hills.

As we ascended our first ridge of hills, Di spotted the first patch of crocus huddled among dry grasses and ground-hugging juniper. We circled the ridge and found - with some difficulty - other light-purple crocus strewn about. Although most crocus were partially closed, the tell-tale gold centers marked the flower. Not too long after, Kerri, spotted a pin-cushion cactus, spines quivering over its red-hue topside. Not to be disappointed, more crocus and cactus were found on other hill-tops. With the mission to locate crocus accomplished, the group continued its discovery trek and located several dark-covered clumps scattered on small sandy outcrops. It didn't long for Kerri, aspiring naturalist that she is, determined that it was a living mass and persuaded the group to take a different perspective (and photographs). Speak to Kerri if you wish to know the secret of the living dark mass.

The sparsity of new-growth vegetation is a reminder that even mid-April remains a daunting time for plant-life. Nevertheless, the crunch of our boots on the dried grasses and withered flowering plants reminded us of the potential for life even here in the sandy soil of the Lauder Hills. Negotiating our way along the ridge-topped oaks and through the coulees littered with downfall and new-growth aspen and willow serves as a remainder of the unceasing life cycle in the natural environment of life followed by decay and regrowth. The latter a useful metaphor to also describe the human existence.

As with our Lauder Hills hike last autumn, the focal point to our trek was the bowl, a sandy hollow nestled at the bottom of several small hills and criss-crossed with ATV tracks. We found a wind-protected ridge where we enjoyed a short respite and oriented ourselves to the final leg of the hike. We caught a low ridge of hills – topped with usual oak – that shifted to a north-

south direction and which eventually led to the Hydro line trail and a return to the west entry point and our awaiting vehicles.

A slow-paced hike with plenty of stops to gaze at the scenery, search for crocus (cactus and masses of dark living matter), experience the healing cool temperature and wind (comforted by the warmth of our windproof winter gear) and enjoy a social gathering despite the social restrictions of a pandemic.

