

A Profile of Bilby Natural Area by Gertie Meyer

Bilby Natural Area (PA Site 55, protected by Order-in-Council) encompasses 126 ha southeast of the town of Onoway. Its official access points are at two openings on the west side of Range Road 14, or just south of the railroad tracks on Range Road 15. It includes gently rolling upland, largely covered by deciduous or mixedwood forest on well-drained soils and moister, more organic soils in small depressions. Kilini Creek is a major feature in the northwest part of the natural area. This fast-flowing, wide, shallow stream winds through extensive sedge meadows and drains various dams, the work of generations of beavers.

The upland forests of aspen, balsam poplar, white spruce, and scattered Alaska birch rise above typical understory shrubs, such as hazel, saskatoon, chokecherry, pin cherry and rose. Red-osier dogwood, bracted honeysuckle, willows and various gooseberries and currants grow in wetter areas. On coarser soils, common bearberry and common blueberry occur, but populations of the latter have become less common in the absence of fires. Several orchids can be found on organic soils of the hollows, including round-leaved orchid, white adder's-mouth (a rare orchid), and northern green bog orchid. Marshy areas are home to arrow-leaved coltsfoot, marsh marigold and a host of other moisture-loving plants.



Kilini Creek flows through Bilby NA

The common woodland bird species are present, including healthy populations of red-winged blackbirds, crows and ravens. Bald eagles occasionally fly overhead on their way to nearby Devil's Lake. Bilby NA also provides good habitat for common mammals, including deer, moose and beaver.

Hiking trails in the NA follow two pipelines, one running northeast-southwest and one aligned parallel to Range Road 14, plus an old east-west road allowance. Signs were installed in 1983, before the Volunteer Steward Program began. The first Stewards (1987-1990) were the Allers family from Onoway, followed by Mary Bosiak (1990-1993). In October 1993, the current Steward, Mrs. Gertie Meyer, a

member of a local farming family, took over. She received the Outstanding Individual Steward Award in 2009 for her commitment to stewardship in Bilby NA.

A fire in the northeast portion in 1983 resulted in a lot of deadfall. The burned trees had been in poor condition after being infested with forest tent caterpillars for several years. New growth is now evident and is doing well.



Alison Dinwoodie (left) and Gertie Meyer

Bilby NA has had problems with ATVers, who leave trails and cause ruts in wet weather. Weeds are another problem. Gertie has targeted scentless chamomile, which invaded the mud around Kilini Creek during dry years, but perennial weeds tansy, orange hawkweed (a recent arrival) and hoary plantain (*Plantago media*, an unusual introduction related to common plantain) also pose threats.

Bilby Natural Area has education as its main raison d'être. Gertie invites the public to visit the Natural Area to bird-watch, hike, pick berries, ride horses, cross-country ski and watch wildlife, while showing respect for Bilby's natural values. If you're planning a visit, you can also check out nearby Imrie Park (south of Highway 37 on Range Road 15). The park offers public picnic facilities as well as trail access through a fen to the west shore of Devil's Lake. Here a blind provides an excellent opportunity to watch water birds.