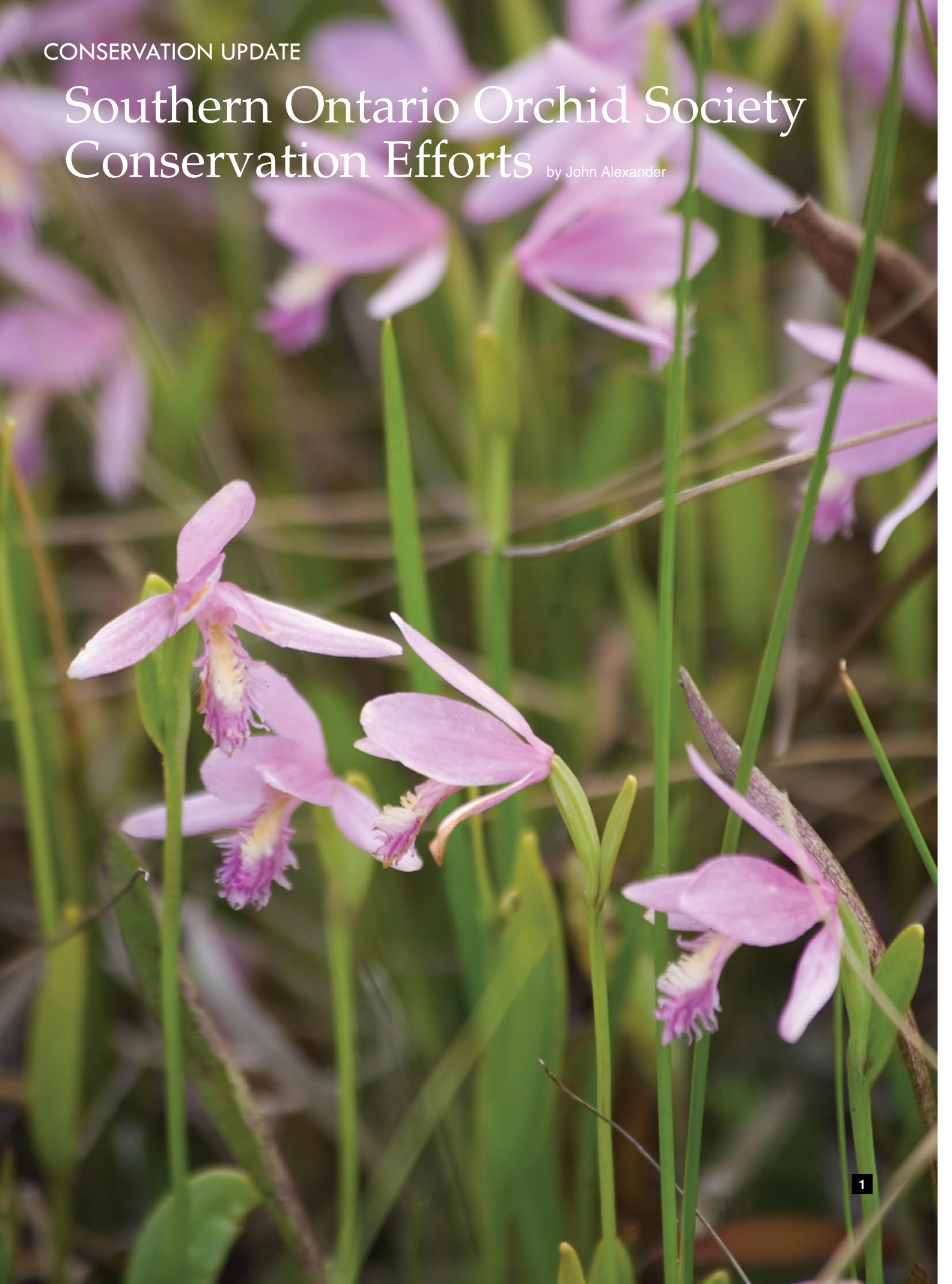


CONSERVATION UPDATE

# Southern Ontario Orchid Society Conservation Efforts

by John Alexander



*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*  
 — Margaret Mead

IN TORONTO IN 1964, a group of thoughtful, committed citizens undertook to change the world. The Southern Ontario Orchid Society (SOOS) was formed by a group of dedicated orchid enthusiasts, many of whom, such as Peter and Inge Poot, are still active members today.

The Southern Ontario Orchid Society was formally incorporated in 1976. In the original articles of incorporation, one of the objectives states:

*To promote, carry on and aid in the development, improvement, study and preservation of orchid plants of all kinds, including, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, the study of orchid culture, development and hybridization and to promote the preservation and conservation of native and tropical orchids.*

Like many fledgling organizations, the newly formed SOOS had big plans. In addition to supporting conservation, some of the original members of the Conservation Committee, Peter Poot, Kevin Tipson and Tom Shields, had the idea to create a seed bank, although with the limited funding available, it would need to be stored in a bar fridge. Luckily other organizations have filled that void.

Another objective which SOOS has embraced since its inception, is to educate the general public and orchid growers about their hobby. Our current program director, Terry Kennedy, continues to bring renowned international speakers to the monthly members meetings. Because of COVID, like most orchid societies, our meetings became virtual. This enhanced our ability to reach a wider group of potential speakers without the added expense of travel. With interesting programs offered, SOOS gained new members from a wider geographical area. The wonders of the digital age!

In addition to the monthly programs, members of the Conservation Committee aim to highlight conservation issues in Canada and Southern Ontario in particular through the SOOS monthly newsletter column "Conservation Corner."

Over the last 60+ years, SOOS has consistently and successfully raised funds through an annual show and sale to support its objective of the preservation and conservation of orchids. Between 2010 and 2023 SOOS has donated over



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CA\$130,000.00 (currently about US \$95,000) toward land acquisition and stewardship supporting natural orchid habitat preservation.

The primary focus of our donations has been to fund projects located within an easy drive from Toronto, where SOOS is based. The Saugeen Bruce Peninsula, about a 4–4.5-hour drive north of Toronto, is home to the greatest biodiversity of native orchids in North America other than Florida, with a species count of 44.

The Southern Ontario Orchid Society has assisted with the acquisition of the McLennan Property (2010), Greiling Estate (2013), Shining Rainbow Deer (2014), Dyers Bay West (2018) and in 2023 the Sturgeon Bay Forest project. In addition to the 44 orchid species, the peninsula supports an abundance of wildlife, globally rare flowers, at-risk birds and reptiles, amphibians, and mammals, such as deer, black bear and fishers (part of the weasel family). The area also boasts a variety of habitats, including globally rare alvars (limestone plains with thin or no soil forming sparse grasslands), sand beaches, fens and ecologically significant meadow marshes.

In addition to the Saugeen Bruce Peninsula, another area of interest is Manitoulin Island. The island is home to many diverse habitats including alvars, wet meadows and pristine forests. Undisturbed habitat still exists there. In 2011, SOOS donated funds to help acquire the Tasker



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- [1] Rose Pogonia (*Pogonia ophioglossoides*) photographed by the author on the fens at Saugeen Bruce Peninsula.
- [2] Rose Pogonia and Grass Pinks (*Calopogon tuberosus*) on the fens at Petrel Point on the Saugeen Bruce Peninsula.
- [3] Small Purple Fringed Orchid (*Platanthera psycodes*).

Property, and in 2016, the Evansville property. In 2021, continuing our ongoing relationship with the Nature Conservancy of Canada, SOOS made our largest donation to date of CA\$25,000 (about US \$18,000) toward the Vidal Bay Forests and Shoreline project, which is redefining conservation in Southern Ontario by creating the largest protected area complex south of the Canadian Shield. The Vidal Bay Forests and Shoreline property features coastal cliffs, undeveloped Lake Huron shoreline, inland lakes and wetlands, intact forests and alvars. According to the International Alvar Conservation Initiative, the alvars of western Manitoulin Island are the best remaining examples of this type of globally rare habitat in North America, where the limestone pavements and thin soils set the stage for a unique assemblage of rare and endemic plant species, including orchids.

For this year's donation, 2024, SOOS has taken a slight step sideways. The Thunder Bay Field Naturalists Club approached us to assist in acquiring a piece of property in a wetland that was slated to be logged if the property could not be acquired. Even though SOOS has traditionally funded projects within easy reach of Toronto, this was a project where the funding ask of CA\$10,000 (about US\$7,300) was a third of the potential overall cost of what remained to be raised. This is the first donation directly to a Field Naturalists group. Many orchid societies do not have a conservation committee, and even for those that do, stewarding properties is a rarity. In Canada, Field Naturalists groups are the boots-on-the-ground. Because many steward several properties, they visit them regularly and are attuned to changes. It makes sense to support each other on local projects, which can protect targeted reserves that would not necessarily fit the profile of larger national organizations.

In 2021, SOOS expanded its philanthropic projects to include a direct educational and outreach project. Through the Conservation Committee, SOOS cosponsored an *orchid-gami*® orchid together with the Orchid Species Preservation Foundation in Edmonton, Alberta. The *orchid-gami*® project directly supports conservation through the funds it raises for SOOS, but also for the Smithsonian's North American Orchid Conservation Center (NAOCC) that developed the project. Due to COVID, initial plans for the distribution changed dramatically and some were postponed. The Conservation Committee added two additional *orchid-gami*® orchids to their selection to promote broader



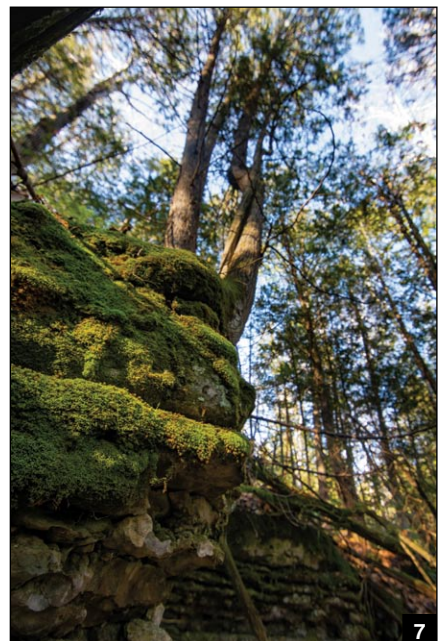
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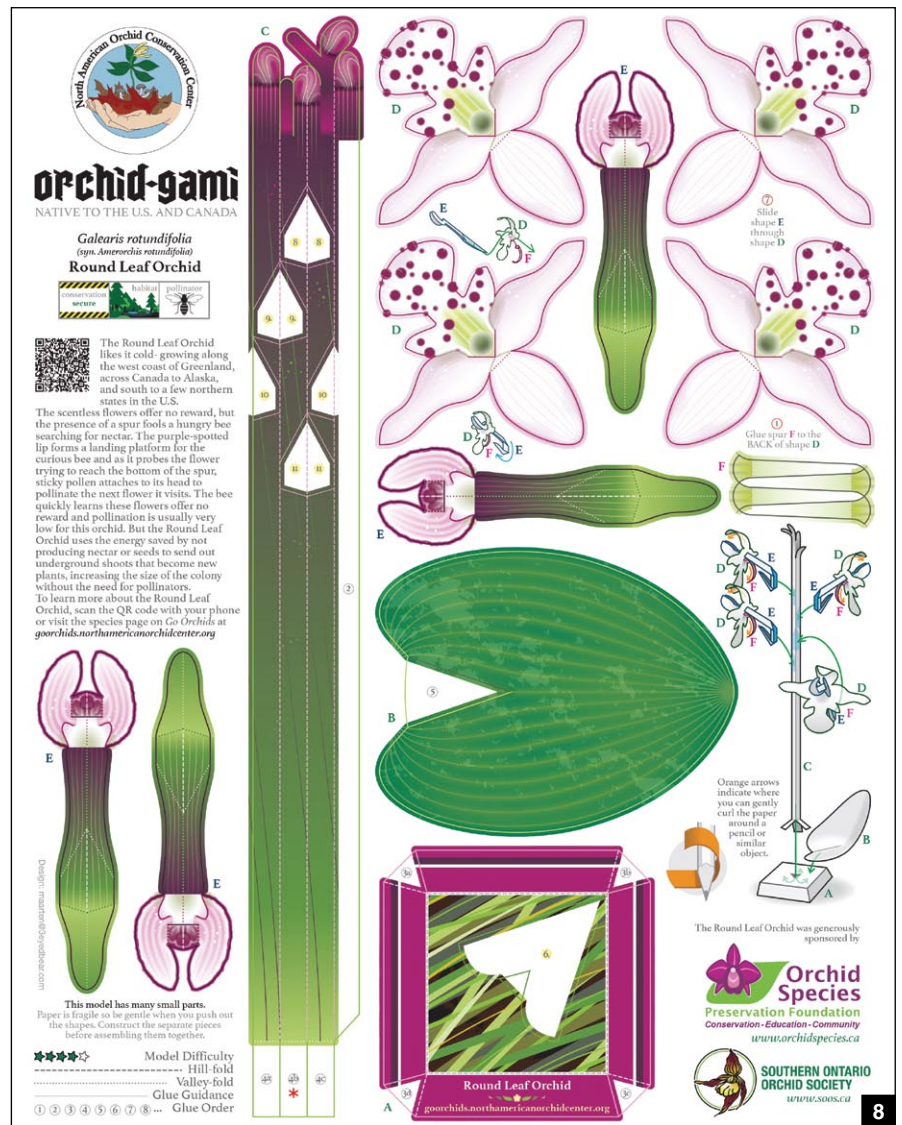
conservation issues. These were assembled into kits of the three orchids — the Round Leaf Orchid (*Galearis rotundifolia* — our sponsored orchid), the Showy Lady Slipper (*Cypripedium reginae*) and the Rose Pogonia (*Pogonia ophioglossoides*). Each orchid highlighted a different conservation issue — from climate change (Round Leaf Orchid) to poaching (Showy Lady Slipper) and wetland destruction (Rose Pogonia). As orchid shows reappeared in 2023, the Conservation Committee created a display that showcased the *orchid-gami*® project.

At the SOOS and Ottawa Orchid Society (OOS) shows in the spring of 2023 close to 1,000 *orchid-gami*® of our cosponsored orchid were handed out to visitors at the shows. Each packet contained conservation information about the Round Leaf Orchid with links to the SOOS website for more information. Throughout the spring SOOS, OOS and the Orchid Society of the Royal Botanical Garden shows, over 50 additional kits of the three orchids were sold.

In 2023, the SOOS Conservation Committee also participated in educational outreach to the Milliken Mills High School in Markham through their “Connecting with the Land Symposium” in May, and the Ontario Nature Youth Summit for Mother Earth in September, both with *orchid-gami*®. The participants at the Youth Summit were between 14 and 20 years old — hopefully our next generation of orchid enthusiasts and environmentalists! At the Youth Summit, the SOOS Conservation Committee also gave a presentation entitled Ontario Orchids and Conservation.

It has been an honor to take the groundwork that previous Conservation Committee members have initiated and build upon it. Through previous committee chairs, Susan Shaw, Tom Atkinson and the late Tom Shields, along with active members Henry Glowka and Kevin Tipson, the conservation committee has been a consistent, if somewhat behind-the-scenes voice for conservation at SOOS. HOW DO WE CHANGE THE WORLD? TOGETHER. *Daid Suzuki*

When we received the notification that SOOS would receive the AOS Conservation Recognition Award and that it came with a donation of US \$1,000, we decided that it was important to mark the occasion with a specific investment. At the same time, Dr Leslie Ee, Chair of the Canadian Orchid Congress (COC) was considering microfunding conservation projects in different regions of Canada. I reached out to Ontario Nature, who steward several properties on the Saugeen Bruce



Peninsula, to identify something that was directly related to native orchids. They identified a project to remove part of a decaying boardwalk in their Petrel Point Conservation area. Several years ago, they replaced the southern portion of this boardwalk and made it wheelchair accessible and sustainable. The portion of the boardwalk on the north side of the fen had fallen into disrepair to the point of being hazardous to use. The decision was made to remove the boardwalk and let the fen rejuvenate to a natural state. The donations from the COC and SOOS helped to make this possible and will greatly improve the health of the overall fen. We judged that it was an appropriate use of the AOS Conservation Award funds and would help to set an example for organizations working together. It is important to remember that none of this happens without the ongoing support of the membership and volunteers that make the SOOS annual shows the success that

[4–7] Vidal Bay, Manitoulin Island Archipelago, Ontario, Canada.

[8] Round Leaf Orchid (*Galearis rotundifolia*) *Orchid-gami*® cosponsored by the Southern Ontario Orchid Society and the Orchid Species Preservation Foundation.

they have become. I am a fan of using quotes in articles and presentations to create a mindset, set a tone, or leave a lasting thought. Right now, my favorite is the following from poet and author Maya Angelou:

*Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better.*

— John Alexander, Conservation Committee Chair, Southern Ontario Orchid Society (email alexanderarts@sympatico.ca; www.soos.ca).