

# Beachcombing for Parklands

– Gavin Hanke, Curator of Zoology

## The Only Way to Build a Diorama

In anticipation of the September 20, 2003 opening of the Parklands/Mixed-Woods Gallery, behind-the-scenes stories of the Gallery's creation have been appearing in your new member newsletter, *Features*. Next in this four-part series is *Beachcombing for Parklands*, a story written by the Museum's new Curator of Zoology about a collecting trip to the Interlake region.

One of the most interesting dioramas in the new Parklands/Mixed-Woods Gallery is the underwater scene of Lake Winnipeg. Am I biased? Of course - I love fish and the lakes in this province, and it has been wonderful to contribute to this Gallery. Since I was hired by the Museum last fall, I have journeyed to Lake Winnipeg to collect many small fishes that will be replicated for the underwater diorama. But this is not a fishy tale, well, not in its entirety. This tale is that of a trip to collect rocks for our Lake Winnipeg reef replica. Fish, frogs, birds and dogs also figure into the trip, but this day, we wanted rocks.

Museum Diorama Artist Betsy Thorsteinson, Curator of Geology & Paleontology Dr. Graham Young, and I found the drive to Riverton, Manitoba quite uneventful. We did however pass by the rye field that was the inspiration for the Parklands/Mixed-Woods Gallery's magnificent rye farming diorama. From



Riverton, we headed North, against my better judgement in late fall, up the long gravel road which leads to Pine Dock and the ferry to Matheson Island. That morning, the ground in and around Winnipeg was snow-free, but just north of Riverton, we reached the southwardly advancing winter snow. This made us wonder whether we actually would find rocks or just cold, snow-covered, wind-swept beaches. The 100 or so kilometres of unpaved road which passes as the highway to Pine Dock was my first taste of winter driving this year. Lucky for me, we were nearly in Pine Dock before I got out and realized just how slippery the road was.

Thorsteinson & Hanke search for rocks on Matheson Island.





Piles of processed fish left for the eagles and ravens.

The drive is actually fantastic. Most Manitobans rarely explore the narrows of Lake Winnipeg, and once out of farmland, travellers are treated to seemingly endless tamarack and black spruce forests. The tamarack branches were bare and their shed golden needles littered the snow. The usual complement of winter birds dared each other to fly closer to the front grill of the van, but none were slow enough to join the Museum collections.

As we neared Pine Dock, which is an active fishing community, we noticed a huge flock of birds near the road-side in an abandoned quarry. We had made good time getting to Pine Dock, and so decided to stop. The sky darkened with black birds as multitudes of crows, ravens, and bald eagles lifted off in disgust at our intrusion. Why were eagles present in

such great numbers? The last time I had seen so many bald eagles was along Goldstream Creek (Vancouver Island) and they were feasting on spawned-out chum salmon. I soon noticed huge piles of fish heads and guts that had been dumped by the local fishermen after processing their catch. Underneath the blanket of white snow were more yellowed, half rotten piles of filleted carcasses. Sadly, the meat from these small fish is marketed as 'baby walleye' in the absence of larger fish, and the harvest of young fish is not healthy for the lake. If they were lucky, these fish could have had one chance to spawn and contribute offspring to future walleye stocks before death. If not, a fishery, which takes juvenile fish before they can spawn, is doomed. What will happen to the lake ecology is anyone's guess now that

exotics such as rainbow smelt and white bass are well established.

The trip to Matheson Island was an adventure relative to an office-bound lifestyle, and it was almost as though we had stepped into another world. The lake around the narrows resembles Lake of the Woods more than the Lake Winnipeg most people know; the narrow channels, islands, and cottages perched on rock were very inviting. The ferry to Matheson Island was short, and given the warm autumn, was still running without worry of hitting early season ice rafts.

Once on the island, we explored many fishing docks, taking photos for reference; greeted a very large and friendly black lab, and then made our way West to find suitable reef rock. Now when I say reef, I don't mean Great Barrier Reef coral pinnacle,

*“We were searching for interestingly shaped plates of wave-weathered limestone that could be modeled in the Museum to mimic a crumbled, submerged pile of rock.”*



The docks on Matheson Island have not yet retired for the winter.

*“The long day of travel, rock quarrying, and winter weather ensured that the historical and scientific quality of the Lake Winnipeg diorama will be maintained.”*



A frog that didn't quite make it to the safety of the lake.

however tempting it would be to picture that during cold weather. We were searching for interestingly shaped plates of wave-weathered limestone that could be modeled in the Museum to mimic a crumbled, submerged pile of rock. That was our reef. Fortunately as we found out, the snow of a few days prior had melted away, and plenty of rock was exposed.

The original idea was to photograph the rock so that Betsy and her army of artists, mostly volunteers, could make replicas for the Gallery. "Why make fakes?" Graham and I asked. The rocks, although frozen down and requiring some effort to remove, were thin, plate-like, and could be taken in very manageable sizes! We basically said, "point and it's yours". So Betsy picked large rocks and small, rock plates, shelves, gravel, limestone, and cante-

lope-sized rocks dropped by retreating glaciers. Within a few hours, a portion of the beach had disappeared into the nearby van.

The day had gone well, and even the weather agreed with us. So in true style, we relaxed and had lunch on the beach. Perhaps an Australian beach would have been more pleasant, but we had succeeded in collecting our reef, and had time to beachcomb for fishing artifacts washed in from the lake.

As luck was with us that day, we also met a fisherman who had just come in from setting nets. His face clearly showed evidence of years in the sun and cold; I wish we had taken his photograph. I also wish that we had asked his name for formal recognition on an artifact donation form, as he was kind enough to give us two old, weather-beaten floats for use in the

Gallery. He must have thought we were mad, given how thrilled we were to receive the worst of the floats in the scrap-pile.

With floats, net shards, beach debris, a partly scavenged gull, and the truck-load of beach rock, we filled our travel mugs, and turned South (a good direction to head as winter approaches). The long day of travel, rock quarrying, and winter weather ensured that the historical and scientific quality of the Lake Winnipeg diorama will be maintained. Soon the rocks and treasured detritus will be reassembled in the Parklands/Mixed-Woods Gallery offering visitors a new perspective on Lake Winnipeg.