

# *Flowers From The Fen*



The fens in Waterloo host a variety of colorful wildflowers in both summer and fall. Pictured here are fringed gentian (above left), sneeze weed (above right), bidens, (below left), and bottle gentian (below right).



Glaciers that formed Waterloo some 10,000 years ago left gravelly hills surrounding valleys that hosted lakes, marshes, swamps, fens or bogs. Wetlands without a source of nutrient bearing water became stagnant and acidic and often developed into bogs.

Fens, are peat-forming wetlands that receive nutrients from sources other than precipitation: usually springs flowing from surrounding hills and from groundwater movement. Fens differ from bogs because they are less acidic and have higher nutrient levels. They are therefore able to support a much more diverse plant and animal community. These systems are often covered by grasses, sedges, rushes, and beautiful wildflowers.

Most of the fens in Michigan have been mined for peat or drained for farming. Many of those that remain are located in permanently protected lands like our state parks.

The Waterloo Recreation Area has many small fens scattered throughout its 21,000 acres. They are seldom visited by park users, as they are not very foot friendly. They contain large clumps of grasses and sedges that are a sprained ankle waiting to happen. Stepping into the breaks in the mat of grasses and sedges can leave one stuck to the knees in mud. Losing one's balance may mean grabbing for something to break the fall only to discover that the something is poison sumac.

Fens may not be the friendliest places to visit, but they are important for many reasons. Fens provide important benefits in a watershed, including preventing or reducing the risk of floods, improving water quality, and providing habitat for unique plant and animal communities. ***These rare and unique habitats are worthy of our protection.***