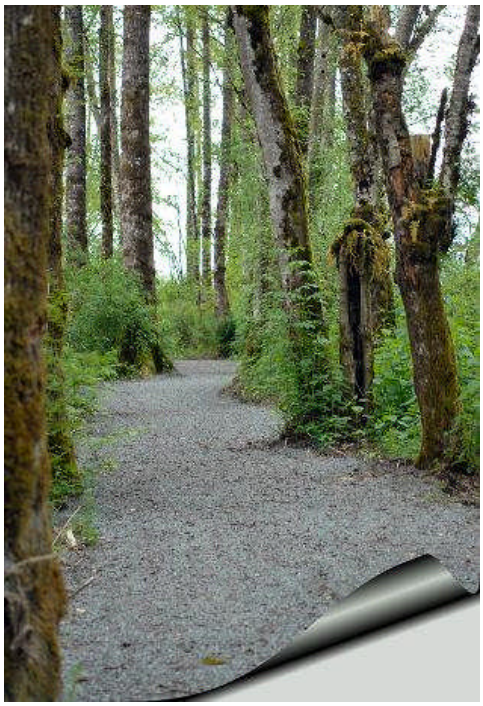
Gallery Forests

- by Ron Ydenberg



Viewed from across the river, the forest on Brae Island has a bleak demeanor. It huddles dark and damp against the grey sky, branches black and bare, with only a few remnant leaves adding some spatters of color. The vivid blaze of October's leaves was doused in November's rains, and they now moulder on the forest floor. The forest is ready for winter.

Brae Island is covered in 'gallery' forest, so-called because rivers often have distinct types of vegetation, usually with tall trees, growing in narrow corridors (galleries) along their banks. The vegetation is distinctive because rivers offer good growing conditions along their banks, with rich soils, abundant water, and a warm microclimate. Gallery forests are special in several ways, among them that they are one of the few deciduous forest types in B.C. Now, you of course know that 'deciduous' is not the same as 'broadleafed', a common confusion of those unfortunate souls not acquainted with the rudiments of botany. Deciduous merely means that leaves are dropped all at once at some point in the year. There are, for example, several species of larches in the province that lose their needles in the fall (a conifer that is thus not evergreen, but deciduous), while the arbutus of Gulf Island shorelines retains leaves all the year round - an evergreen broad-leafed tree. Among ferns, some are deciduous (bracken), while others (sword fern) are evergreen. It is the deciduous habit of its trees that gives Brae Island's forest both its spectacular fall colors and its bleak winter aspect.

Galleries form only a tiny fraction of the total forest area in B.C. From the viewpoint of biodiversity, however, they are far more important than their limited extent would imply, because they occupy the best bottomland in B.C.'s river valleys, and they generally have the most benign winter conditions. Leaves and insects emerge here before winter slackens its grip at places further from the river's edge, and migrants use this to advantage by moving along river corridors into the interior of our province. One early May day in 1997, for example, before the snow had vanished at sites further from the river's edge and at higher elevations, I sat in a gallery forest along the North Thompson River, and as far I could see in both directions, hundreds of yellow-rumped warblers were sallying from perches, catching insects over the river. These neotropical migrants breed in coniferous forests, but use gallery forests as flyways.

On the same trip I observed gallery forests along the North Thompson near Kamloops being felled and burned on the spot to make room for ginseng fields. I estimate that a forest about the size of Brae Island went up in smoke during the week between my trip northward and my return. These images frame for me our inability to accommodate both natural and economic values, a dilemma that bedevils

not only our forests, but our rivers, our fisheries, our landscapes, and our cities. Yet, the ability to do so will be essential to a healthy and prosperous future.

It may seem farfetched to portray the destruction of gallery forests as the path to a bleak future. For many the connection is too tenuous to tally much against the tangibilities of the bottom line. But the most important lesson of ecology is that everything is connected - usually in ways we cannot anticipate very far in advance. And far from being obscure, the consequences of our inability to balance natural and economic values will affect our grandchildren in fundamental ways. To cite only one example pertinent here, even 25 years ago few imagined that the loss of forests worldwide would blaze the way to a globally-warmed future, with all of the disastrous consequences that will eventually bring. Then we still thought we would soon run out of fossil fuels and be frozen in a renewed ice age. (That belief in part led to the despised national energy policy of Trudeau's Liberals.) Now it seems that a by-product of combustion then thought benign - carbon dioxide - will strangle us long before we run out of oil unless we are able to learn the lessons of ecology. Brae Island is valuable not only as a park and conservation area, but as a symbol of our effort to learn and apply those lessons.