

SPORTS & RECREATION

Orono Bog Boardwalk founder releases peatland plant guide



Ronald B. Davis, 84, of Orono walks along an old wooden section of the Orono Bog Boardwalk, which he founded and led the construction of in 2002 and 2003.

BY AISLINN SARNACKI
BDN STAFF

The bold red blossoms of pitcher plants hung over the peat bog, their bulbous heads bowed at the end of tall, slender stems. Ronald B. Davis, 84, knelt on the Orono Bog Boardwalk to get a better look, pointing out the soft inner petals of the odd flower, crimson bleeding into bright yellow.

Pitcher plants, which can actually sap nutrients from insects, are one of a few carnivorous plants Davis included in his new book, "Bogs and Fens: A Guide to Peatland Plants of the Northeastern United States and Adjacent Canada," released June 7 by the University Press of New England. The resource covers 155 of the species of plants and serves as a guide to 78 peatlands with boardwalks throughout the region.

"The orchids should be out now," Davis observed Wednesday as he strolled along the boardwalk in the morning sun. "There are six or seven kinds you can see from the boardwalk."

That morning, Davis had arrived at the Rolland F. Perry Forest in Bangor just before 7 a.m. to unlock the gate to the popular Orono Bog Boardwalk, which sees roughly 30,000 visits each season. To most boardwalk visitors, Davis will introduce himself as a volunteer. And he is. But he also happens to be the founder of the boardwalk. He's the reason it exists.

"As far as wetland boardwalks go, it's one of the best, if I do say so myself," Davis said. "It's one of the largest wetland boardwalks in the northeast."

Originally from Brooklyn, New York, Davis moved to Maine in the mid-1960s with a Ph.D. in zoology from Cornell University, where his studies focused on Maine's coastal spruce-fir forests. Also during that time, Davis served as a park naturalist at Acadia National Park during the summers.

As a professor at Colby College, then at the University of Maine in Orono, Davis taught a variety of courses, including ecology,

invertebrate zoology, botany and wetland biology. He was known for bringing his students on field trips, including trips to the Orono bog. But after years of wading through the peat moss and fragile wetland plants, Davis noticed they were damaging the ecosystem along their path.

"That was a motive for building the boardwalk — so people could see the bog without destroying it," Davis said.

David said Maine is especially abundant in peatlands, in comparison to other northeast states. Somewhere between 3 percent and 4 percent of the state is covered in peat, he said. Yet when he started studying the state's peatlands in earnest in the '80s, he couldn't find much in-depth information about the ecology of this important habitat. Over the past few decades, he has worked to fill in that gap of knowledge.

"As I was reaching my retirement, I thought, 'Wouldn't it be nice if people could appreciate the beauty of peat bogs?'" Davis said. "One thing led to the next, and by 2002 we were constructing [the Orono Bog Boardwalk]."

Starting at the east edge of the Rolland F. Perry City Forest, commonly known as the Bangor City Forest, the Orono Bog Boardwalk is 4,200 feet long, starting as one path and splitting into a loop. Because of this "lollipop" shape, walkers have to walk the first part, which is 800 feet, twice, making for a 5,000-foot-long walk — just shy of 1 mile.

Today, the boardwalk is operated and managed by a committee and a group of devoted volunteers as a joint venture of the University of Maine, the City of Bangor and the Orono Land Trust.

Davis, now retired, is professor emeritus at the University of Maine School of Biology & Ecology and Climate Change Institute. He and his wife, Lee Davis, live in Orono. The couple travel often and enjoy spending time outdoors, hiking, camping and photo-

graphing wildlife. But when they're home, they frequently volunteer at the boardwalk, leading visitors on guided nature walks through the bog.

On Wednesday morning, after opening the boardwalk to the public for the day, Davis walked its entirety, looking for areas in need of repair. But for the most part, he was observing the flora and fauna of the landscape he knows so well.

A bird flew over the boardwalk ahead and perched atop a stunted black spruce tree nearby. Davis studied it through his binoculars.

"A palm warbler," he concluded. "They breed out here, and it's the only place they breed in the Bangor area. They're specific to this environment. They build their nests in bunches of black spruce."

The songbird, with its yellow throat and cinnamon cap, is included on one of the bog's many interpretive panels, which were designed by Davis to help people learn more about the peatbog as they travel the boardwalk. Information about black spruce trees is also included in these panels, which are located at rest areas, along with wooden benches, throughout the boardwalk.

In addition to writing the text for each panel, Davis also shot many of the photographs of plants and animals shown on the displays. In his retirement, he has grown increasingly interested in nature photography.

"I love natural beauty. That's why I do a lot of photography. It helps me focus on nature, actually and figuratively," he said with a smile. "I've been collecting photographs of plants that grow in bogs and fens for 10 years, but I didn't know I was going to use them in a book."

About 70 percent of the stunning color photographs in the guidebook, "Bogs and Fens," were shot by Davis. The rest he acquired, with permission, from fellow botanists.

"The light is becoming harsh," Davis observed Wednesday as he made his way around the boardwalk

loop. Early morning and late afternoon are the best times for photography, he explained.

About halfway around the loop, Davis came to a section of the older wooden walkway that was slightly off kilter. He took note of the section, which would need to be fixed by a local carpenter and boardwalk volunteer. Now more than 10 years old, the wooden boardwalk, constructed out of hemlock, is starting to decay.

"Now it needs to be fixed almost every day," Davis said.

Beloved by the public, the boardwalk is now not only being fixed, but it's slowly being reconstructed with more durable, composite materials. The Bog Boardwalk Capital Campaign, an effort to raise the \$1.1 million to replace the boardwalk with longer-lasting materials, began in early 2012. Since then, the committee has raised enough funds to replace about half of the boardwalk.

In support of the campaign, Davis is selling "Bogs and Fens" at the visitor center at the start of the Orono Bog Boardwalk, and all profits from the book sales there will benefit the Orono Bog Boardwalk.

In addition, Davis will be signing and selling his new book at the Orono Bog Boardwalk at 11 a.m. Saturday, June 25. After the signing, he will guide anyone who is interested on a walk on the boardwalk, where he will demonstrate how to use the book to identify wildflowers and other plants.

"Bogs and Fens," which is paperback and 304 pages, retails at \$24.95. It is available online through booksellers such as Amazon.com and on the publisher's website at upne.com.

The Orono Bog Boardwalk is open 7 a.m.-6:30 p.m. through Labor Day; 7:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. through the rest of September; and 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Oct. 1-16. To learn more about the boardwalk and the Bog Boardwalk Capital Campaign, visit umaine.edu/oronobog-boardwalk, where directions to the boardwalk and a map are available.

Former UMaine football star DeVito to join Black Bear broadcasting team



BDN FILE PHOTO COURTESY OF TERESA BRZUSTOWICZ
NFL veteran Mike DeVito addresses students at Dexter Regional High School in March.

BY RYAN MCLAUGHLIN
BDN STAFF

ORONO — Mike DeVito, a nine-year NFL veteran and former University of Maine football standout, will be in the broadcast booth for Black Bear football games this fall, the school announced Friday morning.

DeVito, whose NFL career included time with the New York Jets and Kansas City Chiefs, will join the broadcast team in a television and radio role for the 2016 season.

for UMaine's locally televised games on WVII-ABC7/WFVX-Fox 22. The games those stations will broadcast will be announced at a later date. Those contests also will be nationally televised on Fox College Sports.

In addition, DeVito will be featured on the pre-game radio show on 103.9-FM.

"We are thrilled to have Mike join our broadcast team," UMaine Athletic Director Karlton Creech said. "To have an alum of Mike's caliber returning to

"To have an alum of Mike's caliber returning to UMaine following an outstanding NFL career is great for all of Black Bear Nation."

KARLTON CREECH

"I couldn't be more excited to reunite with my Maine Black Bear football family," DeVito said in a statement. "The football program at Maine is on track to achieve greatness under the leadership of Karlton Creech, Jack Cosgrove and Coach Harsanyiak and I'm thankful for the opportunity to be a part of it."

DeVito will join Dan Hannigan, a four-time Maine Sportscaster of the Year honoree, and will provide color commentary

UMaine following an outstanding NFL career is great for all of Black Bear Nation. Our fans watching the games at home or listening on the radio will truly be gifted with Mike's insight and expertise."

DeVito earned All-Atlantic 10 honors twice in his career at Maine and appeared in 110 games with the Jets and Chiefs, accumulating 250 tackles, 5.5 sacks, six forced fumbles and three fumble recoveries.

Maine opens its season against UConn on Sept. 1.

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