



PENNY VISITS  
OAK HAMMOCK MARSH

Written by Carol Szuminsky

Illustrated by Kristin Szuminsky and Jack Brown



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Peanut Butter Press

**Dedicated to my father, Jack Brown. Thank you for sharing your knowledge of birding and Oak Hammock Marsh with me.**

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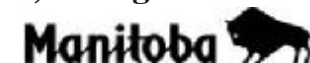
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This book can be used as a field guide to introduce children to some common birds and animals that make their homes at Oak Hammock Marsh and to enrich the experience of visiting this environmentally significant Manitoba attraction. The intent is that while being entertaining and educational, this book will also instill in readers and listeners an appreciation of nature and the world's precious natural resources. My hope is that starting right here in our own province, both individually and collectively, everyone who encounters *Penny Visits Oak Hammock Marsh* will follow Penny and her grandparents' example by practising environmental stewardship through supporting sustainable development initiatives and taking responsibility for protecting the environment. For positive change to take place, this young generation of Manitobans must be aware of the necessity of preserving our land, water, and air and the wildlife and vegetation native to the marsh and other habitats such as the Tall Grass Prairie, Spirit Sands, Boreal Forest, and Narcisse Snake Dens, as well as our provincial and national parks.

**Carol Szuminsky**

\*On Page 23, you will find a map containing a small portion of Oak Hammock Marsh. It shows the route that Penny followed on her first visit to the marsh with Grandpa. Use the map and its legend to walk around with Penny to see the places they went. Locate where they saw each animal and plant. If you get the chance to go to Oak Hammock, watch closely for the birds, other wildlife, and plants that Penny and Grandpa observed that day. You might want to bring along this book, binoculars, and a bird field guide to identify other birds. For more fun, explore the Interpretive Centre.

\*The glossary at the back of the book explains the meaning of technical terms related to the marsh. Bold type is used to highlight these terms in the story.

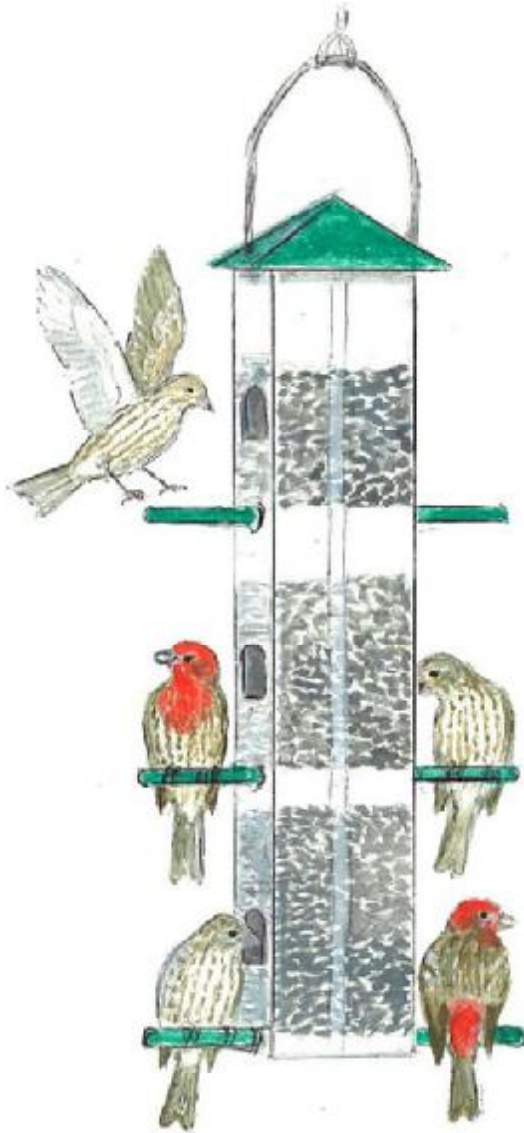
Penny was a curious child who loved adventure. She was never upset when her parents had to go out because that meant she got to spend time with Grandma and Grandpa Brown. They were always happy to see her. It was fun baking cookies with Grandma or sitting by the window with Grandpa watching the wild birds come to the birdfeeder or to splash in the birdbath. But Penny liked it best when her grandparents surprised her by planning an outing to an interesting place. She never knew where they would take her next!



One sunny Saturday morning in late spring, Penny's dad drove her to her grandparents' house to visit for the day. Grandpa had made plans to take her for her first trip to **Oak Hammock Marsh** to spend some time outdoors enjoying nature. He had been so sure that she would say yes that he asked Grandma to pack them a lunch. She had made tuna sandwiches and "ants on a log" – peanut butter on celery sticks with raisins on top. There were also two Granny Smith apples and two thermoses of cold milk. Just in case all that fresh air made Penny and Grandpa really hungry, there were two of Grandma's famous oatmeal cookies for dessert.

Inside Penny's lunch bag, she had tucked a note that said, "I've packed you a nutritious lunch. Have fun exploring the marsh!  
P. S. I love you both." XXOXXO





Penny was excited. She had never been to Oak Hammock Marsh, but she loved to learn about nature. She knew they would be doing some bird-watching because Grandpa had his binoculars hanging around his neck.

“You’ll see and hear many kinds of birds at the marsh,” Grandpa informed her, “but most of them will be different from the pretty house finches and other birds that come to the birdfeeder by our front window.”

Grandma added, “Your grandpa is a volunteer at Oak Hammock Marsh so he knows a lot about the birds and other animals and plants that make their homes there. Most Friday mornings from spring to fall, he gets up really early and drives out there with his cousin to help **band** birds.”

Then Grandma gave her granddaughter a big hug. Grandpa opened the back door of the truck and Penny climbed in. She remembered to do up her seatbelt. Off they went on their adventure, with Grandma waving good-bye. Grandpa said that it would take close to an hour to get to the marsh so she should relax and enjoy the scenery. As they left the outskirts of the city, a Mourning Dove flew up from the grass by the edge of the road and surprised Penny.

“What was that?” she blurted out. Then she realized what it was and added, “Oh, it’s a bird! I hope we didn’t scare it too badly.”







It wasn't long before they left the city far behind and drove through farmland. Penny was busy looking out the window and watching for birds flying in the air or sitting on the power lines. Suddenly, she spied a bird on a wire and pointed.

"Grandpa, what kind of bird is that?" she cried.

"It's an American Kestrel," he replied.  
"That's the smallest falcon found in Manitoba. A falcon is a **bird of prey**. It can fly very fast."

Grandpa told Penny that Oak Hammock Marsh was one of his favourite bird-watching spots because so many different **species** of birds lived or visited there, and it was close to home. This Manitoba marsh was known worldwide as one of the best bird-watching locations in North America. Grandpa reminded her that they would be able to recognize each bird they saw that day by its song or call, size and shape, feet and beak, and by the **field markings** on its body that made that species of bird special.

This made Penny think about how her class had learned in mathematics that there are patterns in nature like the stripes or spots on an animal, the number of petals on a flower or points on a snowflake, and the hexagon-shaped combs inside a bee or wasp's nest.



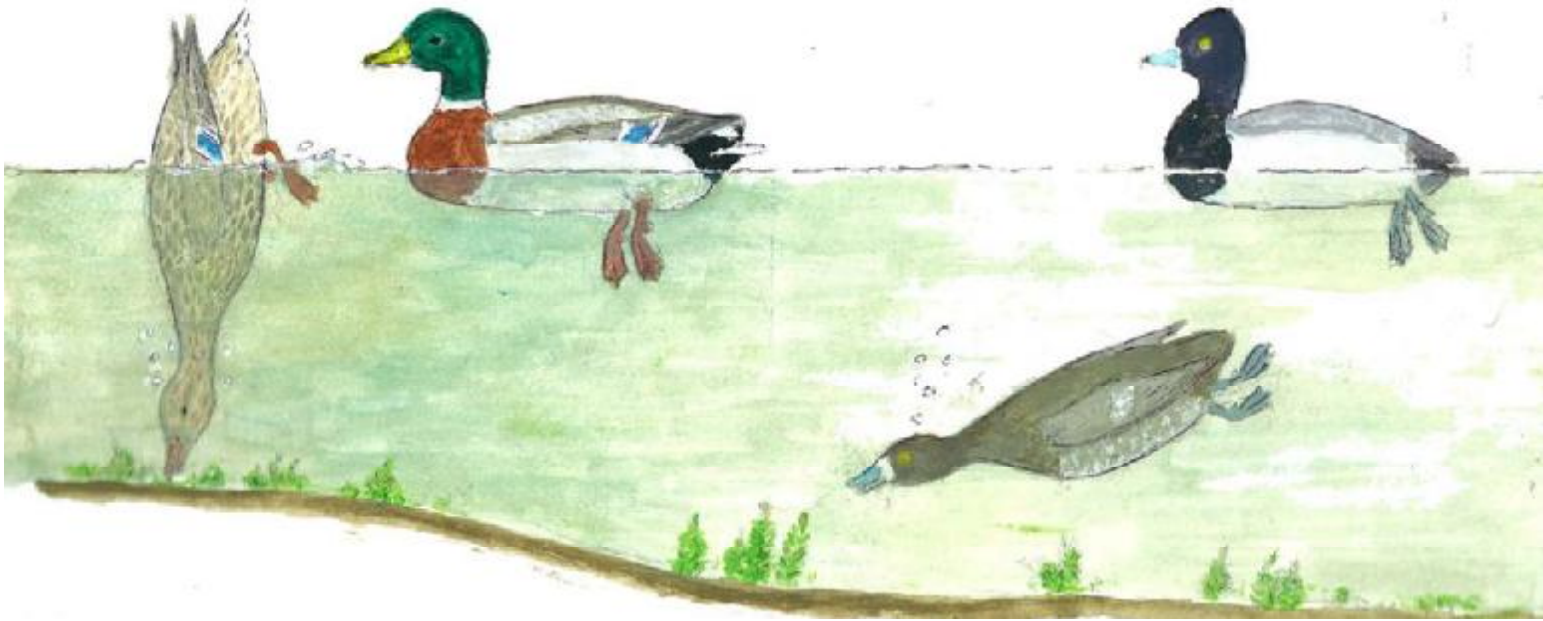
As they got closer to the marsh, they passed a large flock of Canada Geese feeding in the field. A few minutes later, they arrived at Oak Hammock. Just before they reached the road leading to the main parking lot, they saw a big pond. Grandpa pulled his truck over to the side of the road so they could look at the birds that were swimming in the water. He explained that there were two main types of ducks. Then he pointed out a group of ducks and told Penny that they were called Lesser Scaups. She started to count them.

“Oh, I went to count that duck, and it disappeared,” Penny observed. “Where did it go?”

“It dove under the water to feed on **aquatic** plants and animals,” answered Grandpa. “It belongs to a group of ducks called **divers**. There are a number of species in this group. They usually stay underwater for a minute or two, and then they come up in a different place. Their feet are so far back on their bodies that it’s difficult for this type of duck to take off into flight. Before they can get up into the air, they have to run along the surface of the water with their wings flapping. It’s even harder for them to take off from land.”

Grandpa pointed to some ducks closer to the shore.

“Do you see those ducks over there? They’re called Mallards, and they belong to the other group of ducks. Watch what they do!”

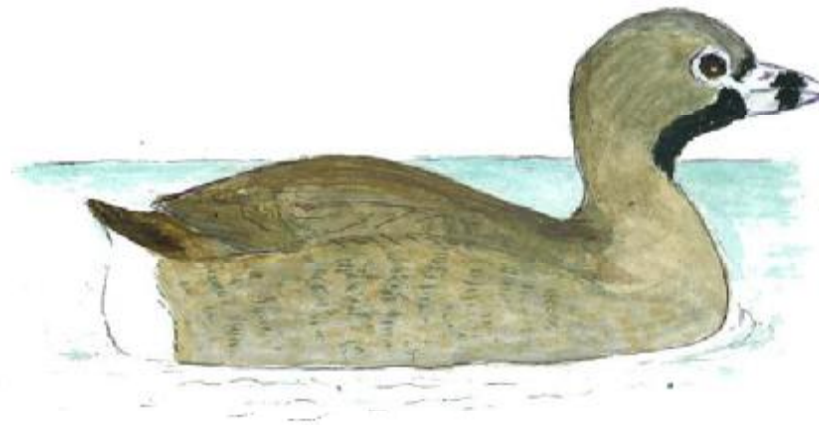


“Look!” squealed Penny. “That one is standing on its head with its tail and feet sticking up out of the water.”

“Yes,” responded Grandpa. “That’s how they get their food. This kind of duck is called a ‘tip up’ or **dabbling**. They can just spring up from the water and start flying.”

Penny whispered, “This is so interesting – and we haven’t even got out of the truck yet,” she continued, her voice becoming louder.

The next bird Grandpa pointed to was a smaller water bird. He said it was a Pied-billed Grebe. They watched as it slowly sank into the water until only its neck showed, and then it dove under the surface of the water. Grandpa explained that a grebe was different from a duck in two ways. Its bill was pointed and shaped more like a chicken's beak. Instead of webbed feet, it had little flaps on its toes called lobes. He said the bird could swim well underwater where it catches its food. She found it interesting that a grebe ate mostly small minnows and water bugs. Penny knew about the **prey** and **predators** that were part of a **food chain**.



From there, it was a short drive to the parking lot. When they got out of the truck, Grandpa said, “Penny, I have a surprise for you. Close your eyes.” He hung a small pair of binoculars around her neck.

“Oh, Grandpa! Thank you! I’ve always wanted a pair of binoculars just like yours,” Penny said happily, giving him a big hug.

Grandpa adjusted the binoculars so that Penny’s eyes were centred on each eye piece and then showed her how to focus them to make the picture clear. He said that binoculars magnify what you’re looking at and that makes the object appear closer and bigger.



Grandpa got his bird book out of the truck. He showed it to Penny and told her that it was really called a **field guide**. He also had a map of the marsh and showed her the route they were going to follow. Then they walked south toward the gravel parking lot by the Clubhouse. As they neared the grass at the edge of the parking lot, a bird appeared in front of them, twittering and fluttering. It had two dark rings around its white neck. The bird shuffled along just ahead of them, dragging its wing on the ground. Grandpa said that the bird was pretending to have a broken wing so it could lead them away from its nest on the ground.

“That’s a Killdeer. Listen for its call,” instructed Grandpa. “As soon as it flies, it will say its name.”

They waited. “Killdeer! Killdeer! Killdeer-deer-deer!” it seemed to say as it flew away. Grandpa told Penny that they shouldn’t look for the nest because they might step on the bird’s eggs. He said that the dark brown speckles on the eggs made them blend in with the surroundings and so they were difficult to see.



They headed toward the **boardwalk** that led through the **willow bluff**. As they walked along the wooden path, they passed over a narrow creek. Penny was amazed to see one kind of plant that was even taller than her grandfather!

“Those tall plants are called **phragmites**,” he informed her. “It’s a giant kind of reed grass that grows well in the wet willow bluff.”



It was a calm morning, and Grandpa’s sharp ears suddenly picked up the beautiful song of a bird. Then his sharp eyes found the small bird sitting on the branch of a tree. It was a Yellow Warbler.

They spotted other birds and used their binoculars to take a closer look. Then they took time to search through the field guide to find the warbler, as well as a Yellow-headed Blackbird and the Blue-winged Teal that surprised Penny when it flew out of the tall grass beside her.





They left the willow bluff and soon found themselves in a field full of holes that were dug by a kind of squirrel that did not climb trees. Grandpa said that most people called these small, brown animals gophers, but their real name was Richardson's Ground Squirrels. He used his mouth to make squeaking noises on his hand, and squirrel heads began to pop up. They weren't afraid of humans and came closer, hoping to be fed. He said that it was best not to feed them because they were wild animals and they might bite by accident, if they got excited.

Penny practised until she could make the same squeaking sounds as Grandpa. She was delighted when some of the animals peeked out of their burrows or stood up on their hind legs and looked around.

Suddenly, a Barn Swallow with a forked tail flew past them and into a nearby wooden shelter. Grandpa knew that the parents had built their nest in the rafters so they crept up quietly to have a look. They watched the father bird feed insects to the babies. After that, they walked toward the main **observation mound**. Grandpa said that the mound was really just a big pile of earth that was built up so people could look out over the water. Penny noticed a tiny toad sitting on the path. Her grandfather waited patiently while she studied it.

“Grandpa, I know this is a toad, not a frog!” she stated with confidence. “Its skin looks dry and bumpy.” Just then, the toad hopped a few short hops. Penny added, “Also, it doesn’t take big leaps like a frog does. I learned all about amphibians and the differences between frogs and toads in science when I was in Grade 2.”



Just then, the toad hopped off the path into the tall grass. They continued on to the top of the observation mound, where they looked out over a large wetland surrounded by **cattails, bulrushes,** and reeds. Grandpa pointed out the man-made islands that the birds nested on, safe from predators like fox and mink. He said this body of water was called **Cell 1**. The first bird they saw on the water was a little reddish-brown duck with a white patch on each side of its head and a bright blue bill. Penny laughed at the way it bobbed its head and kept its tail pointing straight up as it called for its mate.

Grandpa asked her if she would like to **identify** the bird by finding it in his field guide. He turned to the right page, and she was able to find the picture that was an exact match. Penny knew it was a male Ruddy Duck because of its blue bill.

They read about it together. They spotted other ducks out on the water and found those in the field guide too. Grandpa was so proud of Penny and pleased that she was enjoying herself and learning so much about birds.



From there, the path led to a **dike** that divided the willow bluff from a small cell of water and cattails on the right hand side. This was called the Coot Cell. They watched with interest as an adult American Coot dove down and brought up water plants from the bottom of the pond. The plants floated on the surface where the young ones eagerly fed on them. Grandpa said that he couldn't tell if it was a mother or father coot because that species was different from most birds. The males and females both were the same dark gray colour with a white bill.

“Are people allowed to fish here?” Penny asked curiously. She knew how much her grandpa loved to fish. He had given her cousin, Andrew, fishing equipment for his birthday and the two of them had gone on fishing trips together.

“I'm not sure whether you're allowed to fish here or not,” Grandpa answered, “but as far as I know, nobody ever has.

