

THE UNDERSTORY

SLT LAND STEWARD NEWSLETTER

JAN 2012

A POND FARWELL

I walk along the dike separating Thomas Creek from a series of wetland ponds and grassy fields. The ponds, dug by NRCS before the Land Trust acquired what is now known as Green Road Marsh, are ringed by cattails and a scattering of willows and other trees and scrubs planted by volunteers. At times being the land steward for this beautiful property is mostly an excuse for birding. The ponds are a favorite of various waterfowl in all seasons, and the islands created in the middle are a safe place for nesting. Great blue herons stalk the shallows for frogs. An eagle nest on neighboring property has raised fledglings for several years, the ponds and fields providing hunting grounds for their parents. Sparrows and marsh wrens flit among the shrubs and during the spring red-wing black birds announce their territories from the tops of cat tails. A harrier skims inches above the tops of the grasses, flaring wings and tail feathers for an abrupt banking dive on a mouse or vole.

You can easily see across the property from the road or the dike along the west and north boundaries. Over time I have found myself patrolling from its margins, from the outside looking in. I don't often walk through the middle of the area, fighting thick canary grass and without any high point to see from. I also feel that I disturb the waterfowl less this way, especially by not entering into their midst during nesting season. It is a corner left to nature, in which we humans, even those tasked as its temporary keepers, are not really a part, but observers only. It is an illusion of course, that we are not affecting this land. From ponds dug deep into the wetland soils, to the dike which cuts it off from Thomas Creek, to the runoff from adjacent agricultural lands, to changes in climate, this little piece of nature is highly affected by our actions. It is a bit like a tiny island protectorate. Even if political overlords ultimately control much of its fate and directly manage its foreign relations, they leave it some semblance of freedom to handle its own domestic affairs.

This wetland, amid the farm fields,

BY SCOTT ANDREWS

is a remnant of the Great Olympic Marsh, 10,000 acres stretching from here to Padilla Bay. Freshwater marshes used to cover the flats of the Skagit and Samish River floodplains, a huge delta teeming with fish and waterfowl. What was not forested in the lands around the Salish Sea was generally wetland. Most of the freshwater wetlands were drained for productive farmlands, their soils made rich by the silt of floodwaters over thousands of years. Green Road Marsh is a refuge for the species that use it. Like high ground in a flood, it is a place where they can retreat for now during this highwater of cultivation.

In the next 50 to 100 years climate change will affect our corner of the world. The impacts will likely include more frequent or larger floods and loss of the lower lying lands with sea level rise and as waters back-up from that tidal influence. However, if we don't hide behind ever higher dikes that sever the land from the sea, there could be more wetlands again in this basin. Estuarine wetlands could expand with the rising seas and behind them, freshwater marshes. The extent that this vision is met and can be integrated with the preservation of productive farmlands will be one of the larger questions of Skagit Valley's future. The animals and plants from small refugia such as Green Road Marsh may yet have the opportunity to spread out to these future wetlands.

Green Road Marsh, and other Land Trust properties, are part of a continuum over time and the land. Providing a bridge from the past to the future. Land Stewards are part of this bridge, helping in a small way to hand off these special places across time. I am reminded of this as I look at the



interpretive sign at Green Road Marsh. One of the pictures on it includes Ralph Heft leading a volunteer work party on the property. I too am in the picture as is my son Varick at 6 years old. He is now 13 and it is time for me to pass on the role of land steward of Green Road Marsh, just as we all must pass on our responsibilities, small and big, to the next generation of stewards and ultimately to our children.

WE WANT YOUR MONITORING REPORTS!

Please remember to visit your site and send us a winter monitoring report!

For an electronic template, email reginaw@skagitlandtrust.org.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE BEAUTIFUL

Northwest Botany
by Regina Wandler

Small Red Peat Moss *Sphagnum capillifolium*



Found forming hummocks in wooded edges around bogs and poor fens, and more rarely in open peatlands, this carpetlike moss consists of small reddish hanging stems, with wispy, graceful leaves.

It can be brownish green to pinkish red in color. Northern interior native americans such the Tahltan and Gitksan used it as an absorber - for bedding, menstrual pads and baby diapers. It, along with other Sphagnum species, was also used when wet for healing and was placed on wounds. Sphagnum, commonly called peat moss, is used as a soil conditioner, but this is not really sustainable due to the time it takes regenerate. The greatest threat to the existence of sphagnum swamps is the intentional draining for encroaching farmland.

Reed Canary Grass *Phalaris arundinacea*

This well-known grass grows very well in disturbed and poor soil - so well, in fact, that it has become one of the biggest threats to wetland ecosystem diversity in the area! It outcompetes natives and reduces diversity to a mere fraction of what it had been. It is extremely difficult to remove from an area. If you see a small, isolated clump, dig it out and dispose of the grass at a professional composting facility. Some Salish tribes used the stems for decorating baskets. It is not clear whether reed canary grass is introduced or indigenous but spreading.



Highbush Cranberry *Viburnum opulus*



A member of the honeysuckle family, this plant is easy to identify by its beautiful hanging bunches of bright red berries. The bark can be used to treat cramping, and the Haida made it into eye medicine. The Nuxalk chewed the bark and swallowed the juice for lung colds. Harvested in late summer and early fall, many native

american tribes ate the berries, and they could be obtained as late as the first frost. Often left until other berries are gone, they may not be very palatable for wildlife.

**Much of this information came from Pojar and Wikipedia. Moss image courtesy of Bernd Haynold via Wikipedia.*

ON PARTNERING WITH EMERSON

BY JIM JOHNSON

In October of this year Regina and I met with the Principal of Emerson High School, Janice Condrin and independent studies teacher Rachaelle Baxter. It was a first step in rekindling a partnership that flourished to the benefit of both Emerson and the Land Trust just a couple of years ago.

Some of you may remember that Emerson students worked at the Cumberland Creek Conservation Area clearing trails and planting trees. They also wrote and illustrated a visitor's guide focusing on the natural and human history of the area. That brochure is available today in a letterbox at the entrance to Cumberland to enhance the visitor's Cumberland experience. They studied environmental sciences and built wood duck nesting boxes. I found the students courteous, cordial, and enthused, hardly the behaviors most adults associate with alternative school kids. Maybe it was the lovely spring weather, the chance to be out of a confining classroom, the hand of a gifted teacher, or the healing influence of the natural world. Whatever the cause, they were a delight to work with.

For some of the Emerson students their work with us may form the core of their Senior or Culminating Project. The Project typically has a hands-on component. The student creates something or does something in the world outside the classroom. They write an academic research paper exploring the background or history of their hands-on Project. Finally, they present their work in a formal setting to an audience of teachers and parents. Some years before retiring from teaching I introduced and coordinated the Senior Project at my school. I'm a big believer. At its best the Project can break down classroom walls, unify academic and physical work, and foster initiative and confidence, none of which lends itself to ready assessment on standardized tests. It's also full of surprises. One never knows for sure where a particular student project may lead. And that's a good thing. There is a mystery at the heart of all genuine learning.

The Trust in the form of a particular property can provide a laboratory for that learning. A Steward has the chance, collaborating with a classroom teacher and drawing on his or her own experience and expertise, to shape and extend a student's learning. We get something tangible in the deal: trees planted, a trail improved, perhaps a brochure created. Those are a few of the possibilities. Of course the tangible outcomes for the Trust will likely vary according to the nature of the particular Trust holding the students

Continued on the next page...

HEY STEWARDS!

CREATIVELY INCLINED? PLEASE SEND YOUR PHOTOS, POEMS, ILLUSTRATIONS, RIDDLES OR WHAT HAVE YOU TO REGINA (REGINAW@SKAGITLANDTRUST.ORG) FOR INCLUSION IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF THE UNDERSTORY! WE'D LOVE TO INCLUDE SOME OF YOUR WORK!

are focused upon.

For the students, the results are less tangible, but I think more profound and lasting. Chief among them is a sense of competence derived from giving to the larger community. One has to be of some value to give of oneself and being of service to the Trust can foster a sense of self-worth, a habit of community service, and a willingness to participate, the very stuff of citizenship. We may even be growing environmentalists.

What will this year's partnering hold for the Emerson students and for the Trust? Right now it's hard to say. This whole thing is, after all, a bit of an adventure.

THANK YOU!

To the 24 volunteers who turned up to help remove ivy from one of our conservation easements, the Squires Samish Island property with a great blue heronry on it.

To the 10 nest counters who hiked in to March Point Heronry.

To the 8 Fidalgo Fly Fishers who cleared Lyman invasives.

To the girl scouts who came out, potted and planted trees and shrubs at Mud Lake.

To the 6 volunteers who cleared Mud Lake blackberry.



A NOTE FROM MOLLY DORAN

Because of the thousands of hours of work each year by our stewardship volunteers, our land trust is able to do much more. We can protect more land because we have people like you who willingly use your leisure time to help us monitor, care for and restore our conservation areas. You raise awareness of the environment and the needs of the land in our community. By working with others, talking about your volunteer work or by simply describing the beauty of a place protected over coffee with a friend, you link people with the land. And without stewardship, even our remotest conservation areas would not be truly protected. The environmental and community benefits that result from your individual and collective work are essential. Thank you.

At the Trust we ask ourselves "How do we clone these fabulous folks? How do we grow the next generation of stewardship volunteers?" The most important question we can ask is what motivates you all. A study done of stewardship volunteers in the Midwest found that virtually all long-term conservation-oriented volunteers had a strong connection to nature. What was fascinating is that the age their connection with nature developed, correlated with quite consistent

SKAGIT CONSERVATION AREAS AND THEIR LAND STEWARDS

Barney Lake - Tim Manns and Brenda Cunningham

Barr Creek - Russ Dalton

Butler Creek - Jim Owens

Cumberland Creek - Jim Johnson

Day Creek (Berquist and Corp) - Stan Zyskowski

Day Creek Kosbab - Skagit River System Cooperative

Day Creek Slough - Hal Lee

Grandy Creek - John Freeman

Green Road Marsh - Heidi Nichols

Guemes Mountain - Ed and Carolyn Gastellum,
Marianne Kooiman and Joost Businger

Hurn Field - Steffany Raynes and Lin Skavdahl

Lyman Slough - Dick Raisler

March's Point Heronry - La Verne and Jim Scheltens

Minkler Lake - Hal Lee

Mud Lake - Lloyd Brown

Presentin Ranch - Bill and Sally Pfeifer

Samish - Ochs - Pete and Dorothy Haase

Samish River - Corey and Bonnie Stout

Tope Ryan - John Day

experiences. The majority of volunteers in this study were sparked in their connection to nature when they were 10 yrs old or younger by "constantly exploring ponds, streams, woods and fields" or "by spending time on family farms, cabins or camps." For those who developed a connection with nature between the ages of 11 and 19, it was a specific teacher or high school or college class or experience that was most often mentioned. Some volunteers said their connection began with a desire to expose their own children to nature or with the beginning of a life-long hobby like birding. And finally, for those who connected to nature for the first time as a mature adult, most said they were drawn to nature as an outlet from a stressful job or lifestyle. How did your connection to nature begin and grow? We'd love to hear either in person, by email or a letter. By letting us know, you will be helping us to develop the next generation of land stewards by making sure we provide experiences that help connect people with nature.



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Mission Statement

Skagit Land Trust conserves wildlife habitat, wetlands, agricultural and forest lands, scenic open space and shorelines for the benefit of our community and as a legacy for future generations.

WINTER EVENTS AT SKAGIT LAND TRUST



January 20th : Barney Lake Blackberry Removal
10 AM to 1 PM
Barney Lake

January 28th : Samish Island Heronry Count and Tour
10 AM to 1 PM
Parking available at Community of Christ Church on Scott Road

February 18th or 19th : Trailwork somewhere
Time and Location TBD

February 25th : 5th Annual Auction
5 PM to 9 PM
Saint Joseph Center

Come eat dinner and bid on exciting items, or volunteer for the evening!

March 3rd, 11th and 17th: Kosbab Protector Removal
9:30 AM to 1:30 PM
Day Creek - Kosbab



RSVP to reginaw@skagitlandtrust.org