

THE UNDERSTORY

SLT LAND STEWARD NEWSLETTER

DEC 2010

TOPE RYAN: LEAVE IT TO THE BEAVERS?

BY JOHN DAY

In my 3 or so years as Volunteer Land Steward at the Tope Ryan Conservation Area, I have witnessed firsthand beavers' formidable ability to circumvent our best efforts to limit their activity and, at the same time, modify the landscape for their own habitat needs. Prior to European settlement, beavers were ubiquitous in North American lakes, streams and rivers, but by the late 1800s, they had been practically extirpated in many areas by systematic trapping. However, in the last few decades they've come back with a vengeance. Tope Ryan is a good example of this.

Beavers had gained a foothold at Tope well before I became steward, but their activities appeared to be concentrated mostly in the NW corner of the property near the Samish River. SLT staff and volunteers had already put a good deal of effort into installing fencing to prevent them from taking down large trees and to protect the extensive restoration plantings done under the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP).

My first project as a Steward was repeatedly tearing out the same beaver dam in response to complaints by an adjoining landowner whose pasture was being flooded by water backed up behind them. SLT had obtained the required permit from the WA Department of Fish and Wildlife as a part of the larger project to install a leveling device, or "beaver deceiver", which we hoped would provide a more permanent solution. I felt bad about destroying something these critters had put so much effort into building, but I have to admit that I also got a bit of a charge at the moment when the dam would finally give way, releasing a burst of water downstream. It didn't matter how often we pulled them down, though, the beavers would always have them rebuilt in a few days.

The next step was to install the "beaver deceiver". The idea was essentially to install a 40 foot corrugated plastic drain pipe through the dam to keep the level of the pond high enough for the beavers, but not so high that it floods the neighbors. It hopefully lets water out quietly enough (biologists believe that beavers are instinctively "triggered" to build dams by the



sound of running water) far enough downstream that the beavers don't just build another dam right below the first one. It was a fun project to build and for a while even seemed to work. Within a couple of weeks, however, the beavers had built another dam above the leveler intake that backed water up again onto the

neighbor's property. It was back again to the same old tear-down and rebuild cycle.

On one of these occasions, I was waist-deep in the pond in my chest waders, pulling sticks out of the dam and pitching them as far away from the dam as I could, when there was suddenly a splash and a loud "smack!" right in front of me. After nearly losing my footing on the slippery bottom and falling into the water, I pulled myself together enough to realize that I had just had a very close encounter with a beaver. I then noticed a pair of young beavers swimming back and forth in the flooded creek channel right above me and guessed that one of them had come in close to see what was happening to its dam, nearly run into me and then signaled its alarm with its characteristic tail slap.

Over the next year, there was a dramatic increase in beaver activity. They extended their main dam, raising the level of the lower pond until it backed up beyond the previous high levels in the upper ponds and rendered the leveling device completely superfluous. More surprisingly, they began furiously building dams in Swede Creek along the south side of the property adjacent to Grip Road, in an area where I hadn't noticed much previous activity. They also expanded their dam-building upstream along the small tributary creek that enters the property through a patch of woods along the east side of the Reserve.

By the fall of 2009, the beavers had built at least 6 new dams

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE BEAUTIFUL

Northwest Botany
by Regina Wandler

Red Alder *Alnus rubra*

Alders have historically been underappreciated. However, they play a valuable ecosystem role - they pioneer on wet gravel, such as the exposed gravel left behind by retreating glaciers, or shifting gravel bars, and rapidly improve soil structure and fertility. Logging practices over the last century often accidentally encouraged the growth of alder where douglas fir was desired. Now we know that this isn't a bad thing! Alders growing with conifers can support their growth by fixing nitrogen and stabilizing growing conditions in unstable areas. Red alder is also toxic to laminated root rot, and can be used to help control outbreaks.



Tansy Ragwort *Senecio jacobaea*

An invasive from Europe, tansy ragwort has spread over much of the United States. It is now a class B noxious weed in Skagit County, well known for poisoning cattle and horses when they consume it. There are several plants, not all of them bad, that look similar to tansy ragwort. You can identify it by its deeply cut, blunt-toothed lobed leaves with a ragged/ruffled appearance, and by the flower clusters which develop on stout, leafy elongated stems that grow up to 6 feet tall. Each flower cluster is composed of many bright-yellow flowers with (usually) 13 petals.



Twinflower *Linnaea borealis*

The twinflower grows all over the cooler third of the Northern hemisphere. It has a simple, delicate beauty, and is often found in dense, mature forests. Identify it by the two pink-to-white conical pendant flowers growing on each stalk, and shiny dark small leaves. This beautiful plant was named after Carolus Linnaeus, the "Father of Systematic Biology", a man responsible for our binomial (two word) scientific name structure.



**Much of this information came from Daniel Mathews' Cascade-Olympic Natural History. Check it out for more info! Images courtesy of the USDA plants database and NPS.*

There will be emails about a Land Steward educational event in February, regarding how to record digital photopoints on our properties.

LEAVE IT TO THE BEAVERS? CONTINUED

in Swede Creek as well as extended their old main dam on the north side of the hay field. The resulting back-up flooded all the way across the field, practically connecting the Swede Creek ponds with the old dam complex. To make it easier to swim back and forth, they excavated a system of trenches, miniature canals really, across the flooded field between the two sets of ponds. The trenches turned out to be surprisingly deep, as I found out one day when I accidentally stepped in one and went in up to the top of my thigh.

I had always thought that beavers got the water level they wanted mostly by building their dams higher and longer. I soon discovered that they also excavate an amazing amount of vegetation and soil from the upstream sides of their dams. I stepped over one of the new dams in an area that had been flat, open field grown in thickly with invasive reed canary grass thinking the water on the other side wouldn't be much more than a foot or so deep. Instead, my feet suddenly slipped out from under me and, to the undoubted amusement of Ellie and Michael who were visiting the property with me that day, I found myself floundering in 4 feet of water. Luckily I was able find my feet again before my chest waders filled up with water.

Other big changes have become apparent as well. With the huge increase in flooded areas, the fencing no longer protects the trees in the CREP plantations. Quite a few healthy, 8-10 foot tall shore pines, Douglas-firs, and red cedars are being cut down by the beavers. Many more of the CREP trees are dying due to the flooding itself.

On the other hand, what had previously been an expanse of reed canary grass has now become a mosaic of marsh and pond that is attracting birds I had not previously encountered at Tope, including common snipe and Virginia rails. Our wood duck nest boxes have successfully hosted broods of ducklings since we put them up a couple of years ago as well. While I regret the loss of the CREP trees, there are still many healthy trees left. Given that there are few places any more where beaver can be left to their own devices, it seems like a fair enough trade to me.

Background Photo on Page 1 by John Day

THANK YOU!

To the Native Plant Garden Project of the Salal Chapter of The Washington Native Plant Society, for the donation of **80 trees** to Land Stewards at the beginning of October, planted at Cumberland Creek.

HEY STEWARDS!

CREATIVELY INCLINED? PLEASE SEND YOUR LAND TRUST PROPERTY INSPIRED PHOTOS, POEMS, ILLUSTRATIONS, RIDDLES OR WHAT HAVE YOU TO REGINA (REGINAW@SKAGITLANDTRUST.ORG) FOR INCLUSION IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF THE UNDERSTORY!

MARCH POINT HERONRY:

A Poem of Sorts

by *LaVerne Scheltens,*
March Point Steward

On a clear, still, late spring day
Take a drive near Padilla Bay.
South March Point Road is the way to go.
You'll hear something special - I'm saying it's so!
If the sawmill is quiet, that's the best time.
Yes, peace and quiet - that would be fine.
Metal fabrication - that's nearby, too.
If it's noisy there, phooey, putooey, and phoo!
Highway Twenty is not far away.
Cars and trucks speed on their way.
But sound from that road is blocked pretty well
By hills and trees. Isn't that swell!
If you're in a car, you'll have to go slow.
Not much of a shoulder - So be careful, Joe!
Roll down the windows - the south side of your car.
Stick your head out - doesn't have to be far.
Or park your car on the side of the road.
And use your legs in walking mode.
But a bike might be best because it's fun.
And you'll feel so healthy when the ride is done.
Find the hill with trees galore.
Gaze up the slope - you're gonna hear more!
You might see herons perched high in the trees.
Their nests and chicks are hidden in leaves.
You're likely to hear a cacophony of sound -
Raucous and growling from high off the ground.
Isn't it wonderful! ... Glorious and fine!
It's strange enough to blow your mind!
Up in the trees are hundreds of birds.
How to describe them in human words?
They're LARGE and big-billed with long
skinny limbs.
Covered in plumes, very pretty it seems.
Yet they look prehistoric, most strange indeed.
They live near water in order to feed.
Every spring they return to nest on this site.
More and more nests, is space getting tight?
Perhaps they know the Land Trust takes care
To protect this land as the herons' lair.
Men may crowd and eagles hunt here,
But at this spot herons can rear.

The birds rear their young and they're on display.
Check out the photos one of these days.

In spring and summer, there's a live heron cam.
Watch it once - you'll be a fan!

A link to the cam will shed more light.
To find more information, visit this site -
<http://www.skagitlandtrust.org/properties/heronry.aspx>

In nineteen ninety four, a couple had foresight.
Bud and Vera Kinney thought it would be right

To leave some acres to Skagit Land Trust
"Protection forever." That was a "must."

Aren't we lucky! Oh, what a plan!
Leave it for nature, for children of man!

A patch of green, a lifetime of joy.
It's peace for the soul. Oh, boy! Oh, boy!

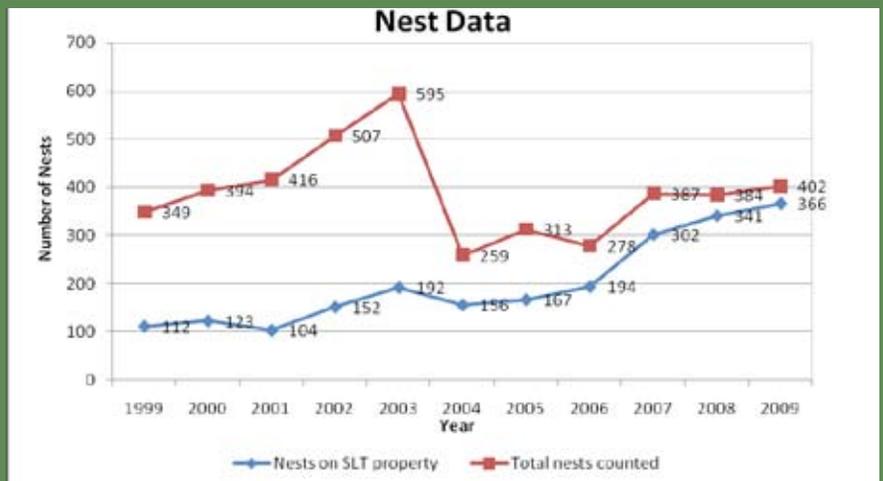
Let's hear it for the Land Trust! Give them a dime.
Or better yet, give them your time.

It isn't hard. It's lots of fun.
You're helping the world - you're helping a ton!

MARCH POINT HERONRY

March Point has been around longer than any other currently owned Skagit Land Trust property, since it was donated to the trust by the Kinney's in 1994. At that time, the heronry had 100 nests on SLT property. Since then, it has expanded considerably (see the graph below! The drop in total nests between 2003 and 2004 can be explained by our loss of permission to count nests on neighboring property beginning in 2004). LaVerne and Jim Scheltens have been stewards for quite some time now, and have taken good care of this difficult to access property.

If you're interested in heading out and learning a little bit more about heronries up close and personal, we will be holding the annual Heronry tour in February at the Samish Island Heronry. Please join us!



NOTES FROM MICHAEL KIRSHENBAUM

LAND STEWARDS IN HIGH DEMAND

It would seem that being a land steward is not synonymous with celebrity. I would think that the opportunity for solitude in nature that being a steward regularly affords is one of its appeals. There are indeed many benefits to walking the protected riparian areas, upland forests and open pastures to enjoy the “quiet recreation” – as our management plans describe it -- that is a defining characteristic of our conservation areas. How, then, have the Skagit Land Trust land stewards become so famous?

SLT has been meeting for over a year with the U.S. Forest Service, Seattle City Light and the Nature Conservancy to talk about common conservation and stewardship goals for the Skagit. All four organizations own significant, and similar, lands in the county and there are many ways we can help and learn from each other. During these meetings, one idea has stood out: over and over again the other organizations have repeated their admiration for SLT’s land steward program and have asked for advice on possibly setting up a similar program for their lands. The secret is out!

But in all seriousness, the amazing work that the SLT land stewards have accomplished over many years is more than obvious. I can’t be more proud to promote your work as a shining example of community involvement in stewarding our beloved natural lands. But don’t be surprised if people start asking for your autograph!



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) - Stan Zyskowski

Day Creek Kosbab - Skagit River System Cooperative

Day Creek Slough - Hal Lee

Grandy Creek - John Freeman

Green Road Marsh - Scott Andrews

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 - LaVerne and Jim Scheltens

Minkler Lake - Hal Lee

Mud Lake - Lloyd Brown

Pressentin Ranch - OPEN!

Samish - Ochs - OPEN!

Samish River - OPEN!

South Skagit (Shaw) - Skagit Land Trust

Tope Ryan - John Day

Upper Skagit (Nank Hewitt) - OPEN!

A CALL FOR PROJECTS!

Skagit Land Trust is putting together a field event calendar for the rest of the year, and we are looking for **YOUR** field projects!

Please send ideas to
reginaw@skagitlandtrust.org

I can't guarantee that we'll have the resources to finish your project this year, but it will be on the radar for next year too.

I'm excited about getting out and getting some things done with you all!

