

THE UNDERSTORY

SLT LAND STEWARD NEWSLETTER

MARCH 2010

ON SOME SCALE, NO SMALL THING

This last November when the pink run was past its peak, Ellie and I, to acquaint her with the property, walked the Cumberland Creek Conservation Area. Along the shore, reachable at only a few points because of high water, lay scattered spawned out pinks—thousands, maybe tens of thousands of them. It was strangely exhilarating, all those dead fish, and they got me thinking about abundance.

Two years earlier, on a hot August afternoon, my daughter and I sat resting along the Cumberland oxbow. In our drowsiness we noticed the grass along the water's edge waving in the absence of all save the slightest breeze. Curious, we investigated. There in the grasses hid and hopped red-legged frogs so thick it took an effort of balance and agility not to step on them. I picked my way to higher ground and walked a few hundred yards on down the oxbow and there in the grasses swarmed still more frogs.

Now pinks and frogs aren't nearly as glamorous as eagles or swans or snow geese, but there is something about abun-

BY JIM JOHNSON, CUMBERLAND CREEK

dance, about profligacy in all these species that is, in this decade, heartening. Maybe the earth is healthier than we had thought. To that end, a group of maybe a dozen of us gathered on a September evening to watch for vaux's swifts roosting in the chimney at Northern State in Woolley. Despite reports of four hundred or more spotted the week before, we saw only one straggler. Still, I'll be out there next fall in the dusk in what will likely become an annual ritual.

In this thirst for abundance, I suspect I'm at bottom nostalgic for the hordes of buffalo on the Plains that I've only read about or the clouds of passenger pigeons that still darkened the skies prior to the opening of the last century. I want their reassurance. Of course the spotting of a lazuli bunting or bullock's oriole or even hearing a pileated woodpecker in the Cumberland woods is of no less value. Abundance and scarcity can coexist; likely, they need each other.

Opting for scarcity is, however, out of the question for a steward. In February of 2009, a group of volunteers (led by Jim Owens, and including John Seehorn, Lynn Postler, Lester Bradford, Sue Edelberg) and I came down on the side of abundance, putting up seven wood duck boxes along the oxbow. This fall when Jim, Hal Lee, and I checked the boxes, we found that 29 ducklings had hatched out. And because they hit the water almost from that moment



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MUSINGS ON CUMBERLAND CREEK, CONT.

of hatching, we were jubilant. Choosing for the moment to ignore the possibility of looming disease, starvation, and lurking predation, we backslapped and high-fived. An observer might have thought we had won the Super Bowl. More importantly, I think, this congenial group of volunteers had helped nudge some tiny bundles of beauty toward more abundance in the world along the middle Skagit.

Tempering my enthusiasm, however, is the resonant and troubling phrase “shifting baseline syndrome” that I ran across just a couple of weeks ago in *OnEarth*, the journal of the Natural Resources Defense Council (winter 2010). It suggests, as I understand it, that we measure most things (the environment, politics, the cold of winter weather, the vitality of our hometown) against what we remember from our past, perhaps reaching back to our childhood. It’s likely, for example, that our fondly remembered childhood backyard wilderness is “only a degraded version of what our grandparents knew which in turn was a degraded version of their grandparents’ baseline.” We may then be apt to mistake what is more accurately environmental impoverishment and degradation for health. And so an uptick in the population of a given species, say trumpeter swans, while welcome, might when viewed in a broader context be cause for only muted rejoicing. Similarly while early salmon returns this fall are encouraging, my father, who as a young man fished commercially off Point Roberts, would probably have found the returns disastrous. In short, one human life



span or perhaps several are not enough to accurately measure environmental change.

Even so, an oxbow empty of wood ducks is an invitation to reconstitute the world, acting always with humility, because we can’t be certain what was once here, when, and in what numbers. Lest this sound too lofty, think on how such work can leave you muddled, cold, and wiping raindrops from your glasses or nose. And when I consider that the

two Salmonid species most threatened locally, coho and chinook, are those that spend the most time in freshwater, what I am hearing is less an invitation than a command to get busy restoring our streams, guided always by a sound and evolving science. Those folks planting trees or hacking back invasives or stewarding a property, whether or not they have ever articulated it, are operating out of the same beliefs held by the poet Elisabeth Costello when she writes, “I believe in what does not bother to believe in me...”

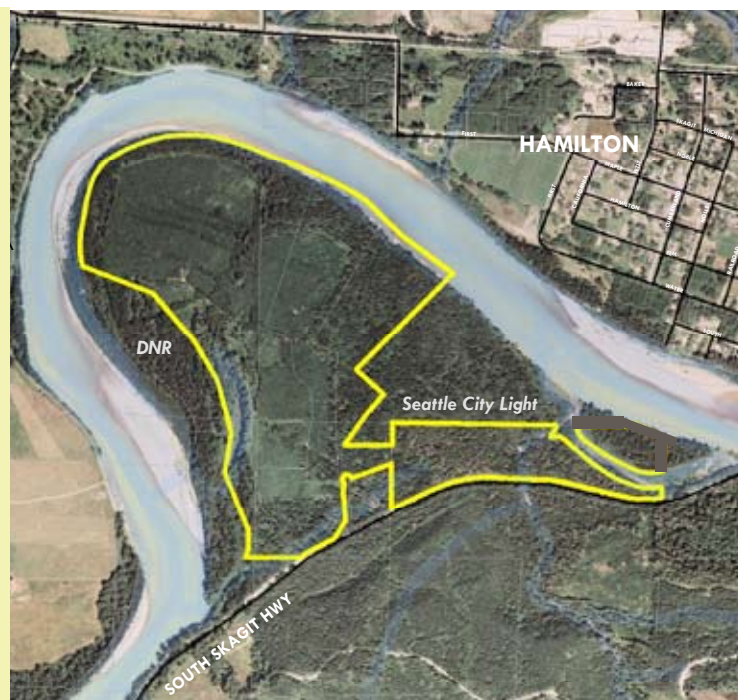
All this blathering aside, next fall holds out the promise of roosting swifts and in only a couple of months, a group of us will be lugging a ladder and packing fresh shaving for those seven nesting boxes.

Jim is a retired high school English teacher, and is pictured here enjoying the Cumberland Creek Conservation Area, of which he has been a steward for seven years. Pictures of Cumberland Creek in this issue were taken by Jim.

Skagit Land Trust purchased the bulk of Cumberland Creek in March of 2003 from the Janicki family. Since then, SLT has had the good fortune of making three additional adjacent purchases. With 200.84 acres, Cumberland Creek is SLT’s largest fee property. Almost the entirety of its peninsula is conserved, with the DNR-owned land to the west and the Seattle City Light purchase to the east.

Jim mentions the oxbow, a unique feature of the property. This pond formed when the Skagit meandered over the land. As humans structured its flow, deepening the main channel, this oxbow was cut off. Part of the management goal for Cumberland Creek is to allow the river to again braid through this property freely. We might lose some acreage statistics, but the benefit to living things will be worth it.

Cumberland Creek is open to the public. See <http://www.skagit-landtrust.org/properties/cumberland-creek.aspx>.



It's going to sound like a cliché to say, but the role of Land Stewards for SLT is more important than ever. The statistics below tell the story: over the past 10 years, the number of conservation areas has increased from 9 to 20 and the amount of acreage under protection has skyrocketed. Call us a victim of our own success, but the issue of long-term stewardship of the many protected lands in Skagit County is a real concern not just for the land trust, but also for other agencies and organizations, many of whom have been talking about ways to coordinate and fund long-term stewardship.

The unfortunate reality is that funding for acquisition of important lands often does not come with long-term dollars for stewardship; it is a lot easier to appeal for support to protect vulnerable parcels than it is to fundraise for the nitty-gritty of managing land. SLT has responded by fundraising for stewardship at the same time that we fundraise for acquisition. As a result, we have created both a stewardship reserve fund to ensure that we can take care of essential property management, as well as specific funds for our new acquisitions of Barr Creek and Guemes Mountain. But even with dedicated funds such as these, the land trust faces a growing inventory of properties with a relatively small staff, something that isn't likely to change anytime soon in these economic times.

Thankfully, I can sleep at night knowing that we have a dedicated crew of land stewards who have agreed to donate their time to ensure that SLT's conservation areas are protected. Our Land Steward program is a model that has generated interest from other conservation organizations and agencies. I'm proud to share information about how we have worked together for so long to look after these lands. I often say that we couldn't do it without you, and that becomes truer every day.

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 - OPEN!

Hurn Field - Ed and Carolyn Gastellum

Lyman Slough - Dick Raisler

March's Point Heronry - LaVerne and Jim Scheltens

Minkler Lake - Hal Lee

Mud Lake - Lloyd Brown

Samish River - OPEN!

South Skagit (Shaw) - Skagit Land Trust

Tope Ryan - John Day

Upper Skagit - Steffany Raynes and Lin Skavdahl

SLT BY THE NUMBERS DECADE EDITION

1418

THE NUMBER OF ACRES PRESERVED BY SLT IN 2000

5563

THE NUMBER OF ACRES PRESERVED BY SLT IN 2010

9

THE NUMBER OF FEE PROPERTIES IN 2000

20

THE NUMBER OF FEE PROPERTIES IN 2010

452

THE NUMBER OF SLT MEMBERS IN 2000

OVER 1000

THE NUMBER OF SLT MEMBERS IN 2010

If you have sketches, reflections, photos, journalings, essays, poems, or anything else from your time as a land steward, we would love to feature them! Send to Ellie at erogers@skagitlandtrust.org.