



Wrapping Mount Vernon in Green: A Growing Corridor of Protection

Skagit Land Trust (the Trust) and many partners have spent decades protecting lands at the edges of our cities and towns, where urban areas meet rural landscapes. As cities grow and become denser, these open spaces and wildlife corridors provide important connections between lands and waters that sustain a web of life. They keep our communities green, give people easy access to nature, and help wildlife move safely between habitats. These emerald ribbons of protected habitat also help cool our cities, manage stormwater, and improve air quality.

Two recent conservation successes in the Nookachamps Valley have permanently protected key parts of this corridor around the City of Mount Vernon. The Big Rock County Park expansion and a new conservation easement on the north edge of town add to places already protected in this corridor, such as Barney Lake.

Yudwasta Big Rock County Park Expansion

Known to the Upper Skagit People as Yudwasta, meaning “of the heart,” Big Rock has always been more than a scenic landmark on the edge of Mount Vernon. It is a place where generations of people have formed lasting connections with the land. Big Rock also lies at the heart of a vital wildlife and open space corridor running north to south along Nookachamps Creek.

In January, the permanent protection of that corridor advanced significantly when Big Rock County Park expanded by 83 acres, thanks to a successful partnership between Skagit County Parks, Skagit Land Trust, and private landowners Ellen Rak and Bill Dunlap. The project was supported by hundreds of Skagit Land Trust members, the Upper Skagit Indian Tribe, Skagit County Commissioners, neighbors, as well as local businesses and organizations. Skagit County Parks Director Brian Adams expressed his excitement: “In all the years we have partnered with Skagit Land Trust in preserving lands for the public, this is perhaps our greatest success story.”

Executive Director's Letter to Members and Partners



Dear Skagit Land Trust Members,

Our hearts go out to all those who suffered damages from flooding in the Skagit this past year. Many thanks to County staff, local residents, fire districts, dike districts, and the Army Corps of Engineers, all of whom worked hard behind the scenes to protect our community.

It is important to recognize how conserved lands also protect communities from flooding. By allowing rivers to behave naturally, protected areas slow floodwater by acting like sponges during heavy rain. Take Barney Lake wetland, for example. Located just east of Mount Vernon, this rich wetland (pictured above) relieves pressure on the river and nearby neighborhoods by giving surging floodwaters space to spread out and slow down – all while providing scenic, critical habitat for wintering waterfowl and wildlife.

Heading north on I-5, just past Cook Road, Butler Flats (pictured right) offers another safe place for floodwater to go. Conserved through a Trust-facilitated project in the early 2000s, this 139-acre property grows organic crops in summer. Come winter, it soaks up precipitation that might otherwise flow into rivers and on toward roads, homes, and businesses downstream.

Protected areas further upriver also help to keep the flood-swollen Skagit River in check. Forested lands such as Skagit Land Trust's Douglas Island (below left), Minkler Lake, Skiyou Slough, and Utopia conservation areas (below right) slow the force of falling rain and absorb it into the spongey forest floor, rather than letting it run off the way it would over compacted soil or pavement.



A beaver looks out over Barney Lake during the December floods.



Photo credit: Eric Mickelson



Photo credit: Eric Mickelson

The two photos below show the flooding Skagit River near the Trust's Skagit River Kahn Conservation Area. These images highlight the increasingly narrow buffers we face as climate change continues to leave its mark.



Photo credit: Eric Mickelson



Climate scientists say that December's atmospheric rivers and related damage offer a preview of greater flood events to come. This reality makes our work together even more urgent. Protecting places where natural processes can occur helps to create a safer living environment in an increasingly dynamic valley. Such processes save public dollars and create landscapes that work for both people and nature.

The 11,500 acres of land and 40 miles of river shoreline that Skagit Land Trust has helped conserve aren't just scenic or good for wildlife – these areas also provide cost-effective, resilient infrastructure that helps prepare our communities for the changing climate ahead. Now more than ever, every foot of shoreline and every conserved acre matters. Thank you for your support.



Molly Doran, Executive Director

Join Us for Skagit Land Trust's Annual Membership Meeting March 19th!

We are excited to welcome Skagit Land Trust members and guests this spring for our Annual Members meeting on Thursday, March 19th, from 5:30-7:30pm at Mount Vernon Library. Come see what we have accomplished together, celebrate with friends, and hear about upcoming plans.

Guest speakers Betsy Peabody, Founder of the Puget Sound Restoration Fund, and Bill Dewey, Policy Director for Taylor Shellfish, will share their knowledge and experience combatting climate change issues such as ocean acidification.

Registration is required, so please go to our website skagitlandtrust.org for registration information, as well as pending updates to Skagit Land Trust's bylaws and a list of Board members up for election at the meeting. We look forward to seeing you in March!



Big Rock's cultural importance helped to make the project a success. Policy Representative for the Upper Skagit Indian Tribe's Natural & Cultural Resources, Scott Schuyler (pictured on the cover with his daughter), supported the grant application. He shared with state reviewers the deep historical and ongoing connection between the Upper Skagit People and Yudwasta. The future park will honor this legacy by highlighting Indigenous history and continued relationship with the land.

The park's more recent conservation story began in 1996 when Skagit Land Trust facilitated Dr. Richard and Holly Hoag's donation of 13 acres of land (and a conservation easement to protect it) at the top of Big Rock. About 15 years ago, however, public access to the park was lost over the surrounding private property. Over the decades, Skagit Land Trust and Skagit County Parks looked for ways to reopen and expand the park. In 2023, when 63 acres of land adjacent to Big Rock Park went up for sale, both organizations recognized a rare opportunity to protect a beloved and culturally and ecologically significant landscape before it was lost.

Acting quickly, Skagit Land Trust took a risk to acquire the property and hold it until the County could assume ownership. The Trust covered the \$1.8 million purchase using organizational funds and a loan from the Washington Opportunity Fund. The Trust also committed to raise additional funds to help make the purchase affordable for County Parks.

With the land secured, Skagit County Parks pursued state funding. The project was awarded a \$1 million grant from Washington State's Recreation Conservation Office, which ranked the project #1 out of 64 applications statewide in the local parks category. The County also contributed \$400,000 of its own funds. Lastly, the Trust was able to absorb over \$400,000 of the final cost due to donations from 350 Skagit Land Trust families and businesses.

Community voices strengthened the project's grant application. Local organizations such as SeaMar Community Health Centers spoke about the health benefits of expanded nature access for east Mount Vernon's growing and diverse neighborhoods. SeaMar affirmed that nearby open space is essential to well-being, and neighbors agreed.

"People need a place to get out into nature and enjoy it," says park neighbor Bill Dunlap. "The hope is that if they enjoy it, they'll be motivated to protect it, too." Inspired by these values, Bill and his wife Ellen Rak donated 20 acres of wildlife habitat they owned adjacent to the expanded park. Their parcel includes a portion of Gribble Creek, where Coho return each year. Black bears, coyotes, otters, and other wildlife also pass through the property frequently. "There's often a tension between protecting wildlife and creating access, but the Trust walks that line well," says Ellen. "Projects like this create ways for people to coexist with all the other beautiful parts of life."

With the transfer of land from the Trust, and the neighbors, Skagit County will be reopening a much-expanded Yudwasta Big Rock County Park to the public soon.

Further Protection in the Nookachamps

Nearby, another project recently strengthened protection of this wildlife corridor. This past November, Diane and Mark Studley (pictured right with their daughter Alison) generously donated a Conservation Easement that permanently protects 26.3 acres of forest, agricultural land, and seasonal wetlands overlooking the Nookachamps and Skagit River floodplain.



Ellen Rak and Bill Dunlap get out for a walk on the land they have donated to Yudwasta Big Rock Park.



The easement extinguishes three development rights and ensures that this highly scenic property – which is part of the view as one enters Mount Vernon on Francis Road – will remain open and undeveloped.

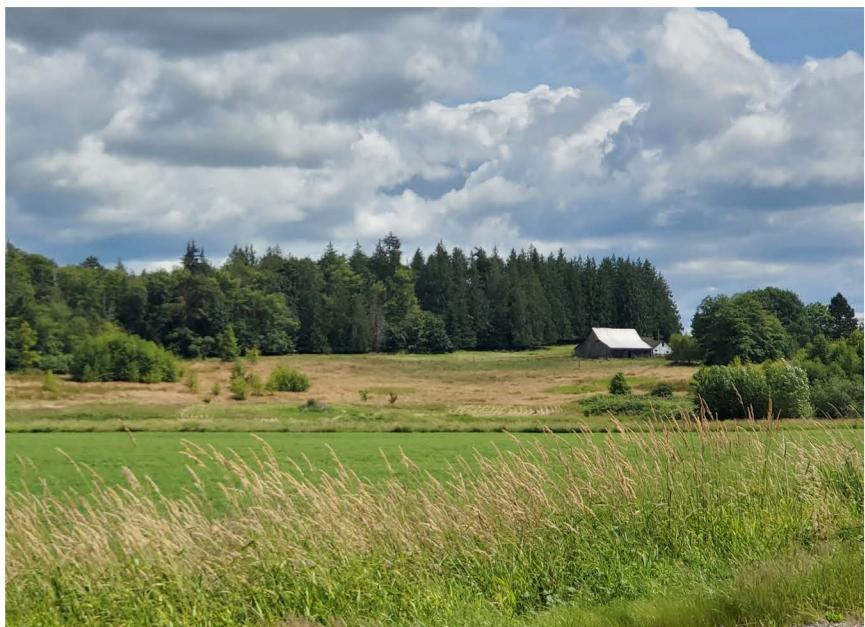
The Studleys' desire to protect this special place goes back a long way. "Fifty years ago, when driving from Sedro Woolley to Mount Vernon, we fell in love with a former dairy farm which sat above the flood plain," Diane recalls. "That is where we raised our family and where our grandchildren now play. With Skagit Land Trust Conservation Easements, we know the land will be protected so that people, as they drive into town, will always enjoy that viewscape and the birds it attracts."

The conservation easement is designed to support both habitat and agriculture. A 7.2-acre Habitat Conservation Zone includes mature forest and formerly open fields now transitioning to forest. Exceptionally well cared for by the Studleys, the forested section offers important habitat, particularly for birds – including an owl pair that nests in the Studleys' barn.

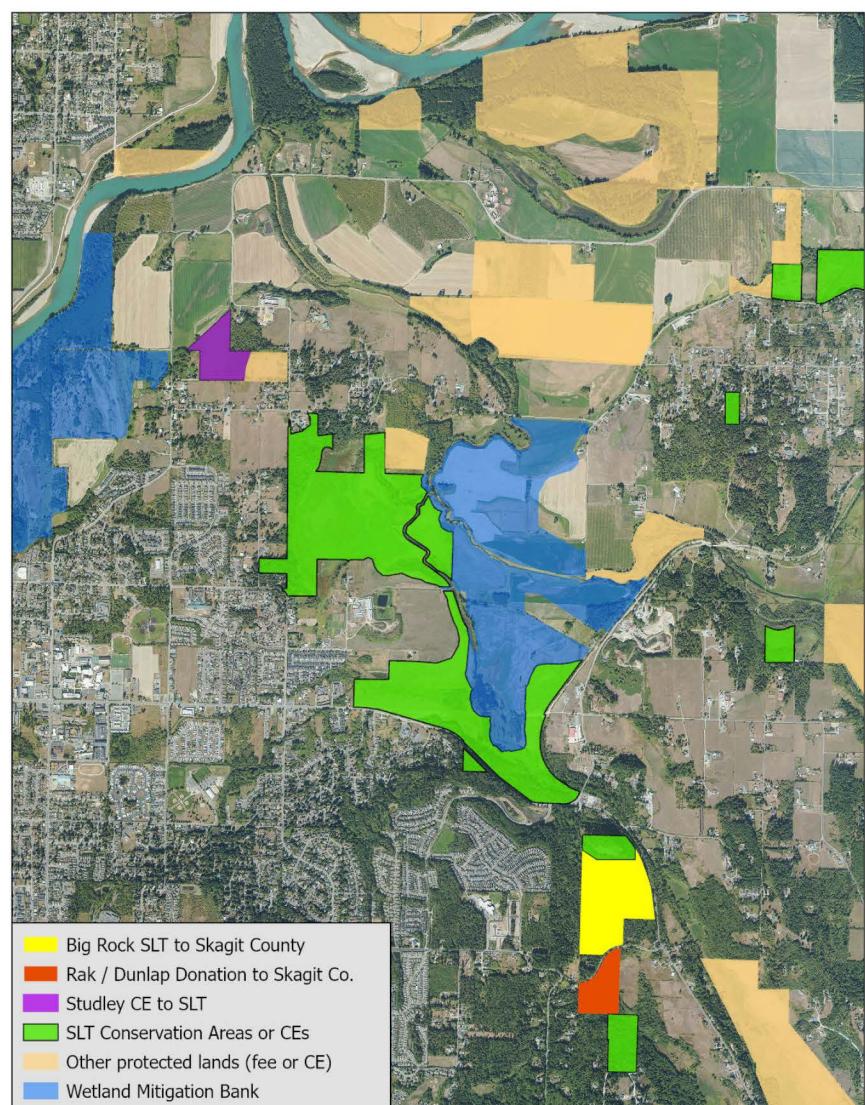
The property also includes a 17.1-acre Agricultural Zone. As part of Skagit County's agricultural legacy, these open fields contribute to the scenic, rural vistas that Skagit residents and visitors love. The remaining acreage includes a residential zone with a farmhouse, barns, and garden that anchor the property in its long history of land stewardship.

This easement is not the first land donation by the Studleys. In 2024, Mark and Diane also donated 13 acres of adjacent land to Skagit County Parks. Skagit Land Trust connected the Studleys with County Parks staff and organized the first site visit, helping to move the park donation forward.

With both of these places now permanently protected, the open space and wildlife corridor around Mount Vernon continues to grow as a legacy for all generations of people and wildlife. Thank you to our members, private landowners, and community partners for your commitment to preserving the natural, rural character of Skagit County.



The Studley Conservation Easement protects the rural view and landscape on the Francis Road entry (above) to Mount Vernon.



Stewardship: The Often Unseen (and Sometimes Gross) Work that Keeps Lands Healthy

When it comes to conservation stewardship, we often picture people working together to dig holes for native plants while creatures of the forest chatter overhead. We don't always think of stewardship's grittier side – addressing dumped paint cans, abandoned cars, stolen signs, and the occasional surprise tent. This less-glamorous, behind-the-scenes stewardship work also helps to protect wildlife, keep visitors safe, and preserve the natural beauty of the lands you help conserve.

Over the past year, staff hauled out over 500 pounds of household garbage, including tires, paint cans, furniture, and small plastic debris – some of which floats onto our properties during flood events. We also removed six abandoned vehicles, multiple full drums of waste oil, and three abandoned tents and campsites (camping is not an allowed activity at our conservation areas). The abandoned camps we encounter are typically sprawling and messy, with food items spread by humans and animals, old clothing, tarps, etc. The footprint of an abandoned camp can be a hundred square feet and often more!

When Skagit Land Trust acquires a new property, our stewardship team assesses if there are any old structures that need to be removed, as we did over on Samish Island this fall. Near the Samish River wetlands, we also removed several sheds and outbuildings in various states of decay – each filled with a bunch of trash and debris. Removal protects the public as well as the land, reducing the risk of injuries or pollution as older buildings degrade and become a health and environmental hazard.



Monitoring and addressing issues on Trust lands requires patience and a sense of humor. Take the Barr Creek Conservation Area sign saga, for example. In 2024, a wooden boundary sign between Skagit Land Trust property and U.S. Forest Service land was damaged. Volunteers replaced it in July of 2024, only to find it vandalized again in October 2025. This time, the sign disappeared entirely and the post was split right down the middle!

Undeterred, staff and volunteer Land Steward Russ Dalton returned to Barr Creek with a replacement sign in November. At a work party the next month, volunteer Paul Johnson (pictured left) trimmed the signpost to size, smoothed the top with careful sanding, and topped it off with a whimsical moss hat. This ongoing effort really shows how we handle the different parts of stewardship with teamwork and good humor.

Member support makes this work possible, and we're grateful to the partners and volunteers who help steward the lands we love. Although it's not always pretty, this work is effective and necessary – and occasionally makes for a good story.



An old trailer (above) and truck (below) are just a few of the larger items dumped at Cascade River Conservation Area.



Skagit Valley College Students Dig into Conservation

The future of conservation isn't waiting for a distant tomorrow. It's showing up today, sleeves rolled up, ready to work – just like the Skagit Valley College (SVC) student volunteers who pitch in at Skagit Land Trust work parties. The group's curiosity and commitment turn classroom lessons into local, lasting change.

SVC students have participated in many work parties over the last seven years. Last fall, they rescued about 100 previously planted trees from the greedy grasp of invasive Himalayan blackberry at Skagit Land Trust's (the Trust's) Minkler Lake Conservation Area. Around the same time, they removed about 750 old blue tube protectors that were no longer needed by growing seedlings at the Trust's Tope Ryan Conservation Area. This winter, the students also helped us plant 200 live stakes over at our Green Road Marsh Conservation Area. SVC students have also conducted research at Barney Lake and March Point and taken field trips to our protected lands at Tope Ryan, Utopia, Samish Island, and Barney Lake.

SVC instructor Sean Howard appreciates how work parties create opportunities for the group to collectively learn a great deal about actual projects that are being enacted and fine-tuned. Conservation student Jordan Blackwell says that helping with these local projects inspires him to study harder and pursue future volunteer opportunities in order "to make the Pacific Northwest a better place for all of us." Conservation student Jaylani Lizama also loves supporting healthier habitats over the long term. She encourages other young people "to see that local conservation efforts are something we can be part of right now."

Trust staff have been consistently impressed by Skagit Valley College students' enthusiasm and passion for restoration. Our Stewardship Coordinator Jonathan Worley finds their energy inspiring and predicts that these students will be critical players in restoration throughout the Skagit when they graduate.

This Skagit Valley College volunteer team reminds us that land stewardship is a community effort that we can be part of today. If this is what the next generation of environmental leaders looks like, we feel hopeful about what's ahead!



Sean Howard, Madison Gray, Jordan Blackwell, and Jaylani Lizama pause for a picture while removing blue tubes at Tope Ryan.



Volunteers from Skagit Valley College gather for a group photo after planting live stakes at Green Road Marsh.

Skagit Land Trust relies on volunteers who bring their knowledge, talents, and time to support local conservation. Are you interested in becoming a volunteer? You can visit our website to sign-up for a work party, or contact Stacy Dahl, our Volunteer & Education Programs Coordinator, to see how your skills can be used to further our mission of local conservation: stacyd@skagitlandtrust.org or call 360-428-7878 x212.

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

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Upcoming Events at Skagit Land Trust (SLT)

SLT Online Speaker Series: Washington's White Birds of Winter with Martha Jordan

On Zoom, Wednesday, February 11th @ 6pm

Tree Planting Work Parties @ Barney Lake Conservation Area

Monday, February 16th @ 9am - 12pm
and 1pm - 4pm

Skagit Land Trust Annual Meeting

@ Mount Vernon Library

Thursday, March 19th @ 5:30pm

*Please go to our website,
skagitlandtrust.org, for more
information and to sign up!*



The lands conserved and protected by Skagit Land Trust have been inhabited and stewarded by numerous tribes and Indigenous peoples since time immemorial. We recognize and respect the inherent, indigenous, and treaty rights of the Coast Salish People who have deep and abiding connections to these places. We seek to partner with local tribes as we conserve and care for these lands and waters.