



Wildlife Corridors Stitch Together Skagit Habitat

The call of a bull elk can be eerie as it echoes across a valley on a quiet fall morning during rutting season. Visitors are often surprised to learn that this high-pitched, two-toned “bugle” comes from mammals that can weigh over 1,000 pounds. The majestic native elk that range through Skagit County are among the largest elk species in North America today. These impressive creatures need access to forest, pasture, and water to thrive. Hearing or seeing elk on the land often indicates that the area provides sufficient space, shelter, and foraging habitat to support wildlife diversity.

“Elk are a sign that large wildlife find the area hospitable, which can mean that cougars, bears, and bobcats do, too,” explain the owners of the Birdsvew Conservation Easement (CE), one of Skagit Land Trust’s (SLT’s) most recently established conservation easements in the Skagit Valley. This CE protects 122-acres of wildlife habitat, mature forest, and working agricultural lands. Combined with an already established, adjacent 123-acre CE, the nearly 250 acres of now-protected land connect the Skagit River to adjacent uplands.

This large conservation easement contributes to a vision shared by the landowners and Skagit Land Trust: the creation of wildlife corridors that will help to safeguard species diversity for wildlife in Skagit County and beyond. “I love seeing the elk of the Skagit Valley accessing their historic range,” says SLT’s Conservation Director Michael Kirshenbaum. “But elk are just the most visible species that benefit from having protected areas in key locations throughout the watershed. Along with the elk, countless other species can thrive in these conserved areas.”

Moving freely across interconnected habitat enables wildlife to access a sufficiently large gene pool, evade predators, and migrate. As climate conditions fluctuate more extremely, wild animals also need to be able to expand, contract, and move across land. However, human infrastructure converts natural landscapes and fragments habitat. While the Skagit is relatively green and undeveloped when compared with some other places, the cumulative impact of our human activities has undermined the ecological connectivity that supports diverse wildlife and plant species.

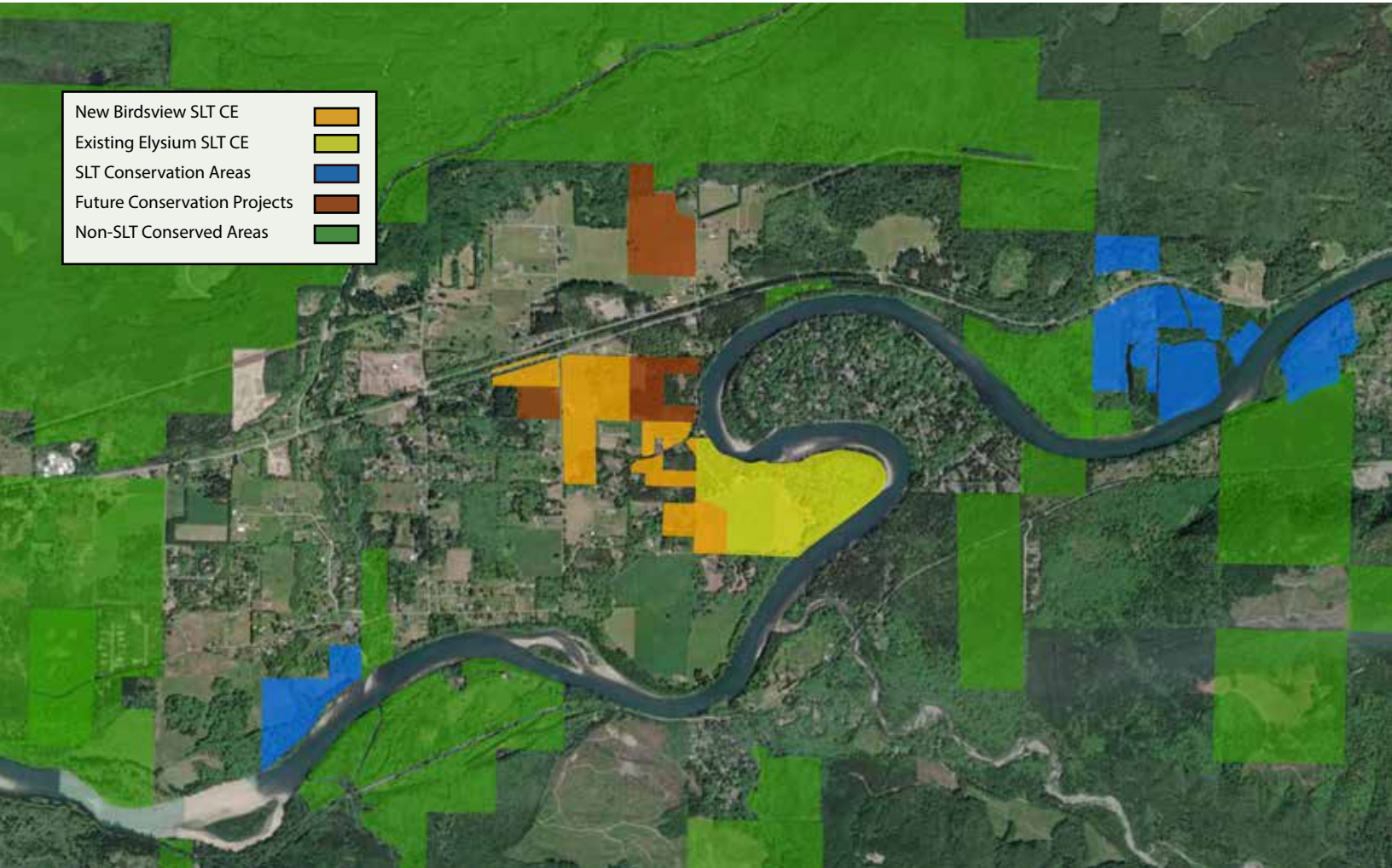
Knowing all this, the owners of the Birdsvie CE land have partnered with Skagit Land Trust and others to protect strategic wildlife corridors through which animals can continue to access their natural range. By maintaining and restoring open space and native vegetation, the landowners have further enhanced wildlife habitat and land connectivity. These corridors function as lifelines, providing areas where animals can graze and pass through in peace, away from areas where they are less welcome. By doing so, these protected areas can benefit people also by lessening conflicts between wildlife and other interests.

Often, large areas of these wildlife-corridor jigsaw puzzles don't qualify for state and federal grants (for example, those not directly on the river). Here is where individuals and organizations like Skagit Land Trust can step in with a vision to stitch the environment back together over time.

We all live in environments that are fragmented. However, through this permanent conservation easement and other partnerships like it, we can protect wildlife corridors that rebuild and sustain healthy wildlife and plant populations in the Skagit. With time and thoughtful care, our community can save existing lands and regain seemingly lost lands as safe havens for wildlife. In the face of rapid land and climate change, rewilding such places is essential to preserving biodiversity in the Skagit for all generations.



2 Elk and other wildlife find peaceful refuge at Birdsvie throughout the year, from summer (top) to winter (above).



Map of the Birdsview CE and surrounding conserved land shows protection from the Cascade Mountains to the Skagit River.

Share Your Talents with the Skagit Land Trust Community

Skagit Land Trust manages over 10,000 acres of land and creates dozens of community events to connect people with the land each year. We have over 550 amazing volunteers who contribute their time and energy toward our mission. Many don gloves and rubber boots and join SLT work parties, but there are lots of other ways to volunteer as well!

SLT volunteers can serve as land stewards, wildlife surveyors, volunteer educators, office volunteers, committee members, or Board members. Some share their expertise by speaking at our events or leading wildlife or plant walks. Below are just a few of many all-star volunteers who have shared their diverse expertise and talents with us.

Brenda Cunningham has served as a volunteer land steward at Barney Lake since 1998. After working as our first Stewardship Director, Brenda retired and volunteered for three terms on our Board. She also provided illustrations for our Natural Skagit book, and last month, she helped us teach community members how to make native plant luminaries.

John Day has been a volunteer land steward at Tope Ryan since 2006 and has assisted with breeding amphibian surveys on several of our properties. John also participates in the Kulshan Neighborhood Youth Program planning and activities.

Tim Manns is a Board member and a longtime land steward at Barney Lake Conservation Area, where he also shares his bird expertise at SLT's swan events and bird walks for the community. Tim also planned and wrote the text for several of the Trust's interpretive signs, and he conducts monthly bird surveys at two SLT properties.

Interested in sharing your talents? Contact us at volunteer@skagitlandtrust.org.



Taking Steps Towards a Career in Conservation by Restoring the Skagit

At Skagit Land Trust, we are fortunate to collaborate with dedicated conservation program partners who help us protect and restore Skagit County's special places. This past year, work crews from EarthCorps, the Washington Conservation Corps (WCC), and Glacier Peak Institute (GPI) all added significantly to the amount of skilled stewardship work contributed to Skagit Land Trust lands.

EarthCorps is an AmeriCorps program committed to developing the leadership skills and ecological restoration knowledge of young adults from across the U.S. and abroad. In 2024, EarthCorps supported us with 19 days of crew time across four Conservation Areas. Their teams focused on invasive species control, tackling blackberry at Hurn Field and garlic mustard at Pressentin Ranch and in areas along river shorelines.

Washington Conservation Corps, another AmeriCorps program under the Department of Ecology, is one of Skagit Land Trust's most consistent partners. In 2024, we were lucky to have 34 days of WCC crew time across seven of our Conservation Areas. WCC crews provide essential help with stewardship projects that require specialized skills, including stream shoreline restoration, invasive species removal, and trail work.

Their efforts have been instrumental in restoring shorebird habitat in Guemes Valley, controlling yellow archangel at Barney Lake, and addressing bamboo and other invasives at Kelly's Point. Over the years, our staff have learned a lot about restoration from WCC crews, who often have valuable technical expertise to share.



Before (top) and after (bottom) photos taken by EarthCorps crews after removing invasive blackberry at Hurn Field.



Washington Conservation Crew at Guemes Mountain trailhead.

This year, Skagit Land Trust also partnered with Glacier Peak Institute's new workforce program. Funded by Snohomish County, this job training program provides young adults from the greater Darrington area with conservation skills and experience through hands-on work opportunities with private conservation organizations, the Forest Service, and local tribes. In 2024, GPI contributed nine days of crew time to three of our Conservation Areas, where they supported projects such as blackberry removal at Utopia and trail maintenance at Barr Creek.

These crews' experience, skills, and knowledge enables us to pursue more ambitious undertakings. For example, while trail-building on the Hegg-Benson trail at Barr Creek, a GPI crew was able to relocate 65 feet of trail to a new wider and smoother route, remove large tripping-hazard rocks from a trail bed, fell precarious trees after

a windstorm, and build rock retaining walls. SLT's Americorps volunteer, Emma, observed: "The crew had no problem following the established trail standards, completing the tasks assigned with care, and providing quality work." GPI Workforce's Ecological Restoration Crew lead, Dylan, reported that: "SLT staff always had a good plan outlined for us, which was very helpful. And we had a blast!"

EarthCorps, WCC, and GPI crews have brought valuable skills, energy, and passion to work as they help us address a wide range of ecological challenges. Given that the Trust manages thousands of acres of land with a stewardship staff of three, our partners' contributions also make our stewardship workload much more sustainable.

The opportunity for our staff to mentor the crew and share career insights is also an important part of these partnerships. WCC's Crew Supervisor, Erika, told us: "It's been great to work with an organization that understands the educational aspect of WCC, and takes the time to teach the members about the organization's mission and why projects matter." By providing this hands-on training in beautiful natural settings, SLT helps to inspire and support the next wave of conservation professionals.

Working together to improve the health of the land also fosters a sense of community and shared purpose. We look forward to continuing to work alongside these dedicated teams to conserve wildlife habitat, agricultural and forest lands, scenic open space, wetlands, and shorelines for the benefit of our community and as a legacy for future generations. Thank you EarthCorps, WCC, and GPI for your ongoing support!



A Glacier Peak Institute work crew poses for a photo after trail building at Barr Creek.

You're Invited to Skagit Land Trust's Annual Meeting!

March 13th, 5:30pm to 7:30pm at Depot Arts Center in Anacortes (611 R Ave, Anacortes, WA 98221)

Join us as we review the past year and learn about current and future Skagit Land Trust projects.

Our guest speakers, Coast Salish Youth Coalition leader Sam Barr, Samish Indian Nation elder Rosie Cayou James, and Guemes Island residents and landowners David Wertheimer and Birch Beaudet will share with us the history, vision, and purpose behind the creation of Dog Woods on Guemes Island, a privately owned yet publicly accessible community forest that strives to center Coast Salish people in stewardship. We hope to see you there!



Other Upcoming SLT Events:

February 13th— Online Speaker Theresa Trebon, "Environmental Change in Skagit County" — 6pm - 7:30pm

February 21st — Muddy Creek Work Party — 9am - 12pm

March 7th — Fidalgo Bay - Graber Work Party — 9am - 12pm

March 22nd — Barr Creek Work Party — 10am - 2pm

April 22nd — Online Speaker Shawn Behling, "Dam It: Beavers in Washington State" — 6pm - 7:30pm

May 14 — Online Speaker Jack Hartt, "Hiking Close to Home" — 6pm - 7:30pm

June 7th — Save the Date for our Lands We Love Summer Social Fundraiser *

Learn more & RSVP for our events online at www.skagitlandtrust.org

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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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Thank you for your love of wildlife!

