

THE UNDERSTORY

SLT LAND STEWARD NEWSLETTER

JUNE 2010

A VISIT TO GRANDY CREEK

BY JOHN FREEMAN

Situated just west of Concrete on the Skagit River floodplain, the 54 acre Grandy Creek Conservation Area was purchased by Skagit Land Trust in April 2003. John Freeman has been the steward of the property since May 2008. He wrote this reflection on his last visit.

Driving north on Cape Horn Road, it is easy to miss the entrance to the Grandy Creek property. Slotted between two small homes, an unimproved driveway takes you down a forested easement to our signed entrance gate. Probably because of the limited parking and signage, I have yet to encounter another visitor on my monitoring visits. Now with barn boots on and camera, notebook, empty trash bag, and clippers in my shoulder bag, I carefully open the barbed wire gate and enter a very special place.

The Grandy Creek Conservation Area is comprised of two oval mixed grass meadows totaling 20 acres surrounded by 34 acres of maple, alder, western red cedar, spruce, and fir trees with heavy native understory. Two sides of the property are defined by waterways. The eastern edge is shaped by Grandy Creek and the southern boundary line is formed by the Skagit River for almost half a mile as it runs downriver from its confluence with Grandy Creek.

As I pass through the gate, I am greeted with a most pleasing view of the entire western meadow dotted with subalpine

buttercups, its forested border, and dark Iron Mountain off in the distance. A trail along the meadow's rim leads to its eastern counterpart, the two being separated by an hourglass opening in the forest.

Moving onto the eastern part of the property, the wonderful fragrance of wet grass from a morning shower is in the air. I check our boundary signs, make note of some elk tracks, and follow the trail that runs between the meadow and the riparian forest as it parallels the Skagit River.

A couple of paths lead through this buffer forest with its heavy undergrowth of ferns, lichen, moss, bleeding heart, and wild roses to the river. My observations today show the Skagit to be quite low and the gravel bars, so loved by the steelhead fishermen, fully exposed. On a low river day like this, it is possible to walk on the river bed up to Grandy Creek (yep, good old barn boots).

After dropping a couple of empty soda cans and a ball of monofilament line into my trash bag, I'm back on the meadow trail, aware of the wonderful silence. My eyes, so used to looking at spots on the road in front of my truck or objects on my desk, are instead now focusing on distant trees, mountains, or a circling bald eagle. Passing through the hourglass opening back onto the west meadow, my visit concludes with securing the wire gate and preparing my monitoring report. Now if I could just brush out my truck's pesky tire tracks...



WE WANT YOUR MONITORING REPORTS!!!

Long summer days are the perfect time to get out to your property, then write us a report!

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

JOHN FREEMAN - GRANDY CREEK STEWARD



Born in Vancouver, Canada and raised in California, John Freeman finally made his way back to the Pacific Northwest in 1994. On his first day here, *The Skagit Valley Herald* featured an article about the Fidalgo Fly Fishers and John soon became a member. He has been fly fishing since the 1970's after being inspired by John Travers' book *Anatomy of a Fisherman*. Fidalgo Fly Fishers has linked Skagit Land Trust with some great volunteers. John tagged along with fellow FFF members and stewards Robin LaRue and Dick Raisler before becoming a steward himself, first of Day Creek Slough in 2006 and then of Grandy Creek in 2008.

John cautioned me not to tell everyone about the beauty of Grandy Creek. "Someone will want to take this over!" He cites the meadows

as his favorite attribute of the property, but you can tell that the creek, the river, even the slugs and the mud are lovable to John. As a steward, he has fostered good communication with neighbors, cleaned up trash, and monitored the area carefully. "If you like solitude in a beautiful place, it doesn't get any better than this." At some point during one of our visits to Grandy, John told me about an old Clint Eastwood line from *Bronco Billy*, where his character sidles out to the center of a meadow and says, "I just want to be where the deer and the antelope play." John has quite the reverence for this piece of land.



Above left: John Freeman in the meadow.

Above right: Grandy Creek visited by the Nooksack Elk herd.

*Front page: Watercolor by John Freeman;
Background aerial photo of Grandy Creek
Conservation Area.*



*Above left: General map of Grandy Creek
Conservation Area; SLT boundaries in
yellow.*

Right: Grandy Creek meadow in May.



THE EDUCATION OF A GREENHORN - ELLIE ROGERS

"If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them." -Thoreau

It's been a full year now since I completed my undergraduate education. This means it's been a full year since I've had to stay up all night churning out papers, spend classes debating post modern theories, or live (almost literally) in the library. With diploma in hand, I exited that safe, scholastic realm in exchange for the real world. My college strived to give me internships and real world experience, but never did I encounter this all-important information I am about to impart here. Not until I met land steward Russ Dalton and worked six trail-building parties at Barr Creek Conservation Area did I come to be able to identify and use trail-building tools. Here is a summary of my favorites!

SLT Field Guide to Trail-Building Tools

Pulaski

Description: Combination axe and hoe on the same head.

Use: Often used in fire-fighting to create fire-breaks, as it is the perfect tool for grubbing as well as chopping. The two tools were first welded together by forest-firefighter Ed Pulaski at the turn of the last century.



Adze Hoe (Hazel or Grub Hoe)

Description: A hefty 6-inch blade on a flat head attached at a 90 degree angle. Back end is blunt.

Use: Its vicious edge allows for precision hacking and its general hoe shape lends itself well to basic clearing of soil and prying of rocks.

McLeod

Description: Flat steel plate with six short teeth on one end and a straight, sharp edge on the other. Handle is 4 feet long.

Use: Great for raking dirt, and making finishing touches on the trail.



Pick Mattock

Description: Much like a pick-axe or a pulaski, this tool has a chisel point on one side and a digging blade on the other.

Use: Breaks soil and roots, picks out rocks. In use since the middle ages.

What we're doing at Barr Creek is bigger than creating almost a mile of trail, at least in my mind. While the art and craft of trail-building is admirable in itself-- gradients and routes are not to be taken lightly-- this trail we're building is an invitation to folks from the road to step foot through the curtain of old cedars and mosses and enjoy the lovely show of a cascading creek and the ascent to Sauk. I wax philosophical on the need for humans to be in the nature that sustains us. I could write a paper on this! Though this year, I'm learning lessons you land stewards know well. When it comes down to it, one must know their tools, get dirty, and build the foundation for these castles in the air.

For more information on the Hegg Benson Trail at Barr Creek Conservation Area, see www.skagitlandtrust.org.

I'd like to thank all of the land stewards for agreeing to become famous in the recent land trust newsletter! We have received a number of comments from leaders of other conservation organizations who have told us how impressed they are with the quality and experience of our land stewards. That's something that we've known for a long time here at the land trust, but it's nice to get the word out to everyone else about our great crew of stewards.

A few updates: The land trust has two relatively new conservation areas, Samish-Ochs and Pressentin Ranch. The Samish-Ochs property is a 28-acre parcel that was donated to SLT late last year on the Samish River north of Prairie Road. The property features valuable riparian habitat along both banks of the Samish and is an important piece of land for maintaining natural habitat on that semi-developed reach of the river. The property consists of fairly dense brush and young trees and doesn't offer easy public access. There is pervasive Japanese Knotweed on the property, but this is an issue all along the Samish. The Trust's Stewardship Committee is in the midst of writing the management plan for Samish-Ochs and we are looking for a land steward for the conservation area.

The other new property, Pressentin Ranch (temporary name), is located across the Skagit from Hurn Field and about a half mile upstream. There is a well-established riparian forest along the Skagit as well as a large pasture. Elk frequently use this property and key questions are whether it should be managed for elk and what will be done with the pasture area (mowing, haying, elk grazing, reforestation). We'll start writing the management plan soon and are also looking for a land steward.

So we'll be busy with these two new properties, along with working on the Guemes Mountain management plan and kicking off a summer of monitoring conservation easements. Let me know if you'd like to hear any more details about any of the above.

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 - Pending

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

Pressentin Ranch - OPEN!

Samish - Ochs - OPEN!

Samish River - OPEN!

South Skagit (Shaw) - Skagit Land Trust

Tope Ryan - John Day

Upper Skagit - Steffany Raynes and Lin Skavdahl

SAVE THE DATE!

LAND STEWARD THANK YOU PARTY AND ANNUAL MEETING

WEDNESDAY, JULY 28 AT 6:00 P.M.

LOCATION TBD

The only time all year where all you wonderful stewards are in the same place! We'll recap the past year, discuss the land steward program, and look to the coming year. We'll also thank you for your extraordinary service, and feed you a delicious dinner. Please come!

Invitations forthcoming.