

THE

Steward

Newsletter of Whatcom Land Trust: Protecting the Nature of Whatcom County



A Year Of Old Growth

Kaitlyn Hammond, Washington Conservation Corps Individual Placement

Day three of my term I woke up with the type of head cold that makes you feel like you are breathing underwater. Any other day, I probably would have stayed home, but I couldn't miss my chance to visit an alpine conservation easement high in the Cascades near Twin Lakes.

At the office, I gathered our site visit materials — a field book full of legal descriptions, maps, and site photos, our GPS-equipped iPad, and my handy-dandy surveyor's vest. As we drove east through Whatcom County, my supervisor described the local geology, ecology, and social dynamics of the area. The misty clouds drifted lazily over the red and gold October leaves, and I immediately fell in love with this incredible place.

After a terrifying drive up steep forest service roads, we began our descent by foot to the base of an old mining camp. "This way," my supervisor beckoned. At the time, I had no idea this fast-walking ex-army ranger could handle even the most rugged terrain. We reached the end of the trail and scrambled straight down the valley and up the ridge where the view opened to a landscape of craggy peaks and colorful vegetation. Huffing and puffing, and with my ears aching from the elevation change, I couldn't help but think to myself, "This is my JOB? How did I get so lucky?"

Kaitlyn Hammond, Whatcom Land Trust's stewardship intern, leads a team of visiting Washington Conservation Corps members, David Syck and Juliet Kiester on trail enhancement at Edfro Creek Reserve. The crew leaders, when looking for a solution to moving heavy logs, designed this bicycle, rigged with a platform to help with the transport.

Alan Fritzberg, photographer

NEXT ISSUE

FARMLANDS





The glassy beauty of Edfro Creek Reach. The Edfro Creek Reach summer project improved the trail experience for a wide variety of users, while simultaneously protecting sensitive wetlands from sediment runoff. Originally a social trail following the Old Saxon road bed, the trail had serious drainage issues. By enhancing the trail this becomes a more enjoyable experience for users of all types while protecting this unique ecosystem.

Stewardship is simultaneously endlessly complex, and remarkably simple. It is working with partners and navigating legislation, and it is digging a hole and putting a tree in the ground.

My year has given me experiences I will never forget, from counting hundreds of eagles on the North Fork Nooksack, to traversing the Stimpson Family Nature Reserve with passionate volunteers doing vegetation and diversity monitoring. I am grateful for the time I was given here to form a relationship with the land and the people and creatures who are a part of it. While “Old Growth-like Forest” may not be achieved here in my lifetime, I can’t help but smile as I imagine those tiny trees standing tall in the forests of tomorrow.

-Kaitlyn Hammond on Stewardship

Restoration Goals

On the drive back we discussed the complexity of restoration, how logging has changed the local environment, and the nature of Old Growth Forests. “You really have to see it to understand,” he said, pulling the car over.

In conservation, we always talk about Old Growth Forest as our reference point, and “Old Growth-like Forest” as our goal for restoration. However, it’s very rare that you actually get to experience the majesty of a real Old Growth stand. When you finally cross from younger woods — even relatively healthy and complex second growth — into the untouched primeval forest, you can feel the change in your gut. Time seems to slow as you inhale the sweet, earthy air, and see trees too big for even a group of people to wrap their arms around standing nobly in the distance. Large snags are scattered about with their bark piled at the roots, trunks now bare and holes housing countless woodland creatures. The forest floor is dappled with sunlight as beams shine through large openings in the canopy, illuminating a world of a thousand shades of green.

As we hiked along, we couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something innately good about this forest, some emergent property that made it more than the sum of its parts.

Stewardship Activities

As the Washington Conservation Corps Individual Placement with the Whatcom Land Trust, journeys to fantastic places are part of my normal week. Our mission is to preserve and protect wildlife habitat, scenic, agricultural and open space lands in Whatcom County for future generations by securing interests in land and promoting land stewardship. We accomplish this in a variety of ways, including buying land, obtaining conservation easements on private property, and facilitating land related conservation activities with other entities.

Throughout the year, I got to experience a wide range of tasks and activities and learn hands on what it takes to be a Land Steward at the Trust. In fall and spring, we hold stewardship work parties where we plant and mulch hundreds of trees, enjoying the company of our incredibly dedicated volunteers. During winter, we transition to site visits, walking boundary lines, and whacking our way through thick brush, and in the summer we move to activities like the trail maintenance project at Edfro Creek.

“What are we trying to accomplish?” my supervisor would frequently ask. On a small scale, the story is different for each property. In some places, the goal is to grow forests that can interact with the Nooksack River, contributing woody debris and allowing the river to form side channels that can be used by salmon. In other places, it is to protect water quality, or maybe to provide recreational opportunities for people to enjoy the richness of Pacific Northwest ecosystems. On a larger scale, however, these individual goals blend into something else: Protecting the Nature of Whatcom County.

While many of Whatcom Land Trust’s properties are beautiful and already provide habitat to local species, stewardship and restoration is critical to accelerate these systems toward “Old Growth-like Forest.” As stewards of these incredible places, we have a responsibility to make decisions to protect and restore the values for which the lands were conserved. There will never be a day where we are not navigating a world with competing ideals, playing a complicated game to successfully allocate resources to restore functional ecosystems. Even so, we must embrace this challenge to secure a future full of all the qualities that make this very special county our home.



The ‘Thousand Puddles’ or ‘Old Saxon Road Trail’ that the Washington Conservation Corps team worked on is important historically to this area. The Backcountry Horsemen are committed to helping protect this ecosystem and this historic trail. This allows us access to lands important to our group and gives us the opportunity to join in with the Whatcom Land Trust in conserving and protecting Edfro Creek Reach.

**-Walden Haines, President,
Whatcom Chapter
Backcountry Horsemen**

A Walk in the Woods with Alan Fritzberg

Colleen Carroll, Communications & Outreach Director

Alan Fritzberg retired from the Board of Whatcom Land Trust in July after ten years of service, but he is still deeply connected to Land Trust efforts. One way Alan continues to engage with the landscape is through his photography, which you will often see featured in our stories. I took a walk in the woods with Alan and gained insights on his connection with the landscape in Whatcom County and his continued efforts in land conservation.

His eyes are on the landscape, the trees, the birds, the falling leaves. As a color or feature in the woods catches his eye he stops to share an insight or a story — pointing out the difference in height, shape and color of the large leafed maple as compared to the vine maple growing just in its shadow. He describes evergreens and firs in particular on this visit to the North Fork of the Nooksack so that a newcomer to this forest can differentiate between the flat needled hemlocks, the spiraled needles of the fir, the pokey blue spruce and majestic Sitkas towering in the distance. Mature Western red cedars are an integral part of the Northwest forests and on this trail are an indicator of moisture in the soil as they like their feet wet.

While glancing at the river, Alan shares his observations, “If you look here you can see where the river ran a couple years ago and see the changing nature of its path.” A long log that had tumbled into the river conveniently demonstrates the story of trees interacting with the river, slowing down the water, creating pools for salmon to rest on their long journey upstream.

Alan comes by his love and deep relationship with nature honestly from both his father and mother. He freely admits to a strong case of Northwest-itis: a love of this land that just won't let go. His keen sense of observation and love of the land seems rooted in his ancestry and life-long pursuit of traveling the rivers in search of fish in his early years and in search of adventure as he grew older.

He spent his formative years here in Whatcom County, sometimes working on his family's 200-acre potato farm — hence his feet and roots are planted firmly in this soil. Alan frequently went fishing with his father and learned the changing nature of the Nooksack, traveling along the major routes as well as the many tributaries that feed it. “The river is an intrinsic part of who I am,” he says. “I grew up with the Nooksack as my backyard.”

Alan's mother was an adventurer in her own right. In 1924 she set off alone to Alaska to teach in the wilderness at the edge of the gold mining country. She gave her blessing when as a teen, Alan and his best friend Bill (pictured below) decided to raft the river, starting their journey below Everson with the final stopping point just below the town of Ferndale, some 18 river miles. They gathered lumber and wood, and Huckleberry Finn style shaped a raft from found items and set off down the river. Other than a tumble in the water and a soggy lunch, the raft held together until the end of the six hour float, and so did the intrepid young men.



BOARD

Stewardship

HONORING BOARD LEADERSHIP

Whatcom Land Trust is grateful to its dedicated volunteer Board of Directors who establish principles that guide our strategies and decision-making, provide accountability, and build trust and good will as we forge our path to the future. Representing broad and diverse community interests, individual board members bring passion, expertise and a network of resources in areas of real estate, education, land use, estate planning, contracts, agriculture and more.

Whatcom Land Trust board members include Chris Moench, President; Rebecca Reich, Secretary; Jennifer Wright, Treasurer; and John D'Onofrio, Lynne Givler, Michael Gropp, Rand Jack, John McLaughlin and Carl Prince.

In August we welcomed four new members to the board, including Lynn Berman, retired organic farmer and restaurateur; Dave Brown and Loch Clark, both attorneys; and Danne Neill, realtor. We also bid goodbye to retiring board members Alan Fritzberg and Simi Jain. We thank them for their years of board service and wish them the best as they move on to new adventures. Thanks to all board members past, present and future!

One way to develop a personal and lasting story, and provide a substantial legacy of stewardship is through a bequest or memorial gift to Whatcom Land Trust. These are simple ways to support this organization's long-term work and the land and special places that matter to you and your family. If you would like to make a charitable gift of assets or real estate, please give Jill Clark a call at (360) 650-9470 or stop by the office at 412 North Commercial Street.

Alan joined Whatcom Land Trust as a board member and served a term as President. Whatcom Land Trust provides him with the vehicle to make a difference in the landscape that is such a fundamental part of his life. Alan reflects on the work of the Land Trust saying, "I am honored to document this beautiful landscape and the stories of the Whatcom Land Trust through photos and words. My hope is that more and more people in Whatcom County will learn the powerful importance of Whatcom Land Trust and what land conservation and stewardship mean to all of us in the county."

*"Whatcom Land Trust stewardship
is about long term commitment to the
health of the land."*

Carl Prince, WLT Board Member since 2010



Winter Eagle Viewing in Whatcom County

Rich Bowers, Executive Director

Each fall during the salmon migration, I undertake a pilgrimage to reacquaint myself with nature and photograph wildlife along the great rivers of the Pacific Northwest and Alaska. My trips have taken me to Alaska to explore the Susitna and Kenai Rivers, Fall Creek, Admiralty Island and Haines; and to the Anarko, Squamish, and Stikine Rivers in British Columbia. I've learned two things – go north if you want to view bears and wolves, but here at home in our own Whatcom County the shorelines and rivers are some of the best places to view the bald eagle.

Both salmon and eagles are iconic figures in Whatcom County, and both have long been intertwined with the culture and mythology of first nation populations throughout the Pacific Northwest. In addition to being our national emblem since 1782, the bald eagle represents what is special and important here close to home – our love for nature, for all things wild, and for this community's intimate connection with the land, water and wildlife.

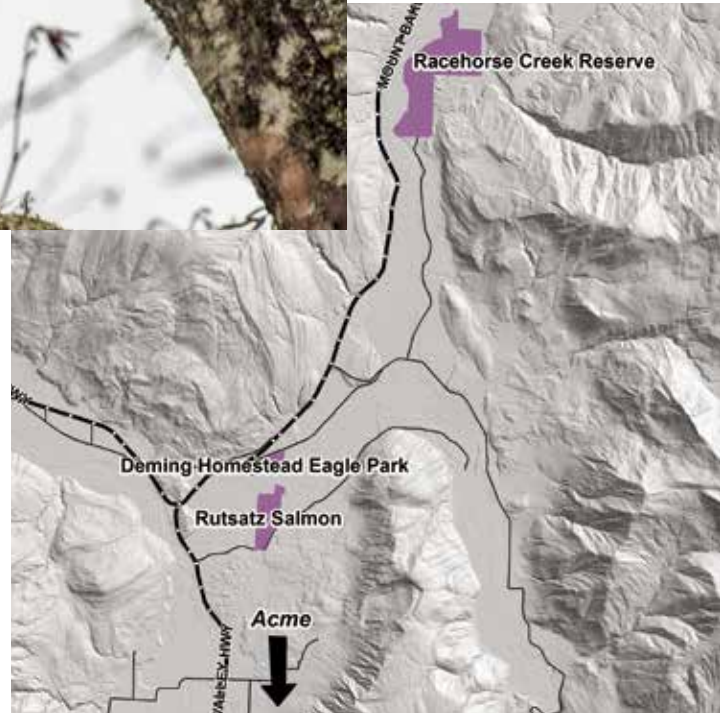
One of the goals of the Whatcom Land Trust is to preserve and protect habitat for wildlife. Many properties are specifically stewarded for salmon, eagle and elk habitat. We hold a number of properties where you can view and photograph eagles while keeping a respectful distance.

During low tides in the Salish Sea you can see eagles at Point Whitehorn or Lily Point. The last time I travelled to Lily Point I counted nearly 100 eagles feeding on the mud flats or keeping watch in nearby trees. But, it is in winter when numbers along the Nooksack River really swell as the eagles come to feast on spawning Pacific salmon. Last December, staff working on properties along the North Fork Nooksack counted more than 500 eagles in just one day! That same day I was visiting Maple Creek Reach and counted more than 150 eagles at that site.

Rich Bowers is Executive Director of Whatcom Land Trust, and a naturalist and photographer in his own right. In this article Rich shares his photography, personal passion for wildlife and a few favorite places to view these magnificent creatures, right in our own backyard.



*Bald Eagle, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, just across from WLT's Ladies of the Lake property. I watched this mature eagle settle onto the branch of a nearby tree to enjoy lunch.*



This will be an off-year for pink salmon who appear on a fixed two-year cycle, so numbers will be lower this year. Pink salmon are the most abundant species of Pacific salmon and pink salmon fry migrate quickly to the sea. After eighteen months in the ocean, maturing fish return to their river of origin to spawn. So the number of adult pinks returning to freshwater in an odd-numbered year is much higher than the number returning in an even-numbered.

The Deming Homestead Eagle Park is an easy place to access—only a tiny detour off the Mt. Baker Highway gets you to a well-tended park where you can comfortably spend an hour or two observing the eagles. Deming Homestead Eagle Park is a Whatcom County Park, created through a donation from the Rensink Family to the Land Trust, before being transferred to the county as a park. Another favorite spot is Rutsatz Salmon property located just upstream of the confluence of the South Fork and main stem Nooksack. This is a perfect place to take a quiet walk and view eagles in season. The Racehorse Creek property along the North Fork Road also offers seasonal eagle viewing.

Finally, in late autumn, before the North Fork salmon runs start in earnest, Kokanee spawn in Fir Creek on the southern end of Lake Whatcom. Kokanee salmon is a non-anadromous form of sockeye. Eagles can be seen at the confluence of Fir Creek and Lake Whatcom, across South Bay Drive from WLT's Ladies of the Lake Preserve and accessed through the Whatcom County day use park. Last year I counted nearly 100 eagles along the creek and Lake Whatcom shoreline, and had great viewing from my car since it was pouring rain!

All of these properties are open to the public for wildlife viewing and photography. Before visiting eagle viewing locations please see related notes on eagle viewing. This year, we also plan to host salmon and eagle viewing raft trips with our business partner Wild and Scenic River Tours. Please see back cover of this issue of *The Steward* to learn more.

WHEN VIEWING EAGLES

Thank you for following leave no trace principals when visiting WLT properties. Please adhere to all posted guidelines. Usage guidelines generally include non-motorized traffic only; no camping, fires or hunting. Some sites have other requirements.

- Always keep a respectful distance from wildlife and keep sounds to a minimum.
- When viewing eagles or any wildlife be sure to respect private property, and only enter lands you are sure are open to the public. If you are not sure, ask permission first.
- If you would like to visit a specific WLT property during salmon and eagle season, please give the office a call. 360.650.9470.

During the prime eagle season from December and January, be aware of traffic issues and be considerate of both fellow viewers and neighbors—viewers can get congested, blocking roads and traffic—especially at the Mosquito Lake Road Bridge and along the North Fork Road.



Scotch Broom Didn't Stand a Chance against the Backyard Collective

Colleen Carroll, Communications & Outreach Director

What do you get when you mix a gung-ho group of recreational specialists with a field of invasive, tenacious, scotch broom? You get over an acre of healthier land and a lot of laughs and camaraderie. Clearing scotch broom from around the base of young hardwoods prevents this aggressive weed from out-competing the native plants for water, nutrients and sunshine.

The Backyard Collective is the brainstorm of the Conservation Alliance, a national group of 160 outdoor industry companies that uses its combined annual membership dues to assist grassroots organizations in the day-to-day work of protecting threatened wild habitat and recreation lands. The Alliance supported Whatcom Land Trust's 2014 effort to protect more than 2,200 acres of Galbraith Mountain, and Whatcom Land Trust was the first Northwest Washington organization selected as the beneficiary of the Conservation Alliance Backyard Collective. In this case the Collective included twenty employees of Superfeet, and two hardy workers from Arc'Teryx, another Conservation Alliance member from just across the border. Other Alliance members here in Whatcom County include REI, American Alpine Institute, Ltd., Nu Muu, and Runner Girl Races, LLC.

Early on the morning of August 18, 2016, land stewards and volunteers ventured out to Maple Creek Reach near Maple Falls on the North Fork of the Nooksack River to help improve the riparian zone. A healthy riparian zone—the area alongside the rivers and streams—is known to be an essential ingredient for a vibrant stream. Forests and native plants alongside the streams and creeks shade and cool the water and support a healthy microclimate for salmon and other water animals. The scotch broom had to go. Armed with loppers, weed wrenches, sturdy constitutions and gallons of water, the Backyard Collective tackled a tough job in the hot August sun.

Salmon habitat is at the heart of land preservation and stewardship at Maple Creek Reach. All five species of Pacific Salmon can be found on Maple Creek Reach depending on the month and year (pinks only migrate every other year). This includes spring Chinook, Coho, fall chum, pink, sockeye as well as winter-run steelhead and bull trout. Chinook, bull trout and winter-run steelhead are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species

Anything you do, where you can step back and see the fruits of your labor, feeds your heart and soul. I just wanted to pick more fruit.—Jeff Grant

Superfeet, Director of Outreach & Fit

Act. Coho is a state species of concern. In addition, bear, coyotes, eagles, otters and bobcats have been observed hunting along the lower creek. The lower reach is also beaver heaven!

Today, the riparian zone along the reach at Maple Creek is filling with young plantings of western red cedar, Sitka spruce and other native trees and shrubs all planted by enthusiastic volunteers since Whatcom Land Trust began restoration work in 2003.

Every day we facilitate stewardship of Maple Creek Reach and other reserves for healthy salmon habitat. We couldn't do it without participation from volunteers — who also make our work in the field enormously productive and fun.

Superfeet is dedicated not only to bringing out the athlete in all of us but also to supporting a range of social and environmental causes. Jeff Grant, Director of Outreach at Superfeet talks about the philosophy of giving, saying, "When you build a culture where you put people ahead of profit it has a huge impact on the spirit of your employees and work culture. This in turn cultivates a business-wide ethic of community service orientation within the Superfeet family. *Be the Awesome* is Superfeet's way of engaging with its community. It resulted from thoughtful questions such as "What is the right thing to do for our employees, our company and our communities?" *Be the Awesome* translates into giving to the community 1,000 dedicated volunteer hours. In this instance the recipient of the *Be the Awesome* team was Whatcom Land Trust. Whatcom Land Trust is proud to call Superfeet a Business Partner. To learn more about the benefits to your company of becoming a Whatcom Land Trust Business Partner, contact Jill Clark, Development Director at 360.746.3423.

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When Salmon, Floods and People Collide: The Canyon Lake Creek Alluvial Fan

Gabe Epperson, Conservation Director

Overview

It was October 2015 and Don and Susan Higdon had just finished renovating their dream home off Mosquito Lake Road near the small town of Welcome in rural Whatcom County. What should have been the beginning of a long deserved and relaxing retirement for the couple quickly turned into a nightmare. Canyon Lake Creek, which descends from Canyon Lake toward the lower Middle Fork of the Nooksack River about a mile upstream from the confluence of the Middle and North forks, had swollen to an unimaginable level, downing tall cottonwoods and carrying large amounts of sediment down the steep canyon into Don and Susan's back yard. Don watched as the Creek jumped its previous path and the bulk of the tributary was now crashing into the corner of their newly renovated home.

Like many other tributaries to mountain rivers in Washington, Canyon Lake Creek experiences major flooding events combined with large quantities of sediment from landslides in the upper watershed. As newcomers to Whatcom County Don and Susan were discovering what many previous landowners have experienced over the years—life on an alluvial fan can be beautiful and dangerous. What at first glance appears to be an idyllic and quiet location in the woods by a trickling stream can quickly transform into a scene from a disaster movie.

Property owners downstream from Don and Susan's home had also experienced repeated flooding events that were threatening the family cabins and camp sites they had constructed since this 30-acre strip of land had been subdivided and sold as recreational lots in the 1970s. Canyon Lake Creek has caused the County difficulties over the last several decades, threatening to destroy the bridge on Mosquito Lake Road crossing the Creek, which would cut off a County road important for access to large blocks of commercial timber tracts and recreational lands and isolating many rural residents.

Even before the 2015 flooding event, Whatcom County's Public Works Department and Washington State's Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) had been working in this critical area and had contacted the Whatcom Land Trust in June 2015 to help identify a solution to the ongoing problem. In addition to the threat to the County's road and bridge infrastructure, someone



downstream from Don and Susan had constructed levees with an excavator using rocks, logs and sand bags to protect their properties. By rerouting the creek away from their properties, landowners also cut off numerous side channels, pools and prime spawning gravels in the forested floodplains for endangered Chinook salmon. WDFW thought that there may be an opportunity to partner with the County and resolve the ongoing threat to human infrastructure and fish habitat.

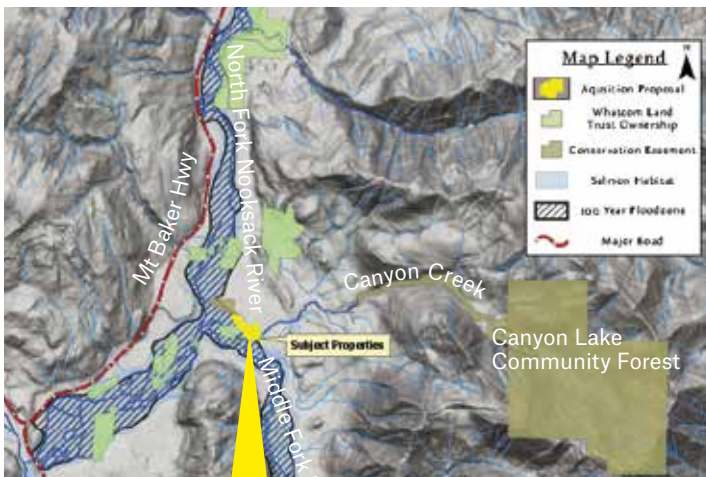
Ecological Benefits

Whatcom County's Salmon Recovery Plan characterized the lower Middle Fork as the third most important area for restoration and the second most important for protection in the Nooksack basin for Chinook habitat. Land acquisition for restoration and protection purposes are the highest priority strategies in this stretch of the river as identified through planning efforts with our key local salmon recovery partners — the Nooksack Indian Tribe, the Lummi Nation, Whatcom County, Washington State Department of Natural Resources and WDFW. The early Chinook is one of two unique genetic strains in the Nooksack River, the South Fork early Chinook being the second. Restoration activities are expected to have a significant impact on recovery.

The Middle Fork is on the EPA's list of critically impaired waterways for temperature, which affects productivity of spawning and egg incubation. Increased temperatures may delay upstream migration, increase adult Chinook pre-spawn mortality and reduce reproductive success. High temperatures during incubation of eggs also decrease the survival rates of emerging juvenile salmon in the spring. Increased summer water temperatures are the result of channel widening, and lack of stable forested islands and riparian stands that once shaded side channels. Protecting forested side channels in the floodplains will help with water temperatures, large wood recruitment for pool formation and other habitat forming processes. The lack of habitat diversity in the lower Middle Fork has a high impact on all salmonid life stages, especially fry, holding, over-summer rearing, and pre-spawn migrants. The most limited habitat types are primary pools, backwater pools, complex edge habitats and side channels, most of which are present in the Canyon Lake Creek alluvial fan.

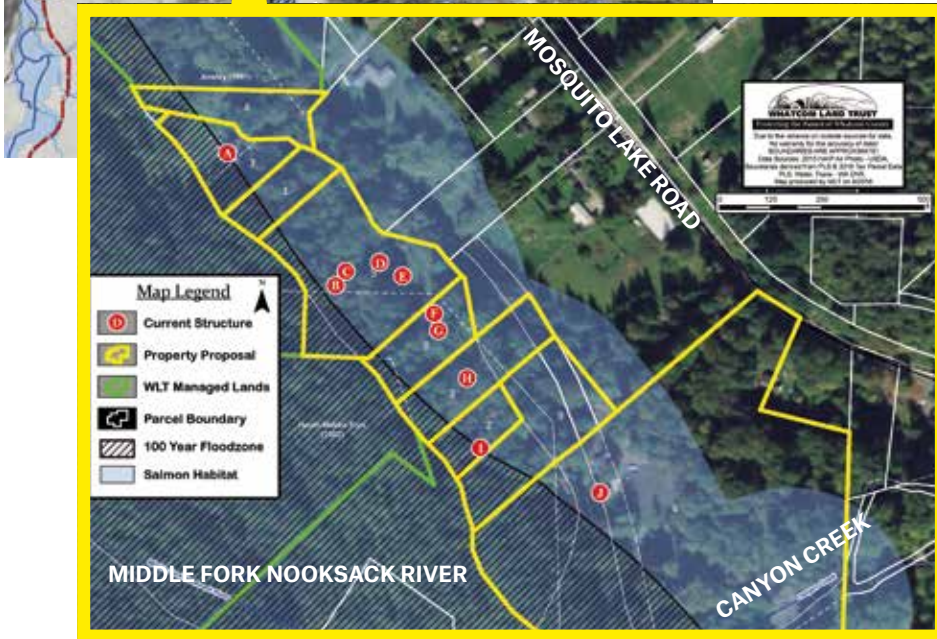


Pictured to the left Don and Susan's home off of Mosquito Lake Rd downstream from Canyon Lake Creek Bridge (12/4/2015).



Project Highlights

- Acquisition and restoration on this alluvial fan to help reverse over a century of degradation of the floodplain forest along the lower Middle Fork Nooksack River.
- Reconnection and restoration of approximately 25-40 acres of floodplain forest for side channel salmon habitat, and roughly 1,000+ linear feet of stream/river corridor.
- Partnering with eight willing landowners, resulting in a win-win solution that helps them with conservation strategies benefitting people and salmon habitat.
- Advance efforts in the lower Middle Fork Nooksack to protect and enhance salmon habitat and reconnect floodplains to the River.



Current Status

Fortunately, Don and Susan were able to move their home back from the Creek far enough that they should be safe from future flooding events, but the experience has certainly opened their eyes to the extreme volatility of alluvial fans and mountain creeks and rivers in Washington. Whatcom Land Trust is working with Don and Susan to subdivide their property and purchase the resulting 7-acre parcel that includes the forested floodplain that we can then work with local partners to restore. This strategy will benefit all sides—floodplains, fish and humans.

There are eight property owners in the target area. The acquisition of their properties combined with ecologically-minded construction work could restore alluvial fan functionality and reduce flood risk.



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The mission of Whatcom Land Trust is to preserve and protect wildlife habitat, scenic, agricultural and open space lands in Whatcom County for future generations by securing interests in land and promoting land stewardship.



The accreditation seal is awarded to land trusts meeting the highest national standards for excellence and conservation permanence.

412 N. Commercial St., Bellingham, WA 98225 (360) 650-9470 info@whatcomlandtrust.org www.whatcomlandtrust.org

Winter Eagle Viewing from the Nooksack River

Sunday January 8, 2016

Join us to see salmon, eagles and Whatcom Land Trust properties from the Nooksack River. In mid-January Whatcom Land Trust is offering a special rafting trip with our Business Partner Wild and Scenic River Tours. The adventure includes a half day on the Nooksack River, a picnic lunch, and you'll be joined by Rich Bowers, Executive Director of the Whatcom Land Trust. To learn more about eagles, look inside this issue of *The Steward*, for Rich Bowers' article on Winter Eagle Viewing in Whatcom County.

To Reserve Your Spot on a Tour

Tickets are \$150 to reserve your place on this adventure. This pays for the raft trip and lunch, and supports the work of the Whatcom Land Trust—Preserving the Nature of Whatcom County.

Tours have a maximum capacity of 30. We're going rain or shine! To confirm please call our office at 360.650.9740 and we'll provide specific details for your adventure.

