



## OKANAGAN SIMILKAMEEN STEWARDSHIP NEWS

### JANUARY 2017

#### Community Clean-Ups and Green Ups

Thanks to volunteers and funders and partners like the Community Foundation of the South Okanagan | Similkameen, TD Tree Days and City of Penticton, Habitat Conservation Trust Foundation, Wildlife Habitat Canada and Environment and Climate Change Canada, Okanagan Similkameen Stewardship was able to make a real difference this past fall.

Over 100 volunteers from the community, including those from South Okanagan Naturalists' Club, Nature Kids BC and Girl Guides, got their hands dirty and planted over 1000 native trees and shrubs, and removed over 300 pounds of garbage from public parks and trails in the Okanagan and Similkameen valleys.



# STEWARDSHIP IN ACTION

## Spotlight on Stewards: The Sopow Family

When Joan and Vern Sopow bought their dream property some 15 years ago, they knew they had their work cut out for them. The 35-acre parcel, located in Faulder BC just west of Summerland, was mostly dense forest with a section of Trout Creek running through it.

"As we started to develop the property, putting in fences and fields on about 17 acres, we learned very quickly that when you disturb soil, weeds grow. Soon we had this prairie of knapweed to deal with. Some days I thought I was out of my mind, that we'd never get through it," exclaims Joan.

Not wanting to spray with chemicals, the couple spent the first several years hand-pulling weeds. Eventually they were able to gain control of the weeds on their pastures. What was left to tackle was an embankment that Joan describes as her last frontier.

"Each spring I would start pulling knapweed and I'd get about 150 feet done and that was it. Then the next spring I would start all over again because the weeds would be back."

Today, the Sopows operate three businesses on their property. Joan runs a horse training and coaching business called Faulder Badlands Sport Horses and is also Director of South Okanagan Therapeutic Riding Association. Together they own Lastfandango Cattle Company, focussing on farm gate sales of naturally born and bred beef. It was through her coaching business that Joan met Alyson Skinner, Executive Director of Okanagan Similkameen Stewardship (OSS).

"At first, I just knew her as the plant lady," laughs Joan. "But then I started talking to her more and more about what she does and she became this wealth of information. I started asking all these questions about plants and weeds and we talked about what we've done and what we wanted to continue to do here. She helped me with what to pull and what

not to pull and I'm still learning which plants are noxious and which aren't."

After talking to Alyson about how OSS helps landowners, Joan and her husband knew it was the right program for them. OSS assists landowners with stewardship and enhancement of natural areas on their properties in a variety of ways, from managing noxious weeds and planting native plants, to installing bird, bat and owl boxes and so on. This past summer, OSS helped the Sopows with hand-pulling invasive weeds and in the Fall planted nearly 500 trees and shrubs on the hillside including Nootka Rose, Snowberry, Oregon Grape, and dogbane.



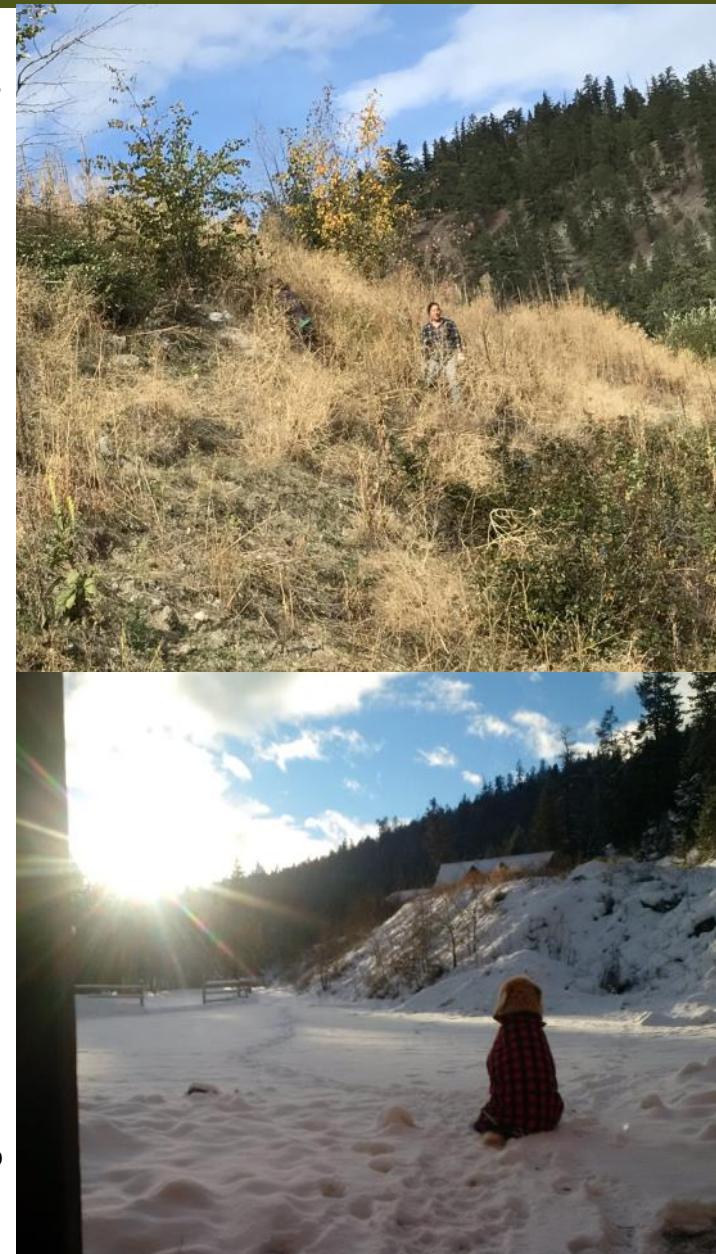
# STEWARDSHIP NEWS

"Joan and Vern were a natural fit to become Wildlife Habitat Stewards since over half of their property is undeveloped," says Skinner. "These undeveloped natural areas like riparian areas, grasslands and low elevation forest are important habitats for wildlife including species at risk. Since I've known the Sopows, I've seen a variety of songbirds, birds of prey, moose, deer, bears and even Nuttall's Cottontail and amphibians using their property."

"Being a steward doesn't mean you can't use your land," continues Skinner. "That's one of the common misconceptions, I think. Our Wildlife Habitat Stewards still maintain their agricultural, tourism and other land use practices while implementing best management practices for wildlife. It's about balance."

"I'm really proud of what we've done. We've got a bunch of beautiful spring flowers that come up every year now, balsamroot and wild roses, and every year more and more are coming in. This spring we want to focus on making our property more bird and bee friendly," says Joan.

"The Stewardship program really marries what we are doing with our cattle. We're trying to do the right thing and you learn as you go. It's an evolution. The more you learn, the more you want to take care of your environment long term. We're able to create a natural beef product from a healthy natural environment. It's great to be able to say that."



## Meet Jenny Freeman, Stewardship Technician



Jenny Freeman has joined Okanagan Similkameen Stewardship as our Stewardship Technician, dedicated to our work in the North Okanagan. In her new role, Jenny will engage landowners and communities on conservation, stewardship and enhancement initiatives throughout the region. Jenny immigrated to Canada from South Africa, and has lived in the North Okanagan since 2007. Coming from a farming family, Jenny has lived and worked on export fruit farms for the last 20 years. She has a professional background in education, and environmental journalism. Jenny is passionate about supporting stewardship in our beautiful Okanagan valley. She is currently completing her MA in Education, and hopes to pursue a PhD. in Agroecology. You can contact Jenny by email at [jenny@osstewardship.ca](mailto:jenny@osstewardship.ca).

## STEWARDSHIP IN ACTION

### Spotlight on Stewards: Clubhouse Farm

Many of us hold nostalgic memories of our youth. Those dog days of summer when we'd fly out the door on a Saturday afternoon and hear, 'Be home for dinner!' as the screen door snapped shut behind us.

Off we were on our next adventure, traipsing through the forest in back of our house, running around the school yard collecting as many insects as we could find, or playing a game of hopscotch drawn in chalk on the sidewalk in front of our best friend's place a couple blocks away. The world was our oyster and we were free to explore it.



These days, for far too many of our kids, those experiences don't exist. In fact, in the past 20 years, child's play has changed dramatically. Kids don't spend near enough time outside. Think about a simple game of Kick the Can. It's within that type of game play that we learn to navigate group dynamics and in turn, gain incredibly valuable life skills – communication, cooperation, negotiation, kindness, compromise, fairness, conflict resolution, empathy, the list goes on. Not to mention what a good brisk walk, a peaceful hour or so next to a lazy river, or an invigorating bike ride in the hills can do for the soul.

For Caroline Noga, a 30-year veteran in child care, the writing was on the wall. Kids needed to get outside. As Executive Director of The Clubhouse Childcare Centre in Kelowna, she could do something about it.

"I wanted Clubhouse Childcare Centre's programs to be focused on nature," say Noga, who knew some orchardists on the outskirts of Kelowna that had an unused section of land. She would approach them with an idea.



With the landowners on board, it wasn't long before Clubhouse started busing kids out to the 4-acre property. Clubhouse staff erected a fence for safety, put up tents, laid out a bunch of tools such as spades and pails and just let the kids loose, describes Noga.

"It was a big transition for everyone. Indoor play is so scheduled and structured and here we had this open space for the kids to roam. At first they just walked in a line around the perimeter, but before long, one of them, a three year old girl, climbed to the top of this big dirt pile and that was it. She broke the ice and after that the kids just thrived."

What started as a pilot project in 2012 has now become an award-winning, non-profit organization. The property, now known as Clubhouse Farms, has expanded to 12 acres and includes an open area with several natural play spaces, an art studio, a garden circle and chicken coop, an orchard and just over 4 acres of forested riparian land situated in a gully. Kids that were once afraid of daddy long-legs or getting dirty are now helping plant peas and learning about how peas add nitrogen to the soil that helps other plants.

# STEWARDSHIP NEWS

"We have three distinctive ecosystems here," exclaims Audrey Hystad, Clubhouse Farms Manager. "We have ponderosa pine grasslands with prickly pear cactus and yarrow and a more temperate zone with agriculture and different species. As we started to press out and use more of the gully and riparian area we realized it hadn't been touched in decades. The property was settled in the early 1900 and plowed over and then just left. That left a chance for a lot of invasive plants to move in. But

there's also some real valuable native plants down there. When we learned about Okanagan Similkameen Stewardship (OSS) we knew it was the perfect match."

Last summer Audrey contacted OSS and they made arrangements to come out and look at the property. "Our job is to support landowners with conservation, stewardship and enhancement of important wildlife habitats. This riparian forest is very likely habitat for the Western Screech Owl, a bird that is Federally listed as Threatened. Almost three quarters of our riparian habitats in the Okanagan have been lost, making this spot at Clubhouse Farm and their pledge as Wildlife Habitat Stewards very significant," says Stewardship Biologist Lia McKinnon.

At the site visit, OSS identified priorities for land management, primarily to manage the invasive species. OSS student



interns worked with Clubhouse Farm staff in identifying and removing invasive plants in the riparian area on the property and will continue to monitor and restore the area in future years.

"As we walked through their riparian forest, we knew it was an excellent opportunity to not only work with the landowners, but also to reach youth, with the children as stewards of the forest," continues McKinnon. "Without a doubt this partnership has been really great for everyone involved."

*We really wanted to work with the land and get the kids outside more often. Now the difference is ownership. If kids grow up with an awareness and appreciation of our natural world, as adults, when they're asked to help save it, they will.*

*This project is so hopeful.*

Audrey Hydras, Clubhouse Farms Manager

# STEWARDSHIP IN ACTION

## Call for Projects!

Do you want help improving natural areas on your property?

Become a Wildlife Habitat Steward and your project may be eligible for partnership with OSS! **Becoming a Wildlife Habitat Steward is simple!** It involves entering into a voluntary Stewardship Agreement with Okanagan Similkameen Stewardship. This agreement outlines your vision for your property, the area you are managing for the benefit of wildlife and how it is being stewarded with our assistance.



Okanagan Similkameen Stewardship is currently in partnership with 70 Wildlife Habitat Stewards who are caring for over 3000 acres of natural areas, including grasslands, shorelines, wetlands, rugged terrain and low elevation forests. Our Wildlife Habitat Stewards include ranchers, orchardists, viticulturalists, bed & breakfasts, homesteads, ecotourism businesses, and outdoor schools. While an incredibly diverse set of land uses, our Wildlife Habitat Stewards all share one thing: a commitment to caring for natural areas on their properties that support a variety of wildlife.

Some examples of projects we have assisted with:

- ➔ Native grass, shrub and tree planting
- ➔ Non-native fish removal
- ➔ Installation of owl nest boxes
- ➔ Installation of bat boxes
- ➔ Livestock and ATV exclusion fencing
- ➔ Invasive plant management

Contact us at  
[info@osstewardship.ca](mailto:info@osstewardship.ca)  
or by phone at 250-809-1980  
if you have a habitat  
improvement project you  
would like help with.



## Bighorn Sheep Update



California Bighorn Sheep are an iconic sight on rocky hillsides in the South Okanagan-Similkameen. During winter, it can seem like Bighorn Sheep are common, as herds move down into valleys to escape the cold and snow in the mountains but unfortunately, California Bighorn Sheep are a Threatened species in British Columbia. At one time, sheep were widely distributed across the region, but urban expansion, human activity, and an increase in agriculture have removed and/or greatly transformed a huge proportion of their habitats. Road mortality and disease transmission from domestic animals have also decimated their numbers – almost 75% of the Okanagan herd died during a pneumonia outbreak in 1999 that was eventually traced back to domestic sheep. Contact as brief as touching noses can transmit viruses, which is why using separation fencing with domestic sheep is critical when a wild herd of bighorns lives nearby.

Since 1999, an awareness campaign and a push to keep domestic and wild sheep separated has seen the bighorn sheep slowly rebound, but serious concerns have been growing about another disease: psoroptic (*pronounced sore-op-tic*) mange. The *Psoroptes* mite was discovered on one ram near Ollala in 2011 and is thought to have come from infected wild bighorn sheep in Washington. Since 2011, the *Psoroptes* infection rate in the Similkameen herd of bighorns has skyrocketed and the population has declined almost 75%. To mitigate the potential for infection of the healthy East Okanagan herd, the Ministry of Environment is planning to relocate the entire infected MacIntyre Bluff herd to the Similkameen Valley, which has the added benefit of giving the declining Similkameen herd a much-needed population boost. There is also a study in this area on the effectiveness of a new potential immunization program for wild sheep against the mite.

A bighorn sheep infected with the *Psoroptes* mite will have heavy crusting lesions around their ears, making the ears seem ‘droopy’. They may also be thin and have bald patches or sores along their body.



If you see a sheep that appears to have signs of psoroptic mange in the Okanagan Valley, please call the Ministry of Environment's Penticton office at 250-490-8200.

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## Winter Wildlife

Thanks to our mild climate, the Okanagan-Similkameen provides some stellar wintering grounds for a good number of migratory birds! Some of the more commonly observed winter residents include:

The **American Coot** can be seen hanging around in massive winter flocks along the shores of nearly any Okanagan water body. Awkward and chicken-like on land, they can dive smoothly up to 6 feet underwater to find food. The American Coot's coal-black body, red eyes, and ungainly large white bill make it a simple bird to learn and identify.



**Trumpeter Swans** can usually be seen on Vaseux Lake in the winter but are also often present on other Okanagan lakes. They are Canada's largest waterfowl species with wingspans up to six feet in length! Young swans are a grey-brown, turning white at approximately 1 year old. The distinctive white body, black bill and gracefulness make Trumpeter Swans highly recognizable birds.



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Alyson Skinner

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Patrick Allen, Director

Jennifer Miles, Director

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The **Northern Shrike** prefers open areas to hunt for the insects they eat. A uniquely predatory songbird, Shrikes will kill their prey – large insects or even small mice! - on the sharp branches or spines of trees and bushes

to eat later. A grey, robin-sized bird, the Northern Shrike has black wing edges, a black tail, and black mask.



Male **Buffleheads**, with their distinctive white 'cap' and iridescent back and neck, are a common sight paddling around with other overwintering ducks.

Although they are occasionally seen here in the summer, Buffleheads tend to breed in northern Canada and Alaska. Females are a brownish-charcoal colour with a white cheek patch to match their mate's cap.

For more information, please contact:

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