



OKANAGAN SIMILKAMEEN STEWARDSHIP NEWS

November 2021

Planting from Spallumcheen to Cawston

Nearly 3300 native trees and shrubs planted this year!

If you follow our monthly e-news or social media pages, you may have noticed that OSS seems to plant primarily in the fall. In our dry climate planting just in time for fall rains and winter snow is a great way to maximize our plant's chances at survival, especially in areas where irrigation isn't an option or is limited by drought. Spring plantings tend to be less successful without irrigation because the plants have less time to put down roots before the hot dry summer weather.

Most of the plants that OSS plants in our restoration projects are found in riparian and wetland environments and they grow in the low, moist areas beside creeks, ponds, rivers and lakes. Riparian habitat is essential to more than three quarters of the wildlife species found in the Okanagan but it is also at risk - more than 70% of Okanagan riparian habitats have been lost since the 1800s. Healthy riparian areas help filter chemicals and other pollutants contaminants from runoff before it reaches the water, reduce erosion by anchoring soil with plant roots, and help slow flooding by absorbing some of the excess water.

This fall, OSS planted at eight different locations in the Okanagan and Similkameen from Cawston all the way to Spallumcheen! This is the biggest planting year we have ever done, both in in the number of plants and the geographical spread of our planting locations! Many thanks to our fall field crew of Bianca Li, Katelyn Michaud and Hailey Mazzatenta! We wish them all the best!



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From vineyard to riparian forest in the making

A few years ago, Mount Boucherie Winery purchased a riverside property in Cawston with a 12 acre vineyard that flooded every spring. Realizing the spot was unsuitable for grapes, vineyard manager Brett Thiessen contacted OSS to see if we could help restore it back to riparian forest. While the vineyard was lying fallow (unused), the nearby forest had begun to reclaim the it, with stands of sandbar willow, goldenrod and milkweed scattered around. The area supports wildlife from Western Screech-Owl and Lewis' Woodpecker to Monarchs and Great Basin Spadefoot and being along the Similkameen. In addition, being adjacent to a Nature Trust of BC property as well as close to Kobau Regional Park, made it a great candidate for a large-scale restoration project.

Over the past 4 months, OSS staff and the Mount Boucherie vineyard crew decommissioned the entire ten-acre vineyard between the dike and Similkameen River. In total, we removed approximately nine kilometres of irrigation, 19 kilometres of wire, and over 1,000 posts to make way for the UN-development!

Following this, OSS staff and volunteers planted 1,550 native trees and shrubs to help jump start the forest regrowth. Plants included cottonwood trees, sandbar willows, and wild roses, among many others. These plants will soon provide habitat for wildlife and improve filtration of water before it enters the river.



Thank you Cawston & Keremeos!

Volunteers break a record!

We put a call out to the community to help us plant such a huge number of trees and the folks of Cawston and Keremeos definitely stepped up!

On Saturday, October 16, powered by coffee and delicious muffins from stewards at the Grist Mill & Gardens, and apples from nearby stewards, the Browns, nearly 20 people arrived at the volunteer day to help OSS staff get approximately 800 large trees and shrubs planted in under four hours- colour us impressed!! This was the largest number of plants that we have ever planted in one day in the history of our organization by about two-fold! We hope that volunteers will take pride and walk the dike in future years and watch this little forest grow.

Thanks so much to the volunteers and community members who helped make this a possibility!



Update on Bighorn Sheep

A new threat for our beleaguered bighorns

Bighorn Sheep are a favorite for wildlife watchers, photographers and even commuters in the Okanagan and Similkameen. Often hard to spot in their rugged terrain habitat, they move into the open during the summer and fall. Unfortunately, Bighorn Sheep are now a threatened species in BC. Habitat loss and a loss of habitat connectivity (roads and fences blocking movement through different habitats), as well as several diseases, make life as a Bighorn Sheep very difficult.



In 1999-2000, about 70% of South Okanagan bighorn sheep died from a Pneumonia virus that is carried by domestic sheep and is transmitted to bighorns through nose touches. It is important for local sheep farmers to make an effort to eliminate pneumonia in their sheep herds and mitigate transmission risk to bighorns whenever possible. Eliminating pneumonia in domestic sheep herds can be done by separating lambs earlier and ensuring they can't touch infected adults after they have been weaned. Other mitigation strategies include double fencing, or using multiple pastures and moving domestic sheep away from edge pastures at times of year when bighorns are around. Although the population has recovered from the 1999 pneumonia outbreak, this virus was detected in South Okanagan bighorn herds again last year.

This fall, bighorn sheep have also been facing Bluetongue Disease, with multiple deaths confirmed in our area. Bluetongue is carried by a type of biting fly and affects hoofed animals like bighorns, mountain goats, deer, and elk, as well as domestic sheep, cows, and goats. It does not affect humans. Provincial wildlife biologists will be doing counts of bighorns this winter to get a better idea of the impact of this disease.



What is rugged terrain habitat?



Rugged terrain habitat is all of the jagged cliffs, steep rocky scrambles, and sheer bluffs throughout the Okanagan. Though it sometimes doesn't look like much, it is critical for a variety of wildlife like Bighorn Sheep, Canyon Wrens, Spotted Bats and Peregrine Falcons. The slopes of loose rock at bottom of these steep areas are used by many of our reptiles, too. Rugged terrain habitat can usually protect itself from threats, since it isn't much good for farming or building but its largest threat is isolation, as these areas can become habitat 'islands' in the developed and recreation lands around them. To reduce your impact, always stay on established routes when climbing, hiking, or biking.

North Vernon Park

A project with amazing community support!

To celebrate World Rivers Day, OSS staff and over 30 volunteer planters made their way to North Vernon Park along the BX Trail and planted nearly 300 native trees and shrubs to enhance the wetland and riparian habitat along the creek! Later on in the week, nearly 25 employees from local company Tekmar came out to help put 400 more plants in the ground.

This park is the location of an important Garter Snake hibernation den and also provides habitat for many other species such as Long-toed Salamanders, Mallards, Red-winged Blackbirds, and Great Blue Herons. The planting project builds onto a different project from ten years ago on the same site that dug a pair of ponds and surrounded them with dense, healthy thickets of willow.

In addition to planting, 15 local residents also attended a presentation all about the different snakes of the Okanagan, how they live and how to be Snake Smart when outdoors. After the presentation, snake ambassador Nora the Gophersnake made an appearance and showed everyone how calm, cool, and collected snakes really are!



We gratefully acknowledge that our work takes place on the traditional and unceded territory of the Syilx Okanagan people.

Partners in stewardship and conservation

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