

## **President's Report: June 2015 to June 2016**

The last 12 months have been a very busy time for the members of the Somenos Marsh Wildlife Society.

### **Somenos Management Plan (SMP) review**

Top of the list is the ongoing review of the SMP, a document that guides the members of the Somenos Management Committee (SMC), a group that I chair at the present time. This group includes the SMWS, Nature Trust of BC, Ducks Unlimited, BC Forest Discovery Centre, Cowichan Tribes, Cowichan Valley Naturalists, BC Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations (FLNRO) and the Municipality of North Cowichan.

The original SMP was signed in 2001 and was due for review after five years. Being ten years past overdue it has become the main focus of the SMC this past year. The main work of the review is now complete and the final draft is near completion.

The new SMP will include:

- New lands being added to the Somenos Marsh Conservation Area (SMCA) due to dike construction mitigation,
- Official SMCA boundaries and rezoning to Conservation Zoning
- Updates to the management area designations and management priorities

### **Current and upcoming projects**

As you might remember from last years President's Report, we hired Elizabeth Bailey as our part time Program Coordinator to lead our active projects, manage our growing volunteer base and to help coordinate our annual WildWings Nature and Arts Festival. Her employment is paid by project grants. Unfortunately we are now sitting in limbo waiting for word on three federal grants we need to continue some of last years work and to challenge two other project areas that need attention.

### **The Water Quality and Salmon Habitat Project**

This project is entering its third year. It is a very successful project where citizen science volunteers test water quality parameters on a regular basis at the mouths of the three creeks entering the Lake as well as in the centre of the Lake. Salmon smolt counts have also been conducted. Considering the very sad condition of Somenos Lake, we are hoping to continue this for as long as funding is found. A very informative report of past work and research is now on the Somenos Marsh website.

### **Stormwater Treatment Project**

Our first stormwater management pond on the north side of Beverly Street near the Fun Pacific golf driving range was constructed last summer and was later planted by volunteers and school groups. The pond was built in partnership with North Cowichan and managed to keep water in it for the entire hot summer last year. It is now all grown in and doing a fine job of cleaning some of the urban stormwater entering Somenos Marsh. With a successful grant to continue the work, we will construct 10 more ponds in the vicinity of the first to increase the areas capacity for taking impurities out of the urban stormwater.

### **Invasive Species Project**

We are becoming very concerned about the ongoing and rapid growth of invasive plants and animals in the Somenos system. With the recent discovery of Parrots Feather, a pond and aquarium plant that has found its way into Somenos Creek, joining the Yellow Flag Iris, American Bull Frogs and Sunfish, all of which are already very established in Somenos, the time has come to take action. These particular 4

invasives may never be erased and we may have to look at other, expensive procedures. With this in mind we have applied for a federal grant to spend three years researching, inventorying and undertaking some measures to apply controls in some high priority sites.

### **Somenos Creek Riparian Project**

With the discovery of Parrot's Feather in Somenos Creek, deteriorating water quality conditions in Somenos Lake and concerns of observers, the SMWS has initiated an informal partnership with Cowichan Tribes, Cowichan Tribes, and the federal Department of Fisheries, to seek long term funding to improve the Somenos Creek riparian corridor. Improved shading and a larger riparian area will help cool water temperatures and shade out invasive species that need bright sunlight to thrive. This will mainly entail planting and will be an excellent project to get community volunteers out and active.

### **Open Air Classroom Viewing Tower**

The tower project has been delayed somewhat due to last year's floodwaters at the tower location causing us to review the foundation design. We are also still short of our fundraising goal of \$50,000. We have \$15,000 in the bank now and all the lumber is precut and ready for timber framing prep. Many thanks to Canadian Bavarian Millwork and lumber for the donation of the cedar.

### **Facilities**

The *Somenos Marsh Open Air Classroom* continues to be one of the more popular destinations for a short nature walk or respite from the nearby urbanity. The parking lot and boardwalk are often crowded. We are now moving into the season when the grasses, bushes and trees grow quickly and can easily get out of hand. In particular is the ongoing problem of grass growing through the boardwalk planks. There are a small group of people who actively clean up the site, trim the bushes that are blocking the path or kicking rocks back to line the trail after someone booted them away who are all very appreciated for their small contributions but more help is needed. Please consider signing up if you love nature, like to work with your hands and are searching for a volunteer position where you will meet many wonderful people. Same goes for the board engraving and replacement, I am the only active volunteer in this department and would appreciate a new volunteer to take over this fun project.

The *Drinkwater Dock*, which we installed almost 10 years ago, is still a secret hideaway that many do not know about. High or low water it is a great place to walk out to, watch birds from, or launch a kayak or canoe. North Cowichan generously cleans it once a year but we also suffer from a lot of garbage strewn about the area, as well as graffiti and other minor vandalism.

The *Somenos Garry Oaks Protected Area*, is also a very popular place to visit and it is well used mostly by residents who have come to adopt it as their own personal park. This is causing some issues as dogs often run free, despite the dogs on leash requirement, and trail users sometimes go off trail into the sensitive wildflower areas.

*Yey'um'nuts* is the last of the Timbercrest disputed lands, the area where the burial site is located. We are happy to report that the land, apart from 3 house lots, has been transferred to the crown and that a management agreement between Cowichan Tribes and FLNRO is imminent. This agreement will bring additional protection to the land as well as a long-term restoration plan for the lands that were damaged by the developer.

### **Issues**

Diking Program

The diking works that now protect the urban core are basically complete except for the new pumphouse and concrete retaining walls north of Thriftys. The dike is already attracting many visitors and now provides a walkable visit to the OAC. Another benefit mentioned above, the dike construction caused some land trades that increases the size of the SMCA. It will be long time before the affect of the new diking can be known but there are already a number of issues cropping up. These include dogs running free into the fields that harbour nesting birds, non-native vegetation planting on the dike sides and introduced invasive species brought in with the fill. We will continue to monitor the situation.

#### Campers and garbage

Its nearing summer and the campers are returning to the Marsh. The new dike is giving them easy access to a number of treed areas bordering the dike. Last years camps were significant eyesores with needles found, making them too dangerous for volunteers to clean up any more. North Cowichan completed a few cleanups last year. We are working with the RCMP, North Cowichan, and needle exchange experts from Nanaimo to find a solution to this important issue. To date a couple of needle disposal boxes have been installed near the dike to reduce the risk of discarded needles and patrols have increased at the Drinkwater dock and York road areas.

#### Elevated Pedestrian Crossing seeking feedback

Many years ago when the SMWS was fighting the construction of the York Road connector bridge. We used the construction of a pedestrian bridge as an alternative to a vehicle bridge. We had a lot of support for this and have been campaigning many years behind the scenes for it too happen. There are many benefits to constructing the crossing including the physical connection of Somenos Marsh to it's other parts, the Somenos Garry Oaks and Yey' um nuts. Other benefits include improved walkability to town and bus stops, connections to other trail systems on the east side of Somenos Creek and Lake, and a safe detour from the Lakes Road hill for bicyclists and pedestrians alike. At one time both our members and the Timbercrest residents all supported the idea. Times change and so does opinions and it is no different in this case. Now some SMWS members are arguing against construction of the crossing for environmental reasons and some Timbercrest residents are against it fearing an influx of campers and homeless people into the Garry Oaks. Cowichan Tribes are concerned due to potential archaeological impacts. The SMWS currently supports the pedestrian crossing, but subject to an environmental and archaeological impact study first. The SMWS is discussing hosting a public meeting with residents to listen to their concerns. I would to get feedback from anyone with an opinion about this project.

#### Events

*WildWings 2015* was a great success and continues to become better known with increased participation. Last year's WildWings held the Celebrate Somenos Day at the OAC earlier in October than previous years to avoid rain. This paid off with increased numbers. The festival launch was not well attended but the art show was successful and very well attended. The *Voices for Nature Concert* with Holly Arntzen, Kevin Wright and the Wilds partnering with Alexander School children was a great success as well.

The *Voices for Nature Concert* returned this past spring as the *Rock the Salish Sea Concert* when we hosted Holly and Kevin back, this time featuring the Alex Aitken students. Again very successful, but the cost of the rental and theatre production as well as keeping ticket prices low, did not make a lot of profit.

*Wild Wings Nature & Arts Festival 2016 (WW16)* planning started when we formed a committee of marsh friends early in 2016 to review and revive WildWings since some events were poorly attended and the intended outcome of fund raising was not being achieved. The first thing we did was re brand

the name by adding Nature and Arts between WildWings and Festival to illustrate the broad area that the Festival encompasses. Our next decision was to model our WW16 after the highly successful Wings over the Rockies Festival in Invermere. Their festival features activities that participants pay to participate in. WW16 is considering offering as many as twenty-five different activities to enjoy. Some of the favourites so far are *birding at local wineries* and *First Nations medicine plant walks*. We are now in the final stages of organizing these events and expect to publish the full list by the end of June.

Another great addition to WW16 is the North American The Trumpeter Swan Society (TTSS) *Annual General Meeting and Swan Conference*, a five-day affair in mid November that will convene here in Duncan. This event will see approximately seventy-five visitors arrive in Duncan from all over North America for the conference. We share the conference hosting with the Cowichan Valley Naturalists and have developed an interesting program that locals can participate in. The theme of the conference is *Swans and Agriculture Working Together*. There will be 2 days of Swan presentations, an evening panel discussion about finding solutions to waterfowl and farming conflicts, a farm tour to experience crop damage first hand and a Friday evening WW16 and Swan Conference wrap up Gala. The Gala's keynote speaker will be Robert Bateman and most events will take place at the Quw' utsun' Conference Centre.

### **Map our Marshes free workshop**

Elizabeth Bailey, our Program Coordinator wanted to pass on that the SMWS is partnering with the BC Wildlife Federation Wetlands Education Program to bring a free Wetland mapping workshop to our community June 11th between 9am and 5pm. Visit the SMWS website for more info. This is a great opportunity for university students, environmental professionals, and community volunteer stewards to learn about the value of wetlands and to gain skills in GPS mapping and invasive plants, a growing problem in our local ecosystems. The workshop will be a classroom-based morning to prepare participants for fieldwork in the afternoon.

### **Thank you**

To Derrick Marven and his photographic/bird watcher cohorts who contribute to his wonderful 'Weekly Warblings' article that frequents our Facebook. Now everyone wants to know what is going on the back seat. To the citizen scientists and other volunteers who do all the volunteer work for us. Big or small commitment, it all Makes a Difference. Thank you everyone

Any questions, comments, feedback or volunteering questions?  
Contact me at [paul@fletcherfoto.ca](mailto:paul@fletcherfoto.ca)