



STEWARD *of the Semenos Marsh*

By Paul Fletcher



It was half a lifetime ago, in 1986, that I first set foot in Somenos Marsh. I had just arrived from Fort McMurray as an oil price refugee and, already missing the nature and landscapes of Alberta, I was looking for similar green spaces to explore and photograph. I was so surprised to find, right in the middle of my new hometown, a mini wilderness and a matching small-scale-nature centre to boot.

Visiting the Somenos Marsh Nature Centre, nestled in a small part of a former warehouse-type building ravaged by annual flooding, I met some old-timer naturalists manning the counter who were very happy to share their nature knowledge with anyone who had time to listen. I learned very quickly that Somenos was a great place for bird watching and other nature activities but was regularly under pressure from development, especially since the land was so centrally located in the Cowichan Valley.

I also learned that the name Somenos was derived from S'amuna', the name of the Cowichan village that once stood close to Somenos Lake and Creek. Oral history tells the story of one family who was responsible for stewarding Somenos as the lake and creek provided fish while the upland forests provided game, building materials and plants for food and medicine. Somenos Creek was also an important transportation corridor to the Cowichan Estuary and escape route, when needed, from the Estuary.

The arrival of settlers brought significant change to Somenos. Newcomers recognized very quickly that the Somenos bottom lands were agriculturally rich and it was not long before the area, then locally known as the 'Somenos Flats', was ditched, diked, fenced and farmed right to the edge of the lake.

As with most modern significant land interventions such as ditching and diking it was not long before the early newspapers were talking regularly about the Somenos 'flooding problem', a problem that remains with us to this day. One fringe benefit of the historical land use and annual flooding was the 'Flats' becoming a mecca for migrating waterfowl using it as a rest area when passing through or staying until spring.

The development eye was on Somenos throughout its post-colonization period. In the early part of the last century a wood mill with railway service occupied a significant portion of what is known today as the Open Air Classroom. The now-defunct Doman Industries, a local powerhouse lumber company at the time, also proposed a mill in Somenos but were refused due to a strong public outcry against such a venture. In later years this same site became home to a boat sales business known as Boatland.

The volunteers occupying the nature centre counter were members of the Cowichan Valley Naturalists, a group of dedicated nature lovers, who had for many years been lobbying the Municipality of North Cowichan to declare Somenos a bird sanctuary. This lobbying was not a new effort as highlighted in a Dec. 20, 1970 *Times Colonist* headline- Bullet-Free Somenos Thrives, birdwatchers meet at lake to celebrate & call to establish a Bird Sanctuary; as it was hunting in Somenos, and the subsequent municipal establishment of a no-shooting zone in the marsh, that fueled the call for a sanctuary.

The naturalists were not the only ones recognizing the importance of Somenos for migrating and overwintering waterfowl. In 1975 the Nature Trust of BC stepped in and purchased a large tract of land north of Bings Creek marking the beginning of land acquisition activities in Somenos. The Municipality of North Cowichan also stepped up to the plate purchasing the old 'Boatland' property to prevent a hotel from being built on the site.

Ducks Unlimited was also very active in Somenos during the '70s and '80s when they signed a long-term lease with the provincial government to manage and enhance the waterfowl nesting habitat found in the marsh bordering the Forest Museum. The habitat enhancements included the pond beside the highway, water control structures, and nesting islands built around the lake that, when viewed aerially, appeared as donuts in the landscape but are now all grown over.

I joined the Naturalists Board soon after finding Somenos. During my

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short sojourn on their board I met John Croockewit, the past Mayor of Hope, who shared my view about the importance of Somenos remaining in its natural state. He and I had many over-donuts conversations about how important it was to prevent further development on these valuable lands. We were early thinkers who recognized that the ecological services provided by the Somenos system more than likely outweighed the economic benefit that development would ever bring. We also saw the potential of Somenos, being located so centrally and close to an urban area, as an economic development opportunity to attract visitors to the valley.

The Naturalists were reticent to get too involved in the political aspects of land preservation and chose to support the creation of the Friends of Somenos with John and I departing the Naturalists board to create the new Society. The Naturalists generously provided some start-up money and by January 1989 the Friends of Somenos became the Somenos Marsh Wildlife Society (SMWS).

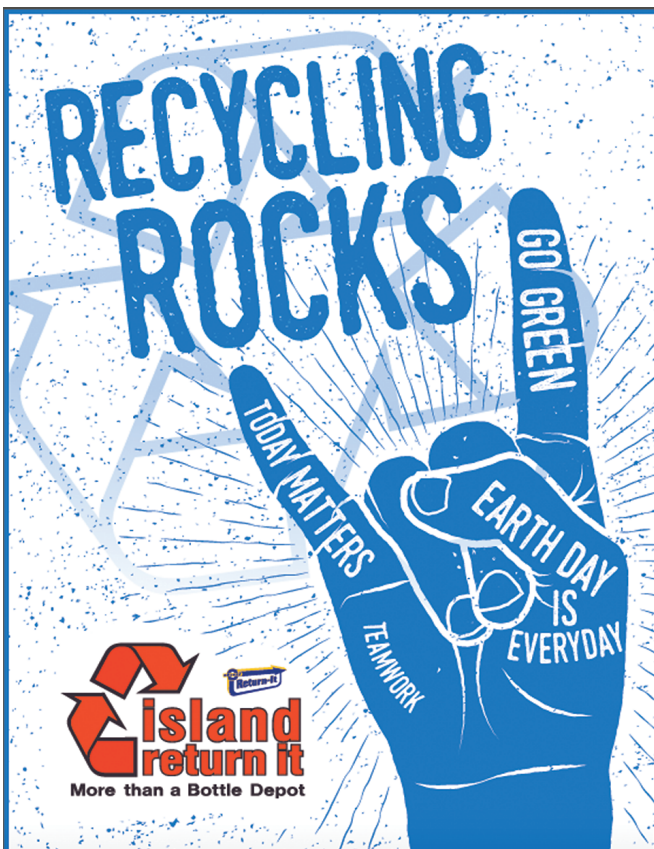
One of our first successes was to help secure a large property on the flats owned by Doman Industries. This property included important seasonally-flooded fields and wooded hedgerows along the old drainage ditches and was critical habitat for over wintering waterfowl. Since we were unable to find anyone interested in helping us buy the property, we approached Mr. Doman directly to buy the land. He agreed to the sale, we settled on a price and made an offer to purchase. A small issue remained as we had no money to follow up on our offer. Fortunately, the Nature Trust of BC stepped in and completed the purchase adding to their earlier land acquisition activity.

Our next effort was to move ahead with our dream of a nature centre and wildlife viewing facilities on the Boatland property. We commissioned Yorke Edwards, the past Director of the Royal BC Museum, to create an interpretive plan that included viewing facilities and a nature centre. The result was an excellent document entitled Wildlife Viewing in Somenos Marsh and provided a roadmap for many of the wildlife viewing

infrastructure projects that we would pursue in the future.

Our dreams of nature centres and interpretive opportunities were quickly dashed in the early nineties when a rezoning application threatened to eliminate the important Garry oak ecosystem bordering the east side of Somenos Lake and Creek. The developer, Timbercrest Estates, was asking North Cowichan for permission to rezone a very large tract of land, once known as the Kingston farm, from agriculture to urban use. Being the site of a long-standing farm, the land was a mix of grade A agricultural soils as well as home to many old Garry oaks, some very large firs and a mixed woodland. The Garry oak meadows also had a long history of camas harvesting by local First Nations. We challenged the rezoning and, after a fashion and a lot of public support, managed to defeat the initial rezoning proposal. The developer then returned with a smaller proposal that, despite the continuing public objection, was quickly approved.

Things shifted dramatically in 1992 when development activities on the



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lower portion of Timbercrest were put on hold due to an ancient burial site being unearthed by the earth-moving equipment. Archaeological digs at the site resulted in the discovery of human remains and artifacts until 1994 when Cowichan Tribes elders put a stop to any further development around what eventually became known as Ye'yumnuts.

At the same time, the BC Protected Areas Strategy, a pet project of the NDP government of the time, was in play, trumpeting the goal of protecting 13 per cent of the provincial land base. Seeing a political opportunity, the Minister of Environment at the time, Moe Sihota, announced that the Somenos Garry oaks and the adjoining mixed woodlands would be purchased by the government to provide Protected Area Status to the Garry oak habitat. As with many political promises, the end result was a very-reduced acquisition that protected only the important Garry oaks while sacrificing the adjacent woodlands, but it was a beginning.

We continued to attend and speak at all the Timbercrest rezoning proposals that followed over the years, winning some and losing many, as the North Cowichan political scene at the time was very pro-development. One memorable public hearing was held in the Cowichan Theatre to accommodate the large crowds that were supporting our efforts to protect the lands. It was a raucous affair with the North Cowichan mayor at the time, Rex Hollett, often arguing back when speakers got under his skin.

Despite our struggles over development issues there were many positive accomplishments during the nineties. One of these accomplishments was the construction of our first boardwalk where there was once only a hazardous trail through towering blackberry bushes that clawed at you as you bushwhacked to the old naturalist-built viewing blind. It was a beautiful boardwalk designed to float during the winter floods but sadly didn't float level when flooded and subsequently broke apart on a regular basis once the water levels dropped. Despite the struggle, I have fond memories of many a wet foot on winter boardwalk hikes when attempting to negotiate the near



*Phil Jennings
enjoying a visit to
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30 degree tilt on the ice-coated boardwalk.

The 1990s were a decade of growth for the Somenos Marsh Wildlife Society as we started to achieve success with our restoration and awareness funding efforts. These efforts resulted in many completed projects that benefitted the marsh and included the first-ever habitat inventory of Bings, Averil and Richards Creeks, the three main waterways feeding Somenos Lake; a full-length documentary video about Somenos; and some stream enhancement work on Averil and Bings Creeks. The decade also gave birth to our 1996 first and only Great Blue Heron festival. It was a wonderful and very popular family event but a daunting affair for our small volunteer base.

In 1998 I published my first book, *Somenos ... the grandfathers spoke to me*, a photo book that illustrated my passion for Somenos while at the same time provided some written context regarding the history of the Marsh. The book's origins go back to John Croockewit and our donut day conversations where I expressed my photographer's dream of publishing a Somenos photo book. I had forgotten about these conversations until 1994

after John had sadly left this earth and I learned that he had left money in his estate to make the book a reality. In 1998 the book was published with the opening page dedicated to my good friend and co-founder John Croockewit.

The decade also resulted in many new issues surfacing in Somenos; We faced hunting pressures under the guise of crop protection despite Somenos being a no-shooting zone, illegal filling of the floodplain, an overnight appearance of a floating crayfish farm on Somenos Lake (that just as quickly left) and a float plane landing strip carved out of the marsh for drug running. Challenging these and many other issues carried on for more than 11 years until we decided it was time to try a different tack.

Holding up a white flag in 2000, we invited everyone involved in Somenos to come together and talk about cooperation versus competition in Somenos. Our efforts were so successful that within a year, after some serious lumps and bumps, the Somenos Management Committee was created and the first Somenos Marsh Management Plan was completed. We celebrated with our partners by unveiling new signage for

the newly-renamed Somenos Marsh Conservation Area that featured our original Fenwick Lansdowne artwork as the new conservation area logo.

At the same time as our white flag moment, we were lobbying Bird Life Canada to designate Somenos Marsh as a globally significant Important Bird Area (IBA) to recognize the importance of the Somenos overwintering habitat for Trumpeter Swans as well as feeding habitat for our Great Blue Heron, a special sub-species (*Ardea herodias fannini*), that frequents the Pacific coast of North America. We were successful in our lobbying efforts and in 2000, Somenos became one of the earliest Vancouver Island IBA's.

In 2006 we turned our attention to the Drinkwater Road boat launch which was, at the time, simply a road that ran into Somenos Lake. Putting on our fundraising hats again, and with North Cowichan support, we raised enough money to hire a Salt Spring Island contractor to build and install an elevated walkway and floating dock to accommodate the seasonal changes in lake levels and to provide a secure launch for boats and a platform to wildlife watch or fish from. On completion of the Drinkwater Dock project we gifted it to the Municipality of North Cowichan.

In 2008, with the now-old boardwalk falling apart on a regular basis and the third generation of the original bird viewing blind having been knocked down by vandals, it was decided to raise the money to build an elevated structure that would allow people of all levels of ability to access the marsh year round. Within a short time, the money was raised and a contractor hired to build the new structure. To surface the boardwalk, we used TREX decking, a plastic and wood composite that was said to last 100 years. To thank our donors, we engraved their names on the boardwalk resulting in over 400 names engraved on the first phase of the boardwalk.

In November 2009 Somenos waters overflowed into the neighbouring residential area, flooding many homes in the lower lands close to Beverly Street and Lakes Road. Due to the flood and the potential for future flooding in the future, local governments took emergency action

and developed a flood protection plan which essentially resulted in ringing the urban area with dikes and pumps, a common flooding prevention solution that was losing favour in places where flooding was a regular occurrence. The great loss for Somenos was that the dike was pushed much further into the marsh than was necessary, thus allowing lands previously subject to flooding, to be developed. The emergency nature of the work was such that public input was not requested and any efforts on our part to limit the diking were ignored.

Back on land, we were fortunate that Ducks Unlimited had purchased the property beside Boatland, thus allowing us to expand our wildlife viewing infrastructure onto the neighbouring property, and it wasn't long after, in 2011, that we raised enough money to complete phase 2 of the elevated boardwalk. On completion of phase 2 we still had enough money to improve the trails and parking lot, add a couple of picnic benches and commission a beautiful entrance archway. In 2012, with a small grant from the Cowichan Wheels Association, we added the Cowichan Wheels accessible wildlife viewing platform to our viewing infrastructure inventory.

We brought the Great Blue Heron Festival back to life in 2009 as the Return of the Swans Festival to coincide with the typical Halloween arrival of the migrating Trumpeter Swans. In 2010 we were back with a larger festival and a new name, WildWings. One of our first sponsors, Lance and Liz Steward from Craig Street Brew Pub, created an annual WildWings beer to celebrate the new festival.

By 2013 we were getting tired. The work that needed to be done in Somenos, particularly in respect to invasive species management, was becoming an impossible task for volunteers, so we took a giant leap and hired our first part-time employee, Elizabeth Bailey, to head up our restoration program work. After a few years we received enough funding to hire Elizabeth full-time.

In 2015 we saw the discovery of a small patch of an invasive aquatic plant called Parrots Feather in Somenos Creek. It is an easily-found

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plant sold for aquariums and garden ponds. A small piece somehow found its way into Somenos Creek and within a few years became a significant environmental threat to both water quality and fish passage for migrating salmon.

However, 2018 brought lots of good news as the review of the original Somenos Marsh Management Plan was completed and the provincial government designated all the Crown lands in the conservation area as the S'amuna'/Somenos Wildlife Management Area (WMA), notably the first WMA in B.C. history that had a First Nation partner in the management agreement. We followed suit by asking and receiving permission from Cowichan Tribes to rename the larger Conservation Area the S'amuna'/Somenos Conservation Area.

Within five years of hiring our first employee, we have become a thriving organization with one full-time program manager, a part-time biologist and a couple of students working with us during their summer breaks. We have received

funding in excess of \$500,000 for restorative projects in and around the Conservation Area including a storm water wetland project in partnership with the Municipality of North Cowichan on Beverley Street to treat storm water before it enters the sensitive Somenos system.

Our current project, a partnership with the Cowichan Land Trust, is a series of landowner contacts with residents living around Somenos and Quamichan lakes to help, if needed, rehabilitate their shoreline interface.

This past summer we completed the boardwalk plank replacement project replacing close to 1,200 defective planks and by the time this article is in your hands, our five years late, 25th anniversary viewing tower at the Open Air Classroom will have been erected. We have a new full-time employee, Elodie Roger, who is taking up the position that Elizabeth left and we are moving forward on our goal of creating protected greenways in the Somenos Basin along the waterways from the mountain tops to the Cowichan estuary to allow wildlife, fish and plants to thrive in a zone that is protected for all time.

On top of the tower being completed we are celebrating the 10th anniversary of our annual WildWings Nature and Arts Festival. This year, with additional funding from the Government of Canada, Heritage Branch, we are fortunate enough to share the stage with our newest partner Cowichan Tribes. This year's theme is Reconnecting with Nature and we will be hosting more than 24 events, many by donation or free, between Oct. 6 and 29.

Some of our more-popular events will be returning such as the: Pi'Kwun BBQ on Kilpahlis Beach in Cowichan Bay; our fun paint night, this year at the Best Western Cowichan Valley Inn; as well as part two of Cowichan Ethnobotany with Nancy Turner. Some of the newer WildWings events include a planned giving workshop for estates and community groups, hosted by the Pacific Salmon Foundation; Afloat in a Boat, the reprise of BYOB (bring your own boat) boat tour of Somenos Lake; and really hopefully, a presentation about the morphology of the dreaded American bullfrog.

The festival ends with the Nature of Cowichan photo contest People's Choice Awards night Oct. 29 at the Old Firehouse Wine Bar and, be sure not to miss, our Oct. 26, first ever 'It Ain't Easy Being Green Gala', featuring our keynote speaker, Patrick Morrow, an Order of Canada recipient and the first man in the world to summit the seven highest mountains on the seven continents. For a full listing of WildWings events visit www.wildwingsfestival.com. Tickets for all events will be available for sale on the website after Sept. 7.

Time is ceaseless. We are now celebrating our 30th anniversary as the SMWS; the blackberry bushes are long gone, replaced by hardhack; homelessness and drug paraphernalia are our newest issues and Parrots Feather has voraciously occupied Somenos Creek.

The Ye'yumnuts cultural site has become part of the local school curriculum and protected forever while friends and many names on the boardwalk are now fading memories.

Meanwhile our employees and dedicated volunteers remain hard at it as the work does not, and will, not end. 🌱



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