

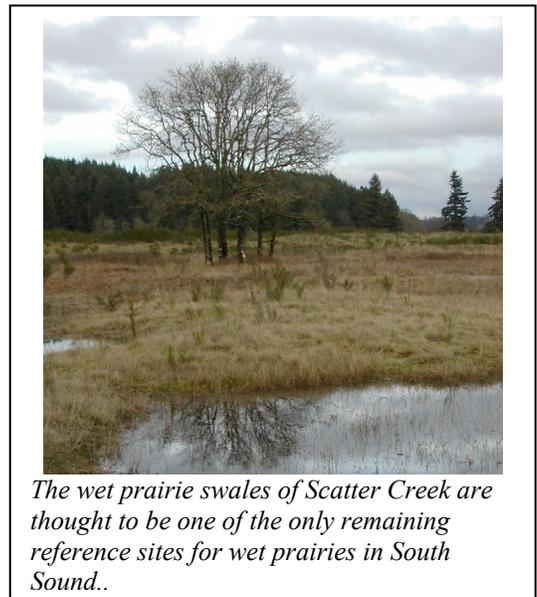


The Nature Conservancy is committed to prairie conservation within the South Sound region and the Willamette Valley /Puget Trough/Georgia Basin ecoregion. The Conservancy will continue to perform outstanding stewardship, protect key conservation parcels and promote a conservation community of cooperative partners.

Wet Prairies in South Sound

The conservation of wet prairies is a focus of conservation efforts in the Willamette Valley, yet little is known about these habitats in the South Sound region. Ft. Lewis and The Nature Conservancy have taken a first step towards understanding these habitats better by contracting with SeeBotanical and WA Natural Heritage Program a recently completed study. “Wet Prairie Swales of the South Puget Sound, Washington” provides a background summary of wet prairie composition, distribution and ecological functions. It also addresses restoration strategies, especially applied to the Muck Creek corridor on Ft. Lewis.

Other complementary studies on wet prairies are also underway or getting started. Last spring, The Conservancy installed a bioassay experiment along moisture gradients at Muck Creek to help determine the suitability of specific species in restoration efforts. The Conservancy also worked with the WA Natural Heritage Program to obtain funding from the Environmental Protection Agency to delineate and map historic and current vegetation communities, including wet prairies, along the Black River. This work is just beginning and has been contracted to SeeBotanical.



The wet prairie swales of Scatter Creek are thought to be one of the only remaining reference sites for wet prairies in South Sound..

Conservation Audit

The Nature Conservancy has initiated a Conservation Audit program to help strengthen our organization’s conservation actions throughout the world. The South Sound program was the first unit in the Northwest to undergo an audit. A group of six Conservancy and contracted staff visited our program for nearly a week in early December. The focus of the audit is the decision-processes leading to our conservation actions.

During their visit the audit team met with staff, partners and volunteers to discuss our program, reviewed our planning and reporting methodology and visited several field sites. The final audit report is expected in a few months. Initial findings highlighted both program strengths and areas for improvement.

The audit team recognized the strength of our partnerships, the depth and breath of expertise on our staff and the range of conservation actions under the program. Areas of improvement centered on utilizing the latest iteration of Conservancy planning methodology, which we are currently using to produce a new restoration plan for Thurston County’s Glacial Heritage Preserve. The audit team also made suggestions to strengthen our overarching conservation vision, our science program and suggested utilizing a broader range of conservation actions.

Prairie Seed Beds

The Conservancy has installed a series of raised beds to help ameliorate the increasing need for seeds of prairie plants in South Sound. Fourteen seed beds, each 40 ft. long, were constructed at Shotwell's Landing to produce seed for 24 different prairie species. This project was spurred on, and financed by the Conservancy-supported Collin's Ecoregional Prairie Enhancement Experiment, Ft. Lewis and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. Seed produced in the beds are needed for a direct seeding treatment in the Enhancement Experiment next fall, as well as other restoration efforts. This experiment is currently underway at six South Sound sites as well as other sites extending from British Columbia to Oregon.



Shawn Zaniewski, WCC crew leader, helps build seed beds at Shotwell's Landing.

Ft. Lewis and McChord Project

Broom Control - This was a busy quarter for Scotch broom mowing at Fort Lewis and McChord. In all, about 320 acres were mowed to enhance both prairie and oak habitats. In fact, we purchased an additional tractor and mowing deck at the beginning of December to increase our capacity to control broom on the two bases.

Quarter Finale – Winter quarter ended with a “big push” effort. Fort Lewis has a remarkable native population of Ponderosa pine (the only occurrence of the species in Washington west of the Cascades). A large portion of the pine woodland habitat occurs within the Fort's Central Impact Area. This area also has numerous firing ranges and access to do restoration work is severely limited during the year, except during the week of Christmas. To assist the Fort's forestry program, we ambitiously planned to treat over 110 acres of pine woodland this year, with a goal to reduce fuel loads in preparation for subsequent controlled burns. In spite of the holidays, we were able to muster three mowing tractors and a number of dedicated TNC staff members for the effort. By the time we were finished, the entire area had been treated to reduce broom and dense Douglas-fir in-growth, overly dense pine had been thinned, and large Douglas-fir that threatened pines had been controlled. Not bad for a week's work!

Thurston County Project

Grazing the Cavness Ranch – Early this quarter the Conservancy signed a lease to manage a substantial portion of the Cavness Ranch, specifically the areas historically used for cattle grazing. This allows The Conservancy to develop a grazing regime more compatible with the substantial conservation values on the Ranch. We have worked with the Natural Resource Conservation Service to delineate an initial grazing program and to locate a suitable cattleman to sub-lease with. We hope these actions will improve the overall stewardship and quality of habitat on the ranch. It also allows The Conservancy to segregate special high-quality habitats for separate conservation actions.

Scotch Broom Control Experiment – Scotch broom continues to be the greatest biological threat to South Sound prairies. While many successful tools and techniques have been developed to kill this weed, we continue to refine our efforts. A new experiment concerning the control of Scotch broom was initiated this quarter on the Evergreen Sportsmen Club, just west of Mima Mounds. This experiment and restoration effort, funded through WA Dept. of Fish and Wildlife, compares three initial mechanical control treatments: mowing with our traditional rotary mower, mowing with a flail mower and hand-cutting and removal of broom. The experiment will follow the fate of Scotch broom as well as native plant recovery and soil nitrogen.



Flail mower at work on mima mounds at Evergreen Sportsmen Club.