

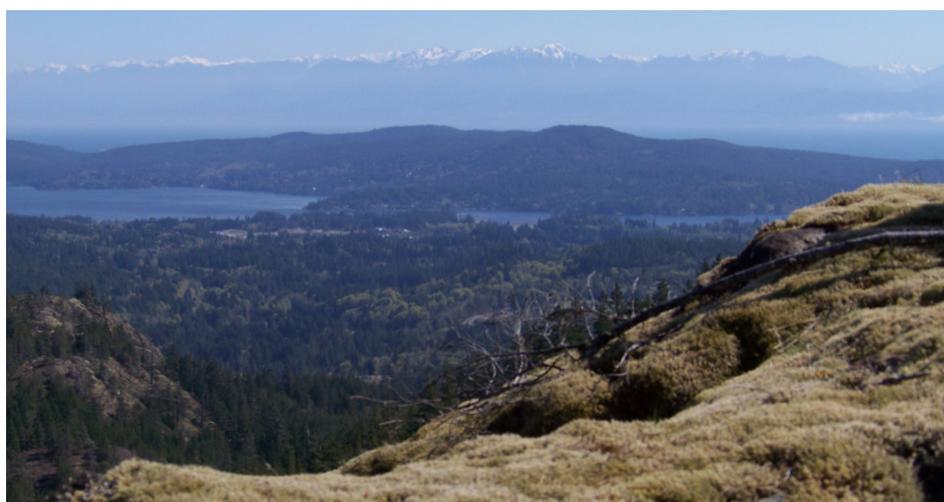
Volunteers in Parks

Feature:
Opening Sooke Hills
Wilderness Regional Park

Volunteer Profile:
Sharon Dowling

Staff Profile:
Lauren Sherwood

**Volunteer & Park
Updates**



What's New?

- » Mountaing Biking Guidelines
- » Trail Widening and Lighting Study
- » Mayne Island Regional Trail
- » Mountain Road Forest

Opening Sooke Hills Wilderness Regional Park

By Lynn Wilson

Sooke Hills Wilderness Regional Park (Sooke Hills Wilderness) is the largest park in the regional parks system. At approximately 4,100 hectares, the park is classified as a Regional Wilderness Area because of its large size, its remote and rugged nature, and the feelings of solitude and self-reliance that the park elicits. The park consists of two separate sections on either side of the Goldstream catchment, today known as the "North Section" and the "South Section."

The provincial government established Sooke Hills Wilderness in May 1997 when it ordered the land to be transferred from the Greater Victoria Water Supply Area to CRD Regional Parks. *continued on page 2*

The land had been identified for its high value as regional parkland and for its importance in buffering the adjacent protected watershed. The creation of Sooke Hills Wilderness also contributed significantly to the visionary Sea-to-Sea Green Blue Belt which today stretches from the Saanich Inlet to the Sooke Basin.

A management plan was approved for the park in 2001. It identified the primary purposes of the park, which are, most importantly, to protect the closed watershed, secondly to protect the park's natural environment, and thirdly, to provide compatible outdoor recreational opportunities. The management plan identified the steps needed to open the park to the public. The first step was to create a regional trail connection between Humpback Reservoir and the CVRD boundary by Shawnigan Lake. This step took many years to complete; however, in 2017 the North Section of the park was finally officially opened with the establishment of the rugged and picturesque 13km Sooke Hills Wilderness Trail.

The final step was to open the South Section of the park. Planning began in 2017 with the creation of a staff technical team. The team identified the park's main access points, necessary facilities, and official trail system. They also developed a detailed park map, sign package, and communications materials. The most significant project in opening the South Section was the construction of a large parking lot at the main access off of Highway 17. Other work included upgrading and signing trails, and building park facilities. The South Section was officially opened in November 2020.

A key feature of the South Section is its long-distance trail connection with Sea to Sea Regional Park. This landscape level connection provides access to almost 10,000 hectares of regional parkland with its many opportunities for hiking, cycling, and equestrian use over rugged backcountry trails. The South Section also bring visitors to the summits of Sugarloaf Mountain and Mount Braden, with their spectacular 360 degree views of the surrounding landscape. The park opening plan importantly ensures plenty of space is left for protection of large carnivore habitat and sensitive ecosystems and features.

Now that the South Section is officially open, perhaps it's time for you to plan a visit. Remember to prepare for wilderness conditions and organize your trip to match your abilities. We hope you enjoy many memorable adventures in this truly wild regional park!



Photo credits: Rick Eppler

Volunteer Profile

Sharon Dowling, Volunteer Naturalist at Francis/King Regional Park since December 2019.

Tell us a bit about yourself?

My first mentors were; Disney's Mowgli in the Jungle Book, Jacques Cousteau, David Suzuki, Wade Davis... you get the idea. I graduated from Northern Alberta Institute of Technology as a Biological Science/ Ecology Technician and had many happy years working in Alberta Parks and BC's Fed. Fisheries. Years later I went to UVic for Recreation and Administration, later branching into Recreation Therapy. With a diploma for Instructing (PIDP) in hand, my daughter and I went abroad to teach - what an adventure that was! I'm now back in Victoria, working as an Educational Assistant at Claremont High and looking forward to whatever comes next...

What is your favourite volunteer memory or experience?

One beautiful day at the park a group of old friends met at the Nature Centre for a reunion and to hike the trails. The common thread that bound them was that three of the five were friends from childhood and had lived in the area as kids. After reading the information and seeing the pictures of Freeman King, they related their own memories of spending time in the park with Freeman. It wasn't until that moment that they realized they were also a part of "Skippers Kids" and held a special place in the park's history.

What do you most enjoy about volunteering with Regional Parks?

I enjoy the feeling of giving back, of contributing in a small way to the health and wellness of our 'home' and the people on it. It's my belief that nature/parks are critically essential to us in a myriad of ways, so having these beautiful green spaces close to where everyone can easily access them is a precious gift.

Yet another big perk for volunteering at the park is working with and learning from the awesome Naturalists that work here. They're friendly and knowledgeable and have such great people skills for relating information as appropriate for all ages ~ while having fun doing it!



Staff Profile

Lauren Sherwood, Parks Naturalist since September 2018

What is your position and when did you start working at Regional Parks?

I'm one of the Parks Naturalists at Regional Parks and have been in this role for three years. Before that, I was at Panorama Recreation as an Early Years Nature Program Assistant, BC Ferries/Parks Canada as a Coastal Naturalist, and the Osoyoos Desert Centre as an Interpretive Guide, to name a few!

What do you enjoy about working at Regional Parks?

That all the parks are so different and unique! From exploring the intertidal zone at Island View Beach, the hilltop at Lone Tree Hill, the coast at East Sooke, the lake at Matheson – there's such variety that it's always an adventure to visit. When we offer guided programs, helping visitors connect to parks by sparking joy, in turn, brings me joy!

One of the other joys of being a Parks Naturalist is working with the amazing volunteers. Getting to know each volunteer is such a perk as everyone comes from different backgrounds and has their own stories to share.

Tell us a bit about yourself

I grew up in the small desert town of Osoyoos, in the Okanagan, but Victoria and the island have always been a second home. I have been fortunate enough to be able to travel to over 20 countries across three continents and look forward to traveling again one day when it's safe to do so. Through these travels, I gained an appreciation for how extraordinary BC is with its biodiversity of plants and animals. Whenever I'm out hiking, I feel like I always see something new! Besides hiking, I'm also into playing boardgames, reading, gardening, and camping. And soon, I'll be channeling my inner interior designer when my partner and I move into our new home!



Volunteer & Park Updates

In December 2020, Habitat Acquisition Trust launched a fundraising campaign to raise \$1.4 million of a total \$3.4 million purchase price for the nearly 50-acre (19.8 hectare) property located east of Prospect Lake, known as the Mountain Road Forest. The CRD has committed \$2 million toward the purchase. When this private fundraising campaign successfully concludes, the CRD will have the funds it needs to acquire the land as a new regional park. This outcome will protect the diverse natural habitats found there and enable a continuation of the public access that the current property owners have allowed for the past 50 years.

Following the Mountain Biking Advisory Committee process, in May 2021 the CRD Regional Parks Mountain Biking Guidelines and short-term actions to support were passed by the CRD Board. They will play an important role in the enhancement and growth of sustainable quality mountain biking experiences in the regional parks system where deemed appropriate.



The Capital Regional District (CRD) will begin development of the initial section of the Mayne Island Regional Trail in 2021. As identified in the Gulf Islands Regional Trails Plan (2018), this 2.3 km bike and pedestrian trail will be developed between Village Bay ferry terminal and Miners Bay village. Construction is anticipated to start as early as August 2021 and be completed in 2023.

The CRD retained consultant services in 2019 to conduct the Regional Trails Widening Study. The study considered options to widen and separate trail users and potentially light the 6.6km portions of the Galloping Goose Regional Trail between the Selkirk Trestle and Grange Road (adjacent McKenzie Avenue) and the Lochside Regional Trail between the Switch Bridge and McKenzie Avenue/Borden Street. Public engagement on the separated use pathway design with lighting is currently ongoing - you can fill out the survey and find more info at www.crd.bc.ca/TrailsProject.

All photos in this newsletter are supplied from the CRD Image Bank unless otherwise noted.