

An aerial photograph of a restored wetland area. A large, winding stream of water flows through the center of the landscape, surrounded by patches of green vegetation and dark, exposed soil. In the upper left, there is a small building and some structures. The overall scene depicts a natural habitat restoration project.

Swanson Lake Wildlife Area: A Community Restoration and Conservation Hands on Habitat Project

How thirty volunteers from different group affiliations formed a partnership to restore a fire stricken habitat.

By Pheasants Forever Chapter 800
Spokane, Washington

In partnership with Spokane Audubon
Society and Washington Department of
Fish and Wildlife



Flames consume the shrub-steppe.

Picture 21,000-acres of public wildlife habitat that lies within the scablands of the Columbia Plateau. The ecosystem is dominated by sagebrush shrub-steppe, dotted with mesic grasslands, wetlands, potholes, and ponds. This habitat is home to upland game birds; various species of songbirds, raptors, reptiles, amphibians; and mule deer. Several Washington State at-risk species also exist. One of the most critical is the sharp-tailed grouse. It's a special place and one of the last of its kind on the Columbia Plateau. What if I told you that this same habitat, a Washington State

Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) property called the Swanson Lake Wildlife Area, was decimated in a matter of hours? In less than 36 hours over Labor Day weekend, 2020, the Whitney Road fire, fueled by 40 to 50 mile per hour winds, consumed all the shrub-steppe habitat leaving a moonscape apparition in its wake. When devastation happens, people come together, putting their differences and opinions aside. This was exactly what happened

on a beautiful day in May. On May 11, 2024, eighteen miles south of Creston, Washington, at the same area left to dust and ash, multiple groups diverse in their passions were able to find common ground. A partnership, if you will, was spawned.



The Whitney Road fire showed no mercy to the Swanson Lake Wildlife habitat.



Organizers Kim Marie Thorburn and Mike Gruenke

Pheasants Forever chapter 800 from Spokane, Washington president Mike Collier and habitat chairman Mike Gruenke, Spokane Audubon Society coordinator Kim Marie Thorburn, and WDFW Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area manager Mike Finch developed plans to restore an area near Z Lake on the wildlife area on a 225 foot by 100-foot (22,500 square foot) shrub plot. The goal was to create a critically needed winter food source for the sharp-tailed grouse, as well as thermal and escape cover for pheasants, valley quail, and the other wildlife that also reside there.

There was much background preparation before the ground could be broken. President Mike Collier and Mike Gruenke purchased fabric stakes and T-posts, organized materials, designed a luncheon, and recruited volunteers. Kim Marie Thorburn recruited volunteers and secured an ALEA volunteer grant that paid for food, drinks, and volunteer transportation and included funding match from Spokane Audubon to purchase fencing and eight different species of plants.

Water Birch, Aspen, Choke Cherry, Red Osier Dogwood, Buffaloberry, Serviceberry, Black Elderberry, and Douglas Hawthorn that ranged in size from 10-centimeter plugs to 2-gallon pots would provide variety and suitable food for the resident upland game birds. In all, 700 plants were provided by the Spokane Audubon Society. Mike Finch was also instrumental in identifying the site, getting all the appropriate approvals completed including a cultural review, and recruiting volunteers.



Volunteers discuss location of shrubs while others build an access gates in the distance.



A fully planted Buffalo Berry shrub. To give this plant its best chance at survival, landscape fabric was laid over the top of the soil. Then a square of fabric was staked at the base to prevent weed intrusion and retain moisture.



T-posts being installed for the fence

The team met on numerous occasions and after much collaboration, developed a finalized plan and a project date of May 11th. With the project date just two weeks away, the WDFW sprayed the site to eliminate the existing white top and invasive thistle vegetation to preserve as much ground moisture as possible.

May 11th was a Saturday; however, volunteers began to arrive several days before the scheduled planting. With camping available, this project didn't bring only locals to help. Volunteers traveled hundreds of miles from every corner of the

state. On Wednesday, two days before the project was to start, the site was rototilled with a tractor by the WDFW, and Pheasant Forever volunteers with the help of WDFW employees laid out 2,000 feet of landscape fabric. The fabric was staked in vertical and horizontal rows where the shrubs would be placed and would be essential for reducing weed intrusion and retention of soil moisture in the harsh, dry growing conditions. At 8:30 Saturday morning, with temperatures already close

to 80 degrees, all thirty volunteers had arrived, and the planting began. Several volunteers got their hands dirty making quick work in getting shrubs in the ground. Other volunteers installed 70 ten-foot T-posts, zip tied 750 feet of 7 ½ foot fencing to the posts and built two access doors. The fencing would be critical to keep deer and porcupine from browsing to raise the rate of plant survival. While all this effort was going on, Smiley, the Pheasants Forever project cook, hauled in all his cooking equipment to



Drone footage of the plot and volunteers planting shrubs.



Volunteers take a break and enjoy Smiley's luncheon.

prepare a special thank you meal of turkey, green beans, potatoes, stuffing, and dessert. At noon, with the project nearly finished, volunteers made their way to the luncheon. Organizers had everyone introduce themselves and their group affiliation. While eating, conversations could be heard among all the volunteers. There were many different groups, different ideas, different opinions but common goals when it came to conservation. After lunch, volunteers returned to finish planting a few remaining plants and to stake a final weed barrier square

around each individual plant. Later cleanup began, and volunteers began to depart. Dirt-covered hands were shaken, and immense gratitude was spread around to all volunteers by the organizers. Volunteers reciprocated with smiles and thanks back to the organizers for a project that was well organized. The Swanson Lake Wildlife project may have been only a 22,500 square foot area, but the impact that it will have on the outlying areas' biodiversity over time is unmeasurable.

This project is an example of different groups coming together for good. The Swanson Lakes project and the groups that participated are a snapshot of the future and what conservation should look like. Because of the dedication and hard work of its members and volunteers, the Pheasants Forever Spokane Chapter received the grand prize award of a 7500 dollars grant. The top award, that was given out by onX maps and Pheasants Forever, was awarded to the chapter after being selected over 97 other projects across the country.



Volunteers celebrate the finished project. Good things happen when partnerships are formed.