

## **The Salt Spring Trail and Nature Club: A Short History**

This is a story of an organization that for a half century was the largest interest group on the island and has provided thousands of islanders with terrific outdoor experiences. It is the story of the many individuals who started it and kept it going. As a result, this short history is full of the names of many of these talented people. Hopefully few of them have been missed and hopefully you will enjoy hearing about them. On a small island everyone is important and everyone contributes something. The Salt Spring Trail and Nature Club is a good example of this.

### **The Beginnings**

In January 1973 a group of friends met at the home of Joanne and Arthur Milner to start what eventually became the Salt Spring Trail and Nature Club. The name was chosen to reflect the interests of both hikers and nature enthusiasts. Ruby Alton became the first president, Mary Sylvander the vice-president, Gerry Holland the secretary, Earl Dunlap the treasurer, and Loes Holland the trails coordinator. Mary Sylvander was in charge of major hikes and Vera Perillo of minor hikes.

There were some interesting additional club responsibilities that don't exist as board positions today. These included maps (Tom Marcus), archaeology (Beth Hill), birding (Mick Jones), and botany (I.C. Shank). Anne-Marie Dahlke planned natural history outings.

Gerry Holland developed a constitution for the club based on the template provided in the province's Society Act. This was printed and distributed to all members in 1974. Fees were kept low to allow everyone who wanted to participate to join. Joan Lott arranged to have the club logo—hiking boots and binoculars—designed.



The club members were fortunate to have Lassie Dodds, Ted Brown, and others who grew up on the island to show them the existing trails, many of which had been used to get from place to place before cars and roads came to Salt Spring. Jean Holmes and Mary Sylvander spent many hours identifying trails on maps and then identifying the property owners so that permission could be obtained to walk on their land.

Tuesday was chosen as the day for outdoor activity, and events were scheduled for every month except July and August when many members either had visitors or were away travelling. One off-island event was scheduled each month, often to other Gulf Islands and Vancouver Island as

ferry and water taxi travel was easier and cheaper back then. More extensive off-island excursions were planned for the spring and fall. Joan Lott arranged the first of these—to Costa Rica. Other trips included Forbidden Plateau, Hurricane Ridge, Manning Park, Seattle, and Orcas Island.



*Photo courtesy of Joy Holland*

***Lassie Dodds and Loes Holland***

The club was started and run mainly by the many talented and skilled newcomers who arrived on the island in the 1960s and 1970s. But they were had a lot of help from oldtimers like Lassie Dodds, Ruby Alton, and Ted Brown. Marc Holmes remembered these beginnings fondly:

The club was destined to succeed from the first. Hard-working executives planned the many necessary actions carefully. Numerous volunteers arranged and led walks, improved trails, wrote briefs, drew up a constitution, registered the club under the Societies Act with the Provincial Government, made complicated but necessary arrangements for trips, and helped in numerous other ways. Even good hiking land was deeded to the public by a member. One kindly property owner even “hid” hot mulled wine in a hollow tree on our hiking route during the Christmas season.

Enthusiasm of members was always high and I don’t remember that it was ever necessary to have membership drives. Annual meetings were always well-attended, and turned into happy social and dining occasions. Many close friendships have been formed over the years. All club members love nature and the outdoors—this is the common bond.

The club had 90 members in 1973, 117 in 1974, 147 in 1975, and grew to a maximum of about 300 by the early 2000s. In 1975, 1271 people participated in 36 outings for an average of 35 per outing. Besides hikes, walks, and more recently rambles, the club has scheduled bird watching, flower walks, archaeological digs, marine biology, and a monthly social evening with speakers on such topics as ornithology, geology, botany, and travel.

## **Trail Building and Maintenance**

Members have developed and maintained the island's trails from the very beginning of the club. In 1991 this activity was made more official when a trail maintenance and development committee was created to oversee the work. This has involved partnerships with many government and island organizations.

An early but continuing project has been the Jack Foster Trail, which starts at the top of Southey Point Road and continues down to the ocean. The club first started work on the Jack Foster Memorial Trail in 1992. (Jack was a member of the club and led hikes along this Ministry of Highways right of way.) For years the path to the beach was problematic with walkers having to cross wet, muddy sections and then having to rely on a rope for the final descent. In 2012 the club built boardwalk over some of the muddy bits and the next year stairs were built to the beach. In 2020 a memorial bench was installed for Herb Otto near the stairs he had designed and built with club members. Additional boardwalk and work on the stairs was also completed that year.

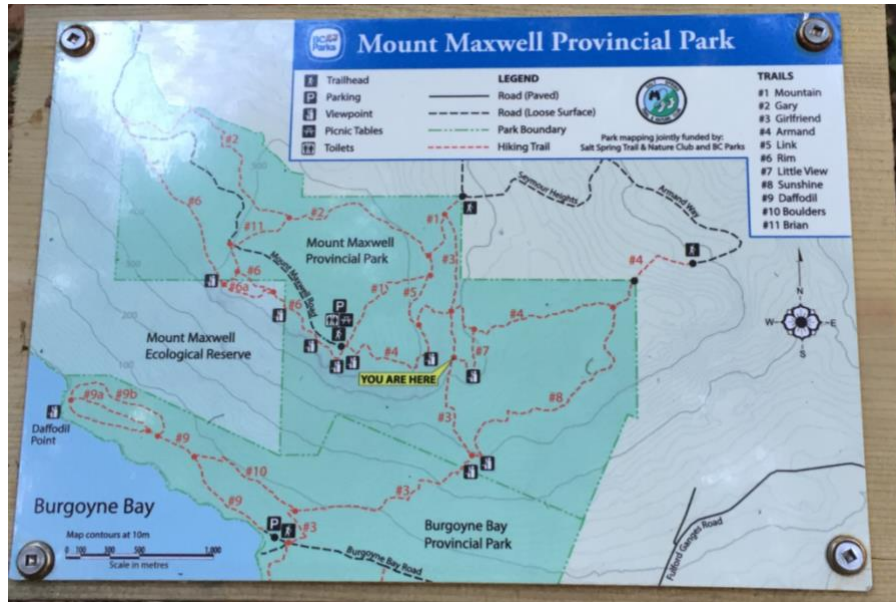


*Photo courtesy of Murray Coates*

### ***Celebrating the installation of the memorial bench for Herb Otto***

For many years the club has had contracts with BC Parks to help maintain the trails in the island's provincial parks. This has involved monitoring and clearing debris from the trails, an

annual broom cutting in Ruckle Park and elsewhere, and, more recently, the development of new trails in Mt. Erskine and Burgoyne Bay. Long-time club members Tony Pedersen and Brian Radford were cited by K2 Park Services in 2007 “for their many hours of trail maintenance, removal of fallen trees and bridge work,” as well as for installing “screens for traction control on various bridges ... to prevent anyone from slipping during the wet season.” Tony was especially busy in Ruckle Park for many years, while Brian was the main custodian of the trails on Mt. Maxwell. Brian’s Mt. Maxwell trail map was the basis for the signage that now helps visitors find their way on the trails.



**Trail map on Mt. Maxwell.** This map was based on one developed by Brian Radford. The club’s volunteers worked with BC Parks to design and install these maps at every trail junction in the park. The posts on which the signs were erected were built in Trails Coordinator Herb Otto’s workshop, and club members lugged them up the mountain to be installed. Similar maps were also designed and installed on trails on Mt. Erskine and around Burgoyne Bay.

In 2017 the club joined the Gulf Islands Trails Society. In addition to giving us the expertise of the trail builders on the Outer Gulf Islands, this partnership gave us a liability insurance policy that covers any private landowners who sign a non-binding contract with us to allow public use of trails on their land. In October of that year the club signed such a contract with Kunzang Dechen Osel Ling (KDOL), otherwise known as the Buddhist retreat centre on Mt. Tuam. The club hopes to develop other such trails on private land in the future.





*Photo courtesy of Gary Quiring*

**Constructing the KDOL trail.** This involved several work parties with as many as 35 club members working on the trail at the same time. Ongoing maintenance of this trail has necessitated several more work parties.

## **Land Acquisition**

The club has supported all land acquisitions that provided trails that our members can use. Most of these land acquisitions have been successful, but a few failed to materialize. The funds that were donated to these various causes came largely from donations, usually bequests. Here are the main land acquisitions that we supported:

- **Andreas Vogt Nature Reserve.** When the AVNR was given to the Conservancy in 2002, the club donated \$1,000 to help defray acquisition costs related to the purchase.
- **Manzanita Ridge Nature Reserve.** In 1989, Martin Williams wanted to protect 20 hectares (50 acres) of his quarter-section forestry lot. The club negotiated a price of \$35,000 for this piece of land and had no trouble putting together the required funds, partly with a generous bequest from John Norget. However, there was some problem in finding a public body other than the Crown to hold the land, so Martin withdrew his offer. Jump to 2002 and the same piece of land was again offered for sale, this time to the now-established Salt Spring Island Conservancy for \$95,000. The club donated \$5,000 and our members donated over \$10,000 more to help make the acquisition successful the second time around.
- **Burgoyne Bay Provincial Park.** Established in 2004, the land that is now Burgoyne Bay Provincial Park was purchased with other land from the Texada Land Corporation. The club donated \$5,000 to this purchase and again our members contributed many thousands of dollars more to help acquire this wonderful park.

- ***Mt. Erskine Provincial Park.*** The Trail and Nature Club led annual hikes to the top of Mt. Erskine with the landowner's permission for many years. When the land was offered for sale in 2005, the Conservancy was notified and arranged to buy the land. The club and its members were strong supporters to help make this acquisition happen. This land was the centrepiece of Salt Spring's fourth provincial park, which was established in 2006.
- ***Creekside Rainforest.*** In 2008, after the Salt Spring community had raised just over \$1,000,000, The Land Conservancy of BC took ownership of the property. The club contributed \$1,000 to this purchase and our members contributed much more.
- ***Blackburn Lake Nature Reserve.*** The Salt Spring Island Conservancy acquired this nature reserve as their headquarters in 2013. We were there to support them with a donation of \$1,500 from club funds.
- ***Mt. Erskine's Missing link.*** When the trail between Mt. Erskine Provincial Park and the Conservancy's Manzanita Ridge Nature Reserve was interrupted by a piece of private land, the club's board supported the acquisition of this existing trail connection in 2021. Fundraising for this acquisition was accomplished through the BC Parks Foundation, and the new acquisition is destined to become part of the provincial park.

The club was also able to obtain grants from BC Nature to support a couple of these land acquisitions.

While our donations may seem small in comparison to the total amount required for these purchases, they represent a large commitment from a club that relies on a nominal membership fee for its funds. As well, the club's funds have been used for donations to other causes, as you will read elsewhere in these pages.

## Partnerships

The club has had and continues to have many partnerships with government departments and other organizations. While some of these have already been mentioned, here is a more complete list.

***BC Parks.*** The club has contracts with BC Parks and park facilitator K2 Park Services to monitor and help maintain the four provincial parks on Salt Spring. This has also involved creating and installing new trails signage in the parks.

***CRD Regional Parks.*** The club has participated in the development of the Interim Management Plan for the Mill Farm Park Reserve. Over the years we have regularly used and also maintained the trails in this park.

***Islands Trust.*** In 1991, when Fiona Flook was president, the Local Trust Committee asked the club to share its knowledge of Salt Spring trails with the general public and sign them so that

they could be easily accessed. The club hired Islands Trust Chief Planner Linda Adams to do this, and by July 1993 the Salt Spring Island Trail Network Mapping and Policy Project was completed. It included a 14-page report consisting of policy, plans, and 32 map sections of the island. These were submitted to the Local Trust Committee for inclusion in the Official Community Plan.

***Islands Trust Conservancy (Lower Mt. Erskine Nature Reserve).*** In addition to monitoring, maintaining, and signing the trails in the provincial parks, the club has managed the trails in the Islands Trust Conservancy's Lower Mt. Erskine Nature Reserve since 2001. This involves clearing the trails of debris when strong winds like the one in December 2018 bring down trees to obscure the trails. Of course we get help from the many anonymous people who regularly use these trails. This reserve resulted from the donation of land by Jack Fisher who lived nearby and was a keen member of the SSTNC.

***PARC.*** The club has worked with our local parks and recreation department (PARC) for years. We've always had an official representative on PARC's now dormant Trails Advisory Committee, and several of our members have also been members of that committee. In 2003 the club partnered with PARC to fund over 65 signs to identify the island's trails and beach accesses. This was the first time all of our public trails were so identified. The signs were entirely designed and made by volunteers, most of whom were club members.



***Trail signs.*** These signs indicating trail and beach accesses still stand after almost 20 years. The logos of PARC and the Conservancy are at the top of the signs indicating trails for which they are responsible. Other accesses for which no official body is responsible also exist—without any logo.

Many of our members are also members of the Salt Spring Island Conservancy, and the board of Friends of Saltspring Parks was made up largely of Trail and Nature Club members. The club has also partnered with Island Pathways to develop the paths in Ganges and beyond and with the Conservancy and Island Paddlers on many evening presentations.

## Nature

A newsletter to report nature events and findings started in 1982. It had no name until the next year when it was known as *The Oystercatcher*. It soon broadened into a club newsletter with many stories about club activities and sections entitled “Nature Notes.”

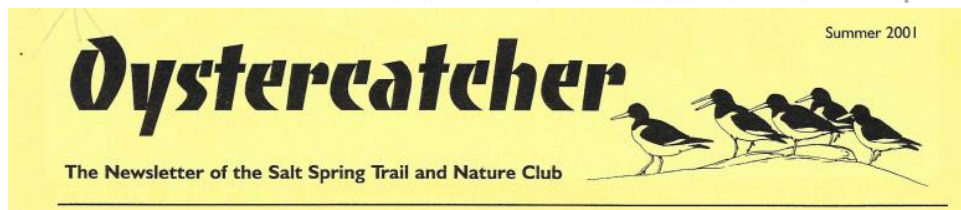
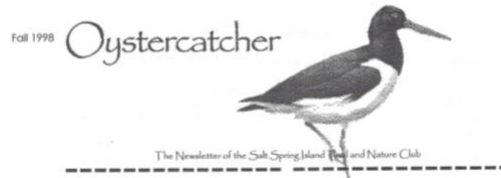
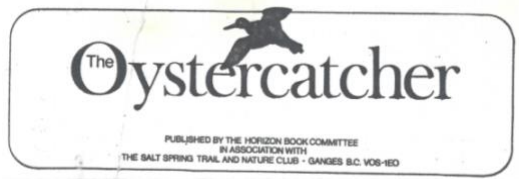
For well over 40 years the club has participated in what the 1982 newsletter referred to as “the annual exercise in masochism known as the Christmas Bird Count.” In 1981, 118 observers spotted 14,724 birds of 96 species. In the following year, 111 observers spotted 13,161 birds of 90 species. The enthusiasm for counting the birds each year is just as strong today.

Club members also led many birding expeditions over the years. Glenn Moores was the club’s chief birder for many years beginning in 1991. Glenn also installed bird houses all over the island. We don’t know how many of these were occupied, but many of them are still attached to the trees where Glenn installed them. Others who worked assiduously in this area were long-time club members Ailsa Pearse, Nancy Braithwaite, and Fiona Flook, who were also among the seven women who started the Salt Spring Island Conservancy. More recently, Tim Marchant, Peter McAllister, John Neville, and Susan Hannon have led bird outings, usually in the early hours of Thursday morning.



**Thursday morning birders** Photo courtesy of Bernadette Mertens-McAllister





### ***The Mastheads from the first Oystercatcher and some later versions***

In 1982, I.C. Shank completed and published *Wildflowers of Salt Spring Island*, a project originally started by Dr. R.D. Bird. Mr. Shank was the editor of some of the first *Oystercatchers*, represented the club at the annual meetings of the Federation of BC Naturalists, and often wrote the column “Nature Notes” for the club’s newsletters.

The club has had a long and distinguished relationship with BC Nature. Many of our members have taken board positions with BC Nature and we have hosted their annual general meetings twice, most recently in 2015. Every member of our club is also a member of BC Nature and we obtain liability insurance for club activities through this provincial organization.

In 2014 the club began its Citizen Science Shoreline Survey. The first part of this involved studies of sea star populations as indicators of ecological health along the shores of Ganges Harbour. All along the coast sea-star wasting disease had decimated the sea-star population. This study was coordinated by naturalist David Denning and club members were trained to do the necessary research. This project also included water-quality studies in Ganges Harbour using sophisticated equipment partially funded by the club. A third project—the sampling of beaches for forage eggs—was also planned.

In 2016 the club financed the Purple Martin Project under the leadership of Peter McAllister. This involved building and installing 25 boxes to encourage the return of purple martins to the island. Over a hundred purple martins have returned to the island in just a two-year period.

Many residents and newcomers to the island have learned about the island and surrounding area through their experiences with the club. Members have provided expertise in many fields and the

club's affiliation with BC Nature has provided us with representation to government agencies, as well as many other opportunities to experience nature through provincial activities. In addition to the many birding outings, we have enjoyed mushroom walks with Linda Quiring, wildflower walks with Nancy Braithwaite and others, and geological walks with Tom Wright, Kees Visser, and other island geologists.



**SSTNC booth at the Fall Fair.** Barry and Sheila Spence provide information to islanders on the club and its activities. Photo courtesy of Sue Lehmann



Club members listening to the leader at Pimbury Falls

## Club Presidents

|      |                |
|------|----------------|
| 1973 | Ruby Alton     |
| 1974 | Ruby Alton     |
| 1975 | Mary Sylvander |
| 1976 | Mary Sylvander |
| 1977 | Jean Holmes    |
| 1978 | Jean Holmes    |
| 1979 | Tom Fraser     |
| 1980 | Jack Ready     |
| 1981 | Bob Robertson  |
| 1982 | Bob Robertson  |
| 1983 | Peggy Jacobs   |
| 1988 | Eleanor Lloyd  |
| 1989 | Jean King      |
| 1990 | Dennis Seward  |
| 1991 | Fiona Flook    |
| 1992 | Fiona Flook    |
| 1993 | Jim Barber     |

|      |                 |
|------|-----------------|
| 1994 | Jim Barber      |
| 1995 | Ian Fraser      |
| 1996 | John Myers      |
| 1997 | Keith Webb      |
| 1998 | Bill Earl       |
| 1999 | Fred Howell     |
| 2000 | Linda Quiring   |
| 2001 | Bill Harrington |
| 2002 | Simon Rook      |
| 2003 | Simon Rook      |
| 2004 | Fred Powell     |
| 2005 | Fred Powell     |
| 2006 | Ron Hall        |
| 2007 | Ron Hall        |
| 2008 | Zeke Blazeka    |
| 2009 | Zeke Blazeka    |
| 2010 | Kees Visser     |

|      |               |
|------|---------------|
| 2011 | Kees Visser   |
| 2012 | Kees Visser   |
| 2013 | John Heddle   |
| 2014 | Nieke Visser  |
| 2015 | Nieke Visser  |
| 2016 | Linda Quiring |
| 2017 | Sue Lehmann   |
| 2018 | Sue Lehmann   |
| 2019 | Sue Lehmann   |
| 2020 | Charles Kahn  |
| 2021 | Charles Kahn  |
| 2022 | Carron Carson |
| 2023 | Carron Carson |
| 2024 | Carron Carson |
| 2025 | Carron Carson |
| 2026 |               |

## Special Events

**Blackberry Festival.** Each year the hiking season begins with the Blackberry Festival at Ruckle Park on the 2nd Tuesday after Labour Day. This event, the brainchild of Bill Harrington, first began in 2002.

**Christmas Luncheon.** This event has been held on the second Tuesday of December and is the last activity before the holiday break. Lunch fees cover all costs, including food, hall rental (if required), and taxes and gratuities.

**Annual General Meeting.** Traditionally the AGM has been scheduled for the third Tuesday in January. It has usually been combined with a potluck lunch provided by the members.

**Strawberry Social.** This last event of the season takes place on the last Tuesday of June. It involves a shortened outing and a longer lunch climaxed by the serving of delicious local strawberries and ice cream provided by the club. In 2005, the Ramblers sponsored the event and provided 50 pounds of berries and four litres of vanilla ice cream. Although members had as many as three servings, there were sufficient berries left over to be sold to members at a bargain rate and still more to donate to an Anglican Church lunchtime program called Music and Munch.

## Honorary Members

If you look back over the almost fifty years of the club's existence, you will see the names of many members who have contributed in countless ways to the club's success. They can't all be listed, and listing them would run the risk of missing some. However, early on the club started a tradition of recognizing one special member each year as an "honorary member." The members so selected included Bob Ball, Gerry Holland, Jean Holmes, Loes Holland, Jean King, Eleanor Lloyd, Joan Lott, Tony Pedersen, and Mary Sylvander.

In 2002, at the suggestion of Bill Harrington, the club decided to discontinue this practice, which included a free lifetime membership in the club. Instead it was decided to initiate a new honour role for those who had made a special contribution to the club. These individuals were called Trailblazers. The list of trailblazers is very long but each of them worked hard to make the club successful. At the risk of missing some of them, here is a list of trailblazers up to 2021: Janet Anderson, Bob and Betty Ball, Jim Barber, Owen Benwell, Zeke Blazecka, Nancy Braithwaite, Jack and Yvette Clements, Ian Fraser, Bill Harrington, George Hignell, Ashley Hilliard, Nancy Holcroft, Charles Kahn, Ann King, Betty Kirk, John Myers, Herb Otto, Dick and Chris Pattinson, Fred Powell, Frauke Prystawik, Linda Quiring, Brian and Margie Radford, Paul and Beth Ranney, Alan and Rita Robertson, Simon Rook, Lynn Thompson, Kees and Nieke Visser.

Since 2001, the club has also remembered members who have died each year by dedicating one metre of the Trans Canada Trail to each of them.

## Conclusion

Unfortunately, the names listed in this short history don't include all of the hardworking members, many of whom laboured anonymously in such roles as editing the *Oystercatcher*, providing refreshments at club events, and serving in the many administrative roles of the club such as taking minutes at board meetings and organizing weekly events. Needless to say, a club is a lot more than just the people whose names are most prominent. Every member makes a unique contribution, and the club's success has depended on all of us. May it continue to provide education, recreation, and enjoyment for islanders long into the future.