

Our Backyard

A NEWSLETTER ON THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT IN SAANICH



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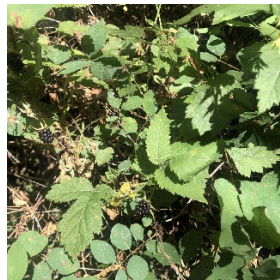
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Summer Connections: Culture, Harvest, and Journey in WSÁNEĆ Territory

By Dominique James



Wild berries ready for picking! (Clockwise from left, Salmonberries, Saskatoon berries, Trailing blackberries)

For the WSÁNEĆ people, summer has traditionally been an important season of harvesting, travel, and community connection. The WSÁNEĆ Nation is made up of Coast Salish peoples whose territory includes areas around southern Vancouver Island, the Saanich Peninsula, and nearby islands and waters. Their way of life has always been closely connected to the land and sea. During the summer months, families participated in activities that provided food, strengthened relationships, and passed important cultural knowledge from one generation to the next.

Dominique James is a member of the WSÁNEĆ Nation, currently residing on the WJOLEŁP Nation of her maternal family home of the Sampson family and also tied to the BOKEĆEN Nation on her paternal side. Dominique has many skills and talents, from plant propagation to cultural knowledge and plant uses, and is always eager to share her knowledge. Dominique is a passionate SENĆOFEN speaker, having worked at the LÁU, WEL, NEW Tribal School in the SENĆOFEN immersion program, then receiving education through UVic for Language Revitalization.

Fishing was one of the most important summer activities for the WSÁNEĆ people. Salmon fishing provided food for families and communities and was deeply connected to respect for nature. One traditional fishing practice was reef-net fishing, a highly skilled method developed by the WSÁNEĆ and other Coast Salish peoples. Reef-net fishing required teamwork, knowledge of tides and fish movement, and careful stewardship of marine resources. Fish caught during the summer were often cleaned, smoked, or dried so they could be stored for the winter months.

In addition to fishing, many families gathered shellfish, berries, and plants during the summer season. Clam digging and collecting oysters or mussels along

the shoreline were important food-gathering activities. Berries such as salmonberries, salal berries, thimbleberries, wild strawberries, Indian plum, huckleberries, blackcap raspberries and trailing blackberries were collected and shared among families. Camas harvesting was also an important practice as it was W̱SÁNEĆ food staple along with salmon. Camas bulbs were carefully dug from the ground and prepared as a food source in early summer. These harvesting activities taught younger generations about responsibility, sustainability, and respect for the environment.

Summer was also a time for travel and cultural gatherings. Families often travelled by canoe (which could lead to days/weeks sometimes even months) between villages and islands within W̱SÁNEĆ territory. Canoes allowed people to trade, visit relatives, and participate in ceremonies and celebrations. Elders shared stories, songs, and teachings during these gatherings, helping preserve language and cultural traditions. The summer

season helped strengthen family ties and community connections.

Today, many traditional W̱SÁNEĆ summer activities continue through cultural revitalization and community programs. Canoe journeys across the map, language learning, environmental stewardship, and traditional harvesting practices remain important parts of W̱SÁNEĆ culture. Community members continue working to protect their lands, waters, and traditions for future generations. These activities show the strength and resilience of W̱SÁNEĆ culture and the continuing connection between the people and their territory.

Summer activities for the W̱SÁNEĆ people are about much more than recreation or work. Fishing, harvesting, travelling, and gathering all play an important role in maintaining culture, supporting families, and caring for the environment. Through these traditions, the W̱SÁNEĆ people continue to honour their history and pass valuable knowledge to future generations.



Camas bulb

Saanich Naturescaping Program: Participant Feature



Back pond area of Naturescaped yard

Kirk and Marion have been Naturescaping their outdoor space in Saanich's Shelbourne neighbourhood for well over a decade. Their enthusiasm for gardening in support of wildlife and local ecosystem health is truly infectious. As former educators, they also love sharing their knowledge and experience. This includes the many ways caring for their outdoor space via Naturescaping has had a positive impact on both their lives and the environment around them.

What led you to use Naturescaping in your outdoor space?

We were drawn to Naturescaping after taking some gardening classes and falling in love with the beauty of native plants and the idea of a garden that needs less ongoing maintenance. The easy-care aspect really appealed to us, but even more than that, we loved knowing it helps keep the ecosystem healthy by welcoming native birds, insects, and pollinators that many non-native plants don't support. We also value the way Naturescaping can enhance the natural environment while contributing to our own food security. More than anything, it feels like reclaiming the land and returning it to a more natural, living state.

What have you found to be the most rewarding or interesting part of Naturescaping?

The most rewarding part of Naturescaping has been watching the variety of birds that come to visit the feeders and even build nests in the yard. It has also created such a lovely way for us to spend more time outside and feel more connected to the natural world around us. One of the most special parts has been seeing neighbourhood kids stop by to notice all the life in the yard. A teacher from a nearby school once brought their whole class over to take a look, which made it feel like the space was inspiring curiosity and connection well beyond our own home.

What has been a challenge with Naturescaping, and how did you address it?

One challenge was learning that some native plants did not thrive, while others did a little too well and quickly took over certain spaces by growing too fast or too thickly for the spot. We addressed that by getting to know the plants better and learning how they adapt to different growing conditions, which helped us make better choices over time. Starting a large Naturescape project also involved a lot of heavy work at the beginning, but now that it is well established, it has become much more about light, manageable maintenance.

What advice would you have for someone just starting with Naturescaping?

If you are just starting with Naturescaping, begin small, maybe with just a planter or two, and place it somewhere you will see often, and where neighbours can enjoy it too. Choosing plants that support both people and wildlife is a great way to start, especially ones like blueberry, salal, or salmonberry that can provide food while also helping birds and pollinators. Starting small makes the process feel manageable and lets you enjoy the rewards right from the beginning.

Final thoughts or words of wisdom?

Do it! Naturescaping is a wonderful way to build community, get to know your neighbours, and create opportunities to share and learn from one another. As former educators, we especially appreciate the educational value in showing others what is possible and sparking curiosity about the natural world. And along the way, you get to enjoy one of the best rewards of all, more birdsong in your yard.

Where to Learn More:

Visit the [Saanich Naturescape](#) page on our website for the complete program booklet, inspiring project examples, checklists, and an array of resources—from bird box plans to native plant lists. Whether you are just starting and looking for inspiration or are a seasoned gardener looking to incorporate some wildlife-friendly approaches, there is something for you.

Saanich residents who are putting Naturescaping practices into action can join the registered Saanich Naturescape Program! Participants receive:

- Yard signage and regular email updates with tips
- Exclusive access to workshops and learning opportunities
- Invitation to an annual Naturescaping gathering
- Community connections with fellow Naturescapers in Saanich

To join, ensure you have three existing Naturescaping practices already started and are ready to expand them. Discover more on our [Naturescape](#) page and apply today!

The rewilding of Cuthbert Holmes Park continues



Freshly planted trees along berm area

Cuthbert Holmes Park is becoming a little wilder, and a lot more vibrant!

Restoration work is continuing along the Colquitz River, with a focus on boosting biodiversity, expanding the tree canopy, and creating healthier habitat for wildlife. Over the winter, Saanich Parks' Natural Areas team planted more than **270 native trees** and **300 native shrubs**, while also removing large areas of invasive species along the park's lower berm trail.

This part of the park presents some unique challenges. The berm was originally built using rock and gravel left over from construction of the McKenzie Interchange, making it a difficult place for young trees to take root. To give the new plantings the best possible start, crews used an excavator to dig planting pits, and a slinger truck to fill them with high-quality soil.



Fresh soil added to the Cuthbert Holmes planting area

This work is part of an exciting **three-year ecological restoration project** that will bring more than **3,000 native trees** and thousands of native shrubs to the park. To make room, crews will also be removing invasive English hawthorn that has spread across the site over the past few decades.

There is even more to come. Plans include building a new creek alcove along the Colquitz River to create better feeding and habitat opportunities for **Coho salmon** as they return upstream to spawn. A new trail through the restoration area is also planned, giving the community more ways to experience the park and watch it grow and change over time. The area will also offer valuable outdoor learning opportunities for local schools and community groups.

Of course, restoration work sometimes comes with surprises.

In this case, it was a cheeky beaver. After flood debris flattened part of the perimeter fence, the beaver slipped into

the site and munched through more than **40 trembling aspen trees** planted last year. Fortunately, aspens are resilient and can re-sprout from their roots, so the trees are expected to recover well over time. Staff quickly repaired the fence, and there have been no further tree-snacking incidents since.



Beaver activity in Cuthbert Holmes Park

Saanich Parks will be hosting community planting events throughout the project, likely during the fall and winter seasons. Stay tuned for ways to get involved and help shape the future of this special natural area!

Saanich Parks Volunteer Reflection



Brad Hawkes has been a Restoration Assistant for the *Pulling Together* Program at Rosedale Park, located in the Strawberry Vale neighbourhood of Saanich, since 2024.

What motivates you to volunteer with Saanich Parks?

I have been recently reflecting on volunteering for two years in the Pulling Together Program. I have been a volunteer removing invasive plants in Rosedale Park. I have had many positive experiences of being involved with this program.

The name of this program nicely describes how much I have enjoyed working with people in our neighbourhood that I did not know. It has expanded my connections beyond our street to others who enjoy Rosedale Park forest and want to help in its restoration. It has built for me a larger neighbourhood community.

I want to keep active as a senior. This program has given me an opportunity, three times a month, for two hours of exercise. Kim, our Lead Steward (head volunteer) provides a break in the middle of the session to keep our strength up, including offering an apple for us to enjoy.

What do you enjoy about volunteering with Saanich Parks?

Although I have worked in forest ecology, I have learnt a lot about non-native species and their impact on the biodiversity in Rosedale Park. I have really enjoyed seeing native plant species rebounding after the invasive ones have been removed. This helps me to keep a positive attitude towards the work in spite of the long potential time frame to complete the restoration of the entire park. The park restoration plan, by using a zoning approach, provides initially one completed area for me to see the results of our labour.

I have been very impressed with Kim, who provides valuable information at each

work session on safety, restoration objectives, changes in the park plan, recognition of our work and others in the program, wildlife sightings, and future plans for seeding and planting native plants. Kim sends an email before each session that provides the session work objectives, which helps me to bring the right tools and clothing. Kim also asks us for our input and feedback on the park plan and each session's objectives. This shows me that I am an important part of the park team.

Any final thoughts?

These two years, as part of the Pulling Together Program, have been both enjoyable and a great learning experience. Thank you to all the Saanich staff involved with this program.

Thank you, Brad, for all that you do to care for Rosedale Park and for helping showcase the rewards of this volunteer work!



Pulling Together volunteers at Rosedale Park.

Rithet's Bog Park: Partnering to Maintain a Diverse Wetland in Saanich

Rithet's Bog Park is one of Saanich's most important natural areas. This sensitive wetland supports local biodiversity, provides habitat for wildlife and species at risk, and helps manage stormwater by filtering water and reducing flood risk in the Colquitz River watershed.

Today, the bog is facing growing pressure from climate change and invasive species, with longer, drier summers raising concerns about water levels. In response, the District of Saanich is working with community and government partners to better understand the park's hydrology and ecosystem health, and to help guide future restoration and management decisions.

In December 2025, Saanich brought key partners together to share data, local knowledge, and ongoing work in support of coordinated planning for the park.

Several projects are now underway. Monitoring supported by the Province of BC, the Rithet's Bog Conservation Society, and the Broadmead Area Residents' Association is collecting groundwater, surface water, and precipitation data to inform a hydrology study and restoration planning. At the same time, a district-wide stormwater and surface water model is being



Northern red legged frog (*Rana aurora*) at Rithet's Bog. Photo credit: © Russ Pym

developed to support integrated watershed management in the Colquitz River watershed.

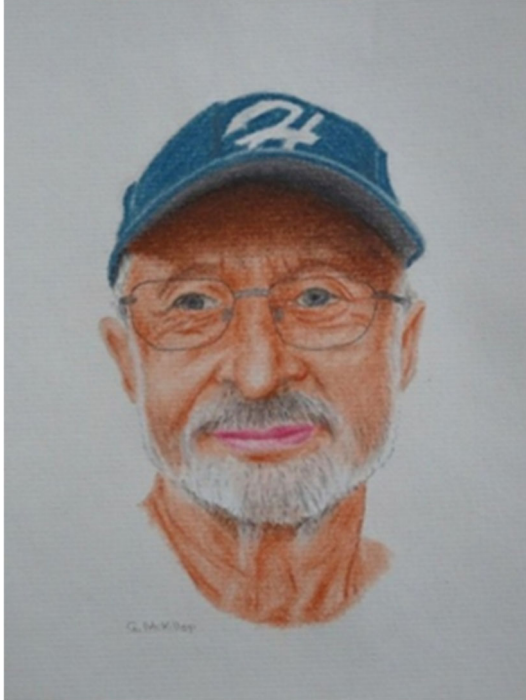
Additional work is focused on mapping wetland ecosystems and assessing vegetation changes over time, helping improve understanding of how climate change may affect this important habitat.

In January 2026, Saanich also received \$10,000 in federal Priority Places funding, delivered through the BC Ministry of Water, Land, and Resource Stewardship, to support a wetland stewardship plan for species at risk in Chatterton Marsh, including Vancouver Island beggarticks and northern red-legged frogs.

This work builds on the ongoing efforts of volunteers and partners. The Rithet's Bog Conservation Society, Pulling Together volunteers, and Saanich Parks continue to play a key role in invasive species management and biodiversity protection, while Saanich also maintains the park's weir to help regulate water levels.

Together, these efforts will help guide future restoration and ensure Rithet's Bog remains a healthy, biodiverse, and valued community resource for years to come.

In Remembrance: Dick Battles



Artist sketch by Greg McKillop

Saanich Parks staff and volunteers are deeply saddened by the passing of Dick Battles, a longtime and much-valued steward of our natural areas.

A lifelong Victoria resident, Dick dedicated countless volunteer hours to Pulling Together in PKOLS (Mount Douglas Park) and, in more recent years, to restoration work in Boulderwood Hill and Knockan Hill. Known to many park visitors for his steady presence, warm smile, and tireless efforts removing invasive species to make room for native plants, Dick embodied quiet dedication and care for the environment.

As Pulling Together Lead Steward Judy Spearing shared, he was “quick to smile and slow to criticize,” while Natural Areas Supervisor Rick Hatch remembered him as humble, hardworking, and always ready with pruners in hand. Dick’s kindness, positivity, and lasting contributions to Saanich parks will long be remembered and he will be greatly missed by all who knew him.



EVENTS



Saanich Recreation Trails & Treks

Enjoy fresh air, beautiful scenery, friendly chat and gentle exercise as we take different walks through Saanich parks and trails. A great way to meet people! [Trails & Treks | District of Saanich](#)

Saanich Parks Volunteer Opportunities

[Volunteer with the Pulling Together Team](#)

Exercise, meet new people and help restore ecosystems by removing invasive species in Saanich parks and natural areas. Find a work party happening near you and get started today!

Saanich Parks Educational Opportunities

Park Naturalist Pop-ups

Fridays in summer, July 17, 24, Aug. 14, 28 | 9:00-11:00 am | 4 different locations

Meet up with a naturalist this summer. Learn about native plants and animals, conservation efforts and more. Stop by to grow your Natural Intelligence or register for an optional walk for a deeper appreciation of nature and biodiversity in our region. Find out more on page 31 of the [Summer 2026 Activity Guide](#)

Cover photo: Naturescape participant front yard, R. Cenerini



Keep up to date on local community stewardship projects and environmental issues. Subscriptions to this newsletter are free and available in electronic version. To subscribe, please send your contact information to the editor or visit saanich.ca/ourbackyard.

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