

Friends of the Columbia Gorge

Protecting the Gorge Since 1980

Fall 2011 Newsletter



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Friends of the Columbia Gorge

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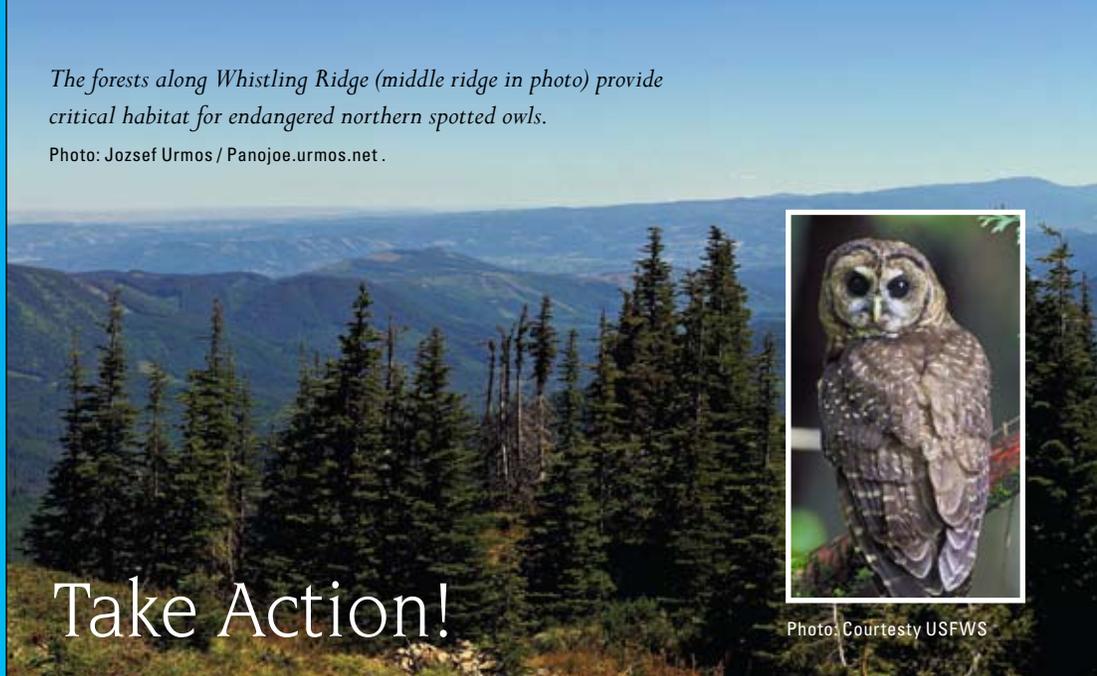


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Link to us on Twitter and Facebook
from our website: www.gorgefriends.org

The forests along Whistling Ridge (middle ridge in photo) provide critical habitat for endangered northern spotted owls.

Photo: Jozsef Urmos / Panojoe.urmos.net.



Take Action!

Photo: Courtesy USFWS

Stop the Whistling Ridge Energy Project

The most destructive wind energy project in the history of Washington State has been given the nod of approval by the Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council, and will soon be on the desk of Governor Gregoire awaiting her decision.

With the stroke of her pen, Governor Gregoire will determine the fate of this highly controversial and poorly planned wind project, and with it the fate of an irreplaceable national scenic treasure – the Columbia River Gorge. See the article on page 8 for more detailed information about this proposal.

The governor has walled herself off from public input as she considers the project's pros and cons, yet most of the state's residents are unaware of the project and what is at stake. It is incumbent upon us to make sure that the public and the media are aware of the stakes and will hold government officials accountable for their actions.

Please help! We need to spread the word. Writing letters to the editors in newspapers is one way to make sure the public is informed and our elected and appointed officials are held accountable. To find out how you can help, visit www.gorgefriends.org/whistlingridge. ■

Citizen action makes the difference! Your actions for Gorge protection are crucial to our success. Contact your Senators and Representatives using the information below, or check www.senate.gov or www.house.gov for other offices.

Oregon

Sen. Ron Wyden, (202) 224-5244
<http://wyden.senate.gov/contact/>
Sen. Jeff Merkley, (202) 224-3753
senator@merkley.senate.gov
Rep. Earl Blumenauer, (202) 225-4811
Rep. Greg Walden, (202) 225-6730
Rep. Peter DeFazio, (202) 225-6416
Rep. Kurt Schrader, (202) 225-5711

Washington

Sen. Patty Murray, (202) 224-2621
<http://murray.senate.gov/email/index.cfm>
Sen. Maria Cantwell, (202) 224-3441
<http://cantwell.senate.gov/contact/>
Rep. Jamie Herrera Beutler, (202) 225-3536
Rep. Norm Dicks, (202) 225-5916
Rep. Doc Hastings, (202) 225-5816
Rep. Jay Inslee (202) 225-6311
Email your **Congressional Representative** by logging on to www.house.gov/writerep/

Cover photo: Spirit Falls on the White Salmon River.

Photo: ©Paul Thomson / Onthewildsidephotography.com and flickr.com/photos/paul_ts_pics/

Director's Letter

“Do you think the next generation will give a damn about the Gorge?”

That blunt question from Friends founder Nancy Russell to longtime member Phyllis Clausen six years ago stopped Phyllis in her tracks. Together Nancy and Phyllis helped build Friends of the Columbia Gorge, and Phyllis also took on building Friends of the White Salmon. Pondering Nancy's question, Phyllis didn't have an answer. But she decided she wanted to be part of the answer.

Phyllis provided seed money and worked with Friends' staff to create the *Vic Clausen Youth Education Program* in honor of her late husband. Now in its fifth year, the program works with the Washougal School District and has brought more than 800 students into the Gorge for stewardship and education.

This past year, our members Loring and Margaret Winthrop approached Friends about making memorial gifts in honor of their son Matthew Winthrop, who passed away at age 34 from cancer.

The Winthrops decided they want to honor Matthew by educating children about the Gorge. They especially want to provide Gorge opportunities for low-income students in Portland, like the group of seventh graders from St. Andrew's Nativity School that I took out to see petroglyphs including *She Who Watches* and to tour our Dancing Rock property last fall.

St. Andrew's is a 100% tuition-free private school for low-income youth, primarily African American and Latino kids. Students there typically enter sixth grade with third grade reading skills, but by the time they finish middle school at St. Andrew's, they are prepared for college-prep high schools. Bright and engaging, they ordinarily have virtually no opportunity to explore and learn about nature.

Because of the Winthrops' generosity, this fall we launched the *Great Gorge Wahoo!* (more details on page 10) and took

St. Andrew's students back to the Gorge. In addition, they read *Terra Tempo, Ice Age Cataclysm*, a locally published graphic novel about the ice age floods, and the author met with the kids and discussed the book with them.

At the end of our tour last fall, a young man named Angel thanked me with a compliment I will never forget. With an easy smile, Angel told me enthusiastically that the trip was, in his words, “Sick and tight!” Those three words held the answer for Nancy, Phyllis, and the Winthrops. I think we can safely say, “Yes, the next generation *does* give a damn!”



Kevin Gorman
Executive Director
kevin@gorgefriends.org

Kevin Gorman with students from St. Andrew's Nativity School below *She Who Watches*. Photo: Courtesy of St. Andrew's Nativity School



*Friends of the
Columbia Gorge
works to ensure that
the beautiful and
wild Columbia Gorge
remains a place apart,
an unspoiled treasure
for generations
to come.*



On October 26, the White Salmon River burst through the hole blasted in Condit Dam in a flood of smoke, silt, and surging water.

Photo: Andy Maser and Steve Stampfli. To see video of the blast as the White Salmon breached the dam, visit www.whitesalmonimagery.com and www.youtube.com/columbiagorge

White Salmon River Runs Free!

Rick Till, Conservation Legal Advocate, rick@gorgefriends.org, and Nathan Baker, Staff Attorney, nathan@gorgefriends.org

On October 26, Friends of the Columbia Gorge and our partners celebrated a defining moment in the protection of the White Salmon River: the breaching of Condit Dam and the first step in restoring a free-flowing, wild river. Breaching the dam begins the physical process of reopening long-inaccessible areas of the river to spawning salmon and whitewater recreation.

Condit Dam was built between 1911 and 1913 by Northwestern Electric Company to provide electricity to the Camas paper mill, then owned by the Crown Willamette Paper Company. In 1947, Condit Dam was acquired by PacifiCorp. The dam sits on the county line between Klickitat and Skamania Counties, 3.3 river miles

from the confluence of the White Salmon and Columbia Rivers, and just inside the boundary of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area.

Historic settlement agreement

In 1991, PacifiCorp applied with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) to relicense Condit Dam. The following year, Friends and several other conservation groups intervened in the FERC proceedings to advocate for river protections.

In 1996, FERC concluded that it would relicense the dam only if PacifiCorp installed expensive fish ladders and met new in-river flow requirements. Complying with these conditions would have made the

cost of operating the dam at least two times the value of the power produced.

In 1999, PacifiCorp signed a historic settlement agreement with Friends of the Columbia Gorge and more than twenty other intervenors in which PacifiCorp agreed to remove the outdated dam. For more than a decade, PacifiCorp worked to obtain all the necessary permits for dam removal. Friends was involved at every step of the way, supporting this unique restoration opportunity.

Dam finally breached

Once the permits were secured, PacifiCorp was finally able to accomplish the breaching by opening a hole at the bottom of the dam via controlled blasting. The massive reservoir behind the dam drained in less

than one hour, as the river returned to its natural flow.

For almost one hundred years, salmon attempting to spawn in the White Salmon River found their path blocked by Condit Dam. But breaching the dam has reopened substantial stretches of high-quality habitat in the river's main stem and tributaries, including about 33 miles for steelhead, 21 miles for coho, 13 miles for spring chinook, and eight miles for fall chinook. Biologists predict annual returns of about 800 steelhead and 8,000 salmon.

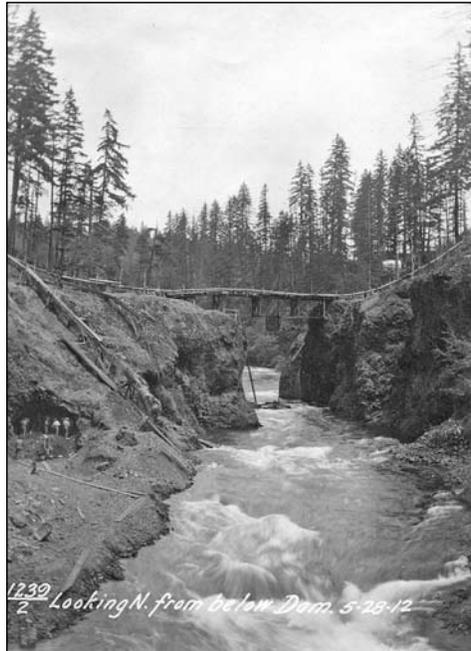
Over the coming months, PacifiCorp will dismantle the remainder of the dam, as well as the cofferdam that was used during the initial construction of the dam. In the fall of 2012, the restored riverbank will be revegetated with native trees and grasses, and native wetlands will be restored.

At 125 feet tall, Condit will be the second tallest dam ever dismantled in America. (The tallest will be the Glines Canyon Dam on the Elwha River in northwest Washington, which is currently being removed.) But despite the dam's size, its removal will not significantly affect PacifiCorp's available energy resources: at the time of its breaching, Condit Dam's energy capacity accounted for less than one quarter of one percent of PacifiCorp's energy portfolio.

The removal of Condit Dam was cheered by whitewater enthusiasts. Local kayaking instructor Heather Herbeck noted enthusiastically, "It's only a matter of time before we all get to experience our first descent of the lower canyon. This removal is bringing new life to the watershed for the local community, recreationists, fishermen, Native Americans, and others. We can all unite in celebrating the future of the White Salmon River."

New threats emerge

Even as we celebrate the successes of removing Condit Dam, the White Salmon River faces new development threats.



White Salmon River in 1912, seen from just below the site of Condit Dam shortly before construction.

Photo: Archival photo, courtesy Steve Stampfli

In 2007, a development scheme surfaced in Klickitat County to rezone more than 1,000 acres of land along the White Salmon River for intensive residential

development. Under the proposed rezone, development density would increase by as much as twenty times beyond what is currently allowed.

The proposed rezone threatens in-stream flows and water quality in the White Salmon River, as well as upland wildlife habitats and numerous cultural resource sites important to the Yakama Nation. But despite these substantial resource impacts, Klickitat County has refused to meet its obligation under the State Environmental Policy Act to prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS).

To protect the White Salmon River, Friends of the Columbia Gorge joined with Friends of the White Salmon to file an administrative appeal and block the proposed rezone until an EIS is prepared. The Yakama Nation also appealed on the same grounds. Friends has been working with these partners, as well as our attorneys at the Crag Law Center, to ensure that the salmon returning to the White Salmon River will have clean, plentiful water and that the outstanding values of the White Salmon River are protected. ■



With the removal of Condit Dam, salmon will once again spawn in the upper reaches of the White Salmon River. Photo: Judy Wilcox



Four Sisters: Another Conservation Purchase

Kate McBride, Land Trust Manager, kate@gorgefriends.org

Commitment to protecting the Columbia Gorge runs deep even in difficult economic times, and just recently another Friends member stepped up to acquire an important Gorge landscape to protect. In September, a generous anonymous conservation buyer purchased a 123-acre site southeast of The Dalles. The new owner has named the property Four Sisters, after the four huge basalt rocks that lie randomly scattered on the land.

The previous owners of the Four Sisters property – Bob and Janice Staver and Bruce Schwartz – were well versed in Gorge protection issues. Janice once served as a Wasco County representative on the Columbia River Gorge Commission, and the land they owned, originally purchased

for investment and later considered as a potential building site, has long been protected from grazing and kept relatively free of invasive plants. Many years ago, Friends founder Nancy Russell hiked the property and expressed a great desire to see it protected.

This past May, Bob Staver contacted Friends about the land. Someone looking for property to build on had recently approached him about the parcel, but he, Janice, and Bruce hoped to find a conservation buyer.

Friends staff immediately contacted a member who had expressed an interest in preserving land in the Gorge. She agreed to look at the property, which rolls up the hills behind Murray’s Addition, just east of Sevenmile Hill Road. The land is

beautiful, with five vernal ponds – a rarity in the eastern Gorge. Balsamroot and lupine blanket the ground in spring, and camas is abundant near the ponds. As the ponds dry out in summer, pink Douglas’s onion appears, followed by *Downingia* that covers the low areas in a sea of blue. This particular property is the only place in the Gorge where Howell’s milk vetch, a Columbia Gorge endemic species, survives.

Although the land was dry and brown in summer at the time of the visit, pictures of the spring blooms showing the wonderful wildflower displays cinched the buyer’s decision to protect the land.

For more information on protecting land by acquisition, contact Kate McBride at kate@gorgefriends.org or 541-386-5268. ■

25th Anniversary Events

Kevin Gorman, Executive Director, Kevin@gorgefriends.org

August marked a series of celebrations around the 25th anniversary of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. Festivities started with the dedication of the Nancy Russell overlook at Cape Horn on August 13. More than 150 enthusiastic Gorge supporters gathered to celebrate the occasion and hear Oregon Senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, along with other dignitaries, talk about the significance of the vision for the Gorge and the visionary of Cape Horn.

A video of the dedication is online at www.youtube.com/columbiagorge.

Later that day, 200 people gathered at Skamania Lodge to honor the individuals credited with ensuring passage of the Columbia River

Gorge National Scenic Area Act.

Special tribute was paid to

Oregon's late Senator Mark

O. Hatfield and awards were

given to Senator Ron Wyden and

Representative Norm Dicks, the only members of the current Northwest Congressional delegation to vote for the 1986 legislation.

The event was sponsored by the Columbia River Gorge Commission, the U.S. Forest Service, Friends of the Columbia Gorge, the

Columbia Gorge Visitors' Association, Skamania County, Skamania Lodge, and other groups. ■



Senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley. Photo: Rick Ray

Friends board member Aubrey Russell spoke at the dedication of the Nancy Russell Overlook at Cape Horn.

Photo: Ann Campbell / Annscreativephotography.com



Thank you, Ken!

Maegan Jossy, Outdoor Programs Coordinator
maegan@gorgefriends.org

For two decades now, Friends board member Ken Denis has been organizing Adopt-A-Highway work crews on the Historic Columbia River Highway to clean up litter near Multnomah Falls. Twenty years ago, our founder Nancy Russell asked Ken if he would "adopt" this stretch of the highway. Ken said yes, and he has coordinated volunteer teams just west of Multnomah Falls four times a year ever since.

Ken was recently nominated for the 2010 Logistics Community Service Award by Kroger, the parent company of his employer Fred Meyer. Our sincere congratulations to Ken on this well-deserved recognition. Next time you're out on the Historic Highway, you can thank Ken Denis and his hard-working volunteer crew for keeping this section of the highway litter-free!



Photo: Felice Denis

OPB Special on Columbia Gorge

In recognition of the 25th Anniversary of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, Oregon Public Broadcasting has produced a one-hour Oregon Field Guide special about the Columbia Gorge. The program will air beginning November 17, the same date that President Ronald Reagan signed the Scenic Area legislation in 1986. Check local listings for viewing times.



Controversial Wind Project Heads to Washington Governor's Desk

Nathan Baker, Staff Attorney, nathan@gorgefriends.org

Since the creation of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area in 1986, few projects have threatened Gorge resources like the controversial Whistling Ridge Energy Project. This winter, the fate of the project and the outstanding scenic beauty of the Gorge will be in the hands of Washington Governor Chris Gregoire as she considers whether to approve or deny the project.

In 2009, SDS Lumber filed an application with the Washington State Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council (EFSEC) to build up to 50 wind turbines, each up to 426 feet tall, on prominent ridgelines near Underwood Mountain. The immense turbines would loom over the Gorge horizon and would be visible for many miles in every direction. The affected scenic landscape is within the Cascade Mountain Range and is visited by tourists from all over the world for its unique qualities, including dramatic mountain vistas, steep cliffs, pastoral lands, and the Columbia River.

The Whistling Ridge project would degrade views from the Historic Columbia River Highway, the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail, the Oregon Pioneer National Historic Trail, and the Ice Age Floods National Geologic Trail – all important features of our national heritage.

The project would harm wildlife by permanently removing hundreds of acres of forested habitat – including land within a designated Northern Spotted Owl Special Emphasis Area. The true extent of the impact to wildlife remains unknown, because SDS has never surveyed the site

for birds during key migratory periods, in direct violation of EFSEC's rules.

The project also would harm the tourism economy in the Gorge, cause substantial traffic along local roads during construction, and reduce property values in surrounding communities.

The power capacity of the Whistling Ridge project would be only 75 megawatts, at best. This is a drop in the bucket compared to the more than 17,000 megawatts of current wind power capacity (including all built, approved, and proposed projects) in Washington and Oregon. The Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) has recently concluded that wind power capacity “is being developed in the Northwest far in advance of regional

power demand.” In fact, most Northwest wind energy is currently being distributed to California.

Friends of the Columbia Gorge supports responsible development of renewable energy sources, but the Whistling Ridge proposal is not responsible. It is not critical to our energy needs and not worth sacrificing the unique scenic beauty and wildlife of the Columbia River Gorge.

Because of the project's impacts, multiple groups and agencies have opposed or recommended substantial modifications to the project. These include federal agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service; local business and conservation groups like the Skamania



The Council recommends giving SDS a permit now, and then assessing the project's impacts on wildlife later. This approach is unlawful and unacceptable.

County Agri-Tourism Association, Save Our Scenic Area, and Friends of the Historic Columbia River Highway, as well as regional conservation groups such as the Seattle Audubon Society, Columbia Gorge Audubon Society, and Gifford Pinchot Task Force. In addition, more than 1,100 citizens have signed a petition opposing the poorly planned Whistling Ridge project.

After hearing from hundreds of concerned citizens, the EFSEC voted on October 6 to recommend that Washington Governor Chris Gregoire approve the Whistling Ridge project, but with changes to the project to reduce some of its scenic impacts. The Council identified just fifteen specific turbines

that it determined should be deleted from the 50-turbine proposal.

The Council's recommendation would somewhat reduce the project's scenic impacts as viewed from certain viewpoints, such as Panorama Point, the City of Hood River, and the community of Underwood. But from other viewpoints, the project would still dominate the natural landscape, even with the fifteen turbines deleted. From viewing areas such as Interstate 84, the City of White Salmon, Viento State Park, and Nestor Peak, the scenic skyline would be broken by overlapping clusters of turbines with massive spinning blades and flashing lights, all deemed acceptable by the EFSEC.

The project also could still harm

eagles, hawks, bats, and the already endangered northern spotted owl. The Council recommends giving SDS a permit now, and then assessing the project's impacts on wildlife later. This approach is unlawful and unacceptable.

Friends of the Columbia Gorge and other stakeholders have asked the EFSEC Council to reconsider its recommendation. We have also asked the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Bonneville Power Administration to fully address whether the project might harm spotted owls or their habitat prior to any agency approvals for the project.

The final decision-making authority for the State of Washington lies with Governor Gregoire. Unfortunately, the Governor will not be accepting any public comments on this project. However, she will be reviewing the administrative record, which demonstrates that this project is not in the public interest and should be denied. Some places should simply be off-limits to large-scale wind energy development. The ridgeline framing the heart of the Columbia River Gorge is one of those places.

For the latest information about the Whistling Ridge project, visit www.gorgefriends.org/whistlingridge. ■



The image at far left presents the turbine placement originally proposed by SDS. The other image indicates the minimal changes recommended by the Washington State Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council (EFSEC).

Simulation: GeoDataScape; Detail: Karen Chandler

Sandy Wright, Development Director
sandy@gorgefriends.org

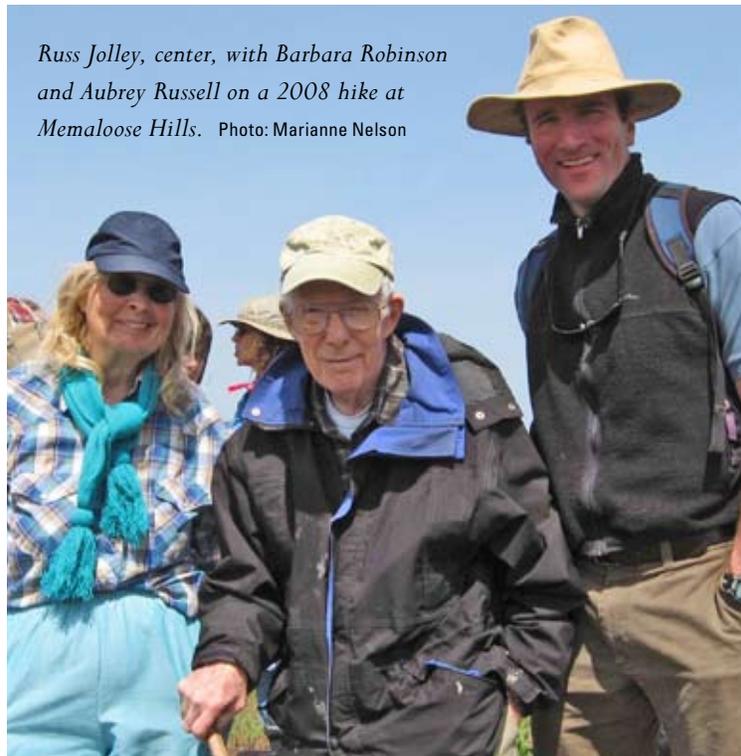
"Evening with Friends"

On October 17, Friends board and staff honored a special group of members at our annual "Evening with Friends," held at the home of Betsy Smith, the sister of our late founder Nancy Russell. The party was a thank you to Conservators and Guardians, members who contribute \$1,000 or more annually.

More than 80 people gathered to hear Betsy talk about her childhood with her "big sister" Nancy and celebrate our latest successes in Gorge preservation. Special recognition was also given to individuals who became Guardians of the Gorge in 2011, a new giving society for members who contribute \$5,000 or more a year. For more information on becoming a Conservator or Guardian, contact Sandy Wright at (503) 241-3762 x102 or sandy@gorgefriends.org. ■

Friends' accomplishments over the last decade, from bringing down Condit dam to starting a land trust to building an overlook at Cape Horn, could not have happened without the generous bequests we have received. If you are interested in leaving Friends of the Columbia Gorge in your will, contact Sandy Wright at (503) 241-3762 x102 or sandy@gorgefriends.org.

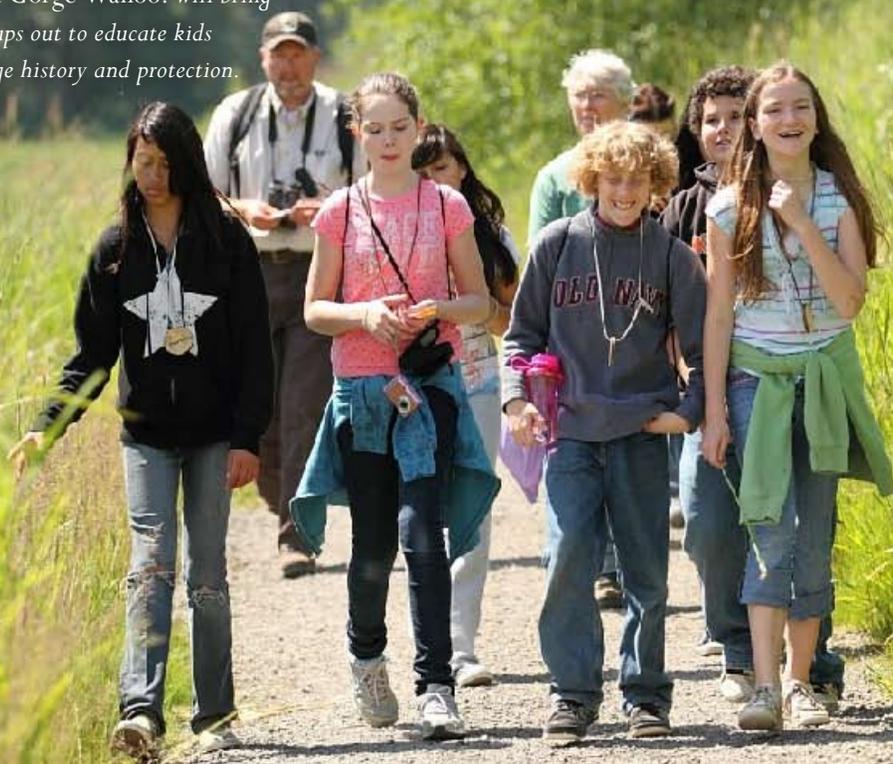
Russ Jolley, center, with Barbara Robinson and Aubrey Russell on a 2008 hike at Memaloose Hills. Photo: Marianne Nelson



Russ Jolley's Legacy

The Columbia Gorge lost a powerful voice recently with the passing of the inimitable Russ Jolley. The author of *Wildflowers of the Columbia Gorge* and a passionate advocate for Gorge protection, Russ introduced thousands of adults and children to special places in the Gorge and elevated the status of the Gorge's unique ecosystems through his research and advocacy. Russ was famously frugal, and his final gift to Gorge protection was to generously leave the bulk of his estate to Friends of the Columbia Gorge. ■

The Great Gorge Wahoo! will bring school groups out to educate kids about Gorge history and protection.



Great Gorge Wahoo!

This fall Friends of the Columbia Gorge launched a new program called the *Great Gorge Wahoo!*, taking school kids into the Gorge to educate them about its unique qualities and the importance of protecting it. The program is a great opportunity for donors to support youth education about the Gorge. The *Great Gorge Wahoo!* was developed in response to members wanting a meaningful way to honor loved ones who cared about the Columbia Gorge. To learn more about the program, contact Sandy Wright at (503) 241-3762 x102 or sandy@gorgefriends.org.

Photo: Ann Campbell / Annscreativephotography.com

Featured Hike: Elowah Falls

Moderate: 3.5 miles, 260-ft elevation gain

Maegan Jossy, Outdoor Programs Coordinator
maegan@gorgefriends.org

The trail to Elowah Falls bustles in summer with hikers enjoying the easy path, stunning waterfall, and verdant beauty. But Elowah reveals an ethereal splendor after the leaves have fallen, when summer hikers are safe at home and views of the cliffs and falls are unimpeded. Fall and winter rains feed myriad seasonal seeps along the trail, and in the forest's snowy stillness, these treasures are just for winter hikers. Bundle up and see for yourself! ■

Directions: From Portland, head east on I-84 to Exit 35. Turn left at the stop sign, then immediately right on Frontage Road for 2.1 miles. From eastern Gorge, take Exit 37. Head west on Warrendale Rd. for about 1/4 mile to a stop sign. Turn left, go under the freeway and turn left again on Frontage Road for 1/4 mile.

Bald Eagle Viewing: 1 mile, 170-ft elevation gain

Join us for a winter outing to view the annual migration of bald eagles to the mouth of the Klickitat River. Wildlife biologist Cathy Flick will be our guide as we watch dozens of eagles hunting salmon on this exciting half-day outing. The date will be announced in January to coincide with winter salmon runs and eagle activity. Register at www.gorgefriends.org/baldeagle.



Elowah Falls in winter finery.

Photo: Greg Lief / Liefphotos.com

Special Gifts

July 21, 2011 – October 20, 2011

IN MEMORY OF MARJORIE SUE ABRAMOVITZ
MARSHALL GOLDBERG

IN MEMORY OF ROBERT AUTREY
CAROL LEWIS
ALAN AND LANA MILLER
KANDIS NUNN
BROOKS AND SUZANNE RAGEN
BARBARA SCHWARTZ

IN MEMORY OF BOB BARD
LAURIE AND EDWARD SIMMONS

IN MEMORY OF LEO MATTHEW CRABTREE
ROBERT CRABTREE

IN MEMORY OF CAROLYN COOPER GRASSLEY
DAVID COOPER AND
CYNTHIA SOFFEN COOPER
MICHAEL AND LOIS HART SCALES

IN MEMORY OF SEN. MARK HATFIELD
STAN E. KAMBLY
JEANETTE KLOOS
FORREST AND BJ SIMMONS

IN MEMORY OF JOHN HELMER, JR.
AUBREY RUSSELL

IN MEMORY OF JOHN HOOD
MARSHALL GOLDBERG

IN MEMORY OF RUSS JOLLEY
JEANETTE KLOOS
BRUCE MUIRHEAD AND
DENISE PARE-MUIRHEAD
CARLTON OLSON
NANITA SAMMONS
AMY YOUNG AND
KEITH DAELLENBACH

IN MEMORY OF JACK MILLS
MARIE V. HALL
AUBREY RUSSELL

IN MEMORY OF MARK NELSON
NORTH CHEATHAM

IN MEMORY OF DR. RUDI NUSSBAUM
PATRICIA HOOVER

IN MEMORY OF HUDSON REED
MARA WILDFEUER

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LORING AND MARGARET WINTHROP

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MARILYN LIPKO

IN HONOR OF TED AND FRAN AMES
MISSY VAUX HALL

IN HONOR OF BOB HANSEN
JIM OLDFIELD AND KATHLEEN SANSONE

IN HONOR OF PHILIP HEID
VIRGINIA AND TED KOONTZ

IN HONOR OF WILLIAM STORMO
JOHANNY JACOBSEN



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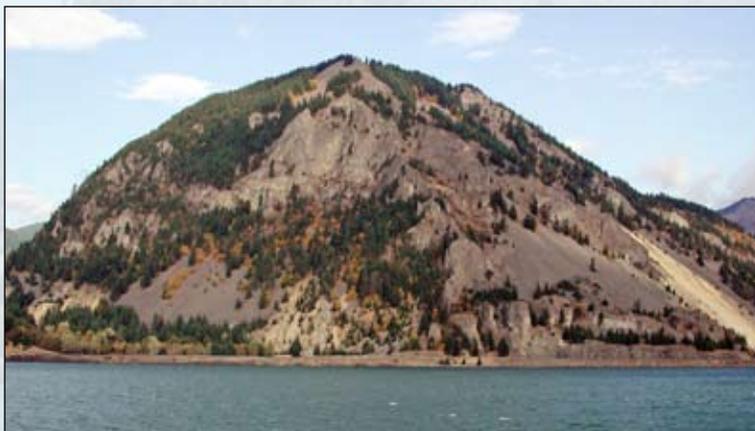
Friends of the Columbia Gorge

P.O. Box 40820
Portland, Oregon 97240-0820

Know Your Gorge: *Then and Now*



Photo: Circa 1910, Courtesy of the Columbia Gorge Interpretive Center



Today the sunken forest is submerged in the high waters behind Bonneville Dam.

Photo: Kevin Gorman, 2002

Sunken Forest

The Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, established by Congress in 1986, celebrates its 25th anniversary in 2011. To commemorate the occasion, our quarterly newsletters are providing windows to the past, from the 1860s up to the present. In this issue, “Then and Now” highlights the Gorge’s “sunken forest.”

On October 30, 1805, Lewis and Clark came upon old-growth snags in the Columbia, and Clark wrote in his journal that the “remarkable circumstance ... gives every appearance of the river being dammed up below.” In fact, several centuries before Lewis and Clark arrived in the area, the Bonneville Slide had indeed dammed up the river, creating the “Bridge of the Gods” that took a prominent place in Native American legend. Geologists believe the river broke through the earthen dam within a matter of days, leaving the channel where Cascade Locks is located today. The dam and subsequent narrow channel caused backwater to flood upstream shoreline forests, creating the sunken forest approximately seven miles upriver from the slide.

When Bonneville Dam was built in the 1930s, the remaining sunken forest was flooded, but it is commonly believed that many of those ancient old-growth snags still stand as they have for centuries, but now underwater. ■