

Conservation of the Morse Preserves, Graham, WA

By Mary Sue Gee

The Morse Preserves contain over 200 acres. The first parcel of 52 acres of the Morse Wildlife Preserve (MWP) was donated in 1995 by Lloyd and Maxine Morse who were passionate about the protection and maintenance of natural resources. Later they donated 50 more acres, named the Maxine G. Morse Nature Conservancy. Simultaneously they donated \$50,000 in stewardship money to care for wildlife and to help with conservation and education.

To aid construction of a stewardship plan for MWP, a plant inventory was undertaken immediately, sufficient to establish that five critical habitats existed: prairie, oak savanna, palustrine wetland and Muck Creek, mixed mesic coniferous forest, and a dry Douglas-fir forest. However, the need for more site-specific inventories was great, more so now as wildlife (common and unique) disappear from our region. Thus some inventories were expanded, plants and birds becoming very good. Other inventories have a good base or are embryonic.



Two rare plant species exist on-site, and have been reported to the DNR-NHP, WA. Both species are associated with the prairie and oaks. Pictured is one that few visitors to MWP know; even fewer know where it's located! Over 100 oak seedlings and acorns have been planted with over 80% survivorship. Prairie restoration is on-going in order to diversify the habitat and enlarge the populations of plants. Exciting results include species not only surviving but increasing in numbers and in patch-size. One of these species is *Lupinus*

albicaulis (sickle-keeled lupine), a host for Puget blue butterflies. The population of *Viola adunca* (blue violet) is good and a host for the great-spangled fritillary butterfly which is present on-site. One future conservation goal may be to augment this butterfly's population by increasing the numbers and patch-sizes of the blue violet.

The bird inventory is excellent, thanks to members of the Tahoma Audubon Society and a special nation-wide program called MAPS (Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship). MWP, one of two research stations in WA, has been a MAPS participant since 1995. The erection of bird boxes and the fostering of vegetation to provide food and cover resulted in the return of the western bluebird in 2007. The boxes proved to be such a favorite of swallows, the bluebirds lost their homes.

The wetlands and its channels, brooks, and drainages on-site are part of the headwaters of Muck Creek in the Nisqually Watershed. The water quality is good to excellent, and provides habitat

for birds, insects, and swimmers like the western brook lamprey, a species of concern. Our inventories for amphibians/reptiles/fish and macroinvertebrates are small but growing.

An insect inventory was begun in 2007 with over 100 species being identified, the majority being native bugs. One species found on MWP, a “large mayfly”, has been reported in only one other



county in WA. Again, water quality proved its value as the mayfly larvae live in fresh water like Muck Creek clinging to rocks. ((Google Lynette Schimming and click on [Lynette Flickr – Photo Sharing](#); then click on “albums”; then “Morse Wildlife Preserve” with 102 eye-popping photos of bugs, etc. Lynette is a photographer/naturalist who ID’ed and helped establish the insect inventory.))

The forests – dry Douglas-fir, mixed mesic coniferous/deciduous, and expanding oak woods – are the largest natural resource on MWP.

While some cultural disturbances like logging have taken place in the past, the forest canopy of leaves and needled-branches effectively covers the undergrowth which is moderately high in quality and diversity. Pictured is bark of one coniferous tree species not commonly found inland, but present on two of the Morse Preserves. Additional *Picea sitchensis* (Sitka spruce) are being planted in forest openings along with cedar and western hemlock to increase canopy coverage. All the forest habitats provide for a variety of mammals, and our inventory continually expands. Species include deer, coyote, raccoon, bobcat, bats, rodents, an occasional bear, a growing presence of elk and a recent tentative sighting of a western gray squirrel – a big gray furry and bushy-tailed creature hopping through the underbrush. While cougars are in the area, none have been spotted on MWP.

The Morse Preserves are large, high quality parcels of forested land, water, and open prairies, and they provide exceptional habitat that is being conserved in Pierce County. Luckily, there are partners in conservation of this land – Forterra (landowner), Tahoma Audubon (education), and the Morse Force (a volunteer management group). We work together to keep this land and its wildlife in a safe state plus providing for education. The Preserves are privately owned, but open to the public on the second Sunday of each month from April through October. Groups wanting to visit at other times need only to contact the Morse Force ([morsewildlifepreserve@gmail](mailto:morsewildlifepreserve@gmail.com)) and arrange a day and time for a private tour. Please visit and enjoy!