

We Remember Jon Soest 1938 - 2008

Jon Soest became a hiker and wilderness advocate while in grad school at the University of Washington. His first job was teaching physics at William and Mary in Virginia, where in 1969 he began his grassroots conservationist life as a founder and a president of the Virginia Wilderness Committee (VWC). That group is still very active today, having helped to secure a total of 177,214 acres of congressionally designated Wilderness in Virginia.

The VWC formed after a grassroots workshop with staff from The Wilderness Society. We learned about the Wilderness Act of 1964, and became inspired to work toward an Eastern Wilderness Act, identifying areas in Virginia suitable for placement in the National Wilderness Preservation System. Through workshops and trips to Washington, DC, we learned from Wilderness Society leaders how to interact with public land managers, identify potential wilderness candidates, lobby Congress, and raise grassroots awareness of the importance of wilderness preservation.



March 26, 2007. Photo by Gordon Congdon of Chelan-Douglas Land Trust during a snowshoe trip with conservation organizations to learn the history of White River floodplains.

Photo provided by Heather Murphy who says "This just makes me smile seeing his wonderful charming eyes and deep grin and the sunny, snow covered day."

Until the Eastern Wilderness Act, the U.S. Forest Service had been refusing to recommend wilderness status for anyplace that had ever been logged or lived on, claiming that public land had to be essentially "virgin" (like much of western Wilderness) to qualify as Wilderness. But the VWC began to look for suitable land that was, in the words of the Wilderness Act, "retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements...and which generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable." The VWC examined maps of the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests, met with the two Forest Supervisors and their staff, and located a number of potential areas worth investigating on the ground. We would leave Williamsburg on Friday afternoon or during holidays, join up with other activists, and go exploring through the national forests of Virginia, some of which (though still in Virginia) are actually west of Cleveland! We got around!

After six years of lobbying in Washington, DC, and testifying before congressional committees, the VWC celebrated the passage by Congress of the Eastern Wilderness Areas Act in 1975. One of our proposed areas won Wilderness designation, and several others were protected as Wilderness Study Areas. Since then, all but one of those original areas has been designated Wilderness, and the remaining one is on the VWC's agenda for this Congress. Subsequently we also helped to win Wilderness designation for large portions of Shenandoah National Park.

After returning to Washington State, Jon was active in the Washington Wilderness Coalition, the Tatoosh Group of the Sierra Club, Mount Rainier Park Associates, and Friends of the Clearwater, hiking trails and lobbying for protection of the Clearwater roadless area and adoption of the 1984 Washington Wilderness Act.

Sally Soest

I remember Jon's description of one of his first visits to the upper Wenatchee Valley and how he felt about its natural beauty. Jon shared with me that they drove into Leavenworth in autumn on one of those cold, clear days with fresh snow blanketing the tops of the ridges. He was so excited by how beautiful it was. Those are some of my favorite days as well and I will always think of Jon after those first autumn snowfalls with the fresh white snow against a clear blue sky.

Mary Jo Sanborn, Water Resource Manager
Chelan County Natural Resource Department

I've known Jon for several years through NCW Audubon activities, but was also privileged to witness his contribution to the Wenatchee Watershed Planning effort as I attended meetings the past two or three years. Jon was soft spoken, somewhat shy, and always had a smile. He was inordinately generous with his time, attending meetings (seemingly constantly) and, to my mind, was the ideal environmental advocate because he kept on top of what groups of diverse interests were doing, sharing his comprehensive knowledge with everyone. He always spoke of the larger environmental picture, keeping whole ecosystems in mind. He didn't hesitate to contribute, challenge, discuss – unfailingly with gentle good humor. While he challenged, he was respectful and patient, but nonetheless got his points across. He was extremely well respected as a priceless and seemingly tireless advocate. I doubt anyone can fill his shoes, and he will be missed beyond words. I wish he could have stayed in Hawaii to his heart's content!

Rachel Scown

I am so saddened with Jon's passing. I had a chance to work with Jon on our local Chelan Beebe Springs project for a short time by reporting actions taken by the project workgroup. I was impressed by his attention to detail, knowledge of the "process" and his ability to look down the road and anticipate possible consequences of actions taken. He will be sorely missed.

Dan Smith, Chelan

Jon Soest used to tell me that he should get the "Hard Seat" award because he represented Audubon in so many meetings. He was right – I never knew someone who could go to so many meetings and make a real difference for conservation. For his many hours of dedication, Audubon Washington awarded Jon our "Conservationist of the Year Award" in 2007. Jon will be remembered for his wonderful sense of humor (Very dry with a twist!) and for his honorable and consistent approach to complicated conservation problems. He never wavered from protecting habitat in the vast watershed around Leavenworth. He always gave me sound and careful advice on how to talk with agency staff and landowners. And, on a personal note, Jon and Sally were very generous to me when I first took on the Executive Director position in 2005; they gave me a key to their Seattle condominium as I made the transition from Olympia to Seattle. We already miss Jon in our statewide Audubon Conservation meetings, but I know Jon would want us to continue our passion to conserve habitat for birds and wildlife—and do it with a very dry sense of humor!

Nina Carter, Executive Director, Audubon Washington



Jon shares a happy moment with other members of the Watershed Planning Team including Mark Oswood and Mary Jo Sanborn. photo provided by Mary Jo Sanborn

We were all saddened to hear that Jon Soest passed away. Many of us were first introduced to Jon through his work with Audubon and the Wenatchee Watershed Planning Unit. Over the many years that we knew Jon, he was a partner in our efforts, a skeptic when we needed it, a friend, a joker and, above all, a man who cared deeply about his community and the environment. His tolerance, patience and fortitude were mightily tested as he sat through countless meetings and years of watershed plan development, challenging us all to consider the bigger picture and the connectivity of all things in the watershed. Even in times when we all grew tired of each other and wanted to throw in the towel, we would return to the table and start it all over again, including Jon.

All the members of our effort have fond stories to tell of Jon. One member said well what many of us felt about Jon, saying "We became good friends and found that we had many interests in common. I feel I have lost a brother as we were kindred souls." Commonly-used words to describe Jon include passionate, humorous, constructive and engaged. He always challenged us to be better than we were through his thoughts and actions. We want to especially thank Sally for sharing Jon with us and attending our meetings and events.

Our friend Jon will be missed by everyone, though we find some comfort in knowing that his work in our watershed will be felt into the next generation.

Mike Kaputa and Mary Jo Sanborn and the Wenatchee Watershed Planning Unit

We think of role models as being important in our growing-up days but we never outgrow our need for role models. Jon was one of my adult role models. Jon was a conservationist, not just as a philosophy but as a practice. Jon showed us the value of full engagement, of showing up to hundreds of meetings, workshops, planning sessions, and field trips - and with intelligence, quiet humor, and stubbornness - making sure that future generations were represented. As I was thinking about the immense power this deep engagement has to change the future, a passage from a book ("Animal Dreams" by Barbara Kingsolver) seemed to fit Jon's life: "... the very least you can do in your life is figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof ... Right now I'm living in that hope, running down its hallway and touching the walls on both sides." I see Jon running down his hallway; I think that he's still touching the walls.

Mark Oswood, President, North Central Washington Audubon Society

"Regardless of the situation, we all could rely on Jon for his thoughtful, forceful, but quietly diplomatic approach to many of the natural resource debates facing our community, our state, and our world. He was tireless in his work, but it really seemed like he was having great fun along the way. Jon laughed like no one else, and invariably made everyone laugh along with him. I believe that humankind would indeed be much better off if we all treated our natural world—and us living beings on it—with the level of compassion and care that Jon showed. Farewell Jon—you have left a blessed and remarkable legacy."

Bob Bugert and the Chelan-Douglas Land Trust

My memories of Jon are from our evening Audubon meetings. He was always such a welcoming presence. I appreciated his chuckle and how he was always interested in the goodies I brought. He would mosey over to the table, choose a treat, and thank me profusely even for the simplest of fare. I also appreciated his welcoming presence when I was new to the board. Like everyone, I was in awe of his dedication to conservation and his detailed reports. He is an example for all of how one person can make a difference.

Penny Tobiska

Jon with Chris Parsons at the NCW Audubon booth at Salmon Fest in Leavenworth. photo by Mark Oswood

If only because of the hours of meetings he tirelessly attended patiently defending the public's common interests from the constant attacks of moneyed special interests, Jon should be recognized as a saint. He just kept at it. He never sought but was always worthy of people's respect.

Steve Aslanian, Skagit Audubon Conservation Chair



Jon Soest was a wonderful asset to our region. He worked incredibly hard to protect the environment, he created positive relationships among groups and individuals, he encouraged people to get involved by example and by giving support to the projects of others whenever he could. I counted on his willingness to listen and to take action, and I counted on his manner of friendship. I miss him very much.

Susan Evans

Jon was one of the smartest, warmest and most committed people we've had the pleasure of knowing. His amazingly hard work on the NCWAS Board and on White River issues were like a part-time job - sometimes maybe a full-time one. Though he clearly knew more than most people, he always encouraged others to express their opinions and was very modest about his own work. Together he and Sally have made a very large impact in the whole Valley. He will be missed so much, both personally and "professionally".

Dennis and Jeanie Garrity

The passing of Jon Soest is a tragic loss for us all. While he was the Conservation Chair for the North Central Washington Chapter of the Audubon Society, he was also Audubon's Ambassador to North Central Washington. The Beebe Springs Area Project and the Wenatchee River Study were just two examples of Jon's many activities representing Audubon. His cheery personality, outstanding guidance and advice, his attention to detail, his great sense of humor and his love of the outdoors and its wildlife inhabitants were evident in every project he undertook. His love of the outdoors and its wildlife were his primary interests. He was complimented in these interests by his wife, Sally, who shared his love of the outdoors. Jon Soest was a dear friend who had much to teach us. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family at this sad time.

David M. Klinger and Ann K. Hoyt

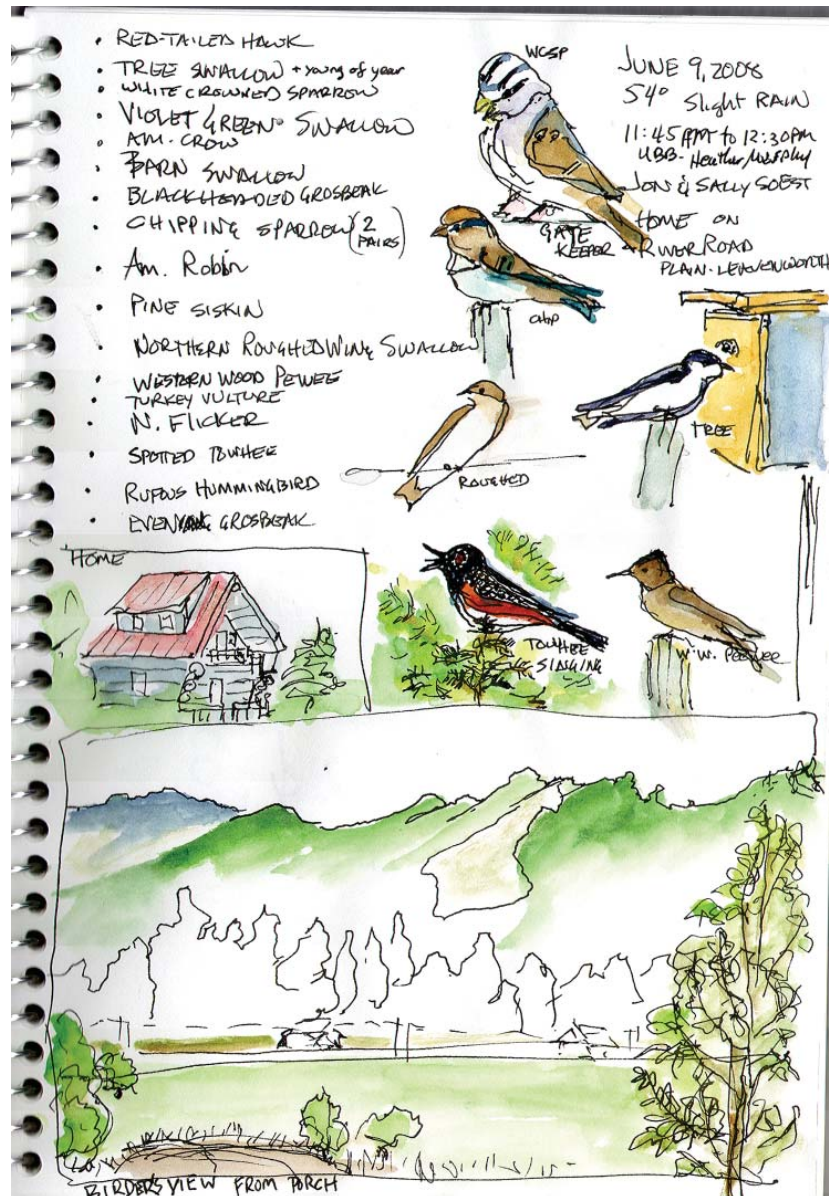
“Soest Home” is a Bird Journal I did for Jon and Sally, when Jon was undergoing surgery and treatments on the west side last June. They could not get back over to their home on River Road in Plain. So, one day after doing our monthly volunteer group birding project (Upper Basin Birders, of which Sally is a member), I went to their home and recorded birds from their porch. I scanned it and emailed it to them that evening so they could still be a part of birding. It made me feel better, to stay connected to them both, through our common love of birds and conservation. And I know they cherished the “nature” of home, while dealing with hospitals and cities.

As to my thoughts of honoring Jon Soest. There is so much to that man; it is hard to compose where my mind is taking me. First I must talk to the professional work we did together. For the many years of partnering between NCWAS and the USFS, I depended on Jon to keep us (Forest Service wildlife biologists) informed of important issues that we could tackle together. He was essential in accomplishing many partner projects, such as:

- the USFS’s White River Wetlands and Watershed Restoration project above Lake Wenatchee;
- the Ware Walk interpretive trail in the White River;
- the combined focus on the White River for all land owners;
- the Leavenworth Spring Bird Fest conservation field trips;
- the Upper Basin Birders Citizen Science program;
- the Icicle Campground Trees, hazard tree topping project;
- the growth of Barn Beach Reserve’s conservation programs through the Advisory Board we worked on together;
- the Okanogan-Wenatchee Forests’ advisory board - offering understanding AND challenges to what the Forest Service does, a good check-and-balance.

As to friendship with Jon. What an easy man to like and easier yet to respect. As time went on, I realized I depended on him to let me know what I might need to adjust, or tweak, or humbly correct in my wildlife biology job with the Forest Service. He did this with humor and genuine caring of me as an individual and for the agency I love. I am lucky to have had such a friend as Jon Soest, a large man in mind-body-spirit, he cast a very large shadow. We are missing him, will continue to miss him.

Heather Murphy



When I heard that Jon’s brain cancer was not responding to treatment I thought, this is so incredibly sad and all too sudden. It’s hard to accept. Jon was more than just a good man -- he was a hero. He was always a gentleman, but he was also tougher than nails. I thought he was indestructible. The world, especially our little corner of it, is better for having had Jon here to take care of it. All of us -- fish, wildlife and humans -- will miss him. My heart is aching. Tears are running down my face. I’m just going to be sad for a while.

Jeff Parsons

This tribute to Jon Soest is produced by North Central Washington Audubon Society and edited by Teri J Pieper and Mark Oswood. Many thanks to all of the contributors for sharing their memories and thoughts at this difficult time. NCWAS may be reached at PO Box 2934, Wenatchee, WA, 98807 or info@ncwaudubon.org