

# The Leader

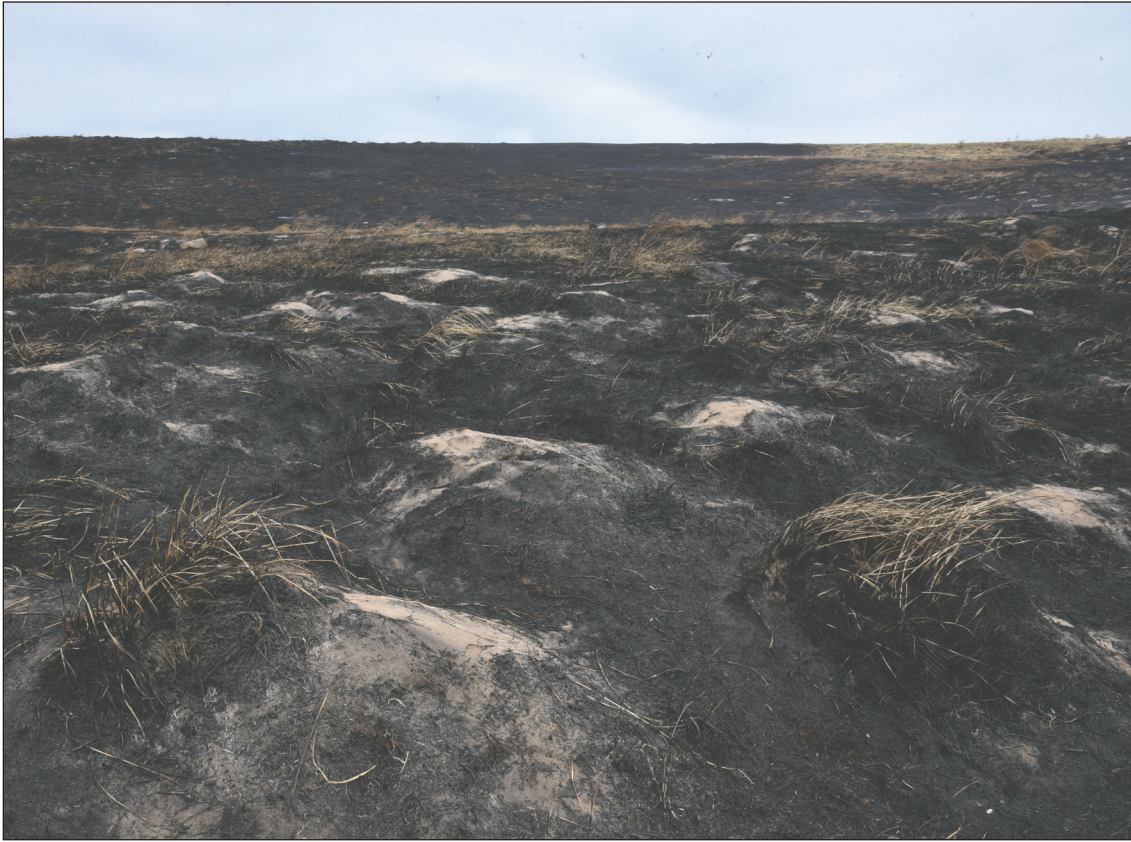
August 11, 2021  
Issue 32 / Vol. 132

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## CLOSE CALL FOR ONE-OF-A-KIND ISLAND



The landscape on Protection Island where rhinoceros auklet burrows are located was left blackened by last week's fire. Photo courtesy of Peter Hodum

# Fire on Protection Island a wakeup call to protect wildlife

**LAURA JEAN SCHNEIDER**  
LJSCHNEIDER@PTLEADER.COM

Much of the seabird population and wildlife on Protection Island may have escaped harm from last week's fire that consumed approximately 25 acres on the south-western side of the 379-acre federally protected refuge, according to experts who visited the island.

The blaze, which was visible for miles due to a large smoke plume that stretched across the Strait of Juan de Fuca, caused immediate alarm throughout the region.

The situation looked dire early on. According to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service's website, 70 percent of nesting seabirds in the Puget Sound area and Straits of San Juan de Fuca depend on the island's unique habitat, including 50 percent of the last remaining tufted puffins in Puget Sound.

And it is currently pupping season for up to 1,000 harbor seals that inhabit Protection Island.

Rebecca Bennett of the Department of Fish and Wildlife Police described the place that burned as "mostly hilly grass-land area on the western hills of the island,



The view of Protection Island from the air near the start of the fire. Summer Martell photo

and around three-quarters of a gravel spit containing driftwood logs and reeds."

For several days after the fire was suppressed, USFW officers worked on-site to suppress remaining hot spots on the island.

In an email to The Leader, Bennett said WDFW enforcement officers had investigated the western sand spit.

A patrol boat deployed an officer via a beach landing to assess the damage on the west side of the area torched by the blaze.

"While this "area [is] popular with harbor seal weaning pups," Bennett said no injured, dead seals or marine mammals

were discovered.

Marty Bluewater, the sole private landowner on Protection Island and its only inhabitant, was not on-island when the fire broke out.

He was en route to Seattle via boat, and at around 9:30 a.m. that morning, he snapped some photos as he left, never imagining the next images he'd see of his home would be clouded with smoke.

When the fire broke out around 11 a.m. last Tuesday, misinformation was rampant. "I kept hearing conflicting things," Bluewater said.

Dreading the worst-case scenario, he asked friends from Cape George to make the trek to the island to retrieve his personal effects.

After a harrowing 24 hours, Bluewater was cleared to return home.

### IGNITING CONCERN

Although the island is protected land and access is limited, many members of the public take proprietary interest in the island. As recently as Monday,

see **FIRE**, Page A6



Two deer make their way across the charred landscape of Protection Island. Marty Bluewater photo

## Wennstrom wins big in Primary council race

Challenger takes lead in Port Ludlow fire commissioner contest

**JAMES SLOAN AND BRIAN KELLY**  
NEWS@PTLEADER.COM

It was a landslide win for Libby Urner Wennstrom in the Primary Election race for the Position 5 seat on the Port Townsend City Council.

Wennstrom amassed 72.6 percent of all ballots cast in the three-way race during Tuesday's election, according to the most recent vote tally Aug. 5.

Tyler Myles Vega will advance to November's General Election for the Position 5

seat after he won 22.1 percent of the vote.

Sky Hardesty-Thompson, the remaining candidate in the three-way race, had 3.9 percent.

"I was expecting to come out ahead but not by that much," Wennstrom said.

"I'm heartened by the support," she said, and added that voters' familiarity with her may have been key to her margin of victory.

"I know a lot of the people here," Wennstrom said.

The dominating performance by Wennstrom left Vega wondering about his chances come November.

Vega and his team are "on hiatus" and will soon decide between treating the council race as a stepping stone toward future races or trying to make an improbable comeback victory.

"Chances to win the race are low ... more of a longshot," Vega said. "It's a low probability race for us."

"We were hoping for better numbers," he added.

The council race lacked an incumbent in the running, as Councilmember Pamela Adams decided against seeking another term.

"I am just glad I had the opportunity to run and get some of my ideas out there," Hardesty-Thompson said.

"It was a great experience," he added. "I was able to learn about some new ideas and I am thankful I had the opportunity to share some with some eventual council members."

"Libby ran a fantastic campaign and definitely shows how it's done," Hardesty-Thompson said.

### BY THE NUMBERS

Wennstrom won every precinct in Port Townsend with 62 percent or more of the vote, according to an analysis of unofficial precinct returns by The Leader.

She did best in the precinct of Port Townsend 702, the area between San Juan Avenue and Harrison Street south of Lawrence Street, where Wennstrom picked up 77.1 percent of all ballots cast.

Wennstrom pulled in more than 77 percent in Port Townsend 710, the precinct north of Cosgrove Street and east of Willow Street.

She also fared above 70 percent in six other precincts; PT 700, PT 702, PT 705, PT 707, PT 708, and PT 209.

Hardesty-Thompson was eliminated from the race with his third-place showing.

His low-key campaign — which lacked a candidate's statement and biography in the local voters guide — was due to a medical emergency and then surgery, he told The Leader.

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# Fire: Scientists visit island to review damages by blaze

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Aug. 9, Bluewater reported that some fisherman had stopped to explore the island, despite signage saying the area is closed to the public.

"In the old days there were people who would come and go," Bluewater said.

Some have not been careful with their beach fires, he added.

Once he woke late at night to see a glow below his house; it was a fire he ended up fighting for five or six hours. Bluewater said he realizes how lucky he was to have spotted the fire at all that time.

According to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service's most recent 15-year Conservation Comprehensive Plan for Protection Island, all vessels are "to maintain a 200-yard conservation lease and tideland withdrawal ... to reduce human disturbance." No access is permitted, but that mandate is sometimes ignored.

According to the plan, Protection Island is one of the most arid climates in Western Washington and has seen scattered fires in the past.

Between 1944 and the 1950s, at least two major fires burned most of the uplands on Protection Island, and there was "another major fire on Violet Point (on the east end of the island) in 1962."

Fire season on the island begins earlier — in April instead of June — and runs later, to October, than the rest of Olympic Peninsula.

Bluewater knows firsthand that standing dry forage in late summer is a huge fire risk.

"That grass is like burning matches almost," he said, and added that the meadows where resident deer graze are very dry at the present.

According to Bluewater, there isn't much on Protection Island to use against fighting fires.

There was a wild-land type "portable fire truck" stationed on the island at one point, but Bluewater said he doesn't know where it ended up.

He said he hoped that government agencies see this recent fire as a motivation to outfit the refuge with equipment for future emergencies.

## FOR THE BIRDS

Protection Island is one of the last enclaves of undisturbed nesting habitat in the



A pigeon guillemot feeds at Protection Island. Photo by Peter Hodum

## Salish Sea.

Most sea birds are "site-faithful," returning to the same locations annually to breed, nest and raise their young.

As nearby islands like San Juan and Whidbey become further developed, the loss of habitat pushes even more avians into an already limited environment.

John Piatt, a research wildlife biologist for the U.S. Geographical Society, said that Protection Island is home to a "globally significant population of birds."

Piatt lives in Port Townsend, and has studied rhinoceros auklets for decades.

"To have a fire at this critical stage of breeding at a refuge is just over the top," Piatt said.

Peter Hodum, a professor in the biology department and Environmental Policy and Decision Making Program at the University of Puget Sound, has monitored avian activity on Protection Island since 2006.

He works with Scott Pierson, a research scientist for USFW, and Tom Good, a Research Fisheries biologist for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association, to monitor the four dominant species of water birds on Protection Island: the glaucous-winged gull (*Larus glaucescens*); the pigeon guillemot (*Cepphus columba*); the tufted puffin (*Fratercula cirrhata*); and the rhinoceros auklet, (*Cerorhinca monocerata*).

Hodum was part of a group who went on-island Friday, Aug. 6 to determine the extent of the fire's impact on the water-bird community.

The group found the fire had burned through several of nine designated avian monitoring areas on the island.

"It was pretty jarring, to see a place you feel a really strong connection to ... suffering like that," Hodum said.

He said one of the most important bird habitats in the Salish Sea had nearly come to utter destruction:

"If the wind had been out of the south, the entire island would have burned. We're fortunate it wasn't worse," he said.

Like Bluewater and Piatt,



A firefighter knocks down a hotspot on Protection Island on Wednesday, Aug. 4. Marty Bluewater photo

Hodum has his suspicions that the Aug. 3 fire was human-caused; there was no lightning, no one on-island who was authorized to be there, and temperatures were not unseasonably high.

He said a small boat was reportedly seen right off Kanem Point, a long spit area, where the fire seems to have started.

"The leeward driftwood was reduced to cinders," Hodum said.

It destroyed pigeon guillemot nests on Kanem Point, he added.

Bluewater sees the crucial habitat Protection Island provides, daily, a rare opportunity.

"There's an eagles' nest out here that's been here since 1976," Bluewater said.

"They just keep adding sticks. I could probably lay down in it," he added.

There are multiple pairs of birds that return every year, Bluewater said.

Two different pairs of gulls have subdivided a mowed area of his yard and won't allow any other birds to nest there.

And there's a family of swallows who build a nest under the eaves of his house that come back year after year.

"It was very sad walking the area and seeing the gulls that lost their nests ... looking for their babies," Bluewater said.

## A SALISH TREASURE

Local birders often associate Protection Island with puffins. The species most folks are familiar with is the iconic tufted puffin (a Washington state endangered species) with a bright orange bill.

But most folks don't know how few of these animals call the island home: Just five or

six breeding pairs who hatch a single chick annually.

Hodum said that the fire had come very close to the cliffs on the southwest side of the island where the tufted puffins nest.

Since the vegetation was not burned, Hodum was optimistic about the state of the nests.

Rhinoceros auklets are also puffins, but they nest underground.

Male "rhinoceros" auklets, named for the facial plumes rising from their beaks, dig underground nests, or burrows, ranging from 2- to 9-foot deep. Breeding pairs meet back together at their burrow each year to raise a single chick.

Hodum estimated that there are about 50,000 rhinoceros auklet burrows on Protection Island — burrows located directly in the path of the fire.

Amazingly, Hodum said the team "didn't find any dead chicks in burrows."

When a fiberoptic infrared camera was threaded into a sample of nests, 40 percent held live chicks; 60 percent were empty.

As the fire burned during the time that rhinoceros auklets fledge, leaving their nests to go to sea, Hodum hoped the empty burrows mean that young birds made their way off-island.

Hodum did discover a few dead near-fledging rhinoceros auklets on the surface of the ground, untouched by predators.

Since rhinoceros auklets do not typically leave their burrows in daylight, Hodum speculated that smoke, stress, or heat could have caused the deaths — perhaps even starvation if parent birds were spooked from returning to their burrows.

"We have something to conserve, practically in Port Townsend's back yard," he added. "On a global level, [this is] one of the largest breeding colonies for rhinoceros auklets in the world."

Hodum said the Protection Island fire is a "wake-up call."

"There was real damage done to the island. Sea birds died in the fire," Hodum said. "We need to do everything in our power to keep this jewel safe."

## FIRST RESPONDERS

After the fire was reported, the state Department of Fish and Wildlife took the lead on sequestering the blaze.

The state agency was notified of the fire via the Washington State Patrol at 11:15 a.m. Tuesday, Aug. 4, and a Washington Fish and Wildlife patrol boat near Marrowstone Island provided the first out-of-county response, arriving at approximately noon.

They were preceded by the first responding vessel, a Jefferson County Sheriff's Office patrol boat, which left soon after the WDFW arrived.

As part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, the WDFW has jurisdiction over the 48 acres on the west end of the island known as the Zella M. Schultz Seabird Sanctuary.

Rebecca Bennett of the Department of Fish and Wildlife Police said multiple entities merged to fight the fire, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Federal Wildlife Refuge; the United States National Park Service; and the Department of Natural Resources, which manages the surrounding aquatic area as the Protection Island Aquatic Reserve.

Additionally, Bennett said a helicopter from Coast Guard Air Station Port Angeles did a fly-over to assess damage.

East Jefferson Fire Rescue Chief Bret Black said the fire department received "a surge of calls" last Tuesday about the fire after a large plume of smoke could be seen coming from the island north of town.

As complaints of smoke grew, East Jefferson Fire and Rescue mobilized to investigate the source.

But once the fire was determined to be on Protection Island, it was out of East Jefferson's jurisdiction, Black said.

"I've worked on fires in national reserves before," Black said, adding that there is strict protocol to protect such delicate ecosystems.

The Protection Island fire is still under investigation. Anyone with information surrounding this incident is encouraged to contact Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Enforcement at 877-933-9847, via website, or through text message. Photos can be sent to the department at TIP411 (847411).

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# Primary: Quilcene EMS levy passes easily

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Hardesty-Thompson's greatest support came in PT 708, where he pulled in 24 votes.

In Port Townsend Precinct 710, he pulled in fewer votes — three — than the five made for write-in candidates in the precinct.

## PORT LUDLOW FIRE RACE

For the Port Ludlow fire department, Glenn T. Clemens and incumbent Commissioner Ron Helmonds will advance to the fall election.

Clemens was in front by just two votes in Thursday's tally, 603 votes to 601.

Clemens had 35.87 percent of the vote, while Helmonds had 35.75, in the latest tally.

The third candidate in the race, Mike Feely, had 27.42 percent of ballots cast.

Helmonds led on Election Night by 21 votes, 530 to 509, and was still in front when

more ballots were counted Aug. 4, by 12 votes.

Unofficial precinct results show that Helmonds and Clemens won two precincts each, and drew to a 131-vote tie in the precinct of Port Ludlow III.

Helmonds won the precincts of Port Ludlow I (39.7 percent) and Port Ludlow V (39.1 percent), while Clemens was tops in Port Ludlow II (38.6 percent) and Port Ludlow IV (36.6 percent).

There will be no recount in the race as both Clemens and Helmonds will advance to November's General Election, according to Jefferson County Elections.

Earlier this week, Feely acknowledged defeat and said he was endorsing Clemens in the race.

"I talked with Mr. Clemens," Feely said Monday. "He seems to be the better choice."

## QUILCENE LEVY PASSES

Voters in Quilcene overwhelmingly approved

Proposition 1, a property tax measure for EMS (emergency medical services) funding, in Tuesday's election.

The levy had 80.33 percent in favor, with 580 "yes" votes and 142 "no" votes.

Prop. 1 found its strongest support in the precinct of Quilcene, where it pulled in 81.9 percent of all ballots cast.

At the other end of the spectrum, the "yes" vote dropped to 75 percent in favor in the precinct of Crocker.

With approval of Prop. 1, the levy rate for Jefferson County Fire Protection District No. 2 will be set at 50 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value.

Property taxes collected from the levy start in 2023 and would continue through 2028. Revenues will be used to pay for EMS vehicles emergency medical technicians and paramedics, as well as needed medical supplies and gear.

Officials with Quilcene

Fire Rescue expect the levy to cost the owner of a property assessed at \$300,000 a total of \$150 a year, or \$12.50 per month.

## OTHER RACES

For the Sequim School District Position 5 race for Director at Large, Kristi Schmeck and Virginia R. Sheppard will advance to the fall election.

Schmeck received the highest percentage of votes at 28.94 percent, with Sheppard close behind at 28.5 percent.

Losing candidates for the Director position include Rachel Tax at 26.81 percent and Derek Huntington at 15.58 percent.

The Clallam-Jefferson Fire District 3 Commissioner Primary winners are Jeff Nicholas (56.7 percent) and Duane Chamlee (35 percent).

Nicholas and Chamlee will compete for Commissioner Position Number 1 this fall, and third candidate Sean Ryan will not advance after tallying 7.97 percent of votes.