



Cowichan Estuary  
Nature Centre

## Heron Cam Launch

Amy Clinton-Baker and the Nature Centre Team

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**Image Credit:** Barry Hetschko

The Cowichan Estuary Nature Centre proudly announces the launch of our live-stream Heron-Cam! Tune in for an incredible birds-eye view of the largest heron colony on Vancouver Island. Last year there were over 110 nests in the heronry with over 200 adult herons in residence!

In the last week of February Nature Centre staff noticed two heron 'scouts' circling the Bay checking out their heronry in the nearby ravine. Within days a 'battery' of herons flew overhead and landed in the shallows of low tide at the estuary - an event timed perfectly with completing and connecting our live-stream heron-cam.

The camera, installed atop a 68-foot tower at Wessex Ravine Park, will join the global wildlife bird-camera movement and be a valuable part of nature education for over 5000 visitors to the Centre and 1000+ students annually. In addition, critical data will be collected and provided to local biologists, government agencies and conservationists working to preserve the habitat of our **Pacific Great Blue Herons**, fannini subspecies, a Blue Listed Species of Special Concern under the federal Species at Risk Act (SARA).

## So what's all the fuss about?

As we face the two major environmental challenges of our time - the biodiversity and climate crises - a staggering [3 billion birds](#), close to one in three individuals, have been lost from Canada and the United States since just 1970. Birds Canada names the main threats to birds as “habitat loss, pesticides and contaminants, cats and invasive species, collisions and the climate crisis.” Within this bleak picture, 2019's [State of Canada's Birds Report](#) offers a glimmer of hope, reporting wetland and waterfowl bird populations are increasing from historic low levels - a success story for conservation partnerships.

Pacific Great Blue Herons, a key species monitored in the Cowichan Estuary's internationally-designated Important Bird Area (IBA), are vulnerable to disturbance by both Bald Eagles and humans. Urban and rural development leads to loss of suitable nesting areas and disturbs birds during their breeding season. Especially during the early stages of nesting, construction and other loud noises or disturbances may cause herons to abandon their nests.

## Our heronry history



**Image Credit:** Tod Carnahan

The almost 30-year-old Cowichan Bay heron nesting colony is no stranger to such disturbances. In the early 2000s BC Ministry of Environment officials identified and flagged approximately 95 nests tucked into a grove of alders surrounded and protected by a mixed wood forest of conifers and Maples in the Wessex Ravine.

In 2004 a new housing development was planned. The forested area to the south of the heronry was clear-cut to the boundary of the colony leaving the herons' nests exposed to increased eagle predation and human disturbance. As a result, the herons abandoned that site. But 30 pairs of herons re-nested not far away, deeper in Wessex Ravine and closer to the estuary. The colony at the current site has grown each year.

In 2008 local Cowichan Bay residents came together to successfully advocate for the creation of CVRD Development Permit Bylaw 3083 (now amended to CVRD Bylaw 3605) to protect the ecological attributes and socio-economic values common to this critical habitat and limit activities within a 100m radius of any Great Blue Heron nest trees.

In 2014, this protection was tested during the construction of a condominium complex which came within 30m of the colony. The development was not complete when the herons' nesting period began. As local heron stewards heard hammering and sawing continuing, concerns heightened. BC Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations' staff met with the construction company, environmental consultants and the Cowichan Valley Regional District to put guidelines in place to protect the nesting herons, including noise reduction and disturbance monitoring protocols. They also confirmed Provincial authority to issue a

“stop work order” if disturbance was noted, which was used for a brief period. This co-operative approach meant the herons were not significantly disturbed and nested successfully.

In 2017 biologists recommended a heron webcam for monitoring the Cowichan Bay heronry - a perfect location both for science and public education about this species of special concern. The Cowichan Estuary Nature Centre took up the challenge and the rest is history!

Many dedicated volunteers and supporters pitched in, starting with a 2018 family bequest gratefully received from heron enthusiast Ann McKinnon. Nature Centre friends like Jim Wisnia and Pacific Industrial and Marine moved fundraising forward. Area D Director Lori Iannidinardo provided a Grant-in-Aid. RBS Managed IT Services got the camera installed and hooked up. We're incredibly grateful to everyone involved for their support!



**Art credit:** Anais MacPherson (10 years old)

Visit our website [www.cowichanestuary.ca](http://www.cowichanestuary.ca) for a live-stream view of the Heronry! Help us keep the live-stream streaming at: <https://www.canadahelps.org/en/dn/m/41033/donation>