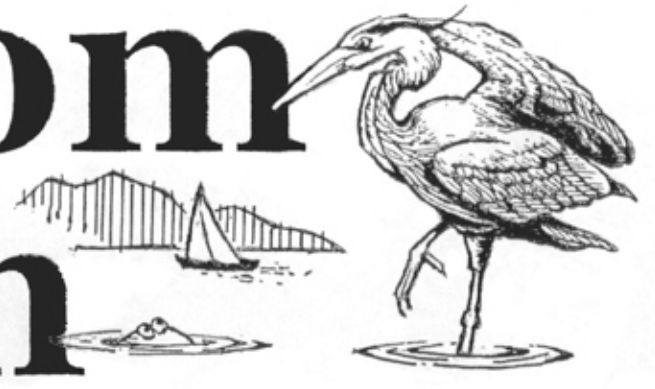




Whatcom Watch



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Bellingham's Post Point Heron Colony on the Move

by *Tori Lehman*

Near the northern edge of Bellingham, the recently completed Little Squalicum Estuary blooms with life. The estuary, completed in 2024 as part of the City of Bellingham's efforts to rebuild historical wetland habitat, creates foraging ground and refuge for juvenile fish. Residents can enjoy the scenic views as it spills into Bellingham Bay.

Now, fuzzy dinosaur-like locals will join them. In 2025, a new great blue heron colony was established just northeast of the estuary at Little Squalicum Park.

When monitoring began for Bellingham's annual report on the Post Point heron colony, heron nests were identified at the park. Monitoring was already underway for the Post Point colony by mid-March when the new colony was identified, so it was not included in the city's annual report. However, a biologist contracted by the city for monitoring at Post Point went out and identified 10 adult herons and 11 juveniles at the site.

The new colony could be the reason the Post Point colony saw a drastic decline in nests during the 2025 season. According to the city's report, which was prepared by Hamer Environmental, the Post Point colony saw a 52 percent decrease in nest-

Tori Lehman is a fourth year environmental journalism major at Western Washington University and spring intern at Whatcom Watch. When she's not reporting, she's found bird-watching in her yard or strolling through downtown Bellingham.



photo: Joe Meche

Adult great blue heron with nesting material.

ing activity and a 66 percent decrease in fledglings when compared to the 2024 report (1). The report points to the new colony attracting birds away from Post Point, as well as an intense windstorm that destroyed some Post Point nests, as likely reasons for the decline.

According to John Bower, a professor at Western Washington University with a doctorate in bird behavior, it is not uncommon for great blue herons to shift their colonies in response to human behavior and bald eagle predation.

"I've always wondered if those herons will abandon [Post Point] and move to a bigger colony out at Birch Bay, but so far that hasn't happened," Bower said. "It doesn't surprise me that the birds would be shifting to a different colony."

Uphill Battle for the Herons

The Post Point colony first established in 2000 after their previous colony was threatened by housing development near Chuckanut Drive. They landed in city-owned property next to the Post

Point Wastewater Treatment Plant near Marine Park.

"I think it's ironic and kind of lovely that the birds, when they moved from lower Chuckanut to Post Point, landed in trees that belong to the City of Bellingham," Jamie Donaldson, a member of the North Cascades Audubon Society, said. "So they had pseudo-protection there, just because they landed in city trees."

The protection did not last for long. In 2018, housing development was proposed for the land adjacent to the colony with plans to create a "view corridor" through the colony's trees. The corridor would have shrunk the colony's buffer zone, which protects the herons and their habitat from human disturbances, and create eye-level threats.

"The gas mowers would start up and the backyard lights would shine right on the nest," Donaldson said. "We don't know what would've happened, but it certainly would've introduced really high threats to the colony."

In response to the proposed development, Donaldson reported on the harm it could bring through Northwest Citizen (2), an online citizen-journalism forum, and raised over \$14,000 to hire a lawyer and appeal the development's permit.

The developers reasoned that if the view corridor shrunk portions of the buffer zone but expanded it in other places, it would average out and comply with the critical areas ordinance that applies to the colony. The appeal argued that the

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A Crash Course in Nitrogen

Where Do Our Local Plant Communities Get This Crucial Element?

by *Theodore Hoss*

Take a deep breath. Over 78 percent of the gas you just breathed in is nitrogen. Nitrogen is critical for life on earth, playing a role in the production of proteins and enzymes, and serving as a core

component of the very genetic coding of all living things. In the plant world, nitrogen serves another crucial role; it is one of the most important elements in the molecule chlorophyll, which is the basis for photosynthesis.

Without nitrogen, plants could not convert sunlight into the forms of energy required by most of the life on this planet. So, to put it mildly, nitrogen is a pretty important component of our

local ecosystems! This article is a quick look into where our plant communities in Whatcom County get the nitrogen they need, and how we as humans impact the natural flow of this key element.

The lack of readily available nitrogen for plant communities may seem like a bit of a paradox, but, in many cases, nitrogen is a limiting nutrient. Even though the element is abundant in the atmosphere, most life forms cannot simply extract the nitrogen from the air. We as animals

have an easy way to acquire the nitrogen we need to survive; it is a part of the food we eat.

How Plants Obtain Nitrogen

Plants, however, don't usually have such a straightforward means of obtaining their nitrogen. Instead, the nitrogen in our local forests and farmlands reaches these plants

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