Post Point Heron Colony

2025 Monitoring – Annual Report

prepared for:

The City of Bellingham Department of Public Works
2221 Pacific Street
Bellingham, WA 98229

prepared by:

Matt Reed
Hamer Environmental
1023 S. 3rd Street
Mount Vernon, WA, 98273

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Executive Summary

First documented in 2000, the Post Point Heron Colony is the most well-established great blue heron nesting site within the City of Bellingham. The only other known nesting site is a colony which formed in Little Squalicum Park during this 2025 monitoring period. The Post Point colony is located in a city-owned forest patch in Bellingham's Fairhaven and Edgemoor Neighborhoods between the Post Point Resource Recovery Plant (PPRRP) and Shorewood Drive. In the fall of 2021 and spring of 2022, the city approved purchase of undeveloped parcels along Shorewood Drive considered critical buffer for the protection of the colony.

Due to the colony's location and sensitivity of heron colonies to human disturbances, in 2003 the City of Bellingham commissioned a management plan and in 2004 adopted a resolution affirming the importance of conserving and protecting the colony (https://cob.org/wp-content/uploads/2004-10-heron-resolution.pdf). A scientific baseline study of the colony followed in 2005 to analyze reproductive success, nesting tendencies, nearby habitat use and the status of the colony. Annual monitoring of the colony has been conducted every year since 2005 to further document colony productivity and success. The 2003 management plan was updated in 2019 and both documents along with all the annual reports are available online at Post Point Heron Colony Resources.

Results from the 2025 Post Point Heron Colony Annual Monitoring are provided in this annual report. Monitoring began on February 16th and ended on August 19th when it was determined that all the young had left the colony. A total of 25 site visits were conducted during the 2025 nesting season, including a site visit during the Ski to Sea Race event at Marine Park.

In 2025, 24 active nests (20 were successful) were counted in 18 nest trees with a total of 35 young observed throughout the nesting season and 34 young fledged. This was a dramatic decrease in nesting attempts and fledged young, when compared to recent years. A number of nests appeared to have fallen to the ground during a windstorm in early 2025 and a new heron colony was established at Little Squalicum Park in northwest Bellingham in 2025, both of which likely contributed to the overall decrease in activity at the Post Point colony. Bald eagles were observed flying over and perching in the colony, but no predation events were documented in 2025 or reported by the public to monitors.

Introduction

The Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodia*) is a widely dispersed species that can be found throughout North America and is a year-round resident of western Washington. Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) categorizes herons as a Priority Species and their colony sites as Priority Areas. A heron colony is considered a Priority Area by WDFW due to heronries being vulnerable to human disturbance. Due to the Priority Species status of the heron colony, the City has protected it under the Critical Areas Ordinance as a Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Area. The 2012 WDFW Management Recommendations for Great Blue Heron provides management guidelines and life history information pertaining to potential projects and activities near colonies.

The City of Bellingham has been proactive in supporting, researching, and monitoring the colony since it was first observed in 2000 and passed a resolution affirming the importance of conserving and protecting the colony in 2004 (https://cob.org/wp-content/uploads/2004-10-heron-resolution.pdf). The City funded the management plan of 2003, the scientific baseline study in 2005, the update to the management plan in 2019, and annual monitoring of colony since 2005.

The City of Bellingham also purchased the adjacent 1.72 acres along Shorewood Drive in 2022 to provide a buffer to the colony from residential development. The purchased property is protected by a conservation easement held by the Whatcom Land Trust.

Priorities for the 2025 Post Point Heron Colony monitoring included:

- General monitoring that focused on behavior, in-colony activities, and nesting chronology.
- Disturbance monitoring for recording disturbances to the herons in or near the colony.
- Productivity monitoring documenting nesting and fledging success of young.
- Nest and nest tree survey for updating and mapping the colony for 2025.
- Foraging observations documenting the use of nearby foraging habitats and disturbances to herons while feeding.

Monitoring for 2025 was carried out by Matt Reed and Graeme Riggins of Hamer Environmental over the course of 6.5 months beginning in February and ending in August. Hamer provides environmental consulting services to government, private industry, tribal corporations, and non-profits throughout the Pacific Northwest and Pacific Islands. Hamer has offices in Portland, Oregon, Mount Vernon, Bellingham and Seattle, Washington, and in the Pacific islands.

Matt was primarily responsible for conducting field visits to the colony and collecting nesting data. Matt Reed was the lead biologist primarily providing project management expertise, some colony observation, assistance, and oversight in report preparation.

Adult heron foraging in Post Point Lagoon

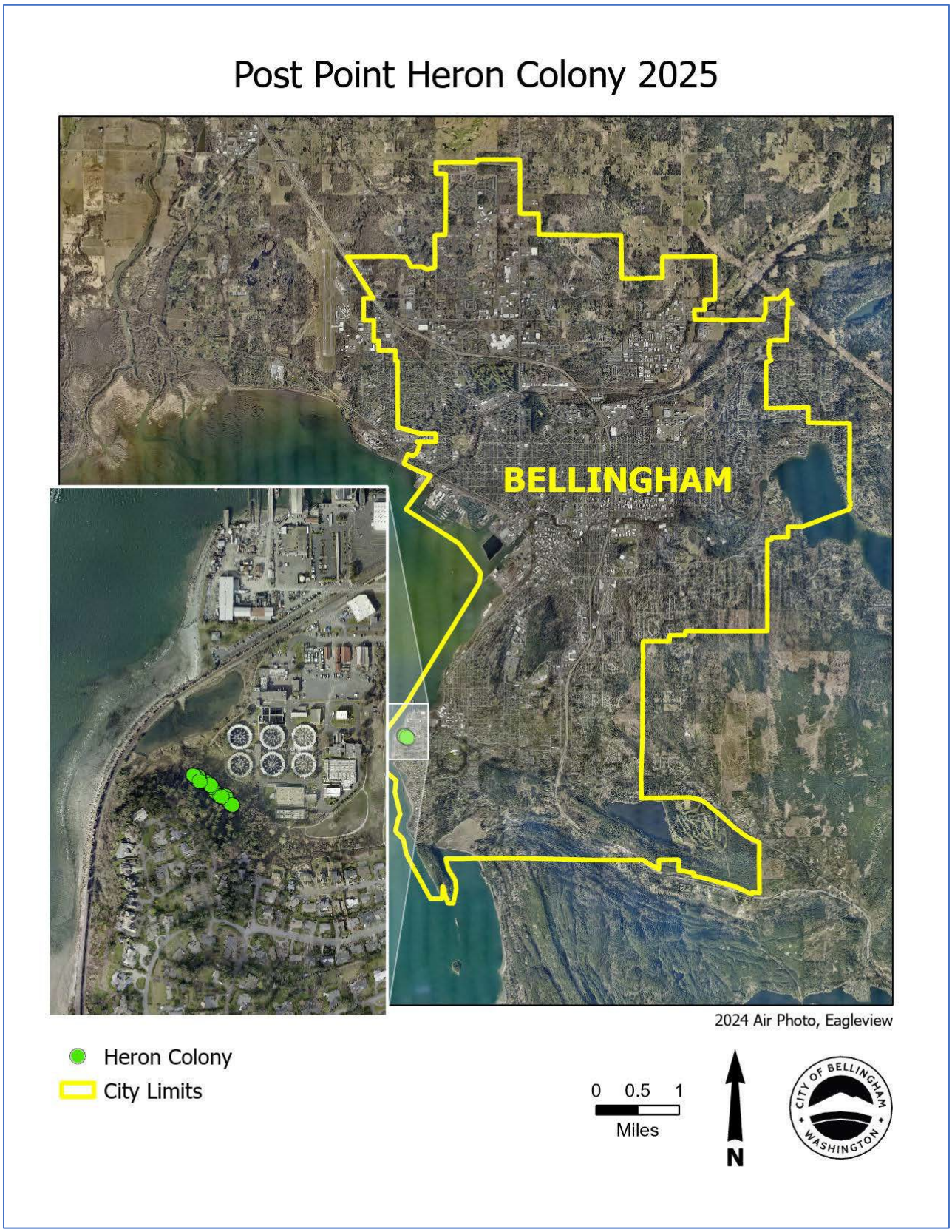

Figure 1: Post Point Heron Colony

Site Description

The Post Point Heron Colony is located near Post Point spanning the boundaries of Bellingham's Fairhaven and Edgemoor Neighborhoods (Figure 1). A forested slope extending to the south and west of the colony provides protection from prevailing winds and weather. The native mixed forest along the bluff has provided a buffer to the colony from residential and urban development. The proximity of the colony to Bellingham Bay provides direct access to foraging areas during the nesting season.

In 2022, the Bellingham City Council authorized the purchase of 1.72-acres in the Edgemoor Neighborhood adjacent to the property the colony is located on, increasing the city-owned site to almost 32 acres including forest, grass, shrub and marine habitats. This 1.72-acre area is protected by a conservation easement held by the Whatcom Land Trust. The city-owned portion of the forested area the colony is situated in (Forest Nest Stand) is approximately 9 acres. In 2023, the City created a Forest Management Plan to guide management actions on the City-owned portion of the Forest Nest Stand. The BNSF railroad causeway west of the lagoon separates the inland habitats from Bellingham Bay. The colony is situated between the residential neighborhood on Shorewood Drive to the southwest and the PPRRP to the northeast (Figure 2). The Lower Padden Park Trail borders the colony between it and the PPRRP.

In addition to monitoring, land ownership, and the conservation easement; the City conducts a variety of activities to protect the colony and associated habitats. The City maintains educational signs along the Lower Padden Park Trail and at Marine Park informing the public about herons, the nesting colony and how to avoid disturbing them. The City also coordinates with the Port of Bellingham and Ski to Sea event organizers to include protective measures during this annual spring event. The City also actively restores heron habitat. Between the end of the 2024 nesting season and the beginning of the 2025 nesting season, the City of Bellingham conducted restoration on 8 Shorewood Drive in 2025 to expand and enhance the Forest Nest Stand. In January 2025 the City planted 165 native trees and shrubs, removed invasive species (reed canarygrass, thistle, hypericum, and Himalayan blackberry) and added 30 yards of mulch. In November 2025 after completion of the 2025 nesting season, the City removed invasive species and re-mulched the newly installed plants.

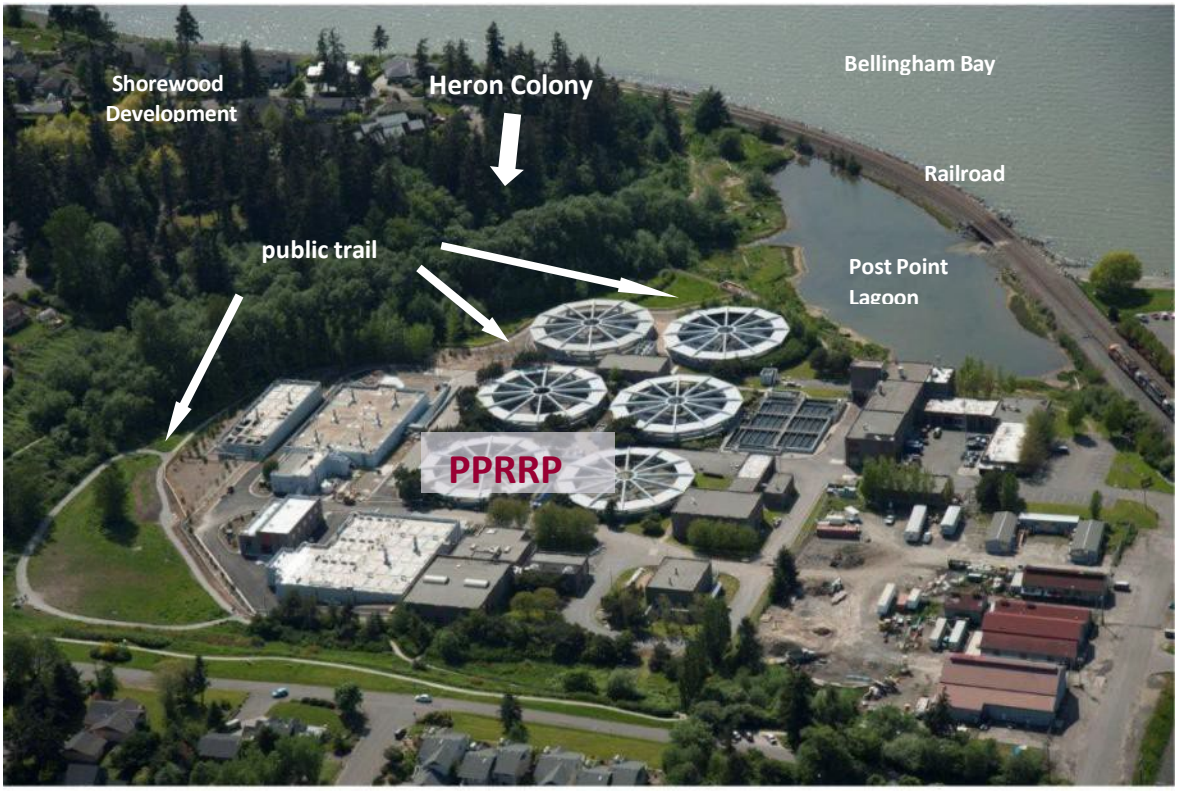

Figure 2: Post Point Resource Recovery Plant (PPRRP). (City of Bellingham Photo, 2014)

Heron Habitats

The area surrounding the colony provides a mix of habitat accessible to herons from mixed forest, wetland meadow, estuary, and marine shoreline. The buildings and clarifiers on the PPRRP grounds are occasionally used by the herons prior to nesting for staging. These habitats provide various benefits and uses for the heron colony throughout their nesting cycle.

The nest stand itself and the surrounding forest is a mixed age forest that provides the structure and material for the nests, the screening from wind, weather, and human activity. Red alder (*Alnus rubra*) and big-leaf maple (*Acer macrophyllum*) provide suitable support and material for large nests. Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) provide screening and protection to the colony. Outside the nucleus of the colony, the forest provides cover for herons to loaf, roost, preen, stage, and collect nest materials.

Wetland meadow habitat found adjacent to the nest stand is the grassy margins near the lagoon that provide valuable foraging habitat for upland prey species, specifically meadow voles (*Microtus townsendii*). Herons are sometimes observed using this area throughout the nesting season.

Post Point Lagoon is a pocket estuary fed by surface water runoff and an unnamed seasonal stream that drains into Bellingham Bay under a BNSF railroad causeway bridge. The shoreline

and salt marshes along the edges of the estuary are used for loafing and foraging. Eelgrass (*Zostera marina*) growing in the lagoon improves foraging opportunities for herons. The estuary also serves as a fledging spot as young herons start exploring outside the colony.

Bellingham Bay provides nearby marine shoreline habitat of eelgrass meadows and open intertidal areas suitable for heron feeding year-round. At low tide, the shoreline area at Marine Park provides access to a wide margin of suitable foraging habitat. While herons use other areas for foraging, this is the nearest marine foraging area to the heronry.

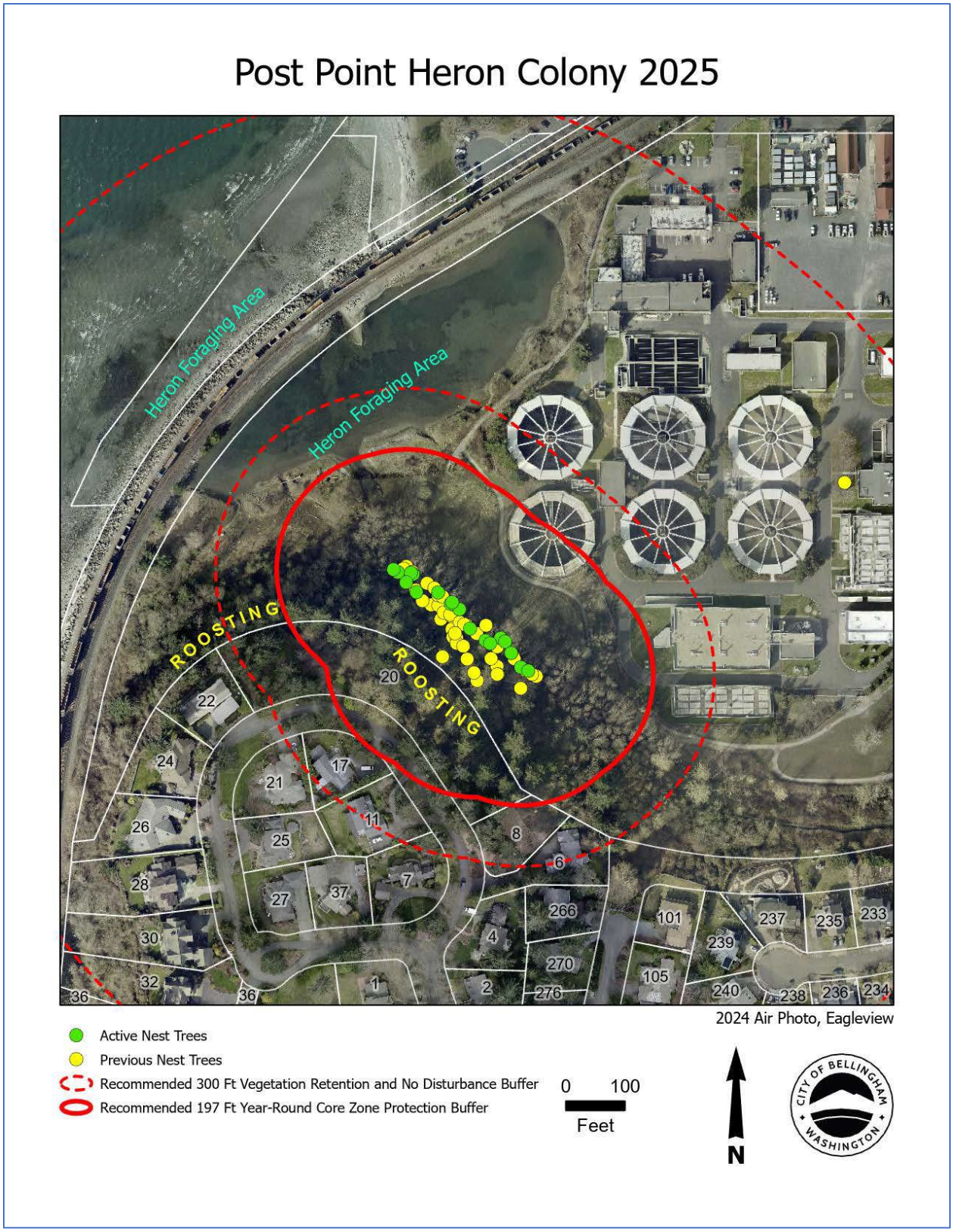

Figure 3: Overview of the Post Point Heron Colony and the Post Point Resource Recovery Plant

Monitoring Methods

Continuous monitoring of the colony since 2005 has provided an ongoing record of the colony's status, productivity, and health. The 2025 monitoring methods for the Post Point Heron Colony were a continuation of the 2022 monitoring methods that were developed based on Ann Eissinger's long-time monitoring of the colony and in part based on the Heron Working Group - Survey Protocol (Vennesland/Norman 2006).

Weekly on-site visits to the colony from February to August involve collecting data based on visual and audible observations of heron behavior, nests and nest trees, and potential disturbances or predations in the colony. Binoculars are the primary visual tool for observing herons perched in or near nests. Data is collected on standardized field forms and each visit compiled into a colony tracking spreadsheet. All visible nests are tracked throughout the nesting season and new nests are recorded as they are constructed. Any incidents or reports of disturbances were noted during weekly visits.

The timing of the visits throughout the monitoring season encapsulates the 6 stages of the nesting season.

- **Staging** near the colony in February as the herons prepare for reoccupation.
- **Colony reoccupation** in March as large concentrations of herons were active in the colony.
- **Courtship, mate selection** and **nest construction** coincided with colony reoccupation in March and remained active into May.
- **Egg laying** which takes each heron approximately 7 days and **Incubation** of the eggs that takes 28 days.
- **Hatching** of the nests and **Brooding/Rearing** of the young.
- **Fledging** is when young leave the nest typically around 8 weeks old.

2025 Monitoring Results

Monitoring for the 2025 Post Point Heron Colony nesting season began on February 8th and ended August 19th. Monitoring occurred on a weekly basis.

Staging and Colony Reoccupation

Three visits to the colony were conducted in February to determine if staging was occurring. No herons were seen during the first two visits in February. During a visit on February 28th, 32 herons were seen, which was considered to be reoccupation of the colony. Heron nesting activity within the colony increased throughout March culminating in 42 herons observed actively constructing or standing in nests on March 26th. Visits in April showed a decrease in adult herons observed in the colony, with between 20 and 38 adult herons seen each week.

In mid-March (13th and 14th), the City was alerted by a member of the public that herons were seen attempting to nest at Little Squalicum Park, adjacent to an estuary that was restored by the City in 2024. A Hamer biologist visited the location March 20th and documented 10 adult herons at the Park along with 7 established nests and 2 nests in the process of being built. A follow-up

visit by the City on June 11th noted 4 active nests and 11 juvenile herons at the colony.

Adult herons improving a nest on a visit in March.

Egg-laying and Incubation

Egg-laying and the onset of incubation at the Post Point Heron Colony in 2025 began in March, with one heron observed in a horizontal position in a nest on March 14th. This posture is often indicative of egg laying or incubation in herons and would increase in April with a high of 23 herons horizontal on the nest during a visit on April 16th.

Herons will lay 4-5 eggs asynchronously but not all of those will survive to fledging. Incubation follows egg-laying and is also indicated by herons taking a horizontal posture on the nest. Egg-laying continued throughout April and May. Young herons hatch over several days after approximately 28 days of incubation. By mid-May, many of the nests had heron young and only three nests showed signs of ongoing incubation by the end of May.

Hatching and Rearing

May is typically the busiest month for young hatching in the Post Point Heron Colony. Since 2005, young have been documented in the colony by May 9th in 18 out of the 21 nesting seasons. The 2008 nesting season failed completely while the 2011 and 2023 nesting seasons had delayed starts resulting in the first young being documented in early June. The 2025 nesting season returned to this late April/early May pattern with the first young seen in a nest on May 7th. Throughout May, young were increasingly observed in nests throughout the colony culminating

into 20 nests with young on the May 25th visit. The hatching of young begins the onset of the 8-week rearing period.

The young will be brooded while adults continue to incubate unhatched eggs in the nest. Young are most susceptible to predation, heat and cold in the first few weeks of their life. They start out covered only by sparse downy fuzz but will be completely covered by feathers within three weeks. One adult will remain near the nest for the first 4 weeks of rearing to provide the young with protection from predators.

Adult heron brooding a young in the nest.

Fledging

The last stage for young herons as they leave the nest is fledging. Most young will fledge at about 8 weeks in age. To prepare to fledge, young are observed exercising their wings by flapping them, exploring limbs near the nest, and eventually taking test flights around the colony. As young explore further out from the colony nucleus, they can be seen loafing or foraging in the Post Point Lagoon or on its shoreline. Nests will fledge over the course of a week or more as the older young of a brood leave to follow adults to better foraging grounds first.

Pre-fledging behaviors were first observed on June 15th with young seen flapping their wings and venturing out onto nearby limbs. A couple nests were considered fledged by June 11th with pre-fledging behavior not documented during the monitoring visit. Flights through the colony from young herons were increasingly common through the end of June and into early July. Most of the

fledging of young occurred between June 20th and July 8th. The remaining young fledged throughout July with the last five young fledging between the July 8th and August 5th visits.

2025 Colony Fledging Progression

- On June 11th, 3 nests out of 20 active nests had fledged (15%).
- By June 20th, 9 nests out of 20 active nests had fledged (45%).
- By July 2nd, 10 nests out of 20 active nests had fledged (50%).
- By July 8th, 16 nests out of 20 active nests had fledged (80%).
- From July 8th to August 5th the final 4 nests fledged (20%)

The majority of the colony's young, 80%, had fledged by the 2nd week of July. In 2025, most of the young had fledged the colony a little earlier than in 2024. All the young had fledged the colony by August 5th, which was a few days earlier than 2024.

Post Point Heron Nesting Chronology Summary 2025

2025 was another successful nesting season for the Post Point Heron Colony. A chronology of the season is summarized below:

- February 28: 32 herons observed staging at/reoccupying the colony
- March 14: 21 herons observed in or making nests
- March 21: active nest construction; 27 herons at colony
- March 26: 42 herons observed either standing in or adjacent to nests; active nest building
- April 4: 8 herons are horizontal on nests indicating egg-laying and incubation are occurring; copulation also observed. 20 total herons seen.
- May 7: the first heron young is documented; 24 active nests documented
- May 14: 30 adults and 14 young are recorded in the colony
- May 25: 23 adults and 34 young observed in the colony (including 1 deceased young); 23 active nests documented.
- June 11: peak period for total young in the colony (34 total young observed); the first nests are documented as fledged. Multiple young seen foraging off Marine Park. 20 active nests documented.
- July 2 – July 8: fledging of young peak during this period
- August 5: all young herons are considered fledged

Total duration for the 2025 Post Point nesting period was just under 23 weeks from when herons were first seen near the colony in February and the last heron young left in August.

Productivity

Visible nests in the Post Point Heron Colony are monitored annually for productivity which is determined by each on-site visit prior to fledging. This measure has been an important indicator of the health and stability of the colony. While herons have the potential to fledge a maximum of five young, nests are most likely to produce two to three surviving young.

Productivity surveys for the Post Point Heron Colony are measured by counting the number of young in every visible nest each visit. The best time to observe young in the nest generally corresponds to an adult feeding. The counting of young is then divided by number of nests to express colony productivity in 1 of 3 ways:

Throughout 2025, 24 nests were located without intruding into the colony. One new nest tree (#718) was observed compared to 2024. Three nests appeared to be active on March 14th with an adult sitting in each nest. Four nests were abandoned at some point early in the nesting season, resulting in 20 successful nests. Weekly observations of the 20 successful nests observed determined 35 young in the colony. Out of the 35 total young, 34 were estimated to have survived until fledging. The carcass of 1 juvenile heron was located under some nest trees during the annual nest tree count in December, in the vicinity of nest tree 569.

Two young close to fledging on September 12, 2023.

Productivity of active nests is calculated by dividing the number of young counted by the number of active nests. Failed nests were included in this calculation, but concealed nests were not. The productivity of successful nests is calculated by dividing the number of young fledged by number of successful nests. Productivity rates for the Post Point Colony in 2025 were 1.75 per active nest and 1.7 per successful nest. The number of successful nests decreased by more than 50% when compared to 2024 and is the lowest number of successful nests in more than 10 years.

Table 1: Post Point Productivity since 2018

Year	Number of active nests	Number of successful nests	Number of young counted	Number of young fledged	Number of young per active nest	Number of young per successful nest
2025	24	20	35	34	1.77	1.7
2024	48	42	103	99	2.06	2.36
2023	45	43	88	85	1.95	1.98
2022	46	45	100	93	2.17	2.08
2021	42	39	104	95	2.47	2.4
2020	40	37	103	94	2.51	2.54
2019	40	38	103	103	2.57	2.7
2018	44	41	97	97	2.2	2.3

Disturbance

Monitoring potential disturbances to the colony during the nesting season is an important objective of on-site monitoring annually. Disturbance, by definition, is an adverse behavioral and/or physiological response to a natural or man-made event (Sutherland 1996, Walker et al. 2006). Repeated disturbances to the colony can cause declining productivity, failure to reproduce or may even cause fragmentation, abandonment, or relocation.

Any disturbances to the colony or disruptions to herons within the colony or using habitats near the colony are documented. In 2025, no direct disturbances or disruptions by human activities were observed within the colony or surrounding habitats. Human/heron interactions of herons along the shoreline of Marine Park were documented between herons and beachgoers, dogs, and water-sports enthusiasts. Other potential passive disturbances to the colony include the BNSF train and aircraft flying over. The colony and herons were observed closely when any of these events occurred to see how the herons would respond to the intrusion.

The Ski to Sea Race returned to Marine Park on May 25th in 2025 and colony monitoring was conducted to overlap with the event activities that day. For May 25th, low tide was -1.94 feet at 10:25 AM resulting in sub-optimal foraging conditions along the Marine Park shoreline for much of the duration of the Ski to Sea Race events. During peak afternoon event times, tide levels were incoming, resulting in less than ideal foraging conditions being between +2.5 feet and greater through 8:00 PM. The City coordinated with the Port of Bellingham and event organizers to place signs and temporary fencing along the shoreline to educate and deter eventgoers from venturing into foraging habitat during low tide. Event organizers informed the media of the no-fly area for drones surrounding the PPRRP and the heron colony. Temporary protection signs were posted along the wooden fence on the trail adjacent to the colony. The event also had a volunteer posted in the park attempting to educate and deter beachgoers from wandering down the shoreline. The noises emanating from the event such as music, bell wringing, and announcers were only slightly louder than the background noise at the colony. Herons were not observed attempting to utilize the shoreline during low tide, nor were they observed flying away from the colony during the event. There were no signs of distress from the adults or young at the colony.

Activity along the shoreline during the Ski-to-Sea event (5/26/2024).

Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) are the greatest predatory threat to the Post Point Heron Colony. Bald Eagles can disturb the colony by consuming unhatched eggs, preying on the young or flushing flightless young from the nests. Some eagles may even attempt to prey on adult herons. Bald Eagles are a common sight flying over the colony or perching nearby. Most of the Bald Eagle flights over or near the colony elicit no response from the herons. On three visits in May, Bald Eagles were observed flying over the colony or perching in tops of Douglas Fir trees nearby. On one more occasion on June 19th, a Bald Eagle was observed flying over the colony. There were no observed instances of a Bald Eagle preying on a young in the colony or causing herons to flush.

Other raptor and corvid species are seen in the area with crows nesting near the colony. Crows were seen mobbing a Turkey Vulture that flew over the colony on one visit and there have been instances in previous nesting seasons of crows harassing Bald Eagles.

Bald Eagle perching in Douglas Fir near heron colony.

Foraging

Foraging surveys were conducted during the nesting season to document how the Post Point Herons are using the nearby foraging options at the Post Point Lagoon and along the Marine Park shoreline. During the height of rearing season, additional monitoring was conducted at Marine Park during low tides when herons would most likely be accessing eelgrass meadows for foraging.

Herons were observed actively using the forage location on 6 out of the 6 foraging survey days. Each of these visits occurred on negative tides with three of the visits occurring around -2 to -2.5

feet. On one visit on June 11th, 8 herons were observed along the Marine Park shoreline, including 6 adults and 2 juveniles. Herons were often seen loafing and foraging along the shoreline of the Post Point Lagoon which is a popular area for young herons to use when they begin fledging.

Heron foraging on the edge of the waterline near beachgoers in 2024.

Nest Survey and Map Update

Conducting an annual nest count at the Post Point Heron Colony is an important tool for defining the overall health of the colony. Annual variation and/or fluctuation in nests may point to a change in the available nesting habitat, predation pressure, or abundance of prey resources in relation to the colony itself. Tracking nests throughout the nesting season can be difficult as nests are often

masked by the leaf cover provided by the nesting habitat. The best time to assess the annual number of nests at the colony is in the fall or winter after leaves have fallen from the nesting trees.

In 2025, the annual nest count was conducted by Hamer Environmental on December 31st. A total of 24 successful nests were counted in 18 nest trees. At least eight nests suspected of being active in 2024 (these nests are not included in the successful nest count above) were confirmed to have fallen to the ground at the time of the nest count and were suspected to have been blown to the ground during a wind event in early 2025. One new nest tree was successfully used in 2025 compared to 2024 (# 718). Data collected during the annual nest count included the nest tree # (if the nest tree was identified in previous years), tagging and GPSing new nest trees using a sub-meter GPS receiver, and the number of heron nests found in each tree. Other incidental information is also recorded, including the presence of eggshells, fallen nests, and deceased herons.

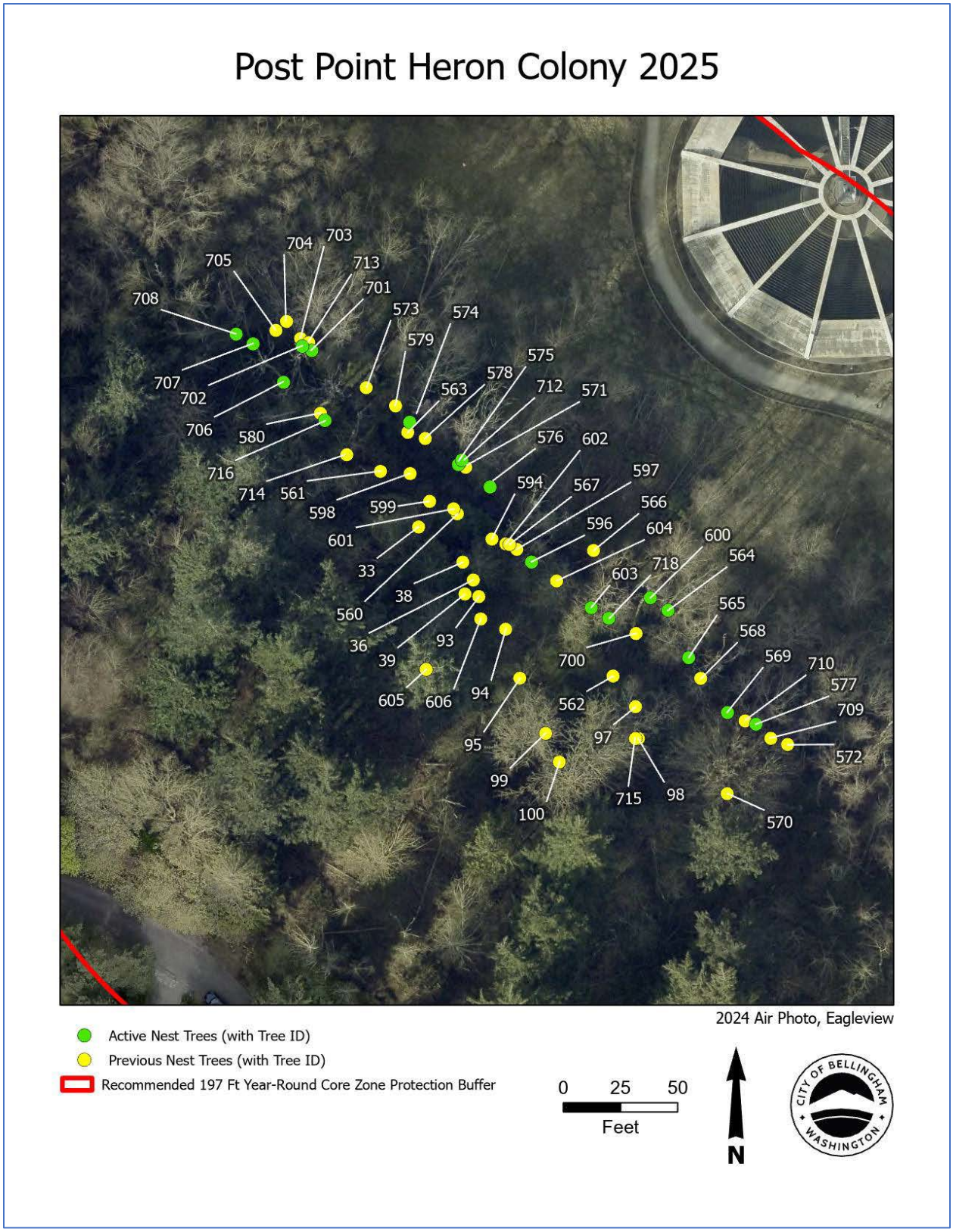

Figure 4: 2023 Post Point Heron Colony Nest Tree Map

Conclusion

The Post Point Heron Colony is important to the health and stability of the Great Blue heron population in the Salish Sea. It serves as a glimpse into nature for many local residents as they stop along the trail to watch in fascination as the herons take twigs for nest construction or feed their young. This is the 26th season of herons returning to nest demonstrating a high level of fidelity to the colony and resilience to remain in an urban landscape.

In 2025, 24 total heron nests were noted from observing the colony from the nearby Lower Padden Trail. Out of those 24 nests, four nests would fail during the season, leaving 20 successful nests. A total of 35 young herons were counted in the 20 successful nests visible from the trail. The colony would fledge 34 young starting in mid-June and continuing until the end of July.

The 2025 nesting season at the Post Point Heron Colony was considered to be a successful one; however, we saw a dramatic decrease in nesting activity and productivity rate when compared to recent years. Nesting activity was reduced by more than 52% and the number of fledglings decreased by 66%, when compared to nesting activity in 2024. The productivity rate decreased from 2.36 per successful nest in 2024 to 1.7 per successful nest in 2025.

While the exact reasoning behind this dramatic decrease is unknown, it's like due to a number of different factors. A total of 8 nests were found on the ground during the end of season nest search and seven fewer nest trees were used during the 2025 nesting season when compared to 2024. This likely suggests that a pre or early nesting season windstorm likely blew down many of the active nests from 2024. In March 2025, a new heron colony developed at Little Squalicum Park in northwest Bellingham. While the new colony at Little Squalicum Park was not officially monitored in 2025, a nest count was conducted in March, 2025 and 9 active nests were observed. The individuals nesting at Little Squalicum Park may have moved away from the Point Point colony, resulting in further loss of that population.

In 2026, both the Post Point and the Little Squalicum Park colonies will be monitored in tandem. This will allow the City of Bellingham to monitor the health and development of both colonies. While the decrease in nests at the Post Point colony is concerning, the site continues to support a healthy heron population, and the nesting habitat largely remains intact. Although a few previously used nest trees had recently fallen, additional nesting habitat is located directly adjacent to the Post Point colony. An in-depth analysis of the nesting habitat at Post Point may be warranted in the near future. A full season of monitoring at Little Squalicum Park will also offer insights into the health and long-term viability of the new colony.

Acknowledgements

Hamer Environmental would like to show appreciation to the City of Bellingham for supporting the continued conservation of the colony and all the assistance provided for the last three nesting seasons. We also want to acknowledge the passion that so many of the citizens in the neighborhood continue to demonstrate for the colony.

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