



## **NAHKEETA NORTHWEST**

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City of Bellingham

# Post Point Great Blue Heron Colony Monitoring progress report: May-June 2011

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Post Point Great Blue Heron Colony, located near Fairhaven in south Bellingham, is the only known heron nesting colony associated with Bellingham Bay. Located in the City of Bellingham, this heron colony is considered a sensitive breeding site and habitat area. Currently there are only 4 known active colonies in Whatcom County including Post Point. The Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) is recognized as a Priority Species in Washington State and is managed by Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. Both the herons and their nesting habitat are protected as a Priority Species.

The Post Point heron colony was established in 2000, with 6 nests occupying 5 nest trees on the current site. Between 2000 and 2006 the colony rapidly expanded to peak at 37 nests occupying 15 trees. In 2007 the colony began a decline to 27 nests, then to 17 in 2008 and 9 in 2009. However in both 2008 and 2009, the colony appeared normal in the early season, abandoned prior to fledging of young, resulting in zero productivity. Abandonment occurred in late June in 2008, and late May in 2009. In 2010 the colony rebounded, with a total of 13 nests and successful fledging of young. The colony was reoccupied in 2011, and as of June 30, 2011, the Post Point heron colony continues to be active, with a total of 17 nests, 16 of which are active.

The 2011 Post Point Great Blue Heron monitoring includes three primary components: general monitoring which focuses on colony activity including breeding chronology, predation and disturbance; productivity which focuses on nestling numbers and fledgling success; and nest survey which will provide an update on the number of nests and nest trees utilized during 2011. In addition, observations will be made to document foraging activity, locations and document any disturbances to heron attempting to feed or gather food for their young. Public education is an important aspect of this work and will be incorporated as opportunities arise. Included in the monitoring plan are periodic progress reports, both informal communiqués and formal reports made to the City of Bellingham. At the end of the monitoring year, an annual report will be prepared and will provide the City with a complete report of the heron's nesting activity for 2011.

The implementation of the monitoring plan is managed by Biologist Ann Eissinger of Nahkeeta Northwest Wildlife Services and focuses on field observation and data collection conducted by assistant Biologists Jaime Welfelt and Dacia Wiitala. Ms Eissinger has twenty years experience

monitoring Great Blue Herons and is expert in their ecology, behavior, colony management and conservation. She is also the author of the 2003 Post Point Heron Colony Management Plan, and 2005 Post Point Heron Colony Baseline Study prepared for the City of Bellingham, Department of Public Works. The Biologist has also been actively involved in public education related to the Post Point herons and herons around Puget Sound.

## **GENERAL MONITORING**

Post Point monitoring commenced in February 2011. Early season monitoring documented staging and successful reoccupation of the colony, followed by egg laying and incubation. A total of 16 nests were active and occupied. A total of 14 site visits were made between February and April. In late April a Bald Eagle incursion damaged or destroyed the contents of most nests. However, the colony remained active and began anew.

For mid-season monitoring, a total of 16 site visits were made between May and June, including close watch for eagles and observations made during the Ski to Sea event. A total of 16 nests remained active through this period. Nesting activity and young were tracked through June. Observations were made and documented by the field biologist on a standardized form. The results of these observations are summarized below.

### **Mid-Season Monitoring May-June**

Although the herons had laid eggs and incubated prior to May, depredation by Bald Eagles in late April resulted in any hatchlings and most eggs consumed or destroyed. Remarkably, no nest abandonment occurred following the eagle attack. Instead, the heron remained in the colony, restored nests and in early May, the colony laid their second clutch of eggs and settled into incubation again. All 16 nests previously occupied remained active.

The month of May was quiet in the colony, with adults incubating and protecting their nests. By late May adults were observed standing at several nests, exhibiting signs of young hatching. As of June 1, young were confirmed. The month of June was dominated by brooding small young, foraging by adults and rearing young. With rearing requiring 8 weeks, the young heron will be expected to fledge from the colony beginning at the end of July and continuing into August. Preliminary counts of young, during June, revealed 2-3 young per visible nest. A total of 5 young are possible, but given the second clutch and relatively fast re-nesting turnaround, it is likely that the heron did not lay a full clutch of 4-5 eggs.

As of June 30, the colony remained stable and heron continued in their nesting activities, with foraging for food to feed young increasing as the month of June concluded.

In addition to the Great Blue Herons, a new occurrence this season has been the regular sighting of a Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*). The Green Heron has been observed feeding at the Padden Creek lagoon and flying past the heron colony at nearly every site visit, presumably to and from its nesting site. Previously, Green Heron have been known to nest along the lower Padden Creek corridor and it is likely this bird represents nesting in that area.

## **Predation and Disturbance**

During each field visit to and in the vicinity of the heronry, observations are made of potential predators, such as bald eagles, red tailed hawks, crows and ravens. Bald Eagles are generally common and regularly observed in the vicinity of the colony.

Following the eagle incursion in late April, monitoring of the Bald Eagles in the vicinity of the colony was a priority. In addition to site visits, neighbors of the colony were watching for signs of eagle incursion and were instructed to contact the Biologist immediately. No other eagle incursions were observed or reported. The male adult belonging to the pair of resident Bald Eagles was consistently perched in the vicinity of the colony, the female was only occasionally observed in May. During June, no eagles were observed in the vicinity of the colony for the first 3 weeks.

No disturbance was observed or reported in the vicinity of the heron colony between May and June.

Disturbance at foraging areas was observed with occasional flushing of heron from their foraging grounds. Heron using the nearshore of Marine Park and Post Point are vulnerable to people, dogs and water-sports enthusiasts utilizing this area. A concerted effort was made during the Ski to Sea race to document any disturbances to foraging heron, however the race conclusion occurred mostly at high tide and therefore no heron were present. In order to avoid disturbance, a request was made for the City of Bellingham to post signs restricting access to the more sensitive foraging and fledging areas associated with Post Point lagoon and the eelgrass meadows near Marine Park. A meeting June 14 with city and Port staff to discuss options concluded with a plan to develop and post signage prior to the fledging of young this year.

## **PRODUCTIVITY**

The productivity of the visible nests within the heron colony is monitored annually and will be measured during visits between June and July when young are large, prior to fledging. Productivity will be reported in the next progress report.

## **PUBLIC EDUCATION**

Public education is an integral part of the heron conservation at Post Point. Interpretive signs continue to attract attention and educate the public. The monitoring biologist is frequently engaged in conversation and information sharing with the public using the trail and off leash area. The signs are very informational and provide basic heron life history facts. In addition to educational signs, some neighbors of the heron colony are providing some informal observations and photographs via the internet. Public participation in heron stewardship is encouraged.

## **POST POINT WASTEWATER TREATMENT PLANT EXPANSION**

The Post Point Wastewater Treatment Plan (PPWTP) expansion is moving forward through the permitting phase and into scheduling of construction. The expansion of the plant will move the plant closer to the heron colony and expand its footprint into the field currently separating the colony from the wastewater plant. Disturbance to the colony is likely, although no construction near the colony will occur during the nesting season. Buffering of the heron colony through

mitigation measures is proposed. The Biologist will review the proposed measures and provide comment. It is recommended that planting of a vegetation buffer begin as soon as possible following this nesting season to help abate construction light, noise and general disturbance.

## CONCLUSION

The Post Point Heron Colony was reoccupied this season, with 16 nests occupied and active. Following mid-season abandonment in 2009 and 2008, the colony is closely monitored to document any disturbance or change. The success of the colony in 2010 was a turning point to reestablish the colony and it is important to continue that success over the next consecutive years, including 2011, to sustain a local heron population.

The herons returned in February 2011 and were observed in the colony earlier than usual, then left temporarily as winter weather returned. Heron reoccupied their nests and added new ones as needed in March. With early egg laying and incubation occurring in March and April, the anticipation of an early hatch was cut short with the loss of most eggs and any young to Bald Eagles at the end of April.

The Colony rebounded in May with the laying of second egg clutches and subsequent young hatching in early June. No further Bald Eagle incursions have occurred and young are active and well cared for by the adults. This year's fledging of young is now expected to start at the end of July and extend into August.

Observations of the foraging areas near the colony were made, and minor disturbances were observed. Human use of Marine Park and associated shoreline increases during the summer months and this corresponds with the increase use by heron to feed young in June and July. Signage informing shoreline users to avoid foraging heron and to keep out of sensitive areas is needed. The City of Bellingham responded to this need, with sign development and posting in July.

Expansion of the Post Point Wastewater Treatment Plant is moving forward. A wildlife mitigation plan proposes habitat mitigation and construction timing to reduced disturbances. Further review of the plan and recommendations will be made by the heron biologist.

Finally, Nahkeeta Northwest would like to extend our gratitude to the City of Bellingham Public Works Department, Larry Bateman and the staff at Post Point for their assistance, and observations reported by neighbors of the colony. Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,



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