

Migratory Bird Sanctuaries of the Capital Region

Capital Regional District | Environmental Protection



The capital region is in the heart of the Salish Sea, one of Canada's best wintering areas for migratory birds. It is also on the Pacific Flyway, a migratory bird highway that millions of birds use heading north or south on their annual migrations. Originally established to control hunting, our three regional Migratory Bird Sanctuaries - Victoria Harbour, Shoal Harbour and Esquimalt Lagoon - provide important habitat for wintering, migrating, nesting, summering and moulting birds, and are home to an exceptional range of other urban wildlife.

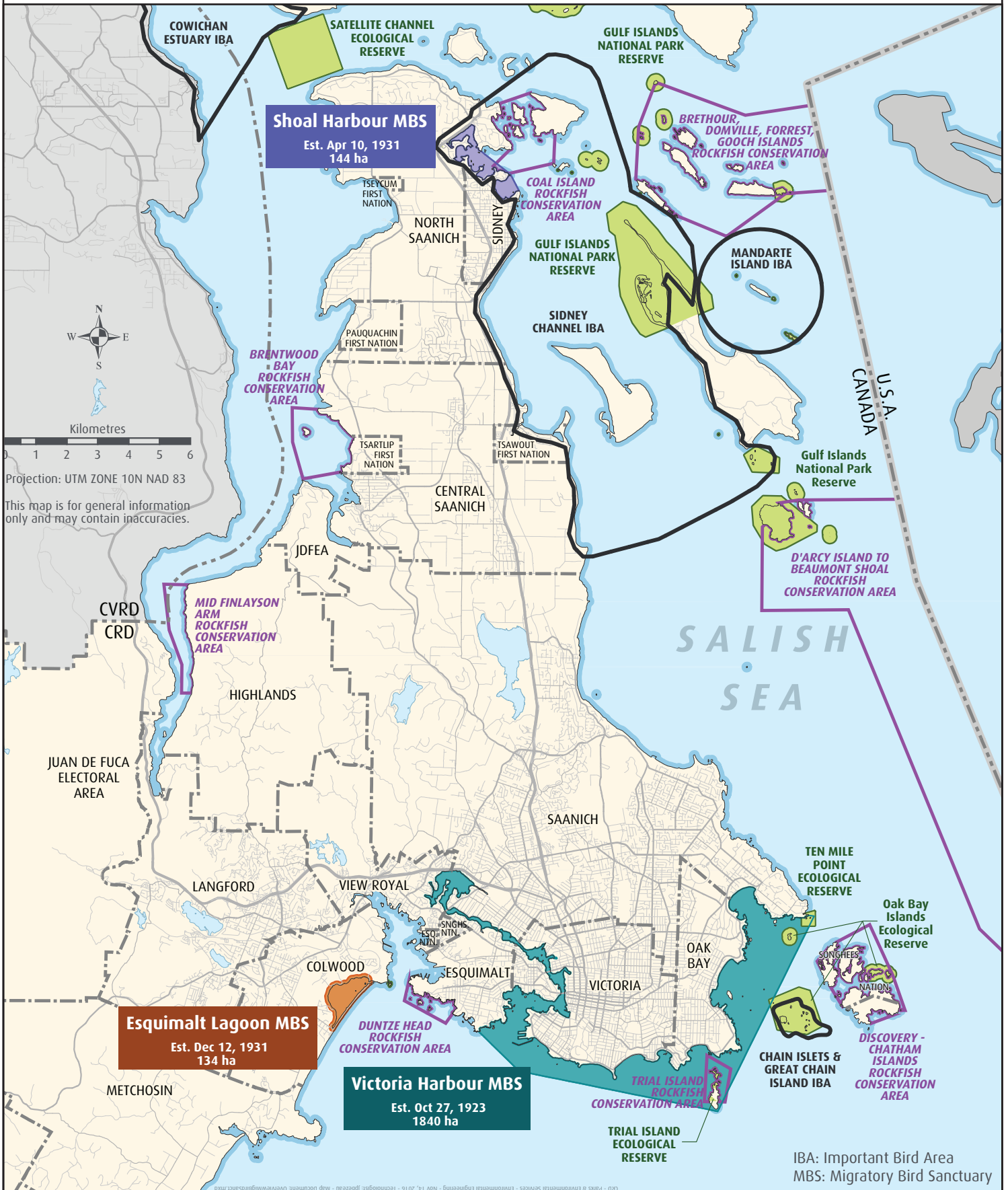
Despite relatively low numbers of birds compared to the past, a positive story is now unfolding. Efforts by conservation groups, citizens, private companies and local government partners to restore and clean up beaches, creeks and other waterways and to remove or reduce contaminants entering these sensitive ecosystems ensure that birds and other wildlife are staying or coming back to our local waters.

As recently as the 1980s, the abundance and diversity of wildlife now seen in and near these sanctuaries were unimaginable. The sanctuaries provide critical habitat for many species of coastal and marine plants and animals, including several federally designated Species at Risk. They are home to dozens of rare plants, such as Victoria's Owl-clover, Macoun's Meadowfoam

and Fleshy Jaumea, as well as the now-rare Garry Oak forest and its associated ecosystems. Several species of whales (Orca, Gray, Humpback, Minke) and other marine mammals (Pacific Harbour Seal, Northern Elephant Seal, Steller and California Sea Lions; River and Sea Otters) occur regularly in and near the sanctuaries. One of the foundation species for the marine food web of the Salish Sea is the Pacific Herring, now showing signs of recovery after decades of overfishing. If herring stocks continue to recover, the birds and other wildlife will follow.

Above: Western Sandpipers forage in a variety of habitats including mudflats, sand and pebble beaches and even rocky shores. In late summer and early fall, fair numbers of this common migrant travel through the area in small flocks, often mixing with Least Sandpipers.

Regional Migratory Bird Sanctuaries



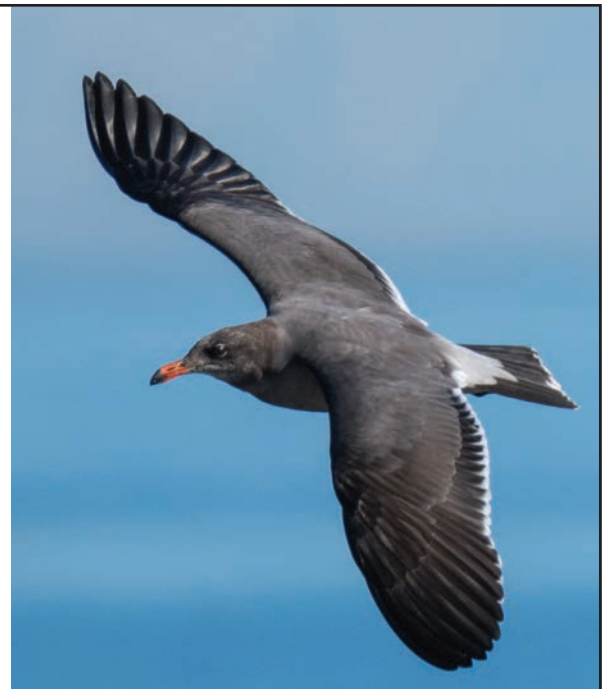
IBA: Important Bird Area
MBS: Migratory Bird Sanctuary

The outstanding opportunities to experience nature and exceptional urban wildlife prompted Nature Canada to designate the 3 regional sanctuaries as NatureHoods in 2015

naturehood
A NATURE CANADA INITIATIVE
VICTORIA HARBOUR BIRD SANCTUARY
URBAN WILDLIFE SANCTUARY & WORKING HARBOUR IN THE HEART OF THE SALISH SEA

Nature CANADA

The **Pacific Black Brant**, a small sea goose, is a fairly common spring migrant, often seen feeding on nearshore seaweed and eelgrass. Now a rare winter resident, Brant were common in winter 100 years ago, and were a favourite Christmas meal. A desire to rein in market hunting of birds, particularly Brant, in the 1920s and 1930s, led to the establishment of our three bird sanctuaries soon after the signing of the Migratory Bird Convention with the USA in 1916.



Victoria Harbour, Esquimalt Lagoon and Shoal Harbour are the only MBSs in Canada where the **Heermann's Gull** is found regularly. From July to October, hundreds of these seasonal visitors from Mexico's Sea of Cortez can often be seen feeding on schools of Pacific Herring and Pacific Sand Lance.

Protecting Migratory Birds

Bird conservationists, scientists and law makers in Canada and the USA made history on Aug 16, 1916, by signing the *Migratory Birds Convention* to protect the continent's bird populations which had already plummeted drastically from over-hunting for meat and feathers. This was one of the world's first international treaties on wildlife conservation and over the years it has helped to keep many species from the edge of extinction.

In 1917, Canada implemented the Convention through the *Migratory Bird Convention Act*; its purpose is to protect and conserve migratory birds, their eggs and nests. Within designated Migratory Bird Sanctuaries (MBS), hunting or disturbing migratory birds is prohibited, as is allowing dogs and cats to run at large. Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) of Environment and Climate Change Canada is responsible for the protection and conservation of migratory birds, their eggs and nests within all MBSs. The Act and its associated regulations contain few habitat protection provisions, other than protecting the nests of migratory birds. Management of habitat within MBSs falls to the landowner: CWS if on federal lands; chief game officer if on provincial lands; and the individual property owner if on municipal or private lands.

Within our three urban MBSs, much important habitat has been degraded or lost, yet they still provide important roosting, nesting and foraging habitat for thousands of migratory and resident birds as well as other wildlife. Local efforts to protect and improve habitat and water quality have contributed to the return of birds and wildlife to our local waters.

Celebrate the urban MBSs in the capital region and join efforts to protect migratory birds and their habitat.

Did you know?

- The capital region is home to the three oldest of BC's seven Migratory Bird Sanctuaries. Currently there are 92 in all of Canada.
- The capital region is one of the best places in Canada to experience wildlife in an urban environment. From huge marine mammals like Humpback Whales, Orcas and Steller Sea Lions, to small birds like the Marbled Murrelet and Anna's Hummingbird, it's all here!
- Bald Eagles and other birds including hawks, owls, vultures, crows, jays, pelicans and cormorants were considered "pests" when the Migratory Birds Convention was signed by the federal government in 1916. These birds came under official provincial government protection in later years.
- Several non-native subspecies of Canada Geese, introduced to southwest BC, are degrading rare plant habitat in coastal meadows, tidal marshes and eelgrass beds. In the capital region, Canada Geese are now resident and abundant, impacting other wildlife and creating new wildlife management challenges.



Western Purple Martin, the largest swallow in North America, is a Species at Risk (Blue-listed, Vulnerable) in BC. Loss of nesting habitat and competition from introduced bird species led to a steep population decline throughout the 1900s. Thanks to a successful program to install nest boxes on pilings, these birds now nest at several locations in the three sanctuaries.

A small auk and relative of the puffin, the **Marbled Murrelet**, (shown here in winter plumage) occurs year-round. Its preference for nesting on large branches of big trees in coastal old growth forests has led to its threatened population status in Canada due to habitat loss from logging. Look for Murrelets in winter, when these small diving birds can often be seen and heard from seaside walkways.



Help protect birds

- **Keep your cats indoors and your dogs on a leash!** Never let your pets chase or harm birds or other wildlife.
- **It's best not to feed wild birds**, especially with bread. Birds fare best when they forage for their own wild food.
- **Boaters and paddlers:** stay well back from birds and other wildlife. Avoid disturbing birds, especially when they are feeding or nesting. If their behaviour changes as you approach, you're getting too close.
- Leave **natural vegetation** and standing dead wood in your yard to provide safe cover for wildlife.
- **Install nest boxes.** They can augment the natural cavities used for nesting by about one-quarter of our birds.
- **Help reduce collisions, make windows and glass balcony railings obvious to birds.**
- **Avoid using pesticides and synthetic fertilizers** and properly maintain your septic system. This helps prevent contaminants from entering waterways through the storm drain system.

Get involved

Learn more about Migratory Bird Sanctuaries:

- Environment and Climate Change Canada - Migratory Bird Sanctuaries (MBS) (<https://ec.gc.ca/ap-pa/>)

Join a local birding or conservation group:

- Esquimalt Lagoon Stewardship Initiative (elsi.ca)
- Friends of Shoal Harbour (shoalharbour.com)
- Friends of the Victoria Harbour Migratory Bird Sanctuary ([Facebook](#))
- Gorge Waterway Initiative (gorgewaterway.ca)
- Habitat Acquisition Trust (hat.bc.ca)
- Purple Martin Recovery Team (saveourmartins.org and georgiabasin.ca)
- Victoria Natural History Society (vicnhs.bc.ca)

All bird photos by Stuart Clarke.