

GW I info sheet

GORGE WATERWAY INITIATIVE

WORKING TOGETHER TO BALANCE CONSERVATION, RECREATION AND COMMUNITY VALUES

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WINGS OVER THE GORGE

One of the most visible and delightful aspects of walking along the shoreline or paddling through the Gorge Waterway and Portage Inlet is the birds. The abundance and diversity of birds in this Migratory Bird Sanctuary is a result of being on the Pacific Flyway, a major migration route on the West Coast, and because of the variety of habitats available.

BIRDS FOR ALL SEASONS

There are two areas where birds are found in great abundance throughout the year:

- Northwestern portion of Portage Inlet from the mouth of Craigflower Creek to Christie Point
- Upper Gorge Waterway from Admirals Road bridge to the “narrows”

Many species of birds using the waterway have populations that are in good shape. For example, significant numbers of Bufflehead and Lesser Scaup use these waters in the wintertime. Their numbers are evidence that they have found a healthy winter habitat to sustain them until they move north again to breed.

The waterway is more than just

open water. Birds have evolved to use a variety of habitats and each year unique and amazing species stop by on their migrations. Dabbling ducks like American Wigeons and Mallards feed in the rich eelgrass beds. Least Sandpipers and other shorebirds feed on burrowing shellfish, worms and crustaceans in the mudflats exposed at low tide, particularly at the mouth of Craigflower Creek.

In response to the annual spring herring run, cormorants are often seen on dead trees and small rocky islands along the south side of the Gorge Waterway. Raptors — owls, eagles, ospreys and hawks — all seasonally hunt the waterway for other birds and for fish.

Shorelines with natural vegetation provide nesting, roosting and feeding habitat, so these areas tend

to have considerably more birds than open lawns or developed areas.

SPECIES AT RISK

Several bird species found in the waterway are at risk. The province has identified the Western Grebe as “red-listed,” which means this species is listed as “endangered” or “threatened” under the *Wildlife Act*.

“Blue-listed” species, like the coastal race of the Great Blue Heron, the Double-crested Cormorant and Purple Martins are considered to be at risk because their habits make them especially sensitive to human activities or natural events.



American Wigeon

Marie O'Shaughnessy



Great Blue Heron

Todd Carmahan



Lesser Scaup

Marie O'Shaughnessy

A SANCTUARY FOR BIRDS

Most people are probably not aware that all the tidal waters of the Gorge Waterway and Portage Inlet are part of the Victoria Harbour Migratory Bird Sanctuary. The sanctuary, established in 1923, recognizes that this area has significant habitat for migratory birds.

Regulations under the *Migratory Birds Convention Act* prohibit removing, injuring, or destroying migratory birds, including their nests or eggs in a sanctuary. Hunting is prohibited, and unrestrained cats or dogs are not allowed to chase or disturb the birds.

While some birds nest in these waters, the sanctuary is most important for the habitat it provides to wintering and migrating birds, particularly waterfowl. Some of these species are considered threatened, and safe and healthy habitat for feeding, resting, and mating are important.

AVIAN ALIENS

Some of the birds on the waterway are not native to this area. Two particularly visible non-native birds are Mute Swans and Canada Geese. The former, which were introduced from England, have proven to be aggressive toward people and harm

native waterfowl.

The Canada Geese are likely from a prairie subspecies introduced to coastal BC to enhance hunting opportunities. Their numbers have

expanded dramatically in urban areas. Without natural predators to control the numbers of these non-native species, they can become a problem.

HOW CAN YOU HELP PROTECT THE BIRDS?

People can do many things to help those birds that call the Gorge "home."

- Leave natural vegetation in the form of thickets and hedgerows and standing dead wood to provide safe cover for wildlife. Canada Geese prefer open lawns and are considered a nuisance by many; planting taller grasses and shrubs will discourage geese and could help reduce their numbers.
- The Naturescape program of the BC Habitat Conservation Trust Fund (www.hctf.ca/nature.htm) provides extensive information on how to incorporate wildlife habitat in residential and community gardens.
- Take measures to reduce or avoid the use of lawn and garden pesticides and synthetic fertilizers, properly recycle and dispose of oil, paints and other chemicals, and maintain your septic system. These actions will help stop polluted water from entering the

stormdrains and the waterway where it causes poor water quality.

- Nest boxes can augment the natural cavities used for nesting by about one-quarter of our birds. Many songbirds can be saved if residents put netting over large windows and glass balcony railings.
- Sometimes the best thing you can do to help wildlife is to leave it alone. Make sure your pets are not free to stalk or chase wildlife, particularly along the shorelines of the waterway.
- Boaters, kayakers and hikers should be aware of birds on the water or shore and avoid disturbing them especially when they are feeding or nesting. It is best to observe birds and wildlife from a distance and avoid any human contact. If wildlife behaviour changes as you approach, you are getting too close.

LEARNING MORE

The best way to find out more about birds of the waterway is to purchase a field guide and binoculars and consider joining a birding group or taking part in local bird-watching activities with the Victoria Natural History Society (www.vicnhs.bc.ca) or the Portage Inlet Sanctuary Colquitz Estuary Society (PISCES).

For more information on the Gorge Waterway Initiative:
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This GWI Infosheet is one in a series on the natural and cultural features of the Gorge Waterway, Portage Inlet and surrounding watersheds

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