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City of Bellingham

Post Point Great Blue Heron Colony Monitoring progress report: May-June 2010

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 and the City of Bellingham and is considered a sensitive breeding site and habitat area. Currently there are only 4 known active colonies in Whatcom County including Port 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. As of 2007 the colony decreased in size to 27 nests and some nest trees were lost in winter storms, reducing the number to 12 trees. In the past two years, 2008 and 2009, the colony appeared normal in the early season, but greatly reduced in number. A total of 9 active nests were confirmed in the colony through May with live young in the nests. In both years (2008-009) the colony has abandoned prior to fledging of young, resulting in zero productivity. Abandonment occurred in 2008 in late June and late May of 2009. As of June 30, 2010 the herons at Post Point are actively nesting and raising young at the Post Point heron colony.

The 2010 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 2010. In addition, some foraging observations will be made to document foraging activity, locations and any disturbances related to foraging sites. 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. 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 2010.

The implementation of the monitoring plan includes on-site field observation and data collection conducted by Ann Eissinger and assistant Jaime Welfelt, of Nahkeeta Northwest Wildlife Services based in Bow Washington. Ms Eissinger has over fifteen 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.

GENERAL MONITORING

Early season monitoring commenced in February 2010 to determine the onset of staging. A total of 13 site visits were made between February and April 2010. Between May 1 and June 30, a total of 12 site visits were completed. During these visits detailed observations were made and documented by the Biologist. The seasonal monitoring has been conducted by Jaime Welfelt with occasional visits by Ann Eissinger. The results of observations are summarized below and are cumulative through the season.

Early Season Assessment

Following a relatively mild winter, no storm damage was observed in the Post Point heron colony and most nests and nest trees appeared to be intact from 2009. As of February, 2010, 11 nest structures remained in the colony, no heron were observed in the colony. However, adult heron were observed staging at the Post Point Water Treatment Plant. A total of 8 heron were observed staging on a clarifier on the west side of the facility. Heron began moving into the colony in early March. By March 6, 2010, 5 nests were occupied.

Breeding Chronology

Field visits to the Post Point heronry started in mid-February. A total of 8 staging heron were observed on February 5, 2010. Colony occupation was first documented March 6th with 11 nests visible and 5 nests occupied, this is similar to 2009.

By March 13 the colony had increased to at least 7 occupied nests, 5 by mated heron pairs. A total of 13 nests were visible, so 6 nests were not occupied. Paring and breeding activities were well underway. By March 19, a total of 14 nests were visible, 10 nests were occupied and two nests were incubating which is on par with 2009. Egg laying and Incubation of eggs will continue.

Early April brought typical spring storms, high winds, heavy rain and occasional hail. The colony remained stable with 10 nests occupied and all incubating eggs. No additional nest were visibly occupied, however, visibility had decreased due to full leaf-out. Incubation continued through April with the first hatchlings detected on the 27th at which time 6 nests were confirmed with hatched young. The actual hatching date is likely earlier since some of the young were visible in the nests. This hatching is earlier than 2009, but similar to years previous. Note, breeding chronology varies by about 3 weeks +/-.

Mild temperatures (50-60°F) and spring weather continued through May. Incubation and early hatching in April gave way to rearing in May and a few early fledgings. By May 1st

at least 7 of the 11 active nests had young, and young could be heard throughout the colony. The heron colony continued to be very active through May as young grew and become more active. Nests contained 2-5 young, most with 3 young. In the last week of May one nest contained a dead young along with its siblings. During a field visit, one of the live young was observed taking the head of the dead sibling and dropping it out of the nest. At the end of May, a photo sent to the Biologist of foraging heron near Marine Park included a heron that appeared to be a juvenal. Some young in the nests were also actively flapping to exercise their wings – a common behavior prior to fledging. This indicated possible early fledging.

In June the colony continued to be active and productive. No visible active nests appeared to have failed and the young were growing and actively preparing to fledge. By the end of June some young had left the colony while other young were fledging.

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. No predator incursions have been observed in the heron colony this season to date.

A special effort was made at the end of May to observe the colony during the Ski to Sea festivities. Three site visits were made prior to, during and after the event festivities. With the finish line located at Marine Park, the potential for disturbance the foraging herons and the colony were possible. The results of the observations were negative for disturbance and proved that the event had little or no disturbance to the herons. Herons were seen feeding in eelgrass beds within about 200 feet of the finish line and were not utilizing all of the foraging area. A limitation around feeding areas at this critical period is however is notable.

Bald Eagles are generally common and regularly observed in the vicinity of the colony. 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. One occurrence on No eagle incursions into the heron colony were observed or reported. No other predation or disturbance was noted.

A persistent pedestrian trail, constructed in 2009, was cleared and actively used again this year, earlier in the season, despite signage and fencing the trail was. The trail was reported to the City of Bellingham and the trail entry points were blocked, parts of the trail obliterated and “no trespassing” signs were posted. A public education effort is needed to inform citizens and neighbors of the sensitivity of the heron colony and to safeguard the colony during the nesting season. Now, it seems acceptable by some neighbors to use the trail, despite the efforts to discourage its use.

PRODUCTIVITY

The productivity of the visible nests within the heron colony is monitored annually and is measured during visits in May and June prior to fledging. Productivity within the colony is an important indicator of the health of the colony and is particularly important this year given that the colony has failed to produce young over the past 2 years.

The Post Point herons have successfully produced young this year and in one case, the maximum number of young were produced for one nest. Based on observations in 2010, between 2 and 5 young were documented for the 11 active nests. Visibility obscured certain nests resulting in an average of 3 young per nest (8 nests). This an excellent result and reflects good health and success on the part of the adults and a viable food source.

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 WATER TREATMENT PLANT EXPANSION

The City of Bellingham is planning an expansion of the Post Point Water Treatment Plant, located to the northeast of the heron colony. The facility expansion, as planned, will require construction of a new clarifier within the colony's 100 foot buffer. The City has requested the Biologist review the project for impacts to the herons or colony. A meeting held June 1, 2010 with COB Public Works and later a public information meeting provided an overview of the project. Further consideration and discussion with Washington Department of Wildlife will be made.

CONCLUSION

The Post Point Heron Colony has reoccupied this 2010 season and continued to nest for a full season, following mid-season abandonment in 2009 and 2008. This successful nesting season is critical to the colony's future. The colony is active and nesting continued through June with fledging of young starting by the end of the month. During the nesting season a total of 11 nests were active and occupied. The colony appeared stable and undisturbed.

The herons returned in February and were observed staging at the Post Point Water Treatment Plant. The breeding season commenced in early March as heron returned to the colony and nests were occupied at about the same time as in 2009. Occupation, pairing, courtship and nest enhancement appeared to be normal, yet about five nests remained unoccupied. Egg laying and incubation began in the third week of March and incubation continued with young hatching in 6 nests by the end of April.

Spring conditions were mild and no major disturbances were observed. Bald Eagles were present, but the usual adult pair posed no threat to the herons and no eagle incursions were reported. In previous years May and early June was the period of destabilization of the colony and over the past two years resulted in colony abandonment. This year a close watch on the colony included observations over the Ski to Sea festival weekend and no observable disturbances were noted. The colony continued to function through June and began fledging young before the end of the month.

An illegal pedestrian trail constructed through the colony from 2009, was used again early in the season and reported to COB. The City responded with renewed fences and signage.

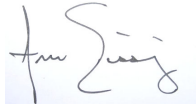
A review of the expansion of the Post Point Wastewater Treatment Plant and possible impacts on the heron colony has been requested by the City of Bellingham and is currently underway.

Close observation of the foraging area and possible recreational disturbance was made due to increased human use of Marine Park and associated shoreline which remain a source of human disturbance for foraging heron. Increased monitoring of foraging herons was made.

As of June 30, 2010, the Post Point heron colony has successfully recolonized, produced young and begun fledging. A total of 11 nests were active and all appear to have been productive. Monitoring of the colony and immediate area will continue until all of the young have fledged from the colony. A final report will be provided following the conclusion of the nesting season.

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 in this monitoring effort. Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,



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