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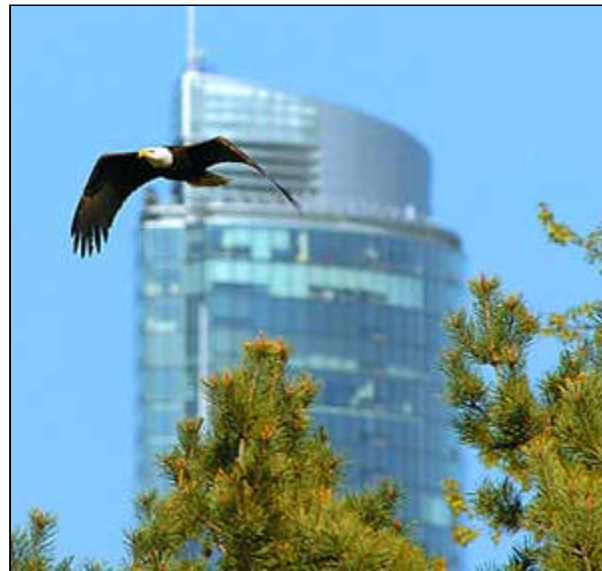
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### NEWS



Greater Vancouver is the world's urban capital for bald eagles. But even as the birds have adopted a unique city lifestyle, their future is far from secure. Photo Dan Toulgoet eagles. Photo Dan Toulgoet

#### Where eagles dare

Just after noon on July 12, 2005, Robert Boelens received a call like no other.

#### NPA cautious about Sam's plan

NPA city councillors are choosing their words carefully about whether they support NPA Mayor Sam Sullivan's idea to establish a drug maintenance program for female sex trade workers.

#### Heed's advice to delegates: concentrate on traffickers

Having an honest discussion about drug policy remains extremely difficult in Vancouver, says the former head of the Vancouver police drug squad.

#### Not enough eulachon to conduct test fishery

Standing on the banks of the Fraser River Wednesday afternoon, conservationist Terry Slack noted there wasn't an eagle or seagull in sight.

#### People still buying into million dollar dream



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NEWS



Back in his office, Robert Boelens examines the contents of a container filled with bones, dismembered crow wings and other tasty delights garnered from beneath the nests of urban

Where eagles dare

Rhiannon Coppin-contributing writer

Just after noon on July 12, 2005, Robert Boelens received a call like no other.

"There's an eagle sitting in the middle of our soccer field. Please help!"

Under overcast skies, a large baby bird of prey had taken its first flight test and failed, right in the middle of a soccer field at Strathcona Park where the Vancouver Police Department and the Whitecaps soccer team were holding a children's soccer camp. Police officers and members of the Whitecaps were at a loss as kids screamed and the eaglet flailed in the middle of the green.



Boelens, a public education worker with the Stanley Park Ecology Centre, drove out to Strathcona Park-nestled between a busy road, a paint factory, and produce warehouses-and wrangled the sharp-taloned infant to safety.

"The legs are what you watch out for," he says, shaking his head and smiling.

The soccer-field eagle was in bad shape when captured. "It was covered in lice, and no healthy bird gets lice," Boelens says. But it made a full recovery, learned to fly, and was released later that summer after some intensive rehab by Boundary Bay, courtesy of the Orphaned Wildlife Rehabilitation Society (OWL).

Score for this half-Humans: 1, Eagles: 1 (and one foul).

When Boelens isn't refereeing police officers and eagles, he helps calm fears and reduce the risks involved with other wildlife encounters in the city.

From the Stanley Park Ecology Centre's top floor offices in the Dining Pavilion, Boelens acts as an ambassador for urban wildlife, fielding calls about raccoons in rooftops and coyotes in carports, and launching diplomatic visits to elementary schools. Over the past few years Boelens has seen a marked increase in requests from the public for information on-and sometimes assistance with-the unabashed, unafraid, urban bald eagles.

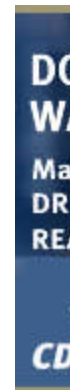
"People are still amazed that they can go to downtown Robson Street-the shopping mecca-and then walk 10 more minutes and see a bald eagle," he says.

Vancouver's bald eagles are easy to spot if you know where to look. They circle Wreck Beach in packs and glide solo over Burrard Inlet. One particularly fearless adult greets happy wanderers on Spanish Banks by sidling up next to loungers on the grass. Juveniles (who lack their white feathers until they're four) loiter menacingly from the tree line above Locarno Beach.

On the East Side, the bald eagles ("bald," from Celtic bal, refers to a "white patch, blaze"), perch high on pilings along Burrard Inlet's industrial shores, and an aquiline beauty props herself during many lunch hours upon the steeple of the Korean Four Square Baptist Church at Pender and Princess.

It doesn't take an eagle-eye to spot them outside the city limits either. Within Vancouver's boundaries, Boelens is tracking 13 nesting pairs, and within the municipalities of Greater Vancouver, biologist David Hancock counts 155.

The GVRD is looking more and more like the world's bald eagle capital, with Vancouver having the greatest density of bald eagle nests of any urban centre. Though surprisingly attractive for bald



eagles, life in the city environment also involves changes in habitat and in habits that many of us would find familiar. Urban bald eagles eat differently (think "fast food"), choose shoddier real estate (think "leaky condos"), and have more run-ins with humans, who increasingly are a losing proposition for the eagles.

"The contrast between the traditional lifestyle choices and what's occurring with the urban population is extreme," Boelens says, while out collecting eagle trash from beneath a nest in the high-traffic Malkin Bowl area of Stanley Park. Boelens picks up the torn upholstery and bird feathers found beneath the nest so he can later deposit them in a box he keeps in his office.

"There's that crow smell," Boelens says, pushing aside a fleshless, feathered black wing.

He sorts through the other contents-mostly feathers and coughed up balls of undigested bone and fur -to make sense of the urban eagle's strange diet. Coastal bald eagles eat mostly fish, but Boelens is discovering that these city slickers have adopted a predominantly avian-based diet; picking on crows, pigeons, gulls, and cormorants when not tempted by the daily special on road kill.

Boelens also compiles the Stanley Park Ecological Society's annual report on nesting bald eagles in the City of Vancouver. Incubation time is over: this last week of April greeted most of the hatchlings around town.

Eagles claim and rebuild their old nests in January or February, lay one to three eggs by late March or early April, and take turns swapping "nest duty" every two hours or so until the eggs hatch 36 days later. After that, they stick around to feed the kids and, once flight-worthy, show them which way the migration goes.

"They're fairly good model parents for humans," Boelens says. "Both are involved in raising their kids and encouraging them to fly."

Last year, 10 nests in the city produced a total of 12 eaglets. Two other nests were abandoned early in the season. (Score: Eagles up by 12.)

The odd thing about the reproductive habits of bald eagles in the city is that the urban nests more commonly produce two live surviving eaglets-a rare occurrence in the resource-scarce wild, where the younger eaglet (the backup) is oftentimes sacrificed, Cain-and-Abel-style, for the well-being of the elder sibling.

Boelens drives around town to point out some of the other nesting sites. We visit a second nest in Stanley Park, high up in a Douglas fir giant and above a densely forested area where abandoned-and tasty-pet roosters have sometimes been found.

Leaving Stanley Park, we pass the heronry, the location above the tennis courts that hosts 170-odd heron nests, and venture to the city's most visible nest, easily seen from the Burrard Street Bridge walkway in the springtime before the leaves grow in. At the base of the giant cottonwood in Vanier Park, Boelens stops to collect more eagle trash: balls of either rat or rabbit fur, cormorant spines,

and pigeon wings.

At Jericho Beach, we discover an abandoned nest in a low-lying cottonwood. The eagle parents relocated to a loftier and more traditional accommodation across the field in a stand of taller Douglas firs, following the surrender of one of their eaglets to first the baseball diamond and then OWL volunteers late last summer.

We take a gander at a nest in Kerrisdale and one on a Southlands property lying on a noisy lip of Southwest Marine Drive.

Boelens reflects on emergence of the new and distinct urban breed of bald eagle.

"The part that interests me is that you've got a creature that not too long ago symbolized pure wilderness: pristine rivers, untouched forests, open fields. Now, it is a symbol of a classic urban wildlife species; living in people's backyards," he says.

And the eagles do, literally, live in people's backyards.

"They must be all over the place. They're invading us!" says Carolyn Bradley, whose parents have shared their home for years with an active and vocal pair of bald eagles.

Bradley assists her now-elderly parents, Japanese-Canadians who married and settled in their present home in the East Side after being interned during the Second World War. Bradley doesn't see the eagles much-the angle of the home's windows to the nest is awkward-but she does hear them.

"It's really hard to describe the sound. It's like a cry, and it's rather piercing. Between four and five in the morning, I do hear it," she says.

Bradley cleans up after the eagles, tidying the lawn under the tree, and chatting with passersby who are enthralled by the nest on her family's property.

"Several months ago a native family stopped by and said, 'Do you know you have eagles in your tree?' and I said, 'Well, yes, we do know that.' He goes 'Do you know how lucky you are?' and he went on and on: 'That's really good luck to have them nesting on your property.'"

Score: Humans up by one.

One Kerrisdale homeowner, who wouldn't give her name, was initially concerned when she first moved onto her eagle-occupied property with a newborn four years ago. She found out that bald eagles, which can weigh from seven to 15 pounds, usually lift nothing heavier than three or four pounds.

Though Boelens can't recall the details, he did receive a call last year from a woman whose pet was snatched by a bald eagle. But he notes they mostly go for prey that won't put up a fight. In the city, that means these magnificent creatures are lining the roads in the morning to pick at last night's road kill.

As landlord to eagles, the Kerrisdale homeowner dealt with the expected inconveniences: lawn debris, noisy 5 a.m. chatter, and eaglets falling out of the nest at six in the morning.

"We called the fire department. The poor baby was freaking out and it was huge, really huge. Bigger than you think," she says.

An unexpected inconvenience popped up however, when she and her husband went to do some home improvements.

"We renovated this house, and in order to take down a third tree that was leaning on this house, we had to have a wildlife consultant come to make sure it didn't disturb the eagles," she says.

Though the city of Vancouver handles roughly 1,300 applications for tree removals on private property each year, if an eagle's nest is in the immediate vicinity, provincial law comes into effect.

"Under the Provincial Wildlife Act, you can't remove any tree with an active eagle's nest in it and active doesn't mean right then, active means it's been used at all in the last five years," says Brian Clarke, a Conservation Biologist Supervisor with B.C.'s Ministry of Environment.

Bald eagles typically mate for life, and can easily live for 40 years. Once a pair has chosen a nest site, they will return to it annually. Even if one mate dies, the other will "re-marry" a younger eagle and keep the giant nest.

"Most trees haven't been abandoned, it's just that people look up and don't see a bird so they think it's abandoned," he says.

Once a bald eagle tree, always a bald eagle tree.

"Applications are mostly in the Lower Mainland because that's where all the development is occurring," says Clarke, who reports that several development permits in southwestern B.C. were denied last year.

In 2005, one Vancouver property developer was permitted to clear trees that included one with a purported abandoned nest. At

present, some eagle-philes are concerned for the well-being of a nest at Ansell Place, sited beneath a new large-rock depot being used by the 2010 highway expansion crews.

As urban development simultaneously concentrates and pushes both north and east, the fight for habitat will escalate and the conflict over the placement of eagles' nests will only intensify.

If anyone has witnessed the crunch that development has put on eagle homes, it's David Hancock, who has followed the Lower Mainland's bald eagle population since the late '50s when he studied them for a thesis at UBC.

"The problem for eagles nesting in the city is finding a tree big enough to hold that huge bulky nest," says Hancock, who owns a publishing house in Surrey and has written several books on wildlife. "They are actually nesting in many cases more closely to each other in the city than they ever would in the wild-sometimes just 150 yards apart."

With many larger trees gone in the Lower Mainland, there are fewer accommodations for eagles in the region-even as their numbers grow.

"At this point, any removal of the nesting trees is a threat. There are already so few bald eagle trees-ones that are potentially big enough to hold a nest-but, my goodness! Throughout much of the land, they've all been cut down and the eagles are trying to nest in pretty inferior trees."

One pair of Lower Mainland eagles were loath to abandon their real estate even after a windstorm this winter snapped their nest clear off, along with the top of their tree. Hancock returned to the site to find that the eagles had rebuilt a brand new nest on the stumpy remains of the tree. Hancock has observed that city eagles, who leave to join other eagles for the fall and winter herring, eulachon, and salmon run feasts, have been returning earlier and earlier every year, ostensibly to reclaim their valuable properties.

Hancock has also found several nests, which are made of all sizes of branches and can weigh over 500 pounds, in dangerous places: over highways, down low to the ground or, as he showed a TV station helicopter news team last month, snuggled up against high-tension power line poles.

"We may need to put up some artificial nest sites nearby where we'd prefer to have them nesting rather than have them nesting in power poles," he says.

Hancock, Boelens, and a host of B.C. naturalists keep records and statistics on nest locations and nest activities to merge into the Wildlife Tree Stewardship (WiTS) Program registry.

"We want these nests to be a component of the environment that is considered when development takes place," Hancock says. "What the WiTS program is doing is making available a database of nest locations. This will simply be a tool that co-operating municipalities will hopefully consult."

WiTS has 680 nests that fall under provincial wildlife protection plotted on Vancouver Island, and the planning departments of several municipalities there already use the database. The goal of its backers is to use WiTS so that eagle nests direct the placements of new roads and parks.

Hancock hopes that in another year or two, once the Lower Mainland database of sightings and GPS-correlated nest sites is complete, mainland municipalities will sign on to the WiTS program, which Hancock says the GVRD is fully behind. (Anyone with information on the location of any eagle nests can contact WiTS through Lisa Dreves at 604-514-4554.)

Hancock is directly involved with what is becoming a worldwide eagle-eye phenomenon: the Internet streaming video eagle nest cam, live and direct from Hornby Island.

Hornby Island is two ferries and a world away. Snuggled off the coast of Vancouver Island between Nanaimo and Comox, it is a world-famous virtual destination thanks to a CCTV camera, two men (David Hancock and resident Doug Carrick), and a bald eagle nest. Two eagles have been trading nest duty every two hours or so since the first of two eggs was laid March 21. Viewers watched live on host Infotec's site as one egg was hatched Wednesday. The other is due anytime this weekend as you read this.

With these and with other eagles, there is always a risk in disclosing specific nest locations; some people for unknown reasons enjoy harassing wildlife, or climbing up to active nests—a bad idea which may cause personal eye injury, or abandonment of the eggs.

A strong black market trade in the U.S. for bald eagle parts also persists, as the public was reminded in February 2005 when 26 carcasses, stripped of talons and tail feathers, were found dumped within the borders of the Tsleil-Waututh First Nation in North Vancouver.

But even this latest round of killings pales compared to the near-annihilation that pollutants and policy caused in this species half a century ago.

Brittle-shell syndrome caused by the pesticide DDT put bald eagle populations in the eastern United States on the brink of extinction. Out west, the bald eagle population was devastated by the Alaskan Territorial Eagle Bounty Law of 1917-1953 when the birds were regarded as competitors for fish.

"The Alaska fish and game branch offered a bounty and they paid- they paid a bounty-on 111,000 eagles. People cut the legs off and turned them in. For every eagle that was turned in, it was estimated that between seven and 10 were shot because they weren't found once they fell," says Hancock.

(Eagles down by undisclosed amount: perhaps over a million.)

The reach of habitat destruction and hunting extended even to Vancouver. "They were literally gone. We had just one pair nesting south of the narrows, in Stanley Park," Hancock says, though he's now more than pleased with the species' recovery.

A falconer since the age of 12, Hancock has long been captivated by raptors: "Raptorial birds are an exciting driving dynamic of the whole ecosystem. If they're doing well, that means that everyone else has to be doing well to support them."

No longer thought of as vermin, no longer the embodiment of total freedom and glory, the bald eagle as a symbol may have morphed to represent the adaptation many of us have made over the past few decades as we move to work with, not in spite of, the environment.

Bald eagles seem to be drawn to Vancouver for the same reasons humans are: mild weather, the ocean, good take-out and a place that's not bad for raising kids. Either the urban eagles were finding it too hard to make a living off the land the old way, or they're descendants of Vancouver-based birds and, no matter how far they wander, really can't bear to leave.

"Why do we live here? We live here because it's a great environment," says Hancock. "What helps make this a great environment is not just the view of the mountains on the North Shore, it's the fish in the ocean and the eagles on the shoreline.

"Those are the treasures of our city."

(Final score for eagles and humans: To be determined.)

To report a nest sighting for the official GVRD and Fraser Valley WiTS registry, contact Lisa Dreves at 604-514-4554.

The web cam-monitored Hornby eagle nest ([www.infotecbsi.com/wildlife/](http://www.infotecbsi.com/wildlife/)) has a newborn hatchling due April 30.

For urban wildlife inquiries in the city of Vancouver, contact Robert Boelens, [coyotes@stanleyparkecolgy.ca](mailto:coyotes@stanleyparkecolgy.ca) or 604-681-9453.

To report wildlife conflict or poachers, call the 24-hour toll-free provincial hotline: 1-800-663-9453 (1-800-663-WILD).

OWL has its Annual Open House, April 29-30, from 10 a.m.-3 p.m.

Call 604-946-3171 for information or to report a downed raptor.

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