



The Oystercatcher

PUBLISHED BY THE HORIZON BOOK COMMITTEE
IN ASSOCIATION WITH
THE SALT SPRING TRAIL AND NATURE CLUB - GANGES B.C. VOS-1EO

P.O. Box 1502 - Published Quarterly
Subscription: \$2.00 per year

Vol. 1, No. 3.
Sept. - 1983

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BLACK OYSTERCATCHER - Haematopus bachmani

In the planning for this series of Quarterlies, the editor and Committee decided to use the name "Oystercatcher" for the publication. The Black oystercatcher is native to Saltspring Island and seemed an appropriate namesake for the newsletter.

The Oystercatcher is an all-black crow-size shorebird. It has a heavy straight red bill, pinkish legs and light eyes. It frequents our rocky shores in search of shellfish and other marine animals.

The voice of the oystercatcher is loud sharply repeated whistled notes. For those who recognize it, the call of the Black Oystercatcher may be heard at all seasons and even after dark. It is an exciting and memorable aspect of a visit to our rocky seashores.

There are two oystercatchers in North America, on the west coast it is all black on the Atlantic seaboard, the American oystercatcher is strikingly black and white. Birders on Saltspring might look closely at crows on the shore - if your crow has a large red bill and pink feet - it might be an oystercatcher.

H.K. Campbell

While on the subject of oystercatchers, the following item appeared in the Vancouver Sun, June 25, 1983:

LONDON - A BBC cameraman sent to film a nest of bird's eggs near a high-speed railroad track blundered into the subject of his documentary and scrambled it. Cameraman John Reay was commissioned by the British Broadcasting Corp. to film an oystercatcher - a common seabird - that built its nest just below a high-speed British Rail track in Anglesey, northern Wales.

All week long, express trains had been hurtling by with nary

a scratch to the three mottled brown eggs in the nest. Railroad men said the parent birds sometimes even huddled on the track as cars thundered above them.

So out came Reay with his camera Thursday night. Walking up the tracks, he heard a crackle underfoot. "You've stood in it," said a horrified railman. There on the tracks was the nest - scrambled underfoot. "I feel terrible and very embarrassed," Reay said. "I didn't even see the eggs."

A DAY ON MAYNE ISLAND - June 7, 1983

by Beth Hill

It was a beautiful day. Flawless weather - that perfect combination of hot sun and a cool breeze. Good company - a group that tends not to be cliquish but seems to foster new friendships. And Mayne Island's own special quality; it is difficult not to sound like a real estate salesman on this subject. All this, plus the warm welcome of Nancy Rainsford. How could the Mayne Island Expedition be anything but a marvellous outing?

The day was planned not only to show off Mayne Island, but also to give the group a glimpse of the past. So we began at St. Mary Magdalene church (1898), a building which conveys something of the "Englishness" of the first settlers. Archie Georgeson once said,

"At Mayne Island there weren't any English people and it always was a friendly island. Well, there were English people too, but they weren't what we'd call English people because they'd been here too long."

It is that combination of English and Friendly that characterizes the early history; and perhaps serves also as a description of Nancy Rainsford, who met us at the church to serve as a guide during the morning.

It is something of a shift for Salt Spring Islanders to realize that Mayne Island was the first centre of the Gulf Islands. As Captain George Maude put it,

"Saltspring was just a drop in the bucket then, but it wouldn't do to tell them that now."

We visited one of the surviving hotels, now called Springwater Lodge (Tom Collinson's boardinghouse, first section 1890), one of the earliest summer resorts on our coast, and we heard about some of the others, and about the dances and parties and visitors. Sunday excursions would bring 700 people for a day on Mayne Island, and other islanders would risk storm, wind and tide in the Pass, for a few hours of fun on the wicked island of Mayne. It follows that this island also had our first policeman, in 1893, and the first gaol in 1896. The gaol is now the Museum, so tiny that the group (55 of us) had to take turns entering. Those waiting their turn examined the ancient farm implements, or soaked up sunshine, or heard a description of one day in the life of Constable Angus Ego, when he had to investigate a murder on Tumbo Island. The island Justice of the Peace, Wm. T. Collinson, reported that

"I made out the warrant and handed it to Constable Ego, and although blowing strongly at the time, Ego left immediately in a sixteen-foot rowboat for Tumbo Island, twelve miles along the open Gulf, and in less than three hours had found Wenzel dead. By 10 o'clock that night Ego arrived back here at the Pass with Captain Shultz, whom he had picked up on the way.

Two o'clock next morning found Ego on his way to Saltspring Island, ten miles distant, to notify the Coroner. Having fulfilled his mission he landed back at the Pass in the afternoon, at once setting to work to empanel a jury, and by next morning had everything ready, jury, grave-digger and a coffin to boot - making the latter himself. All this forty-four miles was performed in a rowboat, right down steady rowing."

One can understand that Ego might be blowing strongly. (This account was taken from Marie Elliott's booklet "Plumper Pass Lockup and the Mayne Island Museum", which we bought at the Museum).

Now we moved to a hidden, sun-filled valley, with an old orchard and a pattern of green and yellow fields, to visit a wonderful old hay barn, a cathedral place, the curving beams rising to a height of about sixty feet where swallows flashed in the dusty beams of sunlight. Here we heard from Nancy about the early farming, and the tons of tomatoes once shipped from Mayne Island, and slipping in, between words, born by the smell of new hay and the scent of wild roses, came an awareness of the presence of the pioneers.

After lunch on Nancy's wide porch, watching the sea traffic in the Pass, we moved to the Lighthouse at Georgina Point, welcomed by genial Jack Ruck, the lightkeeper. The first lighthouse at this site was built in 1885, with Scotty Georgeson as lightkeeper, considered the best fireman on the coast because he could get steam up in the boiler fast, for the steam foghorn. Not only did he get the steam up when the fogs rolled in, but he had also the tasks of lighting the oil lamp at sundown and putting it out at sunrise every day.

In the mid-afternoon, the hikers went off to follow a charming but relatively easy trail to the end of Edith Point, while the walkers ascended a near-vertical climb to the astounding look-out at the Microwave Tower; afterwards it was suggested that perhaps the groups should have been reversed. Standing on the ridge at the Microwave Tower, all the world of the lower Gulf of Georgia lay below us, a huge map at our feet. One could see that Mayne is, in fact, the centre, and Saltspring does seem just a drop in the bucket ("but it wouldn't do to tell them that!"). Five eagles wheeled below us and the jagged white peaks were crystal clear from away north of Vancouver to the Olympics to the south, a breathtaking view as a reward for the breathless climbers.

The late afternoon was spent drinking tea at the Five Roosters or the Rootcellar, visiting some of the island galleries, examining the Cedar of Lebanon that marks the site of the famous Culzean, the 35 room mansion built by Warburton Pike. Some of the more stalwart members of the group went swimming at Bennett Bay. And finally we gathered on the wide porch of Mayne Inn, drinks in hand, to compare sunburns while the scent of roast beef whetted our appetites. Yes, it was a beautiful day.

ALONG THE TRAIL

by A.M. Dahlke

Walking through the woods or along a rocky shoreline one can hardly overlook the abundance of the most primitive plants: the lichens.

Lacking roots, stems, leaves and conductive cells, lichens have found a unique way to exist. Single-celled green algae are supported by fungal filaments, producing a variety of specialized shapes and forms.

Photosynthesis within the algae nourishes the fungus. In turn the threads of the fungal tissue retain moisture and dissolved minerals to sustain the algae.

Lichens are tolerant to cold, heat and draught but the success of the symbiotic relationship requires sunlight, a stable undisturbed surface and unpolluted air and water.

Poisonous substances in the air, smog or acid rain keep the plants small or threaten their reproduction.

Tree lichens are used in Great Britain as a sulphur dioxide pollution indicator.

Lichens have a long history of use as a survival food. An example is the so called "Reindeer moss" which is not a moss but a lichen. Extracts of antibiotics are used in pharmaceutical products and fixatives in the perfume industry.

The lichen dyes of ancient handwoven tartans and tweeds found a recent revival through renewed interest in homespun wool and handwoven works of art.

NATURE NOTES

by M. Pearce

Area 5 - Hundred Hills sent in a very well kept Red Tailed Hawks Log, kept by Morton B. Stratton. Also a report from Joan Lott on seeing two Pileated Woodpecker on June 22, one had a brilliant orange crest.

Area 6 - 3 Pileated Woodpeckers on July 26

- a report on the Scott Point Eagles.

- a visit from a young buck with one horn was about 8" and had two small prongs but other horn was just a few inches long.

Violet-green swallow raised 4 young in nest-box.

Area 8 Both Bay - Mick Jones reported watching a pair of Osprey from June 22 for about three weeks flying back and forth from top of old snag in Long Harbour working on what appeared to be a stick built nest. Then they disappeared.

On a visit to Pender Island in June, I saw 2 female hooded merganzers, one had two tiny babies on its back.

Condensed Log of nesting of Red Tailed Hawks March 20 - July 2, 1983, kept by Morton B. Stratton, 140 Carlin Ave., Ganges)

Nest was on platform of limbs about 50' above ground in a Fir tree. This area, on north-east slope of Mt. Belcher, is forested; but nest was clearly visible and in the open. No nearby trees and nearest branches on nesting tree about 20' above nest. Altitude of area 700' above sea level.

March 20 First observed hawk glide into tree to last year's nest.

Next two weeks a hawk was observed tidying up nest, adding and rearranging a few small branches; at times just standing in the nest.

April 5 Hawk around nest; observed sitting for first time.

Female sat constantly for the next month.

May 8 Female more alert and seems higher in nest--have chicks hatched?

11 Stands above chicks; male chased off an eagle soaring too

close overhead. Both adults seen standing on edge of nest together.

- May 12 1.45 p.m.--first glimpse of a grey downy chick; female on edge of nest tearing up a snake into bite-size portions.
- 13 Female seen several times today feeding bits of food to two chicks; sits high on nest between feedings (a sort of crouching position).
- 15 Sits on chicks; stands on edge of nest; female seen on short exercise flight; male soaring overhead looking for food.
- 18 Mother not on nest this morning at 6.30; chicks growing!
(On holiday for two weeks -- no sightings)
- June 1 Chicks stand about 6" tall; still mostly covered with grey down; adults feed bits of food to chicks; mother away for long periods. Chick seen on edge of nest waving its downy wings (8"-10" wingspread).
- 2 Mother at nest only when feeding chicks; chicks sleep most of day.
- 7 Chicks seen helping mother tear apart food she pins down to nest with her feet.
- 13 Chicks stand erect much of the time -- about 8"-10" tall; wings feathered and heavy; tails feathered; a few feathers on breast and head; shanks bright yellow; eyes piercing.
- June 16 Bodies pretty well feathered now; some feathers on back of head. For next several days chicks stood in rain and sun; parents dropped in briefly with food now and then.
- 27 Chicks seem fully feathered in their juvenile plumage now. They test wings, lifting about 6" into the air straight up; mother still seen tearing up food and feeding bill to bill.
- 30 Only one juvenile on nest this morning.
- July 1 Early A.M.: NEST EMPTY. But later in day a juvenile was back on the nest eating.
- 2 Again a juvenile back on nest tearing up food. This was the last sighting; in next few days the adults(?) were still soaring over our mountain--but never more than two. Where are the juveniles?

Postscript:

Approximate incubation period - 32 days

Approximate time from hatching out to time

of leaving the nest - 54 days.

Terres, The Audobon Society Encyclopedia of North

American Birds says average incubation period is 30-32 days; young fly when about 45 days old.

M. Pearce July 6, 1983

NATURE NOTES - There is always something you have not noticed before.
by Marc Holmes

This summer we saw herds of sea lions hanging around the large buoys between Deep Cove and Patricia Bay. They were seen for several weeks and apparently have not been there in such numbers before. About one hundred big bulls - light brown, the California ones, and dark brown, our B.C. Stellars occupied the best seats in the theatre - i.e. covered the buoys. These gentlemen jealously guarded their roosts and made a dreadful smell if you were down wind. Obviously they needed the

attention of a dentist and they snarled fiercely if we got too close. Perhaps two or three hundred cows, youngsters and young batchelors swam around in nearby waters.

The next new find was a squid jigging ground - not in Newfoundland but in Fulford Harbour. The man jigging was not encouraged to continue because old timers living in this area had never seen this occur before. One lady from the North end said she had seen it happen twenty years ago. A fair sized area on the bottom of the sea was cleaned off and hundreds of sacks of whiteish eggs laid. Above these the squid circled around in the water, either guarding the eggs or preparing to fertilize them. Is this something to do with warmer water temperatures?

A third new sight noticed - not unique to other observers I suspect - was seeing thousands of small fish, possibly needlefish, digging into the sand during high tide at Isabella Point. Presumably they were depositing eggs and were greatly appreciated by a lame mink who lives in a nearby hollow log. This fellow boldly enjoyed his fresh fish lunch, paying no attention to human observers. Crows, robins and dogs were also seen digging.

Finally, a barn swallow flew about our orchard this summer for weeks, adorned with what appeared to be a long white tail feather. And speaking of birds, two female red breasted merganser ducks appeared in our bay mid-July and a female harlequin showed up on August 18th. We have never seen these ducks in the summer before.

NATURE NOTES

by I.C. Shank

While on the way to catch the ferry at Fulford, near the top of Lees Hill we observed what appeared to be a Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*) but the bird flew away before we could make a positive identification. We have been told by a knowledgeable bird watcher that it has been seen on the island occasionally. Is there anyone out there that has seen this bird?

Two bird species - the Red Crossbill and the Pine Siskin have been regular users of our bird bath for the past two months. Ken Campbell also has them around. According to bird books, the Red Crossbill is an erratic and nomadic specie, apparently going where there is ample Pine cones. I suppose they also extract seeds from Fir Cones of which there is a good crop this year.

The Crossbills and Siskins seem to like each others company as they often come to the bird bath together, and can be heard in the woods flocking together.

After an absence of several years, we now have the occasional company of a red squirrel but this is a mixed blessing as he has been burying Fir cones in our plant pots. A week ago, we planted some bulbs in the lower garden but failed to water the planting - a covey of California Quail found it to be an ideal spot for having dust baths. We will have to replant some of the bulbs.

QUADRA ISLAND

by Dorothy Robertson

Thirty three members of the Trail and Nature Club travelled to Quadra Island in mid June.

On our arrival we met at Rebecca Spit for a walk to the end of the Spit and back by the beach. The Spit juts out into Heriot Bay where one can enjoy a panoramic view of the mountain range on Vancouver

Island and across to the Coast Range and some of its majestic peaks in all their snowy glory.

Unhappily the rains came at night but Wednesday dawned bright and clear with gorgeous sunshine.

Ten o'clock saw us all off to the fish hatchery where the walk, led by Peggy Jacobs, started and followed an old logging road. Following this we reached the upper shoulder of Chinese Mountain. En route various plants and flowers were seen and also a grouse.

The sparkling sea view with a back drop of snowy mountains in all directions was well worth the climb.

The hikers, led by Bob Ball, approached Chinese Mountain from a different trail, and a more difficult climb, coming out on the opposite shoulder with different views.

The walkers, arriving back earlier than the hikers, visited the Indian Village at Cape Mudge and also the very excellent museum of art and local artifacts.

Dinner on Wednesday at the Heriot Bay Inn, was a noisy success where we enjoyed a roast beef buffet on the covered sun deck.

We were greatly interested in watching a number of eagles on their roosting tree, in the garden of the Inn. They spent much of their time squawking and harassing each other off the tree, and swooping over our heads. Their numbers varied from three to more than a dozen. Being a great fishing area the eagles enjoyed free meals when fishermen cleaned their catches.

AUTUMN SONG

Sad the leaves of Autumn crackle
As footsteps tread discarded dreams.
Misty drifts the nightly dewfall
And slower now the river seems.

Rusty cat-tails wave and linger
Where once the duck adored her brood;
Busy squirrels hoard their gleanings
And moister ground yields robins' food.

Magic hazy days of Autumn
Turning stones to sparkling jewels,
As come the leaping silver salmon
On their way to upstream pools.

Rich is the scent of sun-warmed bracken
Where browning fronds replace the green,
And falling leaves in flurries skimming
Spread coloured carpets on the scene.

Murmuring throngs of starlings gather,
And oh! the fragrance of the day;
Mysterious poignant pangs of Autumn
Our deepest feelings stir, foreseeing
The beautiful in Winter's gray.

"Souris"