

## Wildlife service limiting Esquimalt Lagoon access



The Canadian Wildlife Service is implementing wildlife refuge areas in the Esquimalt Lagoon to protect bird life, but users such as rowers are concerned it's the first step toward banning all recreational use of the water.

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People could soon be restricted from sensitive bird habitat at Esquimalt Lagoon.

Following concerns from residents, Canadian Wildlife Services plans to designate wildlife refuge areas in the lagoon. The voluntary "no-go zones" could be in place anytime between early November and March 2010.

"In a very real sense the entire (lagoon) is a wildlife refuge area," said Blair Hammond, CWS B.C. ecosystem conservation manager. "Within it there are a few spots that are particularly important for migratory birds."

The move would restrict land and water access to the east and west ends of the lagoon, including the waterway entrance under the bridge. Areas at the north side, near Royal Roads University and the mouth of Colwood Creek are also included.

The move concerns members of West Shore Rowing and Paddling Centre, a non-profit organization that runs youth programs on the lagoon. The restrictions would further limit their training area, as well as impact lagoon visitors, said Brett Malcolm, centre manager. Popular places to wade and walk the shoreline would be off limits. A balance is needed between protecting the natural environment and allowing people to learn and enjoy the lagoon, Malcolm said.

"We are doing nothing illegal here. This is an area that has been designated by the Canadian government to be used by people as well as birds," he said. "We are just trying to hold on to what we have got. The fear is this is a step toward banning recreational use of this area."

The group voluntarily limited a course by 400 metres two years ago to avoid high-use bird areas, Malcolm said. Rowers now use a 1,500-metre course that would be further shortened by 200 metres. Most rowers train on a 2,000-metre course.

Before areas are restricted consultation with the broader public is needed, Malcolm said. "I think the main problem with this area is the traffic," he said. "It's within the migratory bird sanctuary."

CWS hasn't done formal studies on the impacts to birds in the lagoon, however, a study commissioned by Esquimalt Lagoon Stewardship Initiative highlighted instances over a two-month period in 2008. Bird counts on any given day ranged from 196 to 1,406 covering 39 species.

The majority of disturbances noted were caused by humans, with the majority of those caused by motorized and non-motorized boats. A disturbance is defined as anything that disrupts a bird's natural behaviour says the report by marine bird biologist James Clowater. Institutional boating, such as rowing, peaks during the school year, coinciding with migratory seasons, said Kitty Lloyd, ELSI co-ordinator.

"The area is used for breeding, but I think more importantly as a stopover habitat during migration," Hammond said.

Disturbed birds unnecessarily burn calories by temporarily flying away or by being in a state of "vigilance" so they are not foraging for food properly, Hammond explained.

"We have to make sure we are looking after the birds because they should be the highest priority," Lloyd said. "There should be a balance (between them and human use of the lagoon)."

The refuge areas are voluntary, Hammond said. There will be a way for people to report misuse of the space, but the hope is people will respect it as it is a federal migratory bird sanctuary, he said. The initial focus will be on education and voluntary compliance but it is possible the restriction could be regulated in the future.

"That is a long process that really we would rather not have to go through," he said.

A public meeting is scheduled for November, although a time and date has not been set yet.

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