
Stanley Park Heronry Monitoring Report 2006



The colony maintains similar nest and chick numbers as last year, expands its use of new trees, and experiences no observed Bald eagle attacks.

Prepared by:

STANLEY PARK
ECOLOGY SOCIETY

In Partnership With:



The 2006 heronry in 100 words

The Stanley Park Heronry was a success again this year, attracting thousands of admiring Vancouver residents and remaining a recognized destination for tourists, biologists, photographers, and reporters. In 2006 there were 178 active Great Blue Heron nests, similar to last years' 176. Nests were established in 24 trees and two new trees. At least 200-250 juvenile herons successfully left their nests. Although this colony has remained stable this year, nest numbers fluctuate from year to year and the activity of the 2007 heronry can't be predicted.

And a few more details

Despite being classified provincially as a "species at risk", the Great Blue Herons in Stanley Park continued to evolve as a symbol of Vancouver's diverse urban wildlife in 2006, growing in both number and the amount of attention they generated. The location of the heronry is in itself a perfect symbol of the City of Vancouver - situated on the border of forested park, busy coastline, and vibrant, extremely dense human development. The Stanley Park heronry is not only one of the best examples of urban wildlife in Vancouver or North America - it is among the best in the world.

In 2006, their sixth year at this location, the herons returned to the trees near the Park Board offices on Beach Avenue in record numbers, to establish one of the largest heronries ever recorded in Vancouver. The heronry was frequently featured on local and national radio, television and print articles.

The herons were both watchers and watched. They looked down from their nests on Vancouver residents playing tennis, out for a stroll, or on their way to work, while thousands of visitors and residents alike looked up in awe at the noisy, nesting birds. A few West End residents even have a "bird's eye view" from their apartment windows, and can observe the nesting activities of a species risk from the comfort of their patio or kitchen table.



Juvenile Heron Chicks

Photo courtesy of www.sciencerocks.ca

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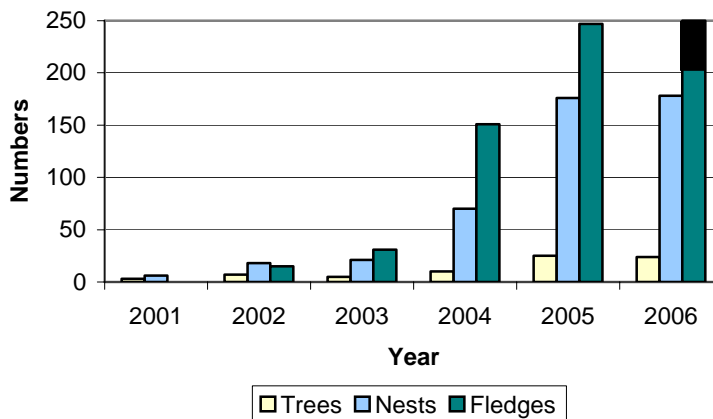
Great Blue Herons have a long history of nesting in Stanley Park, with written records of a heronry at Brockton Point going back to 1921, and continuing through the 1960s to 1990s at the site of the former Stanley Park Zoo. What started as a trickle in 2001 has in the last three years become a torrent, with the herons arriving at the park site en masse from 2004 to 2006.

Prior to 2004, records indicate an average of 20-30 active nests per year with 1979 standing out as a record-setting year with 38 successful nests and 91 fledglings (chicks successfully leaving the nest). These numbers are dwarfed by the counts of the last three years. The sudden growth in 2004 can perhaps be attributed to the abandonment of two Lower Mainland heronries, one in Vancouver and the other in Point Roberts. It is likely that the further growth in 2005 was the result of the same abandonment, with additional herons from the former nesting sites attracted to the apparently prime location of Stanley Park. Offspring from previous years may also be contributing to the population boom. The history and rapid growth of the heronry are illustrated in the accompanying graph and table.

Beach Avenue Heronry Trends

Year	Trees	Nests	Fledglings
2001	3	6	?
2002	7	18	15
2003	5	21	31
2004	10	70	151
2005	25	176	247
2006	24	178	200-250

SP Heronry Growth



Observations of note in 2006

- Courting herons were first observed on January 14, 2006 almost two weeks earlier than last year. The last of the approximately 200-250 juvenile herons to leave the heronry were observed leaving in early September 2006.
- The herons nested in 24 trees in 2006; two of these had not previously had nests. The new trees were in the area between the tennis courts. This area saw a large increase in the number of chicks as well. There were about 27 nests in these trees in 2006 compared with only 3 in 2005. It is thought however, that these chicks were not as successful as those in other areas of the colony; possibly because they were raised by younger parents (fledglings from 2004?). The herons selected Bigleaf Maples, Red Oak, London Plane, and Western Red Cedar trees to build nests in.
- Some of the nests used in 2005 were blown out during the winter months and were not available for birds returning in 2006. Some nests were also dismantled in 2006 and the sticks were used to build new nests.
- The addition of new fences around more of the trees in the heronry had a greater effect than the expected benefits of protecting the trees and people's heads. Although the herons were wary of the fences at first, they soon became used to them and took advantage of their location. They were observed collecting sticks that had fallen on the ground and were now protected from human foot traffic by the fencing. This new luxury of only traveling a short distance for sticks is certainly helpful to the birds, as each stick is passed to the female who weaves them one by one into the nest.
- Adult herons were spotted hunting for fish, crabs, and small marine life around the Park's coastline, False Creek, and Burrard Inlet. It is also possible that they ventured to the North Arm of the Fraser River and the shorelines of islets and beyond for additional food sources for their young.
- There were no documented Bald eagle attacks on the heronry in 2006, compared to eight last year. The attacks in 2005 were thought to have been carried out by the same pair of adult Bald eagles, who themselves have a nest on the other side of Lost Lagoon. In 2006 eagles were observed hanging around the heronry in the early part of the season which disturbed the new parents. However, later in the season an eagle was observed perching near the colony with no disturbance to the herons. One eagle attack on the heronry was reported in 2003 and no attacks were reported in 2004.
- There are six active Bald eagle nests in close range to the Stanley Park Heronry, four in Stanley Park, one in Vanier Park and the other near Jericho Park. (see www.stanleyparkecology.ca for *Nesting Bald Eagle in The City of Vancouver* reports for 2005). One theory suggests that herons deliberately

establish their nesting sites in the vicinity of nesting Bald eagles because the adult Bald eagles will chase “foreign” juvenile Bald eagles away from the area. An interesting inter-species relationship also occurs between the eagles, herons, and northwestern crows that also nest in the trees around the heronry. Flocks of crows were repeatedly observed mobbing any Bald eagles that approached the crows’ (and therefore the herons’) nests, harassing the eagles until they left the area.

- Over 30 dead heron chicks were collected from underneath the heronry in 2006 (similar to last year), having either fallen or been pushed from their nests by their siblings. Some chicks were transferred to wildlife rehabilitators after surviving falls from the nests. The juvenile herons that survived and fledged dispersed to local feeding grounds such as Lost Lagoon, Beaver Lake, the Stanley Park shoreline, Coal Harbour, False Creek, and the coastline from Jericho to Wreck Beach. Other herons likely moved to Ambleside Beach, the West Vancouver coastline, the inner area of Burrard Inlet, the Fraser River, Iona Beach and some of the islets and islands off the mainland.
- The herons are likely to return in late January or early February 2007 to begin the nesting process all over again. The females will select a mate, and then together they’ll either refurbish an existing nest or build a new one, lay and incubate eggs, and begin the arduous hunting and feeding process as their young grow and fledge.
- 2007 will be an interesting year for the Stanley Park Heronry. As the surviving fledglings from the 2005 season (the biggest to date) reach breeding age, they may return to their Stanley Park birthplace to nest. While the survival rate of juvenile herons is low, about 25-30 percent, a substantial increase in the number of nests in 2007 may suggest that the Lower Mainland has sufficient food sources to enable a higher proportion of juvenile heron chicks to survive their first year. It may also suggest that urban herons have adapted to city life so well that their survival rates are higher than those outside of urban areas.
- While the Great Blue Heron is known as a species that is easily disturbed by human activity, the urban herons of Stanley Park seem tolerant of the noise and bustle of the city. There were no records of herons abandoning their nests due to human activity, traffic, or organized events in and around Stanley Park. The herons did not abandon their nests in response to frequent fire engine or police car sirens either. The herons were monitored during the Celebration of Light Fireworks display, and while they were startled and scared by the explosions at first they did settle down after



Adult heron with day-old chicks

Photo Courtesy of www.sciencerocks.ca

5-10 minutes. One chick did fall out of the nest and died during the fireworks and one juvenile abandoned its nest but its fate is unknown. While the fireworks did cause the herons some disruption, there was no evidence to suggest this disturbance was anything more than a temporary one.

- While the birds may be familiar with regular background human activity they remain highly susceptible to unusual and unexpected disturbances that occur at their nesting site, particularly in April and May when the majority of the chicks are newly hatched and are at their most vulnerable.
- Stanley Park Ecology Society heron monitors volunteered more than 130 hours of their time monitoring the heronry in Stanley Park in 2006.
- Heronries don't last forever. Permanent abandonment is the final part of a heronry's cycle and may occur as a gradual decline or as a sudden absence after many years of successful habitation. The most common reasons for abandonment include repeated predation of the nests, loss of habitat due to guano-trophy (destruction of the nesting site due to bird feces), or human disturbance. The Stanley Park Ecology Society is committed to educating the public to ensure that human impacts are minimized and the heronry can be enjoyed for many years to come.

Recommendations

- Adopt the guidelines and recommendations outlined in the forthcoming Stanley Park Heronry Management Plan
- Spend some time using compasses to take bearings of departing and returning birds. This has been shown to give clear indications of the birds feeding grounds, as they usually travel in a straight line to and from the colony.
- Provide more opportunities for education at the heronry site.

Be Sure to Check out our Adopt-a-nest program for the 2007 season

- Details online at www.stanleyparkecolony.ca
- Contact nests@stanleyparkecolony.ca



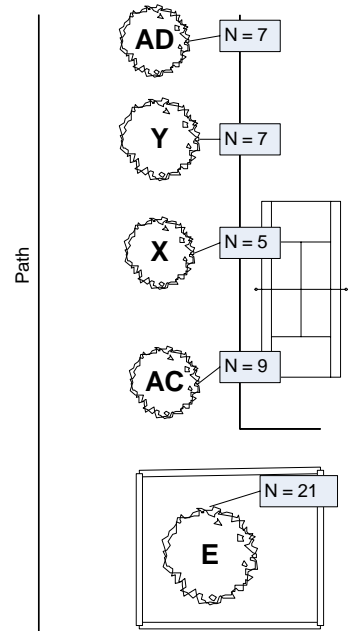
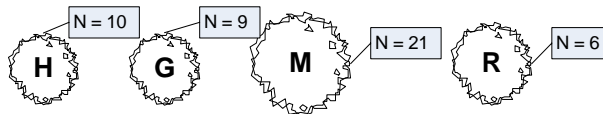
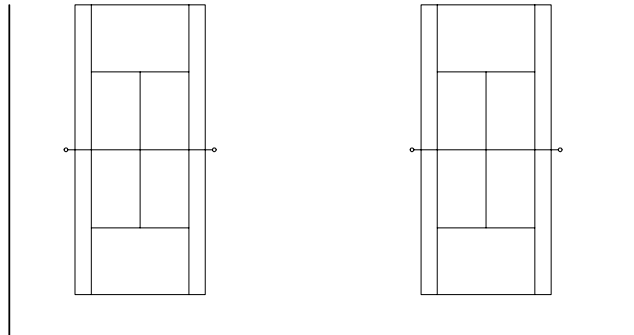
Steven D'Amato

Data in this report was collected by Dalyce Epp, Maria Morlin and Robert Boelens.

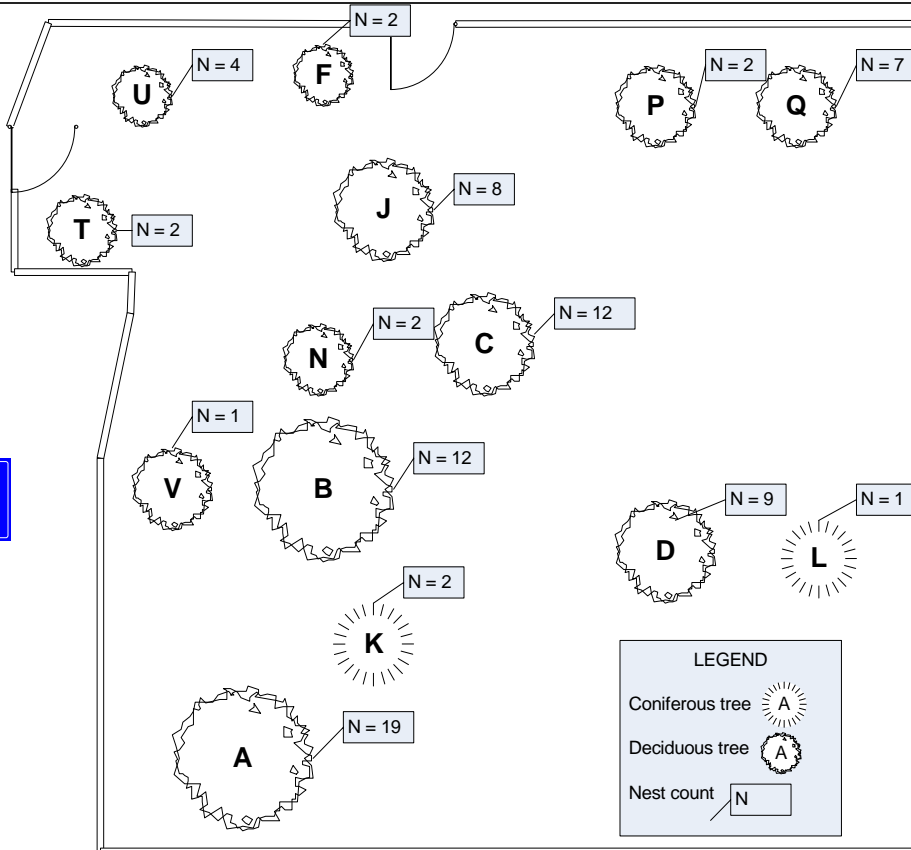
For further details or questions please contact Robyn Worcester at covotes@stanleyparkecolony.ca or 604 681 9453

STANLEY PARK HERONRY Nov 19/06

DIAGRAM NOT TO SCALE



Stanley Park Drive



Path

Nelson St tree →

LEGEND

- Coniferous tree A
- Deciduous tree A
- Nest count N