



October 2010

# Heron Habitat Helpers' HERALD

P.O. Box 99815, Seattle, WA 98139-0815

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SAVE THE DATE

NOVEMBER 3 • 6:00-8:00 PM

## Kiwanis Ravine Wildlife Sanctuary Celebration and Public Information Workshop

**Seattle Parks welcomes you** to celebrate the wildlife sanctuary status for Kiwanis Ravine. The combined celebration and public information workshop will be held at the Discovery Park Visitor Center. (3801 W Government Way)

The evening will be organized as an open house, with 5 to 6 visiting stations for the community to browse and informally get information on Kiwanis Ravine's new "wildlife sanctuary" status. Kiwanis Ravine is the first wildlife sanctuary to be established by Seattle Parks and Recreation Department under its new wildlife sanctuary policy. No formal presentation will occur during the evening.

Park staff is preparing a Habitat Advisory Plan (HAP) that it hopes to have completed by the end of the year. The HAP is envisioned as a way to provide management guidelines to protect the Kiwanis Ravine's Great Blue Heron colony, the largest in Seattle, with over 80 nests this year.

If you want to be involved in preparing the HAP or have questions, please contact the lead Park staffer, Barb DeCaro, at [barb.decaro@seattle.gov](mailto:barb.decaro@seattle.gov)

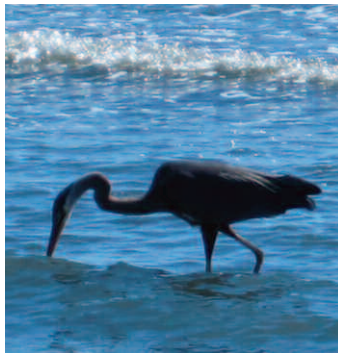
# A Season in the Life of a Heron Colony

By Kay Shoudy

Visitors to Seattle almost always head for the Locks in Ballard to watch ships and pleasure craft entering or departing Puget Sound, but few realize that just a few feet away hidden in a nearby ravine is a miniature wilderness, home to a large and thriving great blue heron colony. The Kiwanis Ravine, a city park in north Magnolia not far from Seattle's busy center, is a steep, forested valley mostly inaccessible to pedestrian foot traffic with a small stream known as Wolfe Creek. The great blue herons can be observed at several locations near the park, particularly early in the season when not hidden behind their leafy screen, flying in and out of their nests or foraging near the Locks. Observing the herons as they court, build their nests and raise their families is an unexpected delight in the middle of a large city, and a wonderful experience for people of all ages.

Great blue herons are found throughout Washington State but prefer river, wetlands and shorelines so the location of the Kiwanis Ravine Park near Puget Sound provides an ideal haven for this fascinating group of wild birds. Located high in an aging grove of alders and maples, the heron colony has persisted for many years in the midst of subdivisions, apartment construction, railroad and marine commerce, growing from 35 nests in 2001 to about 80 in 2009. Although it is not known why the herons form large colonies, these groupings may be defensive tactics as well as providing a large selection of breeding partners for normally solitary birds.

Nesting begins in February, and for many of their local fans, the return of the birds to the neighborhood is a big event. Large stick nests are constructed over 45-50' high in the trees, and seeing four-foot tall birds standing on them is quite amazing. The females may lay four to five eggs with incubation taking about 25-30 days. Both parents tend the eggs. After hatching, feeding is an intense activity also involving both parents, usually going on 24 hours a day, and very noisy. As many as four hatchlings have been known to survive but there is competition and some may be evicted from the nest.



By late summer, usually in August, the chicks have fledged and many can be seen searching for food in the tidelands and near the locks. Although they sometimes hang around the nest for several weeks, the parents refuse to feed them away from the nest. Although as large as their parents, they are far from being self-sufficient, and the mortality rate for young birds is high, only one in five fledglings surviving to become a breeding adult. Researchers believe this may be because the young birds have a difficult time learning to catch fish large enough to sustain them. After fledging, many young birds can be seen in Salmon bay.

Patient and skilled fisherman, these handsome, elegantly plumed birds easily can be seen standing on the shoreline or bulkheads. Strikingly colored, with an almost unblinking yellow eye, they wait for their prey with slight careful movements. Although they seem to prefer fish and crustaceans, they are opportunistic eaters and will hunt rodents, lizards, amphibians, insects and even small birds. In the winter, their diet includes more voles. They do not use their long bill as a spear, a more appropriate description would be barbecue tongs or chopsticks. Sometimes when they swallow a large fish they toss it into the air to get the fins lined up correctly and the fish can be seen disappearing down their long neck.

Nests high in the sky and isolation are the heron's greatest defense against predators but this means their most persistent predators are often other birds. A successful comeback of Bald Eagles in Seattle threatened all the heronries in 1999 with a 40% loss of nests and this is ongoing. Bald Eagles are also coping with increasingly limited foraging areas probably leading to the attacks on heron colonies. Observation by videocam has shown that herons who remain on their nests and exhibit threatening behavior are more likely to preserve their nests, but few adult herons will stick around and defend their nests in the face of a direct eagle attack, as they are likely to be prey as well. Crows, common urban birds in Seattle, also prey on the eggs when the parents are away from the nest.

*Continued on page 3*

## A Season in the Life of a Heron Colony (continued)

Growing populations in the heronry hopefully indicate that nature is finding a balance but the shrinking number of places available for the herons to establish new colonies may yet be their undoing. Other serious threats to the great blue herons include human intrusion, introduced invasive plants like English ivy and knot weed, and illegal dumping. Pollution, dredging and construction also damage potential habitats and eliminate precious feeding grounds, particularly eel grass, a primary food factory for herons.

During the breeding season the herons are extremely vulnerable to human activities and have been known to abandon their nests if disturbed. These are all things that are hard to control in a big growing city. The good news in Seattle is that many citizens and public agencies are working to protect the urban heronries. The City of Seattle has adopted regulations establishing zones around the colonies that limit development and clearing, particularly during the nesting season, and environmental organizations like Heron Habitat Helpers and others are working with the Seattle Park Department to restore the ravine.

Heron Habitat Helpers is a group of local volunteers and Magnolia neighbors who have been working in the ravine and monitoring impacts to the colony from nearby activities. Organized in 2001, HHH has actively sought grants and conducted work parties to clear, plant and stabilize steep slopes as well as seeking mitigation for development activities nearby. But much of the work can't be done by volunteers because of the steep, unstable slopes and thick vegetation in the ravines. The dangerous work is usually done by skilled organizations like Earth Corps, which costs money. A continuing commitment of manpower and money will be necessary if the great blue heron nesting colony is to be sustained and years of neglect and damage to the ravine repaired. Fortunately a city-wide Park Bond issue recently approved by the voters will allocate substantial new resources to Kiwanis Ravine.

Watching these huge birds fly above the city is a rare pleasure. With a 6-foot wingspan and hoarse croaking call, their flight is unforgettable, and can evoke fanciful images of prehistoric avians. Soaring on the lifting air over Magnolia bluff, they seem to be flying only because they enjoy it, and maybe they are. Assuring that these wonderful birds remain as urban neighbors will be both a labor of love and a serious challenge for the future.

# heronnews

By Pam Cahn

## Heron Report

The Kiwanis Ravine heron season continued well into September this year, with nightly feedings still heard mid-month. The colony grew to over 80 nests in the main colony and 8 nests in nearby Commodore Park. Quite a few late nests were built in April and May. First eggs were again destroyed this year by either eagles or crows and multiple nesting attempts were observed on many nests.

It was difficult to observe many nests again this season once the trees leafed out. Out of the visible sample of nests, at least 42 young herons survived to fledge. The two heroncams provided a great look into more nests within the colony this season until views were cut off by technical difficulties. Although many nests suffered early loss of eggs, the majority succeeded in fledgling at least one young from the nest.



MARLA MASTER

# New Boots on the Ground

By KC Dietz

**A**fter nine years, the business of managing restoration projects in the Kiwanis Ravine has shifted from HHH to the Seattle Parks Department, thanks to money from the 2008 Parks Green Space Levy. So far the transition has gone smoothly, from the perspective of the Restoration Committee. Brad Wakeman is still managing the Seattle Public Utility Aquatic Habitat Grants (AHG), which has focused on restoring the central part of the ravine, to improve natural flow of water, shore up unstable slopes, and plant native species that provide habitat for wildlife. The AHG work should be done by 2011. We are also consulting with Parks, thanks to Restoration Chair, Scott Luchessa. He is currently working with Rory Denovan (Parks) to provide a comprehensive list of plants and monitoring techniques specific to the ravine.

The Parks department, with help from private contractors, such as EarthCorps, is working on the edges of the ravine and deep in the ravine, primarily in areas that have not yet been touched by restoration hands. Most visible to the public is the work along the northern edge of the ravine, along the Burlington Northern Railroad tracks, in an area we call the Kiwanis Wildlife Corridor (KWC). This old street right of way was transferred to the Parks Department and has been undergoing a face lift to transform it from a plant association dominated by invasive species, including knotweed, ivy and blackberries, to a viable forest edge. Just this morning I was thrilled to experience a cacophony of sound from birds flitting around the tree cover at the northern most end. We worked so hard to plant all these native species, and they are thriving! Parks contractors and volunteer work parties, run by EarthCorps have cleaned out the expansive weeds from the summer, cleared new ground and are preparing the site for an influx of native trees and shrubs.

**The trail that leads from Gilman Ave West down to Commodore is cleared, so you can easily check out the progress for yourself!**



## **WANT TO GET INVOLVED?**

**Work Party at KRO  
Oct. 9 from 9 a.m. to noon.**

**There are second Saturday  
work parties at KRO  
November 13  
and December 11  
9 a.m. to noon.**

**It is not necessary to  
sign up in advance.**

# Green Seattle Day Work Party

**Saturday November 6 • 10am – 2pm.**

Volunteers will work with EarthCorps, the Green Seattle Partnership & Heron Habitat Helpers on November 6, 2010 (Green Seattle Day). The event is both a celebration of Seattle's urban forests and a chance to join us in our effort to restore the wildlife corridor adjacent to Kiwanis Ravine in Magnolia. At just 16 acres this Seattle Park space is home to Seattle's largest heron rookery with over 80 active nests. Volunteers will remove invasive plant species that are threatening the health of the forest, perform restoration site maintenance (weeding & mulching) and possibly plant native trees & shrubs. For more information on the Heron Habitat Helpers: <http://heronhelpers.org>

To sign up, folks should go to [www.earthcorps.org/volunteer.php](http://www.earthcorps.org/volunteer.php).

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## MISSION

To help Seattle enjoy, learn about, and protect its largest nesting colony of Great Blue Herons in Magnolia's Kiwanis Ravine Park.

### WEB

[www.heronhelpers.org](http://www.heronhelpers.org)

### EMAIL

[info@heronhelpers.org](mailto:info@heronhelpers.org)

### TO VOLUNTEER

[volunteer@heronhelpers.org](mailto:volunteer@heronhelpers.org)

## TO BECOME A MEMBER

Send your check for \$10/year to:

Heron Habitat Helpers • PO Box 99815, Seattle, WA 98139-0815

NAME

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MAILING ADDRESS

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E-MAIL

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PHONE NUMBER

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WOULD YOU LIKE TO VOLUNTEER?

YES

NO

IN WHAT CAPACITY?

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*Donations are welcome!*

## President's Corner

**W**ell, fall is upon us. Summer was rather mild this year. Watering at the Steven's property was a breeze. Last year the blazing sun burned out a bunch of new plants. This year we didn't lose anything. We still host the second Saturday small work parties each month to maintain the properties that we care about. The shed at Steven's has a new floor! Hooper and Mike spent a day putting down a new, treated plywood floor that makes a nice difference. Of course, now we realize that we need a light source in the shed, and the shed roof seems to be leaking. No big deal. Any owner of a home knows that there is always something that needs tending to.

Working with the City has its perks. The Seattle Parks Department is taking responsibility for maintaining all of Kiwanis Ravine Park. They are managing the restoration of the park, including some parts that we have not been able to get to in the past. So, they are contracting out the weeding, the planting, and the monitoring throughout the park. Part of that work is weed control. There are various patches of the invasive weed called Japanese Knotweed all around the park that need to be treated in order to control, and hopefully eradicate the weed. If you are a neighbor, you can help out by eliminating invasive weeds from your own yard. Japanese Knotweed is only one intruder. English Ivy is another. Weed control and monitoring are important topics in our Restoration Committee meetings.

### Summer Fundraiser

*By Mary Beth Dols*

It was a lovely July day for our summer fundraiser. A flock of heron-loving folks enjoyed snacks and drinks in the Atkins' backyard - while the chicks squawked and honked in the nests right above the party. Christine and Perry Atkins live right smack under the heronry and they generously offered their home for this HHH annual event.

**A success – guests donated \$2,200 to keep the heron-cam in the trees operating in the future!**

Our second main thrust for HHH comes through our Outreach Committee efforts. We are acting as stewards for Kiwanis Ravine Park because we care about the great blue herons living and nesting there. As a part of this care, we advocate for the herons and their environment with the city of Seattle and with the Parks Department. For example, a few years back, we got the Department of Development (DPD) to establish a 500' buffer zone around Kiwanis Ravine, as part of legislation called The Director's Rule, to help insulate the nesting herons from noise and other intrusions during the nesting season. As time has passed, we began to realize that the protections granted under the Director's Rule need to be strengthened and expanded. We are currently allied with other groups, such as the Seattle Urban Forest Coalition, in an effort to establish a citywide policy on maintaining our trees as an asset for and part of our infrastructure for the city of Seattle.

If any of this work interests you, please feel free to join us. Contact us at [Volunteer@heronhelpers.org](mailto:Volunteer@heronhelpers.org)  
*Keep your fingers crossed for an Indian Summer!*

**JOHN "HOOPER" HAVEKOTTE, President**

