

Skagit River Bald Eagle Interpretive Center



Visitors enjoy a guided hike along the Skagit River. Photo by A. Smith.

Final Report **Winter 2015-2016**

By Anissa Smith, Interpretive Center Coordinator
Submitted February 16, 2016

Acknowledgements

The staff and Board of the Skagit River Bald Eagle Awareness Team (SRBEAT) wish to acknowledge those individuals who contributed funds, time and effort to the vital functioning of the Interpretive Center (IC) this season. Thank you all for your commitment to our mission and for honoring the eagles in our midst. We could not fly without you.

Numerous donors generously provided the needed funds to operate the IC this season. Contributors included Puget Sound Energy Foundation, Cascadian Farm (General Mills), Skagit River Guide Services, Columbia Bank, Adventures NW, Skagit County, and City of Burlington. We also received significant donations from the visiting public; we greatly appreciate these wonderful votes of support for this work.

We also want to express our gratitude for the many contributions of our partners who make the functioning of our facility possible. Partners include Skagit County Parks and Recreation, United States Forest Service (Mount Baker and Darrington Ranger Districts of the Mt. Baker - Snoqualmie National Forest), North Cascades National Park Complex, Washington State Parks (Rockport State Park), Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group, US Department of Fish and Wildlife, North Cascades Institute, and the Concrete Chamber of Commerce.

Skagit County Parks and Recreation continue to provide us with a facility in Howard Miller Steelhead Park – the perfect location for our work. Park Rangers Rusty Regan and Kyle Peninger were critical to our operation with maintenance, courteous service, and other support.

The Mt. Baker - Snoqualmie National Forest staff support significantly enhanced our efforts. Forest Service staff expertise was integral to our educational programs - leading guided hikes and assisting with school programs. Eagle Watchers provided links to what was happening “in the field” for the IC. They promoted our programs to their visitors and worked toward our mission of helping people have a greater understanding of the Skagit River ecosystem.

Volunteers are the heart of our organization. The Board and other valued volunteers, including Ember LaBounty, Kira Hannum, and our student volunteer Jacob Hadaway donated time to staff the Interpretive Center. Ember LaBounty managed our Nature Store, a major undertaking to raise essential funds for SRBEAT's important mission. Board Treasurer and Sponsor Coordinator Judy Hemenway worked tirelessly behind the scenes and as a volunteer inside the IC this winter. Board President Cora Thomas volunteered her time in the IC and orchestrated a big media push to advertise the admirable mission of SRBEAT and the IC this season. IC Coordinator Anissa Smith focused her energy on providing a high quality educational experience for all visitors and students to enjoy.

Thank you to everyone who helped engage our visitors and teach about this special place. Steve Glenn, Tanya Kitterman, Kevin Ebi, Craig Romano, Pete Haase, Jon Riedel, Richard Brocksmith, and Terri Wilde gave public presentations for free. Guided hikes were led by USFS Field Ranger Matthew Rikken, USFS River Ranger Erica Keene, and IC Coordinator Anissa Smith. Craig Romano led a hike in conjunction with his presentation and Pete Haase conducted an interactive demonstration; both activities helped engage our visitors on a deeper level.

Executive Summary

The Skagit River Bald Eagle Interpretive Center, open since 1997, educates people about, generates appreciation for, and encourages restoration of the Skagit River ecosystem. To accomplish this mission, the Skagit River Bald Eagle Awareness Team (SRBEAT) opens the Interpretive Center (IC) in Rockport, Washington on weekends in December and January and continuously the week between Christmas and New Year's Day. SRBEAT also provides special programming during the week for schools and other community groups.

This season the IC welcomed school groups and visitors between November 28, 2015 and January 31, 2016. Of the 3,486 visitors that were counted, 1009 people voluntarily registered in the Guest Register. At the end of the season, our Guest Register showed that visitors came from 18 different states! Our Washington state visitors hailed from 15 counties and 91 cities. Visitors reported staying overnight in hotels and motels in Burlington, Mount Vernon, La Conner, Sedro-Woolley and Concrete. The IC experienced an increase of 658 visitors over the previous year.

The IC offered eight free, formal presentations for the public covering a variety of subjects from wildlife biology and ecology, glaciers and climate change, native plants and their importance in the riparian zone, importance of ecosystem restoration, and fisheries sustainability in the Skagit watershed. These formal presentations drew 186 visitors. Sixteen free guided hikes focused on eagles, salmon and their interconnected relationships within the Skagit River watershed. The guided hikes brought 539 participants into the Interpretive Center.

In January, 6 schools participated in educational programming offered by the IC. Two hundred and three children and staff members were treated to individualized programs that addressed curriculum standards and requirements in an outdoor, hands-on setting. Students engaged in interactive activities to reinforce the lesson plans. Our IC Coordinator was in charge of tailoring and presenting these programs. The overarching theme of each program was ecological relationships as seen through the lenses of migratory eagles and salmon in the Skagit. This year the IC piloted a collaborative educational program with Rockport State Park to enhance ecosystems studies for a class of 60 fifth grade students from Burlington. The US Forest Service also brought 282 students into the IC to use our resources to help teach students about eagles and salmon. A total of 485 students utilized the IC for educational purposes this winter.

Volunteers are the heart of our nonprofit. Our dedicated team volunteered 454 hours to the IC this winter! Outreach for volunteers takes place in the summer and a training session is held in November to ready volunteers for their 2-month stint at the IC. Currently SRBEAT is preparing to launch a campaign to obtain more volunteers for the 2016-2017 season.

Much effort goes into marketing the IC, its mission, and programs. We were fortunate to have 5 news articles run in 4 different publications this year. The Seattle Times ran 2 articles about the IC, The Concrete Herald made the IC their cover story for their January issue, and Cascadia Weekly and the Bellingham Herald also published news articles. Short press releases also ran in the Everett Herald's print edition as well as online. Our staff updated our website and Facebook page daily with current information. A list of our events was provided to the Concrete Chamber

to be advertised as part of the Skagit Eagle Festival. The Skagit Eagle Festival itself was widely publicized in local and Seattle newspapers.

The 2015-2016 eagle season has been a resounding success! Through valuable partnerships, a dedicated Board and volunteers, critical donors, and an engaged public audience, we are continuing to education people about, generate an appreciation for, and encourage restoration of the Skagit River ecosystem.



IC Coordinator, Anissa Smith, shows a visiting family the width of an eagle's wingspan. The kids show off their own. Photo by C. Thomas.



A youngster adds a feather to our Build-an-Eagle kid's activity, an effective introduction in discussing eagle facts along with our juvenile bald eagle model. Photo by C. Thomas.

Introduction

The Skagit River Bald Eagle Interpretive Center (IC) is an educational facility located in Rockport, Washington, which is supported by partners, sponsors, private donations, and the work of volunteers and staff. Oversight for the IC is provided by the Board of Directors of the Skagit River Bald Eagle Awareness Team (SRBEAT).

The primary mission of SRBEAT is to educate the public about, inspire an appreciation for, and encourage restoration of the unique and scenic Skagit River ecosystem. This is accomplished through a variety of program offerings and visitor information.

The most basic function of the IC is to provide visitors with information about eagles and safety issues when viewing eagles along the roadside. In addition, pamphlets, maps, books, and videos about safety, recreation, wildlife, and conservation among other topics are provided.

Board and Staff

Primary staffing for the IC comes from the SRBEAT Board. Board members and officers provide the majority of coverage to keep the IC open as well as manage the overall operation of the organization. Their admirable dedication is critical to the future of the IC.

For the 2015-2016 season, SRBEAT hired a new Coordinator for the IC to oversee the operation of the facility, programs, website, and social media. The Coordinator was hired the last week of November when the previous year's employee found full-time employment elsewhere. The hiring process was fast and short in order to facilitate continuity. SRBEAT looks for employees who have a background in environmental education, are strong communicators with an ability to make presentations, and who are able to guide a team of volunteers during a fast-paced season.

Partners and Sponsors

The IC is dependent upon the financial support of partners, sponsors, and grants. Partners also help to provide and donate tools and equipment, educational materials, and the facility. Over the past decade, the ties between these numerous agencies and the IC have been strengthened through a mutual desire to educate and inspire the public about the Skagit River watershed.

Partners

Skagit County Parks and Recreation
Puget Sound Energy
Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group
Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest
North Cascades National Park Complex
Washington State Parks
WA State Dept. of Fish and Wildlife
Concrete Chamber of Commerce
Skagit Kid Insider
Whatcom Kid Insider

Sponsors

Adventures NW Magazine
Puget Sound Energy Foundation
Cascadian Farm (General Mills)
Skagit River Guide Services
Columbia Bank

Corporate Sponsors

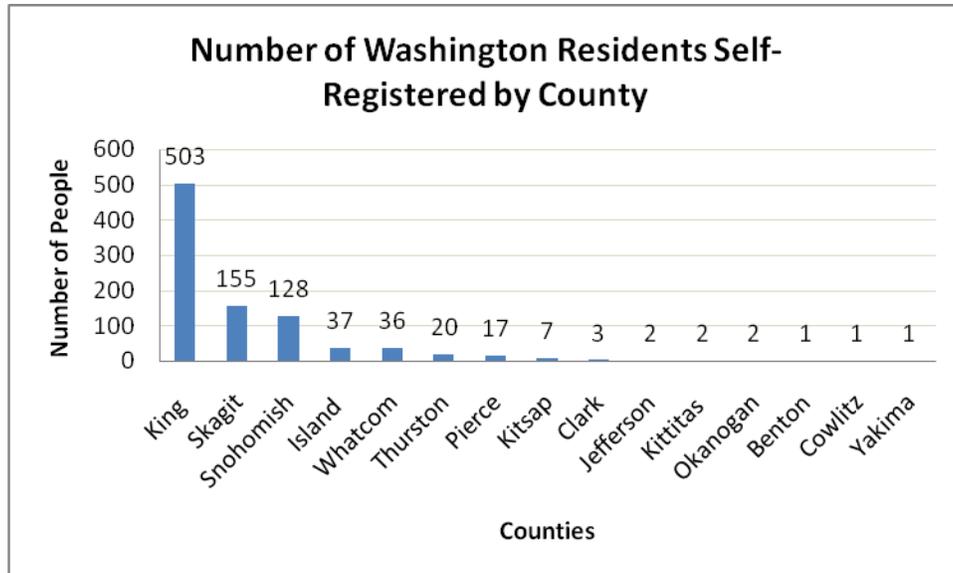
City of Burlington
Skagit County

Visitation

This season the IC was open to visitors weekends between December 5, 2014 and January 31, 2016 and daily December 26 through January 3. The IC was opened on specific days for school groups between November 28, 2015 and January 29, 2016. Visitors were tallied and asked to sign our guest register. The total number of visitors tallied for the season was 3,486 in 35 days.

Date	School Group or Public	# of Visitors
11/28/15	School Group	57
12/02/15	School Group	60
12/03/16	School Group	60
12/05/16	Public	100
12/06/16	Public	7
12/10/16	School	50
12/11/16	School Group & Public	64
12/12/16	Public	93
12/13/16	Public	15
12/16/16	Public	7
12/19/16	Public	41
12/20/16	Public	36
12/26/16	Public	114
12/27/16	Public	65
12/28/16	Public	21
12/29/16	Public	57
12/30/16	Public	34
12/31/16	Public	61
01/01/16	Public	84
01/02/16	Public	324
01/03/16	Public	124
01/07/16	School Group	23
01/09/16	Public	365
01/10/16	Public	185
01/12/16	School Group	13
01/15/16	School Group	26
01/16/16	Public	262
01/17/16	Public	125
01/21/16	School Group	70
01/22/16	School Group	46
01/23/16	Public	265
01/24/16	Public	215
01/29/16	School Group	29
01/30/16	Public	225
01/31/16	Public	163
School Program Attendance Total		485
Public Visitor Attendance Total		3,001
TOTAL		3,486

Of the 3,486 visitors, 1009, or nearly 29%, were registered in the Guest Register. Based on that information, Washington visitors came from 15 counties and 91 cities/towns. See chart, below.



Visitors also came from 18 states: Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Maine, Connecticut, North Carolina, Georgia, Ohio, Michigan, Montana, Illinois, Arkansas, Texas, Colorado, Arizona, Nevada, California, and Oregon. Canada, Germany, and Scotland were also represented.

Information and Education

Basic visitor interaction is a key function of the IC. Our staff and volunteers provide a professional and congenial environment that puts visitors at ease. We had many information requests each week. Generally, these consisted of inquiries about eagle viewing sites, program opportunities, and festival activities. The diverse offerings of all the partners throughout the season are significant to drawing people to the area and enhancing the visitor experience.

One of the key pieces of information we share with the public is the weekly eagle count provided by the US Forest Service and National Park Service. We posted the weekly eagle count at the IC, on our website, and on our Facebook page.

Speaker Series and Guided Walks

In addition to providing basic information about eagle watching, we posted a schedule of our speaker series at the Interpretive Center, on our website, and Facebook. We had 8 guest speakers who gave special presentations covering a variety of subjects from wildlife biology, glaciology and climate change, native plants' importance in the riparian zone, restoration efforts and importance on the Skagit, and forage fish sustainability in the Skagit watershed.

Guided walks were offered at 11:00am every Saturday and Sunday. The informational hikes take about 90 minutes and follow the Sauk-Skagit Reach trail in Howard Miller Steelhead Park.

USFS staff led 14 of these hikes and the IC Coordinator led 2 in conjunction with USFS staff. These hikes were well attended, well received, and have increased in popularity each year.

School Classes and Special Groups

Educational program opportunities were advertised on our website. The IC Coordinator conducted outreach to invite schools that have previously attended the IC as well as schools within the local communities of Sedro-Woolley, Bellingham, Darrington, and Concrete.

IC School Programs

Date	School Group	Grade Level	# Attendees
01/07/16	Zion Lutheran Elementary	Kindergarten	23
01/12/16	Mary Purcell Elementary	K - 3rd	13
01/15/16	St. Bernadette School	Fifth	26
01/21/16	Bayview Elementary	Fifth	70
01/22/16	Darrington Elementary	Kindergarten	46
01/29/16	The Valley School	Fifth	25
TOTAL			203

Nature Store

The Nature Store within the IC, managed by volunteer Ember LaBounty, features local artisans of the Skagit Valley and helps raise funds for SRBEAT. A popular fixture among our visitors, the Nature Store brought in approximately \$400 worth of funds for SRBEAT this season. Outreach to local artisans helps SRBEAT stock the Nature Store with unique goods and wares that allows visitors to share a connection with the Skagit Valley while supporting the local communities. Artisans benefit from free advertising of their items in our store and donate 25% or more of their profits to SRBEAT. Contributors include: Karen Bakke, John Burmaster, Laura Busby, Sue Coccia, Concrete Heritage Museum, Pat Doran, Kevin Ebi, Cynthia Mitchell, Helen Ovenell, Kelly Peacock, Steve Philbrick, Sharon Robbins, Adrienne Smith, John Scurlock, and Andrea Weiser.

In addition to the Nature Store, SRBEAT holds a Raffle to raise funds for the IC's operation. Three artists donated works of art and Skagit River Guide Services donated a guided raft trip for 2. Raffle tickets sell for \$1 each and all the proceeds go to SRBEAT. Local artist Bob Patterson donated a print of a scenic eagle painting of his to the Raffle this year. SRBEAT collected \$246 from our Raffle this season.

Marketing and Public Relations

SRBEAT benefitted from 2 articles that ran in the Seattle Times in early January 2016. In mid-December their journalist attended a guided hike and sat down with SRBEAT's President and the IC Coordinator. The article was equally promotional and educational, describing SRBEAT's mission and purpose while highlighting the important role the IC plays in the local community. The IC's website traffic greatly increased to 4x its normal use after the articles ran and visitorship increased noticeably. Both articles can be viewed online:

<http://www.seattletimes.com/life/travel/take-a-free-guided-hike-to-see-eagles-on-the-skagit-river/>

<http://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/hang-out-with-bald-eagles/>

The Concrete Herald ran an in-depth article on SRBEAT and the IC and used it as their cover story for their January issue. This article effectively illustrated to readers and potential supporters, sponsors, and volunteers SRBEAT's worthwhile mission. The IC was provided with several copies of the publication to distribute to the public.

Cascadia Weekly and the Bellingham Herald both ran articles about the IC that helped us spread the word about our work, events, and our mission.

http://www.cascadiaweekly.com/currents/eye_on_the_eagles

<http://www.bellinghamherald.com/entertainment/ent-columns-blogs/out-with-the-kids/article52154340.html>

Diverse digital media outreach was also a focus of the IC this year. The website and Facebook page the IC operates were updated and added to often in order to engage visitors. SRBEAT partnered with Skagit Kid Insider and Whatcom Kid Insider, two organizations that are respected and well-known hubs of information for families in and around Skagit and Whatcom County. Both organizations were responsible for helping advertise the IC by sharing Facebook posts created by Board members and IC staff.

Facebook posts included information accompanied by photos, videos, and links to news articles. According to Facebook's Insights tool, which allows SRBEAT to analyze outreach effectiveness, our posts engaged thousands of people. Over the course of 2 months, the IC's Facebook "likes" increased by over 300 people. The most popular Facebook post this season thanked the Seattle Times for their article recognizing the IC and contained a link to the article. That post alone reached 16,881 people and garnered 231 views of the article by potential visitors, sponsors, and volunteers. Skagit Kid Insider reported that their ads for the IC did 2.5x better than other "good advertisers" that they represent and that they assisted us in reaching 139,396 potential visitors. Visitors commonly reported to staff and volunteers how digital media played an important role in their decision to visit the IC. Due to the success of our digital media focus this season, SRBEAT's President plans to continue that effort next season to build upon this year's success.

Opportunities for Future Years

As always, the SRBEAT activities are limited by funding. Growth in funding would provide needed resources for increased learning opportunities. Possible suggestions for growth include increasing the season the IC is open, providing more program days in the open season, adding professional staff to develop and implement programs, including an expanded volunteer program, developing a new program series for a specific audience, supporting expanded fundraising efforts, enhancing marketing materials and efforts, enhancing online and social media for more learning experiences, and offering new interpretive displays, materials, and information.

It is essential that Board members and IC staff continue to solicit school groups, develop children's activities and presentations, update the website and media contacts, and seek educators willing to participate in our speaker series months before the IC is open to the public. School contacts need to be made in early September. Presenters should be contacted at least 6 months in advance of their talks. Other aspects of the Interpretive Center's operation are impacted by the short season.

Appropriate equipment is needed to provide presentations for the public and for maintaining records, updating the website, and many other tasks. The IC could benefit from a backup lightbulb for the digital projector, a wall-mounted pull-down projector screen, and a speaker-system to help project the audio portion of our formal presentations.

In addition, some facility upgrades would enhance the IC's accessibility to all people. The building is situated on a steep hill and is not easily accessible to people with mobility issues. The carport at the top of the hill has a low ceiling so it is not possible to park buses or other vehicles (that carry wheelchairs or other mobility compromised people) closer to the IC. A solution to provide access would be preferable. Parking signs for the IC were added this year to help direct the great amount of traffic that fills the parking lot. The signage was effective at directing folks to the IC and reserved parking for our visitors.

A plan for the future should be developed that includes stakeholder input. Scheduling pre- and post-season meetings with partners could improve our public service. Pre-season meetings allow us to set goals and figure out a path to move forward in our partnerships, while a post-season debrief can help us recognize successes and pinpoint areas we want to improve upon next year. Additional planning tools, including steps toward a 5-year strategic plan could be beneficial.

Outreach for volunteers needs to improve in order to better support the IC in the future. While our dedicated team of volunteers is excellent, more people are needed to help ease the number of hours we ask of our volunteers. SRBEAT needs to continue work on a student volunteer program. Outreach was done with North Cascades Institute and Concrete High School this year, but could be more successful with a better developed plan.

The opportunities for organizational growth in programming are wide open. With focus and planning, the organization can develop next steps and seek out funders to support appropriate growth for the future.



The IC's new sign from Skagit County Parks and Recreation. From L to R: Skagit County Park Ranger, Kyle Peninger; Board Member, Leatha Sullivan; Volunteer, Ember LaBounty; IC Coordinator, Anissa Smith; Board President, Cora Thomas; Board Treasurer, Judy Hemenway.