

**THE SALISH SEA ECOSYSTEM:  
STATUS AND IMPACTS OF CHANGES ON MARINE BIRDS**



**Symposium Editors: Scott Hatch and Guest Editors Douglas F. Bertram,  
John L. Bower, and Patrick D. O'Hara**

## FOREWORD TO SYMPOSIUM

# TWENTY YEARS ON: ADVANCES IN ECOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF GLOBALLY IMPORTANT BIRDS IN THE STRAIT OF GEORGIA, BRITISH COLUMBIA, AND PUGET SOUND, WASHINGTON

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Anyone familiar with the geography of North America knows the inland sea between Vancouver Island and mainland British Columbia and extending into Washington State as the Strait of Georgia and Puget Sound. The proceedings that follow refer to this region as the “Salish Sea.” The papers are from a symposium on marine birds and their ecosystems presented at the 2008 annual meeting of the Pacific Seabird Group, held in Blaine, Washington. These proceedings update and add important data to a proceedings on the ecology and status of birds in the Strait of Georgia published twenty years ago (Vermeer and Butler 1989). The choice of “Salish Sea” in the title of the symposium underscores the ecological commonality of a region divided by a political border and reflects a desire for collaboration across the border for a common purpose.

The Salish Sea is one of North America’s important bird places. Species from North, Central, and South America and Asia spend part of their year in the Salish Sea (Butler and Vermeer 1989). In the two decades since Vermeer and Butler’s (1989) symposium, the Salish Sea has become recognized as an ecosystem supporting globally important bird populations. Most of the bird habitats recommended for protection by Butler and Vermeer (1989) have been designated as important or are now given varying levels of protection. For example, the Fraser River Delta was designated a “Hemisphere Site” under the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network; an Important Bird Area with globally, internationally, and nationally important populations; and a provincial Wildlife Management Area. In Washington, Puget Sound is included in the National Estuary Program. Not yet formally included, but being considered as a National Marine Conservation Area by Parks Canada, are the waters of the southern Gulf Islands.

A feature of the 1989 symposium was the paucity of data on population trends and ecological linkages. These data are vital to measure conservation efforts. Three papers in the current symposium—by Anderson and others, by Golumbia and others, and by Bower—provide important analyses of changes to historical numbers of waterbirds. Non-government organizations have a role to play here in seeking funding and conducting monitoring programs. The Coastal Waterbird Survey coordinated by Bird Studies Canada (BSC) is an example of an NGO is coordinating a count of waterbirds by citizens and generating credible trend data.

NGOs are now sharing common survey protocols across the region: for example, BSC and Seattle Audubon on Coastal Waterbird Surveys, and the Coastal Observation and Seabird Survey Team (COASST) and BSC on Beached Bird Surveys (as reported by Hamel and others in the current symposium), both being examples of transboundary collaboration. We also require funding for multi-year studies of ecological linkages such as the relationship between the abundance of seabirds, fish, seals and fisheries, so that we can interpret population trend data. Academia and the NGO community can assist government agencies in this regard if long-term funding commitments are available.

Another feature that became evident in the preparation of the 1989 symposium was the isolation of research conducted in Canada and the United States. The Georgia Basin/Puget Sound Action Plan and the Georgia Basin/Puget Sound Ecosystem Initiative that winds down this year partly rectified this issue. There is now high level cooperation within governments to implement research findings, but ongoing funding will be required to see implementation succeed. The Salish Sea will continue to experience ecological changes brought on by an expanding human population around its shores. This situation is not unique to the region. In many parts of the world, humans need to learn how to manage important ecological areas that are also centers for human endeavor. The shared international responsibility of the Salish Sea ecosystem and its globally important resources provides a prime opportunity to learn how two countries can cooperate for a common purpose.

## REFERENCES

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