



Danny Miller/The Daily Astorian

Cormorants rest below the Astoria Bridge.

Cormorants: Droppings are very corrosive, reducing life span of steel coating

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dozen pairs in 2004 to around 1,700 pairs last year, according to monitoring reports cited by the Oregon Department of Transportation.

The leaps coincide with the beginning of lethal management of a massive double-crested cormorant colony on East Sand Island. The birds abandoned the island several times after the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began shooting thousands of adult birds and destroying nests and eggs in 2015 to protect runs of young salmon.

The Audubon Society of Portland called a mass exodus in 2017 a “catastrophic collapse.”

Fish and wildlife researchers have since questioned the value of cormorant management in saving salmon. They say it was clear after each dispersal that cormorants were resettling on the bridge and farther upriver — areas where they could potentially impact even more salmon.

Cormorant droppings have accumulated on the bridge in layers so thick they have made it difficult for state inspectors to evaluate the structure. The droppings are also very corrosive, reducing the life span of the bridge’s protective steel coating.

“The potential expense we’re facing is a real worry to us,” said Department of Transportation spokesman Lou Torres.

Costly painting

The state repaints the Astoria

Bridge every 20 years, a lengthy but necessary maintenance that has shut down lanes during busy summer months.

Work on the span only just concluded in 2018 and more work is planned in 2021 on the under truss, where many of the cormorants appear to nest.

“We’re really trying to get prepared for that,” Torres said.

He estimates it could cost around \$80,000 to pressure-wash the bridge to complete required inspections. But that cost could quickly increase to \$6 million if environmental agencies require the state to set up containment structures during pressure washing so bird waste does not simply get pushed into the Columbia River.

If cormorants continue to nest on the bridge in such high numbers, the state may also have to paint the bridge more often, every 15 years as opposed to every 20.

Under that scenario, Torres said, “We’re not going to have a lot of years where we’re not painting.”

Either way, the Department of Transportation is weighing its options as 2021 approaches. The department anticipates it will need to begin a hazing program to dissuade cormorants from nesting on the bridge. How to remove them is still an open question.

Several years ago, the state hired a company that set up noise cannons on the Interstate 5 Columbia River Bridge in Portland to disturb thousands of starlings

that had colonized the bridge and whose accumulated droppings on the bridge, catwalks and roadways posed health and safety hazards.

The Army Corps does not link the movement of double-crested cormorants farther upriver to management actions on East Sand Island. The agency blamed attacks by eagles for the birds’ departures in 2016 and 2017.

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Lou Torres | Department of Transportation spokesman

Army Corps spokesman Jeff Henon suggested the birds may not have nested in large numbers on the bridge before because of the billowing containment structures that were around in 2014 during painting and maintenance. When the state moved on to other portions of the bridge and the containment structures were no longer necessary, the birds moved in.

But Torres noted that the bulk of that work was not in areas where birds usually nested and, besides, the number of nesting birds on the bridge during the spring and summer climbed steadily between 2012 and 2018.

“The numbers tell the story there,” he said.

The Army Corps did not shoot any adult birds last year, but did destroy eggs. This year, the agency plans to modify the island’s terrain, creating intertidal wetlands and further reducing nesting habitat to keep double-crested cormorants at the lower levels identified in a federal management plan.

But it’s not as though the cormorants’ relocation onto the Astoria Bridge and deeper into the estuary should have been a surprise.

Studies funded by the Army Corps before management of the cormorants even began indicated it was likely some of the birds would move into the estuary if they were hazed off East Sand Island.

Feasting on salmon

Though further investigation is needed, available evidence suggests the cormorants that have been nesting upriver only recently immigrated from somewhere else — their most likely origin being East Sand Island, said James Lawonn, avian predation biologist with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Past research on Caspian terns, also seasonal inhabitants of East Sand Island managed by the Army Corps, indicates birds that nest farther up in the estuary eat even more salmon than those nesting near the river’s mouth, where more types of food are available. It’s possible cormorants that nest upriver could eat three times more young salmon.

Now the state and other partners are looking into the impact of new cormorant colonies in the estuary on the survival of young salmon.

To Lawonn, how many cormorants are using the Astoria Bridge is a major piece of the puzzle.

One evening at the end of March, Lawonn set up a scope near the Port of Astoria’s West Mooring Basin near the bridge.

He wasn’t sure how many cormorants he would even see. It was still early in the season.

Double-crested cormorants appear inclined to return to nesting grounds where they have experienced success, but they also aren’t afraid to quest elsewhere for better options if they are running into trouble.

He wondered if birds that found safe and suitable nesting on the bridge would choose it first over East Sand Island, bypassing habitat where they had been hazed and shot at by humans and harried by eagles for the past several years.

The Army Corps will not begin monitoring East Sand Island for double-crested cormorants and nesting activity until the end of April or beginning of May.

Even as Lawonn trained his scope down the bridge’s length, the dark, snaking forms of cormorants on support structures at the base of the bridge caught the sinking sunlight and gleamed.

Lawonn counted over 650 double-crested cormorants that evening. A few days later, he counted 943.

Housing: Most units will rent below market rates

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“This has been a project I’ve been excited about since I got the job because I knew Innovative Housing was the organization that could handle this,” Heath said.

The nonprofit has secured the services of an architect and the first steps to renovate the building include dealing with pigeon droppings and window repairs.

These steps, “while not glamorous, are super important,” Heath said, adding, “Look for noticeable repairs to start in the late fall, early winter.”

“We do have plans to open the building for a couple of tours to let people know what’s going on,” she said, “since we are looking at some preservation and community space needs we’ll have to fundraise for.”

City Councilor Joan Herman, in a Facebook post announcing the news over the weekend, said, “Most of the units will rent for well below market rates, which as we all know are not affordable for those on whom the tourism industry depends: service workers.”

Innovative Housing partnered with the Lower Columbia Hispanic Council, Clatsop Community Action and Clatsop Economic Development Resources to secure the state funding.

They plan to partner with Clat-



The old Waldorf Hotel next to Astoria City Hall will likely become about 40 units of affordable and workforce housing.

Danny Miller
The Daily Astorian

sop Community College’s historic preservation program and Tongue Point Job Corps Center for work on the Waldorf, also known as the Merwyn Hotel, Garver said. There will also be a partnership with the city to provide a job shadowing program to future residents.

Garver is grateful to the project’s many partners, especially Heath and the downtown association, she said.

“Over the weekend we were talking about how the project first came to be and it was really the connections that were made for us by (Heath),” Garver said. “She knew about Innovative Housing and some of the work we’d done on historic buildings in Portland and of course she knew about the (Waldorf) ... She did that matchmaking.”

The project appeared to hit a

setback last year when the state rejected an application for funds, finding there was not a need for affordable housing in Astoria. The announcement shocked residents and city leaders. Lack of affordable housing and an overall housing crunch have been major public-policy issues in recent years.

Innovative Housing planned to reapply this year. However, the funds the nonprofit just received are from a different housing fund program, City Manager Brett Estes said.

Garver and others still plan to work with the state to clarify and create criteria for housing funding.

“There were communities all over the state that were economic drivers,” Garver said. “They had jobs but they didn’t have places for workers to live.”

Benitez: ‘I always wanted to come to the United States and get my education’

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Before the camp, she wanted to be a chef, but she said the experience changed her track in life and showed her what she really wanted to do.

When Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico in 2017, family flocked to Benitez’s house, which sustained minimal damage and kept power through a generator. But after the storm, Benitez said, she was left to care for much of her family.

After she missed months of her senior year of classes, Benitez learned it would take an extra year to graduate. Instead, she reached out to her great-aunt, Norma Hernandez, of Astoria, about coming to the North Coast, where she had been visiting since 9, to finish school.

“I always wanted to come to the United States and get my education here,” she said. “That was my dream.”

It was hard leaving her parents, Benitez said, but they were on board with her aspirations. She arrived in early January 2018 and began classes at Astoria High School while still learning English. Within five months, she finished her senior year and graduated with the Class of 2018,

transferring to Clatsop Community College.

Amy Magnussen, Benitez’s counselor through the college preparatory Talent Search program, told her about the Summer Health Professions Education Program, which accepts 80 college freshmen and sophomores nationwide for an intensive six weeks of classes, clinical rotations and professional development.

“I think both her personal experiences and goals aligned really well with the opportunity,” Magnussen said.

Benitez reached out to her educators on the North Coast for references, including Lynn Jackson, the Astoria High School principal, who lauded her “determination and resiliency to overcome catastrophic circumstances” in writing her a recommendation.

After her internship, Benitez will return to Astoria, where she hopes to graduate from the college in 2020 before studying public health at Pacific University. Isn’t quite sure where she will end up and whether she’ll go into physical or occupational therapy.

“I do want to go back to Puerto Rico and see how my skills and my knowledge ... can help there,” she said.