Stoney Creek Trail Report
No. 82 - January 2026

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The **adult bald eagle** on the front page was perched in a bigleaf maple upstream from Bridge 5. Trail visitors have commented many times on the numbers of eagles they've seen along the trail this month. I was lucky to photograph this one on the 16th, as the salmon run—which brought the eagles here in the first place—was pretty well finished. There's more about these regal birds on the following pages.

Note: Michael Seear from the Hancock Wildlife Foundation will speak about Bald Eagles and their tagging program at the Abbotsford Mission Nature Club meeting on **March 11th at 7:30 pm** at the **Ravine Park Hatchery**, 2395 Crescent Way.

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First, a retrospective, a mid-winter reminder of the pleasant walking conditions we can look forward to in a few months.

These photos contrast the appearance of the trail this winter with that of the same location in summer a few years ago.

The top two were taken near Bateman Road at the north end of the trail.

The bottom two were taken at the very south end, in the Latimer Street walkway.

Visiting Big Birds: 1/4

The bird in this photo is a **juvenile bald eagle**. It was photographed by local educator **Quirien Mulder**. Juveniles lack the familiar white head and tail and are mostly mottled dark brown. Their bill and eyes are dark rather than bright yellow. This immature plumage lasts four to five years.

The bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) is one of the most iconic birds of British Columbia. It is widespread throughout the province, particularly around the Salish Sea, Haida Gwaii, and the Fraser River watershed.

Bald eagles are powerful birds, with a wingspan that can exceed two metres. Their massive, hooked bill is adapted for tearing flesh. Their diet is predominantly fish, but they also take waterfowl, small mammals, and carrion. They will readily scavenge and often steal prey from other birds, especially ospreys. There have been rare reports in British Columbia of eagles carrying off very small pets. During salmon runs in fall and early winter, eagles gather in large numbers along rivers to feed on spawned-out salmon—an impressive and well-known sight in the province.

Once severely reduced by habitat loss, persecution, and DDT contamination, bald eagles have made a strong recovery following conservation measures and are now common across much of their former range. The media have noted the species' remarkable comeback. In the 1960s, naturalists could only find three nesting pairs in the entire Fraser Valley; today there are 400 to 500 nesting pairs in the region.

Every winter, the Fraser River and its tributaries host one of the largest concentrations of bald eagles in the world. Local newspapers regularly cover this event, and in 2010 it was reported that biologist David Hancock counted more than 7,000 eagles along a four-kilometre stretch of the Harrison River. Harrison Mills, located at the confluence of the

Visiting Big Birds: 2/4

Harrison and Fraser rivers, is often referred to as the “Bald Eagle Capital of the World.”

Some eagles are local, while others fly great distances from northern British Columbia to escape freezing lakes where fish are inaccessible. Their gathering is synchronized with the spawning cycles of Pacific salmon. They primarily scavenge the carcasses of spawned-out salmon. They begin arriving in late October, with numbers peaking between mid-November and late December. Most eagles depart by February to return to their northern breeding grounds.

The best viewing is in the Harrison Mills area (about 20 minutes west of Harrison Hot Springs), where you can visit the Sandpiper Resort and Rowena’s Inn. Eagle Point Community Park is also a popular public spot for observing eagles perched in trees along the river. The Kilby Historic Site offers excellent shoreline views and often hosts educational events during the season. Operators in Harrison Hot Springs offer jet-boat tours during the peak months, allowing visitors to see the massive clusters of eagles on the Sts’ailes (Chehalis) Flats, which is inaccessible on foot.

Bald eagles generally mate for life. They prefer habitats near rivers, lakes, estuaries, and coastal areas where tall, mature stands of trees provide nesting and roosting sites. They build enormous stick nests—among the largest of any bird—which are often reused and added to year after year.

Bald eagles are long-lived birds, commonly reaching 20 years of age, some even longer. Survival is toughest during their first year of life, when many juveniles succumb to starvation, accidents, or harsh weather. Young eagles spend several years wandering widely before settling into a breeding territory of their own.

Visiting Big Birds: 3/4

The flight of eagles is one of their most impressive features. They are masters of soaring, using rising warm air to glide effortlessly for long distances. In spite of their size and fierce look, eagles' calls are surprisingly thin and high-pitched, like a series of whistles or chirps.

When hunting for live fish, they usually snatch the prey from the water's surface rather than diving as ospreys do. Much of their success comes from patience and timing rather than speed.

For Indigenous Peoples of the Pacific Northwest, the bald eagle holds deep cultural and spiritual significance. They are symbols of strength, leadership, and the connection between the human and spirit world. Eagle feathers are sacred and traditionally used in ceremonies, and their possession is carefully regulated out of respect for these traditions. Although they are the national bird of the United States, the eagles' range extends well into Canada where they are also protected by law.

When bald eagles seriously declined in the US in the mid 20th century due to DDT, shooting and poisoning, the Canadian eagle population acted as a biological reservoir. Eagles from the large healthy watersheds in BC and Alaska spread south to repopulate Washington and other northwestern states. Parks Canada considers the bald eagle a vital indicator of ecosystem health. Because these birds are apex predators (at the top of the food chain), a thriving eagle population suggests that the entire local environment—including the water, fish, and smaller birds—is also healthy.

While bald eagles have made a remarkable recovery, they still face threats. Lead poisoning from ammunition and fishing gear remains a serious concern, as do collisions with vehicles and power lines. Continued care of our rivers and forests will help ensure that these remarkable birds remain a familiar sight in our neighbourhood.

Visiting Big Birds: 4/4

Continuing on the topic of avian visitors, here is another fine photo by Mulder of a common merganser (*Mergus merganser*) in the pool near Bridge 1. The merganser is a large duck found in lakes and rivers across North America. Unlike dabbling ducks such as the mallard, which have flat bills for straining edible plant matter from the water, mergansers are diving, fish-eating ducks. Seeing a merganser on Stoney Creek is an indicator of good water quality, as these birds rely on clear water to see and catch fish. Their eyes are protected by a membrane for underwater vision, and they have long, slender bills with serrated edges—well suited for catching small, slippery prey such as sculpins, sticklebacks, trout, and juvenile salmon that live in the pool.

Mergansers are hardy birds, able to overwinter in surprisingly cold climates, and migrate only short distances—generally just far enough to find ice-free water. They normally begin breeding in the forests of northern Canada in late March, with the season ending by early August.

The white patch on its chin distinguishes this bird as a female. A female merganser typically nests in a cavity well above ground, often in a tree hollow originally excavated by a woodpecker. This means the tiny ducklings must make a literal leap of faith when they follow their mother down to water for the first time. Another interesting behavior of mergansers is that broods sometimes merge, resulting in a single female effectively running a “daycare.”

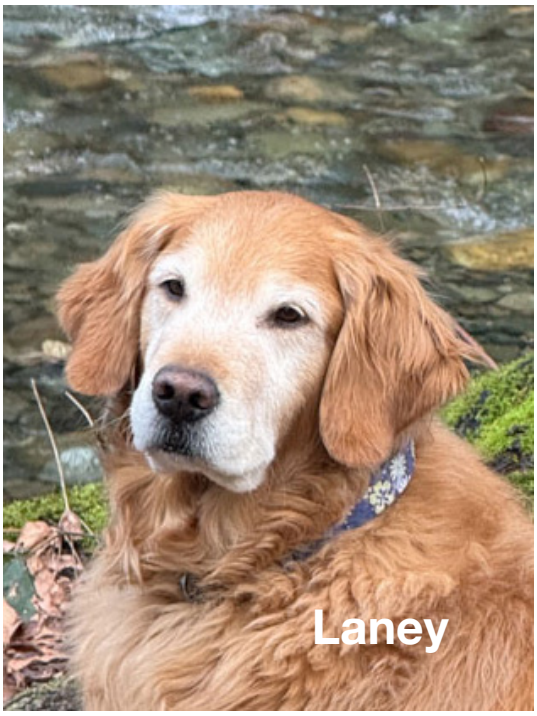
Mergansers—especially females—are known for vocal outbursts that contrast sharply with the generally quiet nature of most ducks. Their calls are raspy, barking, or laughing sounds that carry a surprising distance and are most often heard when the bird is alarmed or communicating with ducklings.

Stoney Creek is a good place for a merganser to hunt, but when it decides to leave, it may face a challenge. Unlike mallards, mergansers cannot spring straight up from the water. Instead, they must run across the surface to gain speed before taking off. Once in the air, however, they are powerful flyers, normally cruising at speeds over 50 km/h.

Trail Dog

Laney is a 7-year-old golden retriever with a gentle nature and a big heart. She joined our family after a referral from a friend and made the trip over from Nanaimo.

From the start, Laney has been an easygoing and affectionate companion. She loves spending time at the park, especially chasing sticks—though interestingly, she has no interest in chasing balls. Laney also adores kids, enjoys being brushed, and is always happy to hop into the car for a ride.



One of her most endearing traits is how quiet she is: she doesn't bark or whine at all. When she wants something, she simply sits on the edge of her sleeping mat and patiently stares until she gets noticed.

If you ever meet Laney, don't be surprised if she quickly figures out which pocket you keep your treats in—she's very observant that way. Calm, loving, and full of personality, Laney has truly made herself at home and brings a lot of joy to everyone she meets.

Edited with help from ChatGPT

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The Jelly Rot, a Welcome Park Resident.

Originally named *Merulius tremellosus* by a German botanist in 1794, this wood-rot fungus is commonly called **Jelly Rot** or **Trembling Crust**. In 1984, for reasons known only to mycologists (fungi scientists), it was renamed *Phlebia tremellosa*. Its form is that of bracket or shelf fungi which have characteristic shelflike fruiting bodies that grow on trees. The Latin name "*tremellosa*" means trembling, describing its wobbly, jelly-like consistency when touched. *Phlebia tremellosa* is usually found growing on the stumps, fallen branches, and logs of both hardwoods and conifers on every continent. This one is in plain sight on a cedar stump near Bridge 5.

You can see in the photo what it looks like but I'll describe it anyway. The body is a fan-shaped, stalkless, spreading cap measuring 2–4 cm wide and at least twice that long. The upper surface is pale yellow in colour and dry, even though it looks moist. The margin (edge) is usually translucent white. Its texture is soft, rubbery, and gelatinous when fresh, becoming hard and brittle when old. The undersurface, where spore formation takes place, features radiating, wrinkled ridges and veins. Its spore print is white. (Spore prints are used to identify mushrooms, like fingerprints are for people).

While not known to be toxic, it is generally regarded as inedible. Its thin, rubbery texture makes it unappealing for culinary use. In Europe, it is nicknamed "Bacon-Pork Rind Mushroom" due to its appearance, not its flavour or suitability for eating.

When a fungus starts making spores, we say it fruits. The *Phlebia tremellosa* usually fruits in autumn and early winter, though it can persist through winter in warmer climates such as ours. Often found in shaded, damp woodlands, its presence can signal healthy, mature forest conditions. Because it is sensitive to disturbance, it may be used as a living indicator of the health of the environment.

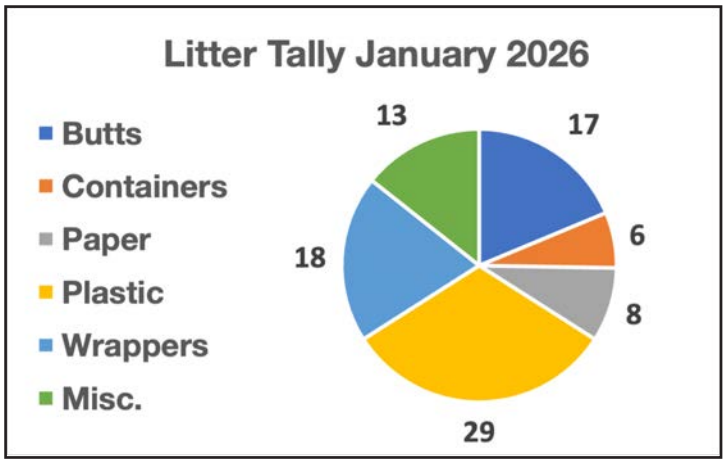
Phlebia tremellosa is very significant, ecologically. It feeds on dead organic matter and can break down lignin and cellulose, converting dead wood into humus, thus enriching forest soil and enabling other organisms to access nutrients otherwise unavailable to them. It benefits fauna as well, as it softens and hollows out logs and stumps, creating microhabitats for insects and small mammals. In short, *Phlebia tremellosa* is a quiet but powerful force in forest ecosystems—a recycler, a habitat builder, and a soil enhancer. If you're trying to determine forest health or biodiversity in Abbotsford or nearby areas, spotting this fungus is a good sign of ecological balance.

Odds & Ends 1/2

1, 2. The **late oyster** (*Sarcomyxa serotina*) mushroom (cap and gills) prefers to grow on decaying trees. This one was found on a broken tree trunk near Bridge 5.
3. Can you identify this 10-cm-long, bi-coloured metallic item? I can't.
4. The **eastern gray squirrel** (*Sciurus carolinensis*) is very common along the trail, especially around Hemlock Hill, and is an irresistible attraction for some trail dogs.
5. Look carefully and you may spot the tiny **glasscup** fungus (*Orbilia xanthostigma*) on a fence rail.
6. This white "ornament" draped on a blackberry cane is the work of a dog owner who conscientiously bagged their dog's mess, then tossed it out of reach so no one else could carry it to its proper destination: a nearby litter barrel. (This is a common occurrence).

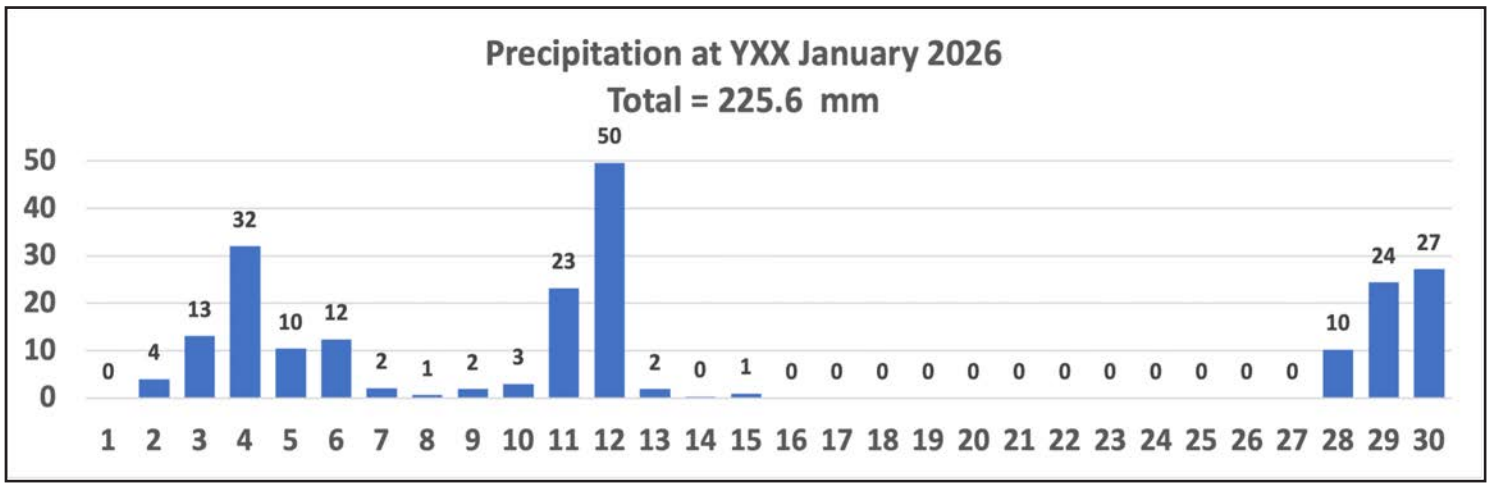
Odds & Ends 2/2

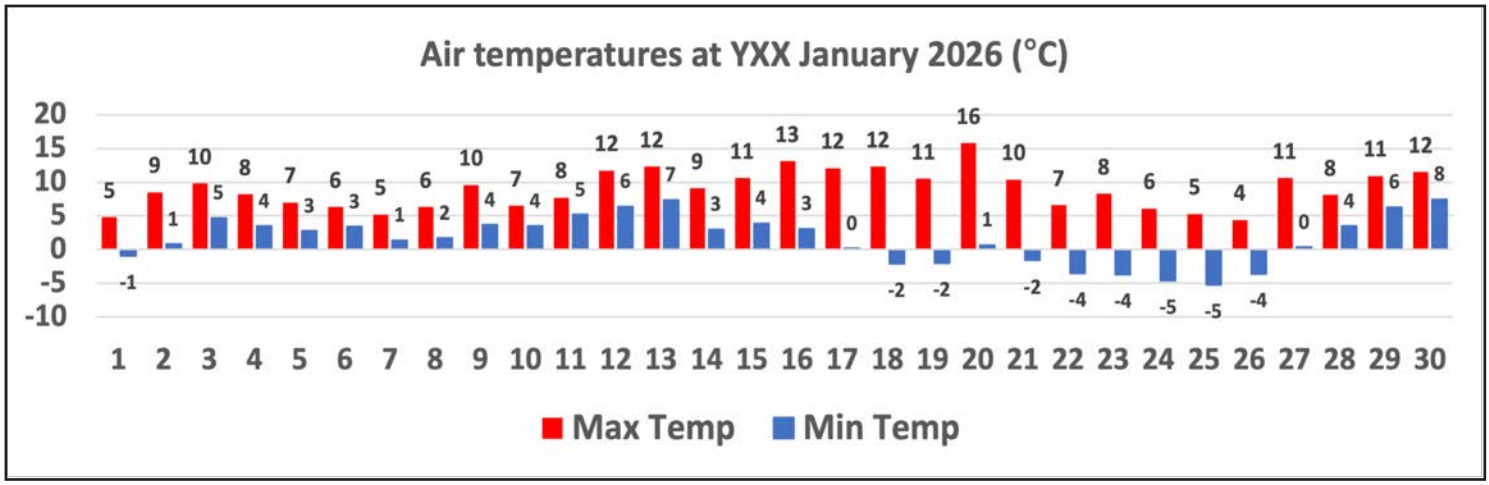
1, 2. Just eyeballing, I'd say these are the two tallest trees in the park: the Douglas fir above Bridge 6 and the western hemlock on its namesake, Hemlock Hill.
3, 4. It took a while, but the gate to the Dog Corral has finally been repaired.
5. The temporary fence erected to protect the large UCES plantation of October 2024 was crushed by this deadfall. Maybe it's time to remove both.

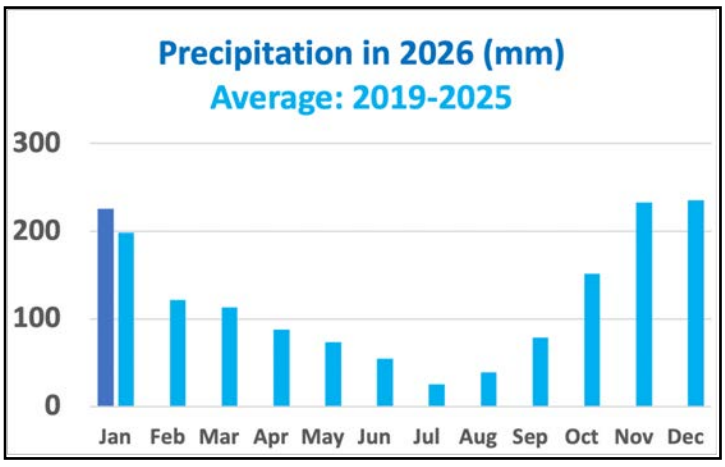


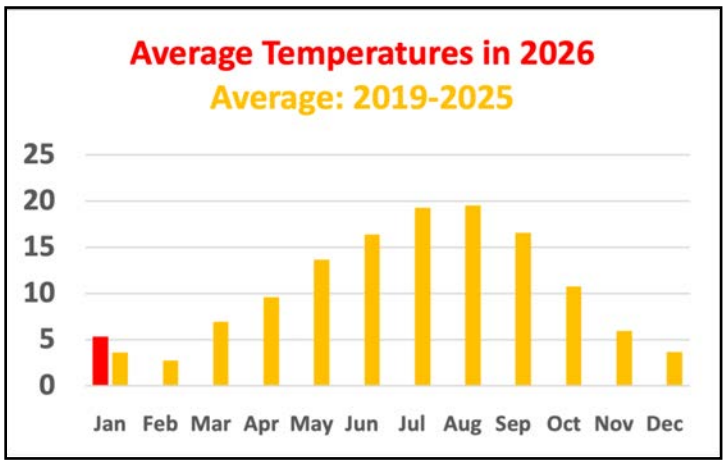
Total litter items = 91

Containers: bottles, bottle tops, cans, coffee cups, lids, juice boxes.
Paper: tissues, napkins, posters, newspaper, receipts, cardboard, etc.
Plastic: dog waste bags & shreds, baggies, other items made of plastic.
Wrappers: candy wrappers, foil, cellophane.
Miscellaneous: clothing, glass, chewing gum, dog balls & fragments, etc.









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For reference, I use these custom place-names: