



Our Backyard

Volume 9
Issue 1
Spring 2009

A NEWSLETTER ON THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT IN SAANICH

Spring will officially be here by the time you read this: plants will come out of dormancy, tree frogs will be singing, native bees will begin pollinating, and of course migratory birds will arrive back to take advantage of our abundance of insects. The first reported Rufous Hummingbird to appear in BC was on Galiano Island on February 26 (one month earlier than normal - I hope he found a feeder). Check out these great websites for information on hummingbirds and other migrating animals: <http://www.learner.org/jnorth/> & <http://www.topp.org/>



Blue Orchard Bee

Make sure you are ready for Spring. If you want to feed hummingbirds, the only thing you should put in your feeder is a boiled (for 2 minutes) 4:1 mixture of water to white sugar. If you would like to help our local fauna by planting native plants, then visit the Annual Swan Lake *Gardening for Wildlife* plant sale (p. 8). How about putting up a bird nest-box? Then don't miss the events at Swan Lake (p. 2), or Haliburton Farms (p. 8). And definitely start a vegetable garden (p. 4) this year with advice from the Compost Education Centre (p. 4), or one of the free CRD workshops (p. 5). And to increase your pollination rates, while helping a native bee, now is the time to put out nests for Blue Orchard Bees.

Spring is such a rejuvenating time of year it is easy to forget how much has changed. We no longer hear the spring field cricket that would be chirping away by May, Western Bluebirds haven't nested here since 1994, the closest the Island Marble Butterfly now lives is San Juan Island, and the Island Blue Butterfly may be extinct. Many plants, such as the extirpated Lobb's buttercup, have lost their foothold on Southern Vancouver Island. Fortunately we now have many groups helping out specifically with stewardship and education programs to protect our special inhabitants (p. 3, 5 & 6).

I hope that this newsletter provides you with some information, and the inspiration, to make things better for our native flora and fauna, as well as how to support our many active organizations. Be sure to nominate one of them for a Saanich Environmental Award (p. 6). With your help, we can hold on to what we have, and perhaps even bring some species back through restoration work. If you would like to get more involved, or have any questions, please contact me.

Darren Copley
Editor

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or email darren.copley@saanich.ca

REAL ESTATE BOOMING !

Ah Spring!

... in the bird world, that is

A time of building new homes and renovating the old. The housing market may be sluggish for the human populace, but among birds demand always outstrips supply. Look around and you will see a flurry of activity as our feathered friends prepare for their new families by building or seeking out nests.

Each species has its own real estate preferences. Some like to build from scratch. Others prefer to refurbish an existing space. Some like it up high, others low. Some are very particular about their construction materials, while others can be rather slapdash.

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Larger species such as crows, eagles, hawks and herons tend to opt for the penthouse effect. Eagles, for example, build in treetops. They make big, sturdy nests out of branches that they poke together with their beaks and feet. Mostly, they use material that has fallen to the ground, but occasionally an eagle will break off a desired limb by grabbing it in its talons and flapping up and down. Eagles re-use their nests year after year, repairing and expanding them as required.



Anna's Hummingbird

At the other end of the scale is the Anna's Hummingbird, a brilliantly coloured little creature, no bigger than your thumb. This hummer has extended its range in recent decades from California to Vancouver Island, thanks, in part, to feeders. A used home would never do for the Anna's. From whatever materials are at hand, it builds a cup-shaped nest about 4 cm in diameter and just big enough to hold two babies. (Her eggs are the size of Tic-Tac's.) She binds it all together and attaches the nest to a branch with nature's strongest thread – spider silk. As a finishing touch, she camouflages the nest with lichens and mosses. She likes to be discrete, and considering her size, it's no wonder.

Another small bird that builds a well-hidden nest is the Bushtit. It too uses bits and pieces plus spider-webbing and camouflage. But its home looks like a dirty sock instead of a cup. Almost fully closed except for a tiny entrance at the top, the Bushtit home protects the newly hatched from wet weather. The Bushtit's credo is: re-use, re-use, re-use. It will pick apart an old nest and re-use the material for the new.

One of the messiest builders is the Bewick's Wren. It seeks out an existing cavity (sometimes a lost baseball cap) and throws together a nest of grasses and twigs. In the middle it constructs a "playpen" of softer materials, plus a little piece of plastic. Why the plastic? Nobody knows.

Margaret Lidkea, Program Manager at Swan Lake Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary, says she has seen more than 100 Bewick's Wren's nests, and they always contain a piece of plastic. And what happened before the age of plastics? Therein lies a doctoral thesis.

Some bird species divide the work of nest building equally between males and females. In other species Ma and Pa have specific roles. For example, Mr. Robin will fetch larger twigs, but he lets Mrs. carry the mud. The female Mallard does everything, from finding the site on a grassy bank and building the nest, to plucking feathers from her breast for lining. The male hangs about, waiting for the female to come back and be his playmate. When he sees she won't leave the nest, he drifts off to seek other entertainment.

Among the birds that like a ready-made house are certain swallows and wrens. They'll gladly move into a human-made bird house if constructed to the right specifications. Violet-green & Tree Swallows are very desirable neighbours, since they eat mosquitoes and other annoying insects. Unfortunately, these birds seem to be on the decline. To help bring them back, why not make or purchase a bird house for your back yard? The Swan Lake Nature House can give you all the details.



Photo: Bruce Stewart - Tree Swallows

The main features to incorporate are: 1) a small, oval-shaped entrance; and 2) a way of opening the house to remove old nesting material. This is very important since lice and other parasites often infest old nests. Plans can be found at: www.hctf.ca/naturescape/Provincial_Guide_2003.pdf p.19-22 .

Also remember: location, location, location. Place your bird house where cats can't get at it and remember that swallows like a wide-open space, while chickadees and wrens prefer being closer to cover, so they can check for predators, before heading to the nest.

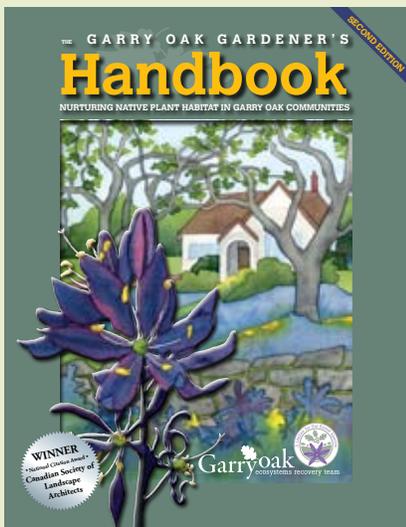
You might consider donating your bird house to be auctioned off during Swan Lake's *Bring on the Birds Festival*. This event, held during the Victoria Day week (May 16-23), features a host of wonderful activities for young and old. In the meantime, visit Swan Lake to participate in family programs or just to enjoy all the nest building activity underway.

By Gabriella Goliger

Gabriella is a snow-bird from Ottawa volunteering at Swan Lake Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary until she returns home in time for the Tulip Festival.

Garry Oak Gardener's Handbook

Announcing the second edition of *The Garry Oak Gardener's Handbook: Nurturing Native Plant Habitat in Garry Oak Communities*. Learn how to garden with native plants to help our endangered local ecosystems. The handbook provides designs for Garry oak meadows, woodlands, hedgerows, rock gardens and more. Download it for free at www.goert.ca/gardeners or request a print copy (by donation) online or through info@goert.ca or 250-383-3427. AND: Learn how to grow more than 75 native plants with GOERT's Native Plant Propagation Guidelines now online at www.goert.ca/propagation. Brought to you by the Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team www.goert.ca



Western Painted Turtle Stewardship Project

Do you have a turtle story to share? Habitat Acquisition Trust (HAT) has partnered with the federal Habitat Stewardship Program since 2005 to provide landowner contact services where species-at-risk may live. We are meeting with private landowners from Metchosin to Galiano to gain knowledge of the distribution and habits of our rare Pacific coast population of Western Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta bellii*). The coastal population is legally designated as endangered. Urban development, road mortality, and nest site disturbance are the main threats.

Results of HAT's 2008 outreach and field research include three new turtle population occurrences mapped, thanks to more than 60 reports from the public and concerned landholders. To read the entire turtle report by professional biologists Christian Engelstoft and Kristina Ovaska, please visit the HAT website (www.hat.bc.ca).

Painted Turtles have low, smooth, oval, unkeeled upper shells. While the upper shell (top) is dark green, the lower shell (underside) features striking orange to red patterns that give them the name "painted turtle". Hatchlings are no larger than a loonie, while adults 30 years or older can reach 25 cm long (12 inches). Look for hatchlings and adults emerging in late April.

Turtles require emergent rocks and logs for sunning close to their weedy aquatic feeding areas. People may also see turtles walking on land during the hot summer months as they search for nesting habitat. Nesting sites can be the limiting factor on population size as they are vulnerable to extreme winter cold, trampling, and predation (dogs, raccoons, otters, and others). Homeowners can protect nesting grounds and provide extra logs for sunning in the water.



Photo: Christian Engelstoft - Hatchling turtle

"We would love to hear about your turtle sightings," says Christian Engelstoft. He and Kristina Ovaska are scientific advisors to the Western Painted Turtle Recovery Team. "Thanks to landowners that have helped us monitor for turtles, we are finding previously undiscovered habitat areas. We still need to learn more about their movements over land, particularly during the summer nesting season." Send turtle photos and sightings to: hatmail@hat.bc.ca / call 250-995-2428.

COMPOSTING IN small SPACES *Marika Smith, Greater Victoria Compost Education Centre*

In the Western world, household food waste makes up over 30% of the waste collected from homes. Home composting is one way that people can change this. Many households have a backyard composting system, creating wonderful natural fertilizer. But what if you live in an apartment or condo or have limited green space on your property? There are composting options available for you too!



A simple and affordable method of small-scale composting is with an indoor worm bin, also known as a vermicomposting system. This is a method of composting that involves setting up a ventilated bin with a stand and drip tray, filling it with worm bedding (leaves and newspaper) and adding red wiggler worms. Roughly the size of a recycling box, the bin can be stored under the sink, in the kitchen, bathroom or even enclosed patio if the temperature is comfortable (or in my case, in the living room corner covered with a decorative scarf). Red wigglers have amazing appetites making them ideal for worm composting—one pound of worms can eat up to seven pounds of food scraps each week and the end result is a great organic soil booster!

Alternatively, if you have a small amount of green space on your property but no space for finished compost, a fabulous composting alternative is with a Green Cone Food Digester. Partially buried into the ground, you don't need to turn it, or empty it more than once every few years. The Green Cone takes ALL food waste cooked and uncooked, including meat, dairy and bones. Decent drainage and a fair amount of sunlight are all this amazing invention needs and one Green Cone can accommodate all of the food waste of an average family of four or five. Both of these compost systems are available at the Greater Victoria Compost Education Centre. For more information please visit us at 1216 North Park Street Wed-Sat 10am-4pm (www.compost.bc.ca).



Many people are now starting to feel the bite and insecurity of tough economic times. For those who can't feel it yet, the mass spending programs by all levels of government set up a classical scenario for a sharp rise in price inflation, particularly for food.

If you have access to a bit of sun-lit soil, no matter how small it is, this is a good time for you to learn how to grow some of your own food. You may need to sacrifice some ornamental plants occupying ideal food growing space. Back in the 1930s, people used to grow fruits and vegetables on their entire garden space, so there is a precedent for this. And, when your food garden is flourishing, it will be beautiful to behold.

If you don't have such land, then this is the time to seek allotment garden space, where you can learn from neighbouring allotment holders and grow a lot of food too. You might also seek to crop-share with a neighbour who is unable to do the work, but is willing to use such space on their land for that purpose. They would enjoy the results and probably your occasional company in their garden. If you plan to do this, develop a maximisation strategy to get the greatest abundance of staple foods. Don't squander your limited space on frills, grow what will provide the most meals and is best for you and your family. Remember, lazy gardeners produce little, so once you begin, you must stick with it. It provides great exercise and entertainment!

Norm Mogensen

Editor's Note: The City of Vancouver has just announced that a portion of their City Hall lawn will be converted into a community vegetable garden. <http://vancouver.ca/greencity/new.htm>

TOD CREEK FLATS PROJECT

Tod Creek drains Prospect Lake and runs north into Tod Inlet through Tod Creek Flats; near the Red Barn Market on West Saanich Road. This 75 acres of privately owned land (divided into four parcels) is mostly in Agricultural Land Reserve, and has been farmed for close to 100 years, starting as St. Joseph's Hospital Farm owned by the Sisters of St Anne. It is farmed in summer, formerly with potatoes and more recently with grain. In winter it functions as a flood plain.

The area is a natural floodplain for storing and filtering extra water in winter, but now it doesn't drain early enough in spring to provide a long enough growing season for most crops. There also is not a sufficient supply of water for summer irrigation. These are important concerns as food security is such an issue for our area, and there are very few floodplains remaining that provide important winter habitat for wildlife. Historically Tod Creek also provided fish habitat, but this has been lost to channelization.

Through the District of Saanich, we received an Infrastructure Planning Grant from the Ministry of Community Services and have hired a consultant to prepare a feasibility study. The purpose of this project is to integrate economically viable land for agriculture with floodplain function and healthy habitat for wildlife. We are looking forward to this report in the early fall.

For more information, contact Mary Haig-Brown, Friends of Tod Creek Watershed Working Group. mhaigbrown@telus.net 250-479-8801.



It's a Grassroots Movement, and It's Growing

Are you interested in learning to work with natural processes to create a healthy, vibrant lawn and garden? Would you like to learn how to make a gourmet salad from your own backyard? This spring and summer the Capital Regional District (CRD), Saanich and other proud sponsors are offering residents two upcoming workshop series on organic gardening and lawn care and organic food gardening, as well as an information session on permaculture.

For more details and to register visit: www.crd.bc.ca/workshops or call 250-360-3051.

Are you a pesticide free gardener or want to be? Show your support and take the pledge to go pesticide-free at www.crd.bc.ca/takethepledge

TREE TALK

On November 5, 2006, several volunteers gathered at Cedar Hill Golf Course to help plant one hundred Garry oak trees. These trees were in honour of Saanich's centennial celebration. To promote the survival of the oaks each tree has been watered, weeded and mulched regularly by the golf course staff. With the exception of three trees out of the one hundred, the oaks are healthy and continue to thrive.

Throughout the winter, staff at the golf course have implemented tree maintenance measures around the golf course and walking path. A Hazardous Tree Assessment course recently completed by golf course employees has presented the opportunity to better identify potentially hazardous trees and those that could be utilized for wildlife habitats. Maintaining the urban forestry within and around the golf course is an ongoing process, with both conservation and public safety in mind

By Julie Valois
Horticulturalist
Cedar Hill Golf Course



Knockan Hill Park

David Trudel

Some days, as I walk through the secluded trails that lead up Knockan Hill to emerge at the spectacular viewpoints at the crest of the hill, I try to imagine all the other individuals locally and around the world who belong to my exclusive club. This is the informal club of people with quick and easy access to a beautiful and safe natural area, such as Knockan Hill, where you can experience the wonder of nature on a daily basis, and by so doing restore your soul.

Given the reports of violence, environmental degradation, natural disasters and other stressors, I realize it is an exceptional thing to be able to have a daily walk in such an environment. Of course, membership comes with a price. In my case this



has meant participating in Scotch broom pulls, coming out to meetings, and generally taking on an active role as a park steward.

This year we are building on the two major projects conducted last year. First, the Good Neighbours' Project of Habitat Acquisition Trust has become a model of community outreach and involvement that we are going to try to emulate. While we don't have the resources to maintain the entire program, we are hoping to be able to offer some components, such as a Speakers Series, once the weather warms up a little.

The other project we are following up on is a report prepared by a team of students from the Environmental Science program of Royal Roads University. The report is going to lead to an integrated park management plan, that will assist us in working effectively with both Saanich and View Royal to manage this valuable community resource. At this stage we are digesting the report's recommendations and planning the way forward. In the meantime we have moved beyond Scotch broom pulls to some attempts at managing invasive patches of *Daphne* (spurge-laurel) and the ever pervasive English ivy.

So as I stand on the top of the hill and look out at the far horizon imagining my counterparts looking back at me from somewhere in Devon, Tasmania, Provence or the Bahia del Salvador, I take heart that here at least we have our shoulders to the wheel and are doing what we can to mitigate the effects of urbanization and development.

2009 Saanich Environmental Awards-Nominations Now Open!

Do you know a group, individual or business that has made an outstanding contribution to the natural environment in Saanich? If so, please consider nominating them for a Saanich Environmental Award. Awards are made in seven categories: Individual, Business/Commercial, Volunteer Organization, Youth Group/School, Biodiversity Conservation, Sustainability and Long-term Achievement. Awards will be presented to the winners at the first Council meeting in June. Winners receive a framed certificate and have their names added to a permanent plaque at Saanich Hall.

Nominations will be accepted until May 1, 2009.

For more information and to make an online nomination, please visit the Saanich website at www.saanich.ca/resident/environment/enviro_awards.html



Saanich Businesses, call 381 9995 for free lighting assessments & product rebates!

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We turn \$50 into \$150+ savings!



Purchase energy efficient lighting & voila...

- ✓ Reduce up-front costs through rebates
- ✓ Gain less than 2 year paybacks
- ✓ Significantly lower electricity bills
- ✓ Reduce replacement & maintenance costs
- ✓ Enjoy long-term savings!



What's New in Sustainable Saanich?

Congratulations to Kim Farris! Our winner of the Sustainable Saanich Draw for \$100 off any new Energy Star-rated product. As a student, Kim was thrilled to purchase a new Energy Star-rated printer. Energy Star-rated equipment use up to 30% less energy, reduce operating costs and produce fewer greenhouse gas emissions – which is good for your pocket book and the planet.

FREE lighting assessments for Business Owners! For a limited time, Sustainable Saanich, in partnership with City Green Solutions, will be offering FREE lighting assessments. Discover paybacks of less than 2 years with smart lighting purchases and the BC Hydro Product Incentive Program rebates. Call Matt Greeno at 250-381-9995 ext 107 to schedule an assessment.

Enter to Win! Entries are taken at the Sustainable Saanich Energy Efficiency Outreach booth in Saanich libraries, recreation centers and building supply stores. Just sign up for the Sustainable Saanich Climate Action Listserv and BC Hydro's Team Power Smart to receive program updates, free workshop details, energy savings tips, and links to energy efficiency grant programs such as:

- Up to \$5000 for homeowner energy efficiency upgrades! www.citygreen.ca
- \$1000 off solar hot water www.solarbc.ca
- Up to 30% off building permit fees when you 'go green'!
- Free 'GreenStart' hotline/ consultations with Paula Steele at 250-381-9995 ext 107

RiverSong

continues celebrating life along the Colquitz

RiverSong, a multi year Saanich community arts project in its third year, is intended to celebrate the plants, animals, and people that live along, and depend on, the river.

The elements of RiverSong are social gatherings, visual and performing arts, and information sharing. The goal of the project is to connect people in the community with each other and the river, and supporting the various conservation initiatives by creating a greater awareness of the river system and its significance in our lives.

We believe by increasing the opportunities and ways that the community is involved with the life of the river, the health of the waterway and strength of the community will be enhanced.

River Stones



In the next phase of this project we will be collaborating with Colquitz Middle School and Saanich Parks Department in the creation of pebble mosaics to mark the pathway that follows the river opposite the school. Using pebble mosaic technique to create stone borders, markers and stepping-stones, this element of the project will provide a physical legacy of the connection of the community with the river, and evidence

of human caring. The technique is accessible to a broad range of ages and abilities. The project will engage all students at the school, especially Environmental Renaissance, a student-led group of young nature enthusiasts, and a team of professional visual artists over a three week production workshop in April and May. An interpretive walk for Environmental Renaissance production assistants, led by Todd Carnahan of Habitat Acquisition Trust, will provide inspiration for the design and creation of mosaics. Installation of the mosaics by Parks staff and artists will take place in the summer and fall of 2009.

The 3rd Annual RiverSong event, Sunday September 27th, marking Rivers Day, will celebrate this exciting community arts collaboration with the municipality and the school. We hope to see neighbours and families come down to the river and see the beauty youth will have created for the trailway.

Contact:

Carolyn Knight cjdknight@shaw.ca

Paula Jardine mrspaula@telus.net

Photo: Angela Wyatt

Upcoming events & announcements

**Swan Lake
Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary**
www.swanlake.bc.ca
250 479-0211

Creatures of the Night
Friday March 20, 7:30 to 9pm
Sharpen your night senses with owl prowling and raccoon trailing. Suitable for families with children over 6 years old. Please pre-register

Gardening for Wildlife
Saturday and Sunday April 18-19, 10 am to 3 pm
More than 5000 native plants for sale, plus informative presentations and displays.

Madrona Farm Tours
www.madronafarm.com
*Starting in April,
Saturdays at 9:30 am*

Madrona Farm Volunteer Days
*Starting in April, Wednesdays and
Fridays from 9-11 am*

**Haliburton Community
Organic Farm**
741 Haliburton Rd
www.haliburtonfarm.org
Would you like to meet some new friends and learn about Organic Gardening. Come out and join our Volunteers and Farmers. Our regular **work parties** are Wednesday's 1:00-3:00 and the second Saturday of each month 10:00-2:00. **Farm Stand** will be open starting April 1st -Wednesdays to Saturdays 11:00-5:00. **Giant Plant Sale** May 2nd All certified Organic Plant starts.

**It's all about the Birds
and the Bees.**
*Easter Weekend, April 11th 2009,
11 am to 3 pm.*

Come learn how to enhance biodiversity in your backyard. Hands-on workshops on making bird, bee, and bat boxes plus demonstrations of native plant propagation techniques. Farm Tours through the day. The first 50 visitors can make a nestbox to take home (by donation).



Victoria Natural History Society
www.vicnhs.bc.ca
Birders' Night
The Classification of Birds
Wednesday, March 25 7:30 pm
UVic's Fraser Building, Room 159
Gary Kaiser will explain a possible new family tree for birds that is consistent with a common sense approach to avian biology.

Marine Night
Marine Invasive Species in BC
Monday, March 30, 7:30 pm
UVic's Fraser Building, Room 159
Dr. Matthias Herborg will present the most notorious marine invaders found in BC waters.

Natural History Night
**How the Turtle Got Painted, and
Other Tales**
Tuesday, April 14, 7:30 pm
UVic's David Strong Building,
Room C103
Habitat Acquisition Trust will present highlights from 2008 on the endangered western painted turtle.

Botany Night
The Story of Richard Layritz
Tuesday, April 21, 7:30 pm
Swan Lake Nature House
Leslie Drew will talk about Richard Layritz, and his contributions to the botanical richness of the Victoria.

BC Breeding Bird Atlas Update
Wednesday, April 22 7:30 pm
UVic's David Strong Building,
Room C103
Hear the results of the first year of this project, and discuss what is needed in future.

**How I Stopped Worrying About
Global Fisheries**
Monday, April 27, 7:30 pm
UVic's Fraser Building, Room 159
Brian Harvey will present an entertaining talk and slide show about his experiences "taking science on the road" to aquatic biodiversity hotspots from British Columbia to Brazil.

BC Nature Conference and AGM
Thursday, April 30 – Sunday, May 3
The spring conference and annual general meeting will be in Duncan this year. For more information visit <http://bcnature.ca/index.html>.

**Point Ellice Shoreline
Restoration**
*Volunteer work parties:
Every Sunday in March and April
from 9am-1pm*
2616 Pleasant Avenue.
Join the Gorge Waterway Initiative on the Point Ellice Shoreline Restoration Project to help remove invasive species and replant with native vegetation.
Contact Jody at 250-360-3065 or www.gorgewaterway.ca

**Volunteers Needed -
Garry Oak Restoration Project**
Saturday, April 4, Wetherby Park
Saturday, May 2, Location TBA

Interested in helping conserve endangered Garry oak ecosystems? Sunny hilltops to flower filled meadows, we are looking for people keen to work their muscles and their minds. Come to remove invasives, and help us plant natives while learning about this amazing ecosystem. For more info please visit www.gorpsaanich.com or contact Jenny: 250-744-1710.

**The 2009 BC Land Summit
A Better Future: Adapting to
Change**
May 20th – 22nd, 2009
Whistler, BC
If you are in the land trust, stewardship, conservancy, or land use fields, you won't want to miss this exciting opportunity. For program and registration details, visit www.bclandsummit.com

Canadian Earth Institute
www.CanadianEarthInstitute.org
250-757-9163
*Royal Roads University - Continuing
Studies*
Discovering a Sense of Place
April 1
**Introduction to Permaculture
Design** April 25
Cob Building May 30
*University of Victoria -
Continuing Studies*
**Deep Ecology and Personal
Connections with Nature**
April 1, 8, 15 & 22,
**Coastal Collective at Esquimalt
Lagoon - Art from Earth**
April 18, June 7
Glendale Gardens
Introduction to Cob Building
May 23 & 24