



Mountaineer Avian Rescue Society (MARS)
MARS Wildlife Eco Centre Project
Completion Report

Name of Project: MARS Wildlife Eco Centre Project
Applicant: Mountaineer Avian Rescue Society (MARS)
Project Start Date: August 1, 2017
Project Completion Date: April 30, 2019

MARS' Mission Statement: To conserve and protect native wildlife and its natural habitat through education and rehabilitation.

For the past 25 years, MARS has operated a wildlife rescue and rehabilitation centre situated in Merville in the Comox Valley. We serve the northern half of Vancouver Island, northern Gulf Islands and adjoining mainland coast. In 2015 MARS purchased almost 11 acres of undeveloped land to accommodate our growing patient load. By the spring of 2017, recovery pens and a new wildlife hospital had been constructed and were in use.

What we learn through doing rehabilitation is shared with others through our education program. Since most of the wildlife patients need care because of conflicts with humans or human activities, education has always been a priority for MARS. Until recently our education program has consisted almost entirely of outreach activities with volunteers taking our ambassador (educational) birds to public events, schools, seniors' homes and other group settings.

The MARS Wildlife Eco Centre Project, funded by Island Coastal Economic Trust (ICET), enabled us to develop our property to create a home for our education program and a gift shop to generate operating funds for the wildlife rehabilitation program.

As a not-for-profit society, MARS relies on donations for the majority of our annual operating costs. Donors, especially children, often ask to see the wildlife in our care. However, in order to avoid causing stress to these sick and injured birds and mammals and/or habituating our wild patients to humans, our rehabilitation permits do not allow public access to patients. Knowing that people are more likely to value, support and protect what they know and love, we looked for ways that members of the public might make a personal connection to our patients without having physical contact.

Construction of Aviaries for Ambassador Birds

We began by building homes in natural settings for our educational birds. These special birds are from several different species, all un-releasable for different reasons. Ambassadors are not kept as pets, but as educators; they work with their handlers to inform the public about the dangers that wildlife face and to give people a glimpse of the beautiful animals that many people have never seen in person, especially up close.



During this project, three ambassador bird pens, 10 feet X 12 feet, were constructed by volunteers to house two Western Screech Owls; a Barred Owl and a Red-Tailed Hawk. In addition, a larger pen, 12 feet X 56 feet, was built to house our two ambassador Eagles. Concrete for all of the pens was donated by a local company. Volunteers from MARS and service clubs spent over 1,000 hours constructing these aviaries ensuring that they can be safely accessed by the public to allow visitors to view the educational birds.



Construction of MARS Wildlife Eco Centre Building

Construction on the 3100 square foot ECO Centre building began in February 2018 and was completed in January 2019.



The building contains a gift shop, three washrooms (two are wheelchair accessible), approximately 1500 square feet for displays and exhibits; almost 300 square feet for a meeting /activity room; eating area with small kitchen for volunteers; a large storage room and volunteer/staff administrative space.

Entry to the Visitor Centre is through the gift shop



Display Area

Volunteers painted murals and constructed dioramas and various displays and exhibits that tell the story of our wildlife patients; how they came to harm and the efforts MARS' caregivers make to help them.



Visitors can stop at a board to read about patients in the hospital



Wander off to explore exhibits



Spend some time in the children's corner



Learn about bones and feathers



Discover why wildlife trees are important

Displays and Exhibits in the Wildlife Eco Centre building consist of:

- A children's corner with stuffed animals; a very popular "scat" exhibit, interactive displays and games designed just for youngsters; books about wildlife; a "please touch" exhibit of furs, feathers, bones, etc.,
- 25 taxidermy mounted in natural settings (large wildlife trees have been erected in the building for this purpose); posters containing information about various native species; a diorama of an estuary containing wildlife; a smaller diorama of a field with birds living in this habitat; a wildlife tree display; and smaller exhibits
- Information and stories about MARS' wildlife patients
- Aural displays (song canopy over the estuary display and interactive exhibit for identifying bird calls)
- Discussion boards to foster an ongoing discussion about how to reduce harm to wildlife
- A closed circuit camera system for visitors to safely view patients in the hospital or recovery pens and talk to caregivers about cause of injury and treatment.
- A projector wall in the meeting room for MARS' films and videos

Volunteers, some of whom have been working throughout the length of this project developing displays and education materials, staff the gift shop and cash register, greet visitors and provide orientation to the site and exhibits.

The Path to Project Completion

MARS is a volunteer-driven organization. Unfortunately, when we started this process in 2015, we knew nothing about the legal requirements for construction of a commercial building. We didn't even know that our visitor centre building would be considered "commercial". There was a lot to learn about provincial regulations (e.g. BC Building Code) and local government bylaws for zoning and permits and we hope that our experience will inform and assist other organizations embarking on similar projects.

Early in September 2015, MARS applied to Island Coastal Economic Trust for project funding estimating the date of completion of our project to be August 2017. In November 2015, the ICET Board of Directors approved our Stage 1 application to proceed to a Stage 2 application subject to a budget change and rezoning of the property. We worked with our regional planning department and in July of 2016, the Comox Valley Regional District Board adopted a bylaw to permit "interpretive/cultural centre" as a principal use and "special events directly related to a principal use" as an accessory.

We were on our way. But there were a number of unexpected hurdles still to come.

Construction Delays for the Interpretive Building

MARS learned that any building constructed to hold more than 30 people has to be designed and approved by an architect. Two laws apply:

- The Architect Act: requires involvement of an Architect for public buildings over 275m² (3000 ft²) and occupancy load for more than 30 people
- Building Code: a design for public assembly of more than 30 people put MARS into a Part 3 building category requiring oversight by an Architect.

Our original builder, who had produced the designs and plans for the Interpretive Building used in our initial application to ICET, is not an architect, so his designs did not meet these requirements. After a lengthy search, we were able to find an architectural firm that agreed to work with us and reduced their fees to accommodate our limited budget. Our building permit was granted in May 2017.

The difficulty in finding a local architectural firm and escalating costs for the project was due in large part to a construction boom in our area and other parts of Vancouver Island. This increase in building activity is attributed to exceptionally low vacancy rates, resulting in single and multi-family home construction coupled with institutional and commercial building to support the residential work. Another factor is a strong migration rate to Vancouver Island from BC cities and across the country.

MARS had a limited budget for this project and it was difficult to find contractors able (or willing) to take on our project during our time line. Construction did not begin until a year later, in the spring of 2018, and even then was delayed by numerous problems outside of our control.

The unusual activity in the construction industry also caused costs to escalate and delays in obtaining designs and structural drawings to put out to tender. Suppliers and tradespeople were backed up and had difficulty providing us with cost information. And, because of increasing building costs, MARS constantly had to review our budget, seek out savings and businesses that would donate materials or provide services 'in kind' and downscale our plans and expectations.

We very much appreciate the patience and support of the ICET staff and members of the Board of Directors as we encountered problems and delays during this project.

Changes to Project Scope

In addition to the Interpretive Building and aviaries for our educational birds, our original proposal included:

- A Flight Pen. This large structure (120 X 40 X 24 feet high) for rehabilitation of Eagles, and other large birds such as Snowy Owls, Sand Hill Cranes, Great Blue Herons, Great Horned Owls and Pelicans, is designed to be open at one end to allow public viewing without causing stress to these magnificent birds
- Accessible trails to viewing sites on the pond, providing opportunities for the public to view recovering waterfowl and visiting migrating birds as well as explore and discover animals and plants living in this environment. This wetland restoration project will demonstrate how to preserve wetlands to benefit wildlife

Our first budget estimate for construction of the Interpretive Building was just less than \$400,000 including infrastructure, project management and insurance. As the costs escalated, it became clear that we could not also afford to construct the flight pen and trails. MARS requested and was granted an amendment to our project.

Although construction of the flight pen is no longer part of the ICET project, it continues to be a “work in progress”. The cement foundation has been poured and additional work takes place as donations come in for that purpose. So far we have spent more than \$60,000 and have set aside an additional \$17,000 to build this large cage for our recovering patients.

BC Hydro recently granted us \$5,000 to build a duck blind on the wetland and volunteers are standing by to build trails to the blind once this work is completed.

The Eco Centre Interpretive Building was completed in January 2019. However, we encountered another problem and delay in obtaining an occupancy permit: MARS is situated in a rural area without fire hydrants. As more than 30 people might be in our building at any one time, we are required to store 15,000 gallons of water for reserve fire-fighting.

In November 2018, Community Gaming Branch gave us a one-time capital acquisition grant in the amount of \$20,000 to purchase three tanks but, because the tanks must be mounted on cement, it was necessary to wait for warmer and dryer weather to pour the concrete, install the tanks and fill with water. Consequently, our Interpretive Building did not open to the public until May 2019.



Economic Impact of the Project

During the first weekend of operation, our Eco Centre received almost 300 people and made \$3500 through sales of merchandise, memberships and donations for the Rehabilitation Program. Since that time, there have been fewer people but we expect attendance to increase as word spreads. Visitors have been generous in their praise of the Centre.

MARS has hired a half time manager for the Eco Centre and a student working under a federal student grant is working in the Centre for the summer. We hope to be able to keep her on part time after school begins in the fall.

Information about number of temporary jobs created during construction:

- 7,000 person hours were required to construct this complex, commercial Eco Centre building over the course of a year.
- Of this number, architects and engineers recorded 1200 professional hours of work.

Media Coverage

June 6 – Comox Valley Record newspaper: front page coverage “Mural for MARS” – see attached

June 13 – Comox Valley Record newspaper: “MARS Visitor Centre in Merville celebrates grand opening this weekend” – see attached

June 19 – Live radio interview “On the Island with Gregor Craigie” CBC

June 30 – Visit from Eagle Radio

Conclusion

As a charitable, volunteer driven organization, MARS has struggled over the past five years to keep up with the demands for our services. Requests for presentations with our educational birds are increasing, our wildlife patient load has doubled, hospital costs are mounting and competition for charitable donations is fierce.

When we began this project, we had two objectives:

1. Build a home for our educational program; and
2. Establish a means of generating income to support our wildlife rehabilitation program.

At the conclusion of this project, we have: secure housing for our ambassador birds with viewing ports for visitors; a beautiful architecturally designed building with displays that tell the stories of our patients and encourages discussion about how to reduce harm to wildlife; and a gift shop that sells attractive local products. MARS members are hard at work adding other features to our property that will be of interest to visitors, such as a duck blind, forest trails and a visitor kiosk.

Funding from Island Coastal Economic Trust has enabled us to become social entrepreneurs. Our community – service clubs, other environmental organizations, construction company, local building supply stores, other businesses, local governments and financial institution - recognized the potential and generously supported us in this endeavor.

Even in the first month of operating we are hearing from visitors to our centre that they are coming back with their family and friends, going on to shop at other local businesses and, in some instances, spending the night in our local area.

MARS is confident that our educational eco centre and gift shop will attract both local residents and tourists who will contribute not only to MARS’ operating costs but also to the economic growth of our rural community.