



# STANWOOD CAMANO NEWS

## COVID rate falls again

Transmission down, vaccine distribution inches forward

By EVAN CALDWELL  
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Virus transmission decreased for the sixth consecutive week in Snohomish County, but health officials warn that there's still a long way to go.

The rolling two-week case rate in Snohomish County decreased to 119 cases per 100,000 residents down from 144 infections per 100,000 people, according to data released Monday from the Snohomish Health District. That's the lowest virus rate since early October.

Over the long weekend, Snohomish County recorded 172 new COVID-19 cases. As of Monday, there were 38 COVID patients in Snohomish County hospitals — down from about 100 a month ago, according to county data.

"I hope the community keeps masking up and physically distancing, so that trends continue to decrease the rate in the community," Dr. Chris Spitters, health officer for the Snohomish Health District, said in a media briefing last week. "And that also alleviates the pressure on the schools, reducing the likelihood that a staff member or a student will enter the school with a case of COVID."

Stanwood has recorded 45 new cases during the past two weeks, down from 55 new cases during the previous two weeks.

■ SEE COVID, A8

# Taking flight

Bird-watching soars as safe activity during pandemic



COURTESY JOAN HELBACKA

Snow geese flock in front of Mount Baker during a recent sunset. These migratory birds are just one of many species a growing number of local bird-watchers are spotting, tracking and photographing in the region.



COURTESY JOAN HELBACKA



COURTESY PHOTOS

At top, common merganser male ducks appear to run on water. Above, Joan Helbacka, at left, and Jeff Osmundson and Colleen Shannon are among the growing number of local residents who find bird watching a safe, satisfying hobby during the pandemic.

By PEGGY WENDEL  
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Birders can't flock together at Stanwood's annual Snow Goose and Birding Festival, which joins a long list of festivals canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but birding itself isn't canceled.

For years, birders have gathered at events like the Snow Goose and Birding Festival — usually held in late February — to share tips, make friends and expand knowledge. For nearly a year, even the regular guided walks offered by groups like the Audubon Society have been on hold.

Yet more avian aficionados are winging it to favorite bird-watching spots than ever before. The outdoor, socially distanced activity is experiencing a boom during the pandemic.

More people are out and about tracking and photographing birds, according to birdwatching sites such as ebird.org. Downloads of popular bird identification apps have spiked. And the birding industry — everything from bird seed suppliers, birdhouse builders and small businesses helping people connect with birds — is seeing huge growth, according to the Audubon Society.

And the Stanwood-Camano area and neighboring Skagit Valley — home to world-class birding opportunities — are seeing more people migrate to the hobby in the past year.

■ SEE FLIGHT, A9

## Stanwood Police get 3 new officers

By PEGGY WENDEL  
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Every February, a few new faces show up on Stanwood's police team.

"At least three people come and go every year," Stanwood Police Chief Rob Martin said. "We always have a plan to train up new people."

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Officials seeing increase in some property thefts, PAGE A6

The Stanwood team is contracted through the Snohomish Sheriff's Office and currently has the police chief, a school officer, two sergeants, a detective and six patrol deputies.

Once a year, patrol deputies have a chance to relocate

within the county. They can bid for other positions in 17 different locations in the county and are assigned according to seniority based on start dates with the Sheriff's Office.

This way, the deputies can experience different shifts in types of locations from rural to suburb to city, Martin said.



COURTESY PHOTOS

Deputy Sennen Klassen, left, and deputy Leon Elliott joined Stanwood's police force earlier this month.

"It's good for us; it's good for the community," Martin said. "It's good for a deputy to experience a small town."

### New to Stanwood

This year, three of the six patrol deputies are learning how being a deputy is different in a small town. Stanwood's

new deputies are Leon Elliott, Sennen Klassen and Maxwell Schrader.

Elliott grew up in Marysville and has a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from Central Washington University.

■ SEE POLICE, A6



COURTESY VASILY BARANYUK

**A pair of snow geese on Wrangel Island, Russia, watch over their two 3-day-old chicks, in late June 2020. These chicks grew into big grey snow geese by the time they flew to the Pacific Northwest for the winter.**

## Snow geese population growing

Many of the snow geese that winter in the Puget Sound area come from a huge colony on Wrangel Island, Russia, in the Arctic Sea, where they spend most of the year, nesting and raising their young. Each winter, great flocks of snow geese leave this colony and fly 3,100 miles to our shores.

Russian biologist Vasily Baranyuk, a frequent speaker at Stanwood's Snow Goose and

Birding Festival, has studied the web of life on Wrangel Island for 40 years. He bands geese with GPS transmitters that relay information about their activities, behavior, temperature, migration and escapes from hunters. Scientists are learning how global warming is changing life in the Arctic. Wrangel Island, for instance, now gets more rain but less snow and ice.

Baranyuk wrote in an email to the Stanwood Camano News that he hopes to return to the festival next year. For now, he gives an update and scientific summary. Summer and fall of 2020

were good for snow geese on Wrangel Island, Baranyuk wrote. But there were very few lemmings. Arctic foxes eat lemmings and lacking that, will eat snow goose eggs. But there were few Arctic foxes this year. Snowy owls did not breed.

The 2020 study by the Working Group on Waterfowl of Northern Eurasia states that the Wrangel Island Snow Goose population is growing rapidly, but no new colonies have yet formed.

"Nesting conditions were very favorable for snow geese on Wrangel Island in 2020: after a winter with low snow

precipitation and an early spring, geese did not experience a shortage of nesting sites. The spring population of the WISG in 2020 was estimated at 685,100 individuals. This is 243,100 (or 55%) more than last year's population."

The colony had about 214,100 nests. About 57,500 goose pairs were counted, up nearly 37% from 2019. They laid 802,500 eggs in 2020 and 652,915 goslings hatched, resulting in 81.4% hatch success.

Although about 2,620 adult birds died during nesting, the mortality rate was only 0.6% of the nesting geese.

— Peggy Wendel / SC News

## Flight

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### Something safe

Jeff Osmundson and Colleen Shannon, married more than 40 years, expand their world during isolation by watching birds. Years ago when they took up birding as an empty-nester hobby, they started spending more time together.

"In the spring when COVID was busting out, we didn't know what we could do safely. We figured this would be safe," Shannon said.

Their son, a biologist, was alarmed that they weren't sequestered inside, until they sent him a photo that showed just the two of them and hundreds of birds.

Yet even out in the wild, they've found that more people are getting outside, coping with being cooped up.

"Everybody and their brother are out walking ... getting rid of cabin fever," Osmundson said.

They found that Wiley Slough on Fir Island was a good place to watch birds, because the new dikes are wide, so people can safely pass. Barnum Point Park on Camano Island is another good spot. Eide Road Preserve, between Stanwood and Camano, is good but can be crowded.

Shannon and Osmundson have permission to visit a secluded spot south of Stanwood. Even there, a few people show up. But there are far more birds.

### Avian abundance

Snohomish, Skagit and Whatcom counties are hot spots for birding.

Winter is especially interesting with Arctic visitors flying in, such as snow geese and trumpeter swans, Shannon said. Ducks and waterfowl congregate in the wide-open river deltas for most of the winter.

Osmundson said his theory is that birds wait for the snow to melt in the Canadian mountains to return to their breeding grounds. Then eagles come down from the east after they feast on the salmon runs up-river and find all these birds waiting to go north.

Osmundson and Shannon stand on a dike near Stanwood; their view is of salt marsh tidal flats. Water gives way to a sandbar, with deeper water beyond. To the naked eye, the place looked deserted. But looking through binoculars or scope, it's a big feathered world with American woodpeckers whistling, ducks quacking and trumpeter swans honking.

Shannon peered through binoculars across the flats, noting that ducks lined the bank of the sandbar, and Dunlins were plentiful.

Dunlins, the little brown



PHOTOS COURTESY JOAN HELBACKA

**Dunlins flash their bellies as they turn in unison. See more birding photos in a gallery at SCnews.com.**



**A great blue heron gobbles down a snack.**



**At top, a cedar waxwing puffs its feathers. Above, a Greater yellowlegs finds plenty to eat at Wiley Slough in the Skagit Wildlife Area.**

sandpipers, feed in the shallows. Dunlin flocks flash from brown to white as the birds twist and bank in unison. Huge flocks fly in aerial maneuvers called murmurations.

"Seven swans a swimming," Shannon said. "A falcon went down on the Dunlin. The Dunlin are up. It's a peregrine."

Osmundson set up a scope on a tripod.

"Holy mackerel! Look at those Dunlin, like ants on an anthill," he said.

She asked, "How many should we put down?"

They list what they see at

eBird.org, an international bird counting site managed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, that tabulates millions of bird global sightings as a powerful resource for research, conservation and education.

"It's a way to stay engaged and have your birding mean something and track what you do," Shannon said.

"Listeners" use eBird to document their trips and what they've seen. Shannon uses it to contribute to "citizen science," helping with the international understanding of changing migratory patterns, climate change and overwintering.

The Anna's hummingbird didn't use to winter here, but now stays all year.

"We're seeing species here that we've rarely seen before," she said.

In recent times, local birders have sighted a Vermillion flycatcher and a painted bunting.

The couple recommends birding as a lifelong social or solitary activity for all ages and families.

Shannon said, "The best times to go birding is ..."

"When you can," Osmundson finished on cue.

### Birds at home

Julia Petrakis puts out feeders so the birds come to her.

"Here I am, watching the birds every day," she said.

Petrakis gets around in a wheelchair and watches birds from windows or on the patio under heat lamps where she enjoys the show with Stellar's jays, chickadees, bushtits, a pileated woodpecker, nuthatches, sparrows, juncos, finches, pine siskin, towhees, robins and variegated thrush.

Lately, there's no birdseed out because of a regionwide salmonella concern, especially for the pine siskin. Birds still flit about the bushes and peck around the patio.

"I have flicker families in what I call the bird condo, which is the huge evergreen out the front door," Petrakis said.

She's been watching birds since she was a teen in New Jersey.

"I get great pleasure in-

tellectually and emotionally in identifying these birds that come," she said. "It's part of who I am to love the birds."

### Photo angle

People get into bird watching for different reasons. There's a spectrum between birders and photographers, with people having skills anywhere in between, said Joan Helbacka. Some people focus on listing what they see, others focus on photographing them.

Helbacka watches two pair of Stellar's Jays that have staked out their territories — one pair in the front yard and one in the back. She opens the kitchen window and throws out a handful of peanuts. They can only pick up two at a time, so they take their time picking that first nut, to get

the size and shape just right. "Just watching them is fun," she said.

Helbacka moved from Renton to Camano Island a little over a year ago. She hadn't met many people here yet when the pandemic struck. She takes care of her husband at home and hung bird feeders so they could see birds from the window. She gets out and finds local wild spots to photograph birds.

"This has saved my sanity. The idea is to get out and about and see what there is to see, get a little exercise and do something creative. Being out in nature is just good for people," she said.

As she looks through old photos, she's seen how her skills have grown.

"Birding is social, but that part is missing," she said. "It used to be you take a shot and say, 'Hey look what I got.' Now you can't do that."

Still, birders are a friendly bunch. Helbacka runs into them on her outings — like Donna Decew, from the south Puget Sound area, who had just seen a murmuration of Dunlin on Fir Island. Decew stopped at Eide Road Preserve, hoping to glimpse the rare sight of a snow bunting and met Helbacka. They chatted while masked and socially distanced.

"If you are a birder or a bird photographer, you always have friends — you just haven't met them yet," Helbacka said. "You have a lot in common: birds, love of the outdoors, conservation and interest in providing habitat for wild species. People are so good about sharing their knowledge."

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