

# Oak Harbor man charged with animal cruelty

By **JESSIE STENSLAND**  
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Oak Harbor police repeatedly interviewed witnesses, dug up a shallow grave near a public beach and had a necropsy performed following a report of a suspicious dog death last fall, according to court documents.

As a result of the investigation,

Island County prosecutors charged an Oak Harbor man, 26-year-old Dwight D. Hill, with animal cruelty in the first degree this week. If convicted of the charge, he could face up to a year in jail under the standard sentencing range.

The investigation began Sept. 2 after a resident of an apartment complex reported

hearing a dog yelp in Hill's apartment; the resident also reported overhearing a subsequent conversation Hill had with his girlfriend and then seeing the dead dog being carried away, according to police reports on the incident.

Oak Harbor police took the case very seriously, with at least three officers writing reports on

the investigation, court documents show. The reports indicate that police had responded to a previous report of the dog, named Lady, being abused, but no evidence was found.

Hill told investigators that he came home from work to find Lady had escaped from her crate and chewed on his girlfriend's leather purse; he said

he later found the dog dead and thought it was from something she had eaten.

Hill and his girlfriend showed the police the spot in a beach area on Bayshore Drive where they had buried the dog. After measuring the site, the officers carefully exhumed the dog's body and brought it to an examination.

**SEE ABUSE, A2**

# Whidbey schools to receive millions in federal stimulus

By **EMILY GILBERT**  
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Whidbey Island school districts are estimated to receive millions of dollars of federal funding from the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 to offset the costs of the coronavirus pandemic.

The COVID-19 relief package includes more than \$122 billion for K-12 education. The bill says the money will be available until Sept. 30, 2023.

Washington state as a whole will be allocated \$1,852,501,071 in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds from the stimulus package, according to a press release from the U.S. Department of Education. The bill stipulates that the state allocates no less than 90 percent of the funds to school districts.

The funds can be used for things like buying masks for students and staff, paying for summer programs to address learning loss, replacing school windows and doors to improve indoor air quality and more.

However, school districts

SEE STIMULUS, A3



Viggo Cerrato, 6, pets a young Shamo rooster named Baby Boy. Cascadia Heritage Farm is currently in the midst of a project to "invigorate" a rare breed of chicken.

# Farm promoting genetic diversity, a flock at a time

By **KIRA ERICKSON**  
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A small family farm is hoping big birds might be the key to getting people to crow about genetic diversity.

North Whidbey's Cascadia Heritage Farm has focused on breeding and preserving critically endangered breeds since the farm's beginning.

The farm's latest endeavor is to create

a vigorous and healthy stock of Malay chickens, one of the tallest breeds of chicken in the world.

Titled the MIGHT Project, for Malay Invigoration Gene Hybridization Team, the goal is to take a breed that has traditionally been inbred and "invigorate" it by crossing it with other chicken breeds, such as the Aseel.

The fowl bred through the project will be referred to as "Cascadia Mighty

Malays." The farm currently has three adult Malays that have taken years to track down. A Malay chick was hatched from a mated pair in January.

A survey completed by the Society for the Preservation of Poultry Antiquities nearly 20 years ago determined that the Malay was the rarest breed in North America. The breed may have descended from gigantic chickens.

**SEE MIGHT, A2**

# Native plant habitat a wild bird's best friend

By **RON NEWBERRY**  
*Special to the Whidbey News-Times*

Steve and Martha Ellis aren't concerned about wild birds going hungry in their yard.

When the Coupeville couple learned about a deadly salmonellosis outbreak among local bird populations this winter that led to a recommendation by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife to take down bird feeders and bird baths, they didn't worry. Steve and Martha are longtime birders who care deeply about birds and other wild creatures and their habitat.

Their property, just shy of an acre, provides many different native plantings that wild birds use for food and shelter.

"Birds simply do not require sup-

plemental feeding, providing there's an abundance of native trees and shrubs," Steve Ellis said.

Due to continued reports of sick and dying birds in several Washington counties, WDFW extended its advisory to keep down backyard feeders and baths through April 1 or take extra steps to maintain them such as daily cleaning. Beyond that?

"It's really hard to say," said Kristin Mansfield, a state Wildlife veterinarian. "Our hope is that we see a significant decrease in reports of sick and dead birds, which we do expect to happen as natural food sources become available and birds begin to spread out more."

Spring couldn't come soon

**SEE HABITAT, A2**



An Anna's hummingbird feeds from a red-flowering currant on Whidbey Island.





A rare, young Malay rooster.



A rare, young Aseel rooster.



A Shamo hen named Baby Girl.

# MIGHT

CONTINUED FROM A1

George Cerrato, who owns Cascadia Heritage Farm with his veterinarian wife, Shuna, and their 6-year-old son, Viggo, said the MIGHT project has not been without its challenges. Earlier this month, a Malay rooster that showed no previous signs of illness mysteriously died.

Cerrato suspected he may have died of a stroke. The body was sent to Washington University Veterinary School for a necropsy to uncover the cause of death.

“If we want this type of bird to continue to exist, we have to figure out a way to make it healthier,” Cerrato said.

Genetic and health issues are not uncommon in such a rare and small population as that of the Malay chickens, he added. Issues range from crooked toes to joint problems and can even include sudden illness such as a heart attack or a stroke.

It’s a paradox any breeder recognizes: to have a healthy animal, the genetic base needs to be broadened, even if it means compromising the standard of the breed.

That’s where the MIGHT project, and crossing the Malay with other breeds, comes in.

“If you love that animal, you have to open yourself up to a wider gene pool,” Cerrato said. “Because if you don’t, you’re going to inadvertently bring in ge-

netic disease that’s going to kill the thing you love.”

Cerrato is hoping others will take an interest in the MIGHT project, increasing genetic diversity and small-scale farming. He has already given two Malay chicks away to a partner of his in the project.

“If we want to capture peoples’ imagination, to get them interested in this lifestyle, big birds might help,” he said.

Besides the long legs and necks, characteristics of the Malay breed include deep-set eyes and three curves in their back. Shuna, Cerrato’s wife, said the breed is also believed to be more calm and talkative than others.

The Malay fowls at Cascadia Heritage Farm are currently about two and a half feet tall. A year from now, if breeding goes well, they could break three feet.

The Cerratos are currently creating 16 enclosures on their farm for the chickens to live.

The farm also has about 40 Aseel chickens, which are believed to be closely related to the Malay breed. Aseel chickens were first bred for cockfighting. Contrary to this seemingly violent background, the Aseel chickens at Cascadia Heritage Farm are tame and trusting, following Cerrato around like a small dog.

“We believe they’re a treasure trove of genetic diversity and wealth,” Cerrato said of the Aseel breed.

The Aseels and Malays are ancient breeds that

originated in India. Cerrato said he found out about the breeds from the Livestock Conservancy, a nonprofit organization that lists all the endangered breeds of livestock and poultry.

“These birds are extremely valuable because of how unique they are,” Cerrato said. “Not only are they unique genetically, but they also represent the cultures they were a part of.”

Having genetic diversity, he added, will help make the chickens less prone to disease. In the event of an avian flu, this could be a very good thing.

Viggo, Cerrato’s son, is the resident “chicken expert” at Cascadia Heritage Farm. He has names for every chicken, such as “Frankenstein,” “Fat Wing” and “Vanilla Ice Cream Hen.” He knows which chicks go with which hens, and he was the first to notice the deceased rooster.

“The goal is to have kids like Viggo have these experiences so that later on in life he can have something to remember and be hopeful about,” Cerrato said.

Another goal of the farm, he added, is to find ways to get young people involved with agriculture. He does not like the hopelessness of some young people he has encountered.

“The best way of getting hope, in our opinion, is looking at the world around you and seeing these other living creatures and saying, ‘These are beautiful,’” Cerrato said.

# HABITAT

CONTINUED FROM A1

enough this year, not for just the birds, but the many nature enthusiasts concerned about them.

“I would suggest that feeding during a cold snap or a snow event does save many lives,” Steve Ellis said. “The warming weather of March is sure to produce large populations of protein-rich invertebrates for the birds to munch on.”

Supporting nature conservation organizations such as Whidbey Camano Land Trust is one way to help ensure that forests, wetlands, and other natural areas remain havens for birds, pollinators and other wildlife. The Land Trust not only preserves lands with an abundance of native plant life, but staff and volunteers also re-introduce native trees and shrubs during restoration and stewardship efforts.

One example is at the Land Trust’s Crockett Lake Preserve, where red-flowering currant, snowberry, Indian plum, Pacific crab apple and other native plants were planted in places where non-native invasive species were removed.

Implementing native plants into your own landscape is another way to help wild creatures.

“Planting native plants that produce seeds and/or fruits is the best assistance we can provide,” said Jay Adams, a Land Trust board member who’s been birding for 45 years. “Also, it’s

important to support the conservation and protection of important native habitat – woodlands, grasslands, wetlands, marshy places and beaches. This provides year-round birds and migratory species the space they need to establish territories and feed and rest as they fly between their wintering and breeding grounds.”

Steve and Martha Ellis retained or planted many native trees and shrubs on their wooded property and have seen at least 65 different wild bird species.

“Red alders are hands down the most important,” Steve said. “They produce prodigious amounts of seeds and their leaves stay on a long time. The latter helps invertebrates, which in turn, feeds birds. The huge Pine Siskin flocks scatter throughout the alders to eat seeds so they aren’t concentrated at a feeder.”

Steve Ellis said he understands there is a natural longing to want to help birds by providing food.

“The real reason we feed is because people have a deep longing for connections to wild creatures, so we invite birds into our controlled spaces through the use of feeders,” he said. “When we retain or replant native flora, we’re the ones being invited into nature.”

Whidbey Camano Land Trust is a nonprofit nature conservation organization that actively involves the community in protecting, restoring, and appreciating the important natural habitats and resource lands that support the diversity of life on our islands and in the waters of Puget Sound.

# ABUSE

CONTINUED FROM A1

perienced veterinary technician for a necropsy.

The technician found that the dog died from blunt force trauma to the liver, causing massive internal bleeding.

The dog likely would have died within three hours and would have been in a great deal of pain, the report states.

In a follow-up interview, Hill told an officer that he was “too aggressive” in putting Lady in her crate and didn’t mean to hurt her, the report states.

Felony animal abuse cases are relatively unusual on Whidbey Island, with some notable exceptions.

About three years ago, Coupeville resident Jonathan Rasmussen pleaded guilty to animal cruelty in the second degree and unlawful possession of a firearm for repeatedly striking a dog with a pickaxe and then shooting it. He received an exceptional sentence of 12 months and a day in prison.

In 2017, a Clinton man pleaded



Photo provided

The death of Lady, above, is being investigated as the possible result of animal cruelty.

guilty to two counts of animal cruelty for crushing a fawn’s pelvis with his bare hands and shooting a doe with a pellet gun because he was upset about the animals eating his apples; he was sentenced to three months in jail.

In 2015, a North Whidbey woman was charged with multiple counts of animal cruelty for allegedly letting her horses starve.



WhidbeyHealth  
HERO



Mei-Ling Stout  
Coordinator  
(Hospice & Palliative Care)

SOME HEROES  
EXEMPLIFY CUSTOMER SERVICE

*"I have worked with Mei-Ling for almost 7 years now, during this time she consistently demonstrates outstanding customer service skills. Mei-Ling is our front line for all incoming phone calls. She is able to take these calls with compassion and empathy while making sure the call gets made to the proper department or person quickly.*

*I have never worked with someone who consistently displays professionalism and positivity in the way that Mei-Ling does. She stands out as a superstar!"*

Mei-Ling Stout is a **real healthcare hero.**

Mei-Ling has a smile that makes you feel amazing; you can't help but smile yourself. She not only brightens the room; she lifts the hearts of everyone around her. She has this attitude of "how can I help" and a passion to make our lives better. I always look forward to visiting with her when I make my rounds to our Hospice and Palliative Care Departments.

Thank you, Mei-Ling for being part of our WhidbeyHealth family and supporting our patients and their loved ones!


You are a superstar!



Ron Telles, CEO  
WhidbeyHealth




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Whidbey  
MEMORIAL  
FUNERAL & CREMATION SERVICE

Whidbey Memorial Funeral and Cremation is pleased to welcome John Haas to it's staff as a full-time licensed funeral director and pre-planning specialist.



John is a native of Oak Harbor and has returned with his wife Kyla to serve his home town. John is the third generation to call Whidbey Island home. His grandparents, Tom and Vivian Wright were stationed here; his father Johnny Haas worked here in auto body rebuild. John returns after several years working in various ministry and related work in Michigan and Washington. He came into funeral service through working part time for Lemley Funeral Home in Sedro Woolley, and then full-time for Evans Funeral Home in Anacortes.

John tells us, "I find it a privilege to help people through one of the most difficult times in life, the loss of a loved one. I lost my own parents at an early age. I did not handle the grieving process well or understand the value of honoring, memorializing, and gathering. Now I find great fulfilment in helping others with the details that help them grieve and honor their loved ones in the loss. It's gratifying to hear people say that we helped them through a terrible time."

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