

# Hornby Island Community School

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## natural history collection



The Hornby Island Community School is not your typical elementary school, but it does a good job of reflecting the values that make Hornby Island itself a wonderfully atypical place to grow up. It's little things like compost and recycling bins in each classroom, colourful reports on "Where our Water Comes From" (an important issue on the island) adorning the walls, and Vivaldi's Four Seasons piping through the PA system to usher kids back from recess that make the place feel special. And, if you are a student at HICS, you think it just comes with



the territory to have a taxidermied Bald Eagle with six foot wingspan suspended in mid-flight in the library. In fact Joy Jeffries, the school librarian, is apt to whip a stuffed mink or Pileated Woodpecker from behind its glass case and relate an impromptu fact or two about it, while allowing everyone their turn to gently stroke its fur or feathers. Normal as this may be for the Hornby school kids, it never seems to lose its excitement for them.

Over the years, certain members of the staff, as well as naturalists in the community have been building up quite a menagerie of local wildlife at the school. All the animals died of natural causes and were found by Hornby Island residents, including students past and present. There was the beaver that was hit by a car outside the Co-op Store, the crow that flew into the school one day and then

by seeing these amazing creatures up close.

It had long been a dream of several teachers and many other Hornby residents to be able to share their collection of over forty stuffed birds and mammals, insects, reptiles, amphibians, awe-inspiring local fossils and all sorts of marine life, skulls, nests, and other natural artifacts with both locals and visitors to the island. In the summer of 2005, with help from the Hornby Island Educational Society, local conservation and community groups, and a small federal grant, the Hornby Island Community School Natural History Collection finally came into being.

Dwindling enrollment at HICS left an unused classroom as the perfect location for the exhibit. A young biologist (me) was hired to sort through the collection, set up displays, and to add educational content to displays. The Hornby school kids were happy to help in adding to the collection. I was frequently surprised with a variety of small wasps' nests, shells and, memorably, a partially eaten, still twitching dragonfly. Local naturalists, both noted and amateur, gave their time and expertise in identifying specimens and providing local background. A well-known local artist designed brochures, posters and postcards. My father got in the act as well, constructing plinths for the specimens. Local businesses displayed brochures and posters. It was a real community effort, but as I have learned from my summer at the school, that is how things get done on Hornby.

For two months I had the pleasure of running the exhibit—meeting locals, summer residents and tourists, and seeing the reactions of city kids to our flock of impressively lifelike stuffed wildlife. I think the most-asked question was "Is it real?"

hit the front door windows on its way back out, the Snowy Owl found starved to death on a local farm, and the Great Blue Heron washed ashore after a storm. Then there are the fossils of ammonites, crabs and giant clams found on field trips to Fossil Beach. It is the belief of many locals that all these specimens are an important part of their island's natural history, and that there is much to be gained

followed by "No, but, is it alive?" I had a great time answering questions as well as learning new things myself from the many interesting folks who passed through the exhibit.

Each animal in the collection was displayed with information about its species, as well as who found it, where and how it died, and conservation status and concerns. The exhibit included a drawing station (for sketching your favourite animal) and a touch table full of interesting artifacts for kids to match to the pictures and names on the wall.

The collection is nothing if not dynamic—all summer locals brought in their rare fossil finds, tiny bird skulls, nests and, sadly, dead animals. I was offered a dead opossum in a bag, which I opened and peered at face to face until suddenly I remembered that opossums are noted for playing dead, then springing back to life with a vengeance. Luckily for me, it wasn't playing this time! In the past, Hornby school students have raised money



for taxidermying their feathered and furred friends, by selling hand made cards or hosting raffles. With this support as well as local donations, the collection continues to slowly but steadily expand. I'll have to go back this year to see if the seal skeleton Joy Jeffries was "cleaning" with help from her ant hill last summer is ready and up for view.

The exhibit will be running again this summer, operating on a nominal entrance fee and visitor donations. There are many good reasons to make a trip to Hornby Island part of your summer plans: natural beauty, a colourful and vibrant community and a continuous stream of summer programs and events. And really, where else could a trip to the elementary school during summer seem like such a good idea? Offering up-close encounters with a massive bald eagle or a tiny hummingbird, and all things weird and wonderful in between, the HICS Natural History Collection is an experience you won't want to miss. 🍁

Hornby Island Community School is located at 1200 Sollans Road. Phone 250-335-2125 for more information.