Volunteers working on osprey cam project for Lillooet

Viewing could begin this spring WENDY FRASER

Sidney, Hornby Island, White Rock and Delta all have eagle cams that attract fascinated viewers and nature lovers from around the world.

Now, a group of volunteers is dedicated to bringing an osprey cam to Lillooet to share the comings and goings, struggles and successes of the ospreys that nest every spring on the old Fraser River suspension bridge.

Brian Barker came up with the idea for the osprey cam after he started watching an eagle cam on Vancouver Island.

"I got up one morning and I turned my computer on and CBC had a video camera of these eagles on Vancouver Island building a nest and I watched it for awhile and it was interesting so I watched it again the next day and the next day," he recalled. "Warning: it becomes addictive. So you get up every morning to see how the nest is coming. Then they lay the eggs. And pretty soon, you're almost part of the family. You watch the eggs hatch and how they behave and then of course, you have to see the end of it, how this all plays out. And there's drama, there's tragedy, there are all the components of a great story."

Barker recalls when a crow stole one egg from the nest, leaving only one remaining. "And I thought, 'Oh my God, all this work for nothing.' But when the crow came back, the parents were a little more vigilant and discouraged the crow."

He says he used to walk down to the old bridge and watch the ospreys every day.

"They were pretty interesting, too. Their eyesight must be terrific because they can spot a mouse or a rat on the railway tracks and they can make a beeline right for the railway tracks and catch a tiny mouse."

He recalls one occasion when an osprey caught a fish and struggled to carry the fish up to the nest. "The fish jumped out of the nest, bounced off a cable and fell back down to the river, with mama chasing it all the way. I thought, 'Boy, that's one lucky fish!'"

At some point, Barker began mulling over the possibility of installing a webcam on the bridge. But he wasn't sure how to do that. He eventually contacted the Lillooet Naturalist Society for help and the society has been busy in recent months laying the groundwork for the project.

Scott Bodaly and Steve Pietila have done much of the legwork, researching technical requirements, looking into costs and contacting others who could provide technical expertise to help with the project.

Bodaly said a camera would be installed on pylon or bridge support at a height that will allow the camera to look down into the osprey nest. Further down on that same support structure, a solar panel will be used to power the camera's battery. A box will also be installed with a large RV battery for a cloudy day

"There's been an incredible amount of support for the idea," said Bodaly. "I haven't run into anybody yet that has said anything negative about it. Everybody is extremely positive about it."

He said a long list of individuals, businesses and agencies have stepped forward to help with the project, starting with Ron Taylor and Fraser Cove Campground, which will host a wi-fi server at no cost. A larger host server was also needed to broadcast scenes from the osprey cam on the web. There were some initial challenges finding a host server until teacher Kim Halayko contacted School District 74, which agreed to act as host.

"They have huge hosting capacity, and they said they would love to do it, it's a fabulous educational tool and they're behind it," Bodaly told the News.

"Bob Van Natter from Virtual Help provided help sorting out the electronics, Scott Hudson was available for advice on the electrical requirements and Doug Grossler from Lillooet Contracting has offered the use of a fancy piece of equipment called a man-lift to get us up on top of the bridge and do the installation, all free of charge. There would have been a pretty big price tag on that."

He said Naturalist Society president Vivian Birch-Jones has recently completed applications for grant funding for the project, which has a $5,200 budget.

We've got our ducks in a row, but we don't have the funding yet," Bodaly explained. "We'll definitely be contacting BC Hydro to see if they can help."

He said working on the project has been "quite a thrill. I'm excited about getting up on the bridge and installing it, but I found out there's paperwork as well. That's where it's great to have Vivian handling the funding applications."

If all goes well, the osprey cam should be installed in time for nesting season this spring.

"Another good thing is that the camera is going to be installed on the 100-year anniversary of the old suspension bridge," added Bodaly. "That seems appropriate."

Osprey Facts

Ospreys (Pandion hallaetus) return to the same nest, made of sticks and often located on man-made elevated structures such as bridges, power poles and buoys as well as cliffs and snags

The diet of an osprey consists nearly entirely of live fish

Ospreys can become completely submerged when diving for fish and still take off with their prey, unlike bald eagles, which pluck fish from the surface

There have been reports of ospreys drowning after locking into a fish that is too big and strong to carry to the surface

The use of DDT and other pesticides once threatened the existence of ospreys worldwide but their numbers have rebounded in recent decades

They are the most widely distributed bird of prey and are found on all continents except Antarctica

Ospreys are unique because they have an opposable toe that can face forward or backward. When sitting on a branch, the bird usually has three toes on the front and one on the back. While holding a fish, the osprey usually has two toes on each side of the fish. When flying with its prey, the osprey invariably flies with the fish head first to reduce wind resistance.