

# Re-visiting Metchosin's "Pearl of Great Price"

- St. Matthew

BY CHRIS PRATT

Much of the following story is a reprise of a like-titled article published 13 years ago, in the April 2005 edition of the Metchosin Muse. At the time the original article was published, it appeared that the DND Mary Hill Battery Lands which define so much of our community's rural and natural character were on the cusp of being declared surplus to military needs. After a deferral of more than a dozen years, recent information suggests that a declaration of "surplus" has occurred and that a corresponding change in land stewardship and use may be imminent. The potential implications for our community are profound.

In aggregate, the Mary Hill Battery Lands consist of over 200 hectares (about 500 acres) of varied terrain: original old growth forests, Garry oak groves, rocky outcrops and more than 2 kilometres of shoreline. These lands also include the Pearson College campus and its adjacent trail system.

When the Victoria Natural History Society conducted a detailed survey and inventory of the site in 2001, their report said, *"This area is the most nearly pristine of all the ecosystems the Victoria Natural History Society has examined in the Great Victoria area, and as such should be regarded as highly valuable ecologically. This site contains at least 7% of the remaining world supply of this rare old growth forest type"*. The type of forest being referred to is, of course, the Coastal Douglas Fir climax growth, the species that once dominated the southern and eastern sides of Vancouver Island, and was so much coveted by the lumber barons; which is why so little of this original forest remains today.

There's plenty of evidence of First Nations use of these lands, in the way of ancient burial cairns and remnant camas meadows. In addition to millennia of First Nations traditional use, this parcel of CRD geography has a rich post-contact history, beginning with Spanish exploration of Pedder Bay and Mary Hill in the 1700's. In the 1850's these lands were part of the original land acquisition efforts embodied within Vancouver Island's Douglas treaties and, not long after these early treaties were concluded, title was conferred to the Weir family, whose name continues to live on in Metchosin.

The topic of Species At Risk and the corresponding federal Act (SARA) has been getting its fair share of news these days, albeit in relation to a marine species that frequents the shorelines of these lands: the Southern Resident Killer Whales (SRKW). After receiving a notable rebuke from the Court of Appeal, the federal government has recently announced its role working with other governments toward a coordinated recovery plan

for the Chinook salmon on which SRKW pod members depend for food. In a decision to declare the Mary Hill Battery Land as surplus and to position them for disposal for other uses, one hopes that the federal government is aware that the terrestrial ecosystems of these lands are also home to several Species At Risk. The sharp-tailed snake is found here and on only a few other sites in Canada. It is “Red Listed” as an endangered species, as is the Townsend’s Big Eared Bat. In addition to the presence of climax Douglas Fir forest, Mary Hill is also home to endangered plant species at the other end of the size scale: Macoun’s Meadowfoam, an inconspicuous little spring flower exists here and on only a very few other sites on the Island – and nowhere else in the world.

Knowledge of the extraordinary, intact ecosystems and rich human history of the Mary Hill Battery Lands positions us to think very carefully about its future stewardship. And with disposition apparently quite imminent, it is important that our local leaders, provincial and government representatives become aware of our corresponding aspirations.

My views today remain as expressed in my April 2005 article in the Metchosin Muse: The greatest value of the Mary Hill Battery Lands is the integrity and the variety of its collective ecosystems, from the octopus in its rocky lair along the shore to the eagle nesting in the giant forest fir, as well as its connection to other wild areas beyond. Fragmentation would compromise its value. It really should be designated and protected as an ecological conservation area, with corresponding covenants.

The future of the Mary Hill Battery Lands is likely to define the future character of Metchosin. Let’s do our collective best to ensure that wise stewardship prevails.