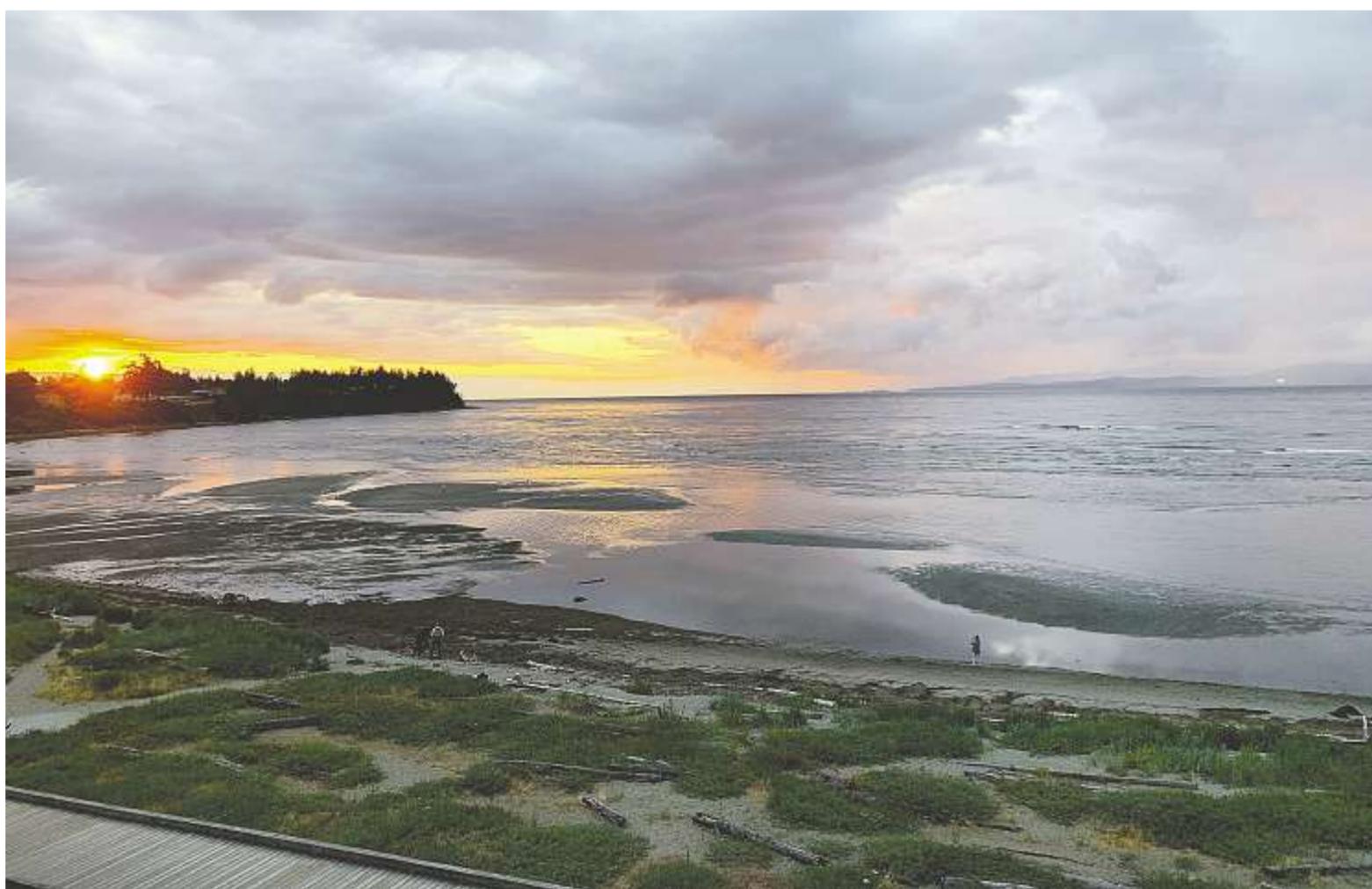


“Since 1985 the non-profit association has rescued 22,750 birds and animals on Vancouver Island. Currently 60 animals are permanent residents for one reason or another, including two black bears ... And another permanent resident is animal ambassador Sandor, a regal bald eagle found on the highway with a crushed wing. **Jane Mundy**

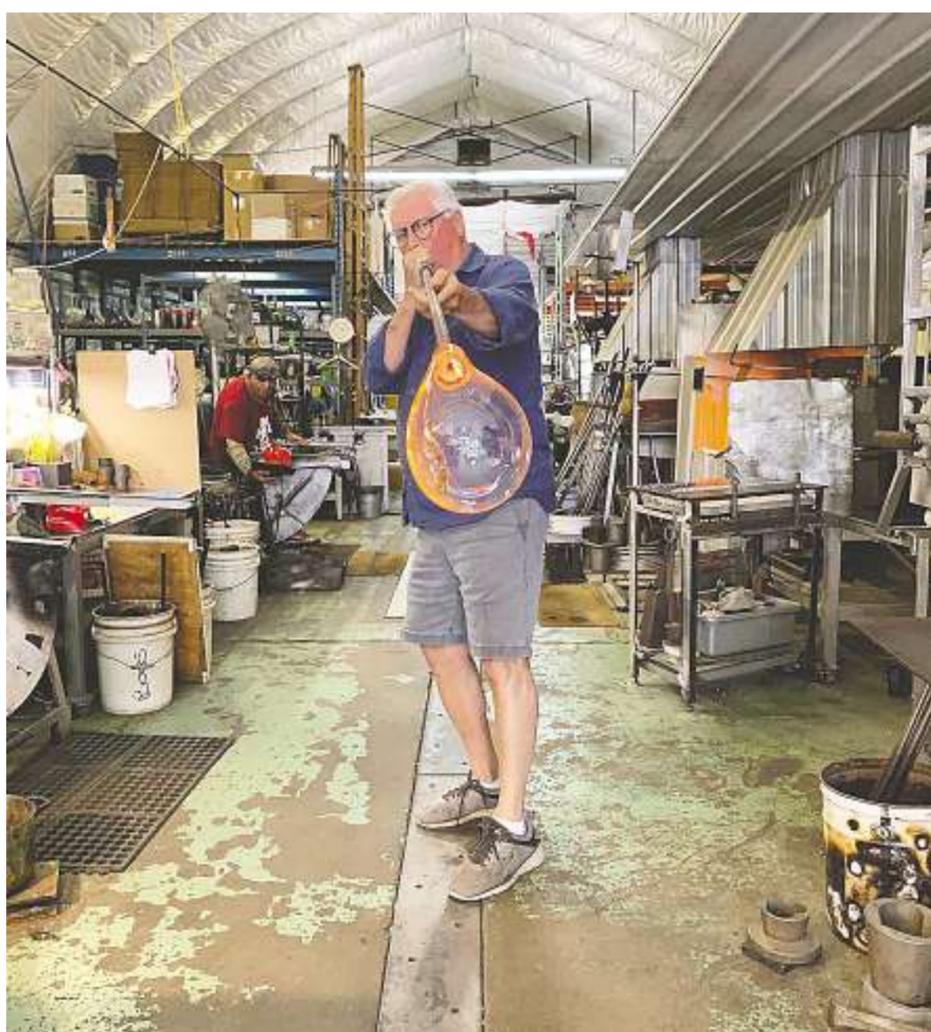
COOL COOMBS, QUIRKY QUALICUM



Savour the serenity of sunset in Parksville after a full day exploring the many charms of Vancouver Island's Oceanside communities. PHOTOS: JANE MUNDY

& PICTURESQUE PARKSVILLE

Island communities have long attracted retirees, but offer plenty of appeal for all ages



It's fascinating to watch the glass blowers at work at Robert Held Art Glass on the Island Highway.

JANE MUNDY

Life's a beach in Parksville and Qualicum, for both people and birds. And there's more to Coombs than goats on the roof.

Chances are you'll strike up a conversation along the boardwalk or the pub with a former Vancouverite or Calgarian who cashed in, moved here and loves it. But not everyone comes here to retire. Sure, there are plenty of seniors here but lately this area has attracted a younger crowd. Crafters and cooks, farmers and retailers have created a sea change in these parts.

Our itinerary started out with beach and spa time and gourmet dining, but after a quick online search an extra day was added for birding and shopping. I discovered there are more than 120 bird species in this area so I contacted a local pro who took me to his "secret" birding spots, but my first stop was the North Island Wildlife Recovery Centre (NIWRA) in nearby Errington.

Sitting on eight acres, the NIWRA is a world-class rehabilitation facility with an interactive learning centre and gift store — shopping began.

Longtime volunteer Dr. Lynne Brookes greeted us and we walked by displays about trash showing the damage we're doing and another display diagramming how a poisoned mouse can kill so many animals.

"Our purpose is to educate the public out of our jobs," Brookes said. Although the release of wildlife back into their natural habitat is

IF YOU GO

BC Ferries connects Horseshoe Bay with Nanaimo's Departure Bay, and the trip takes about 1 hour, 40 minutes.

always the goal, Brookes won't lose her position any time soon.

Along with the bird drop-off, since 1985 the non-profit association has rescued 22,750 birds and animals on Vancouver Island. Currently 60 animals are permanent residents for one reason or another, including two black bears. Kanut, a 26-year resident, enjoyed chocolate pudding mixed into his meds and Rae snacked on a Cliff chocolate bar. And another permanent resident is animal ambassador Sandor, a regal bald eagle found on the highway with a crushed wing. If he's in the right mood, Sandor may greet you at his enclosure. We ogled the largest eagle flight enclosure in Canada where four eagles are regaining muscle strength after an injury — usually from being hit by vehicles.

We watched Teresa (she is one of about 100 volunteers) glove-training an owl. She told us that about 700 animals were admitted last year, some almost DOA, and mostly from run-ins with cats or guns.

Through Pacific Rainforest Adventures I hooked up with Christopher Stephens, a local ornithologist with more than 18 years birding experience. We started at Englishman River estuary where many birds flock to from Mexico. It's almost exotic.

SEE PARKSVILLE ON F10

ENJOY SEA, SHOPS AND SPA TIME

PARKSVILLE FROM F9

The mudflats and saltwater estuary are great for viewing without disturbing wildlife. Step up to the viewing platform for a panoramic view: one side is mud flat and the other a salt marsh; behind is woodland and river and forward (in the distance) is the ocean.

We drove on to Hamilton Marsh, 10 minutes from Qualicum Beach. More than 100 species of birds have been recorded in this huge wetland, making it a favourite spot for both birders and tourists.

Try booking a morning tour when there's more feeding action and you can walk out of the estuary basin to Englishman River. Give yourself at least two hours, and bring rubber boots.

Before checking in at the Beach Club Resort consider stopping at nearby French Creek Seafood Company for the freshest seafood. Our spacious suite contained a well-equipped kitchen so we had excellent halibut cakes and cioppino on our deck overlooking Parksville Beach.

My kind companion says it was almost as good as dinner at the resort's Pacific Prime Restaurant the following night. Executive chef Rick Davidson has cleverly chosen to minimize the menu, but the wine list remains extensive.

Thinking ahead, I reserved time in the swimming pool and a treatment at Stonewater Spa. I swanned up to our room after my "OxyGeneo" facial that was incredibly soothing.

We didn't plan on doing much shopping but Coombs Country Market has become much more than a pit stop for groceries. It's stuffed with gourmet foods and kitchenware, ceramics and even hammocks.

And the deli screams picnic.

Walk behind the market to an eclectic mix of retail shops and galleries.

If you aren't picnicking, Cuckoo restaurant serves great pizza and the building is so gorgeous it's like you've been whisked to Tuscany.

Down the road (going toward Parksville) is Demxx, a huge space choc-a-bloc with deconstruction and building supplies, home and garden decor, rows of bathtubs and much more.

The area of Parksville/Qualicum/Coomb's has amazing shopping, because so many stores carry different items than big box outlets.

I don't think anyone leaves Bamboozle (women's clothing) and House of Leaves (gifts) next door without a purchase. I heard women from Victoria come here just to shop at these eclectic stores.

Be sure to stop at Robert Held Art Glass on the Island Highway for an exquisite piece of art, from clam shell paperweights for about \$30 to one-of-a-kind vases for a lot more. Behind the glass collections is the workshop: watching glass-blowers is mesmerizing.

An obvious sign of a changing demographic here is the arrival of craft breweries. Mount Arrowsmith Brewing Company is the local hipster hot spot and on the same block is the craft distillery Bespoke Spirits House, showcasing "Virtual Vodka" from locally-sourced ingredients.

Getting around is a breeze and another reason why I love about this area. You can kick off your shoes and stroll sandy beaches and do absolutely nothing—or not.

The writer travelled courtesy of Parksville Qualicum Beach Tourism Association. No one from the association read or approved of this article before publication.



There are more than 100 avian species in this area, making it a great place to bird-watch. JANE MUNDY

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