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Moulting elephant seal near Burnside Road escorted back to Colquitz Creek

By Curtis Blandy | Wednesday, March 22nd, 2023

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(Dorothy Chambers)

On Tuesday afternoon, an elephant seal in moulting was harassed by humans and dogs to the point where it found itself in imminent danger, taking refuge in a ditch by the Burnside Road exit off the Trans-Canada Highway.

Moulting is an intense process all elephant seals go through once per year around springtime. While moulting, the elephant seal will come ashore shed all of its fur as well as the layer of skin beneath it.

Elephant seals in moulting will try their hardest to find a safe area to lay low for the entire month. They usually look quite sickly throughout the process, won't move much and will lose up to 25% of their body weight.

This elephant seal in particular was scared of, and harassed by humans and their off-leash dogs walking through Colquitz Park. It fled uphill, leading it to the ditch it was reported to Saanich Police in.

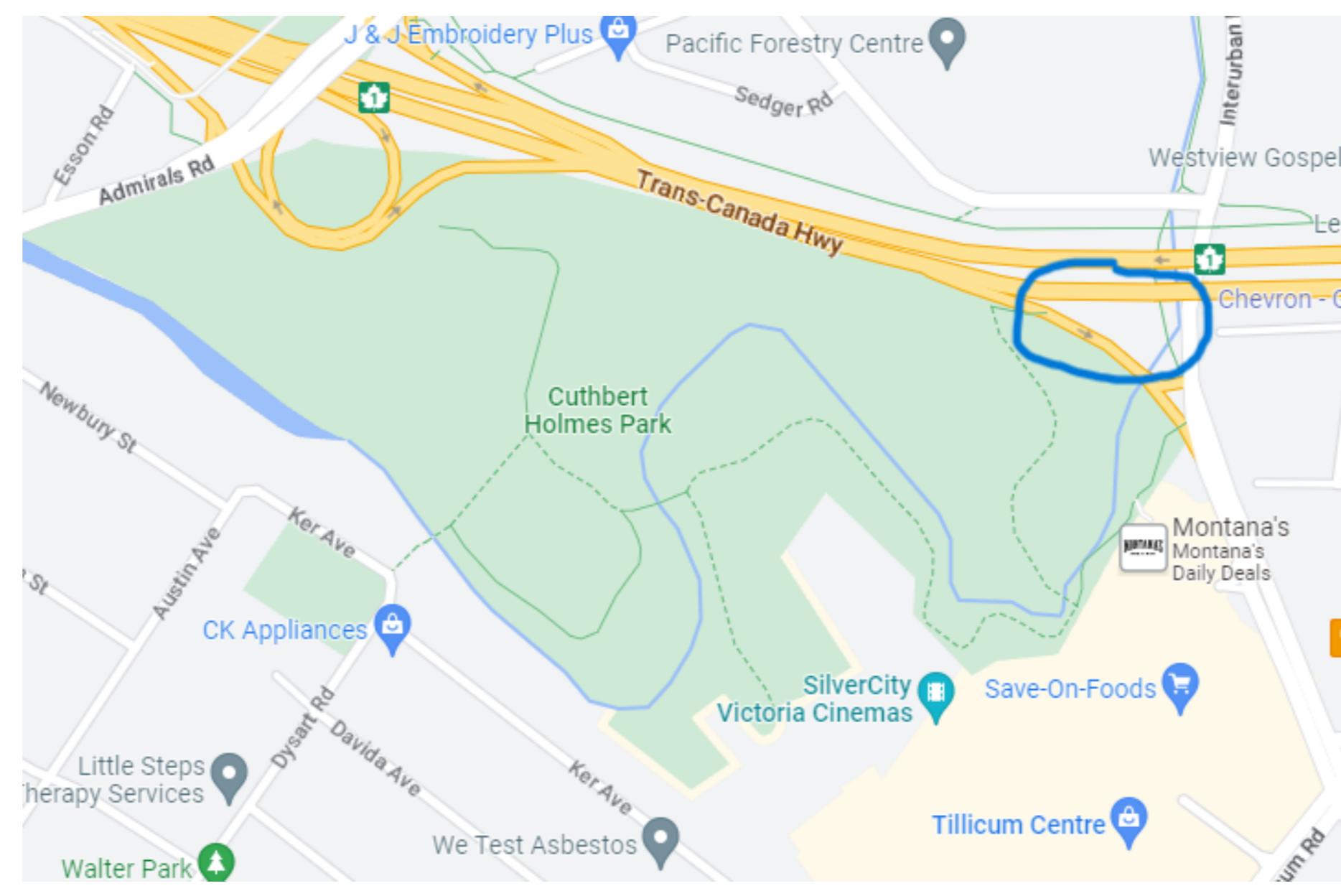
"It was reported by a couple out walking their dog that said they saw a seal on the side of the highway," said Department Commander Mandy Ludlow of Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO).

"They reported to Saanich Police, and they in turn called it into the DFO 24-hour observe, record and report line."

Ludlow and another DFO officer attended the scene and found two Saanich Police officers in the ditch beside the highway exit.

"The animal had travelled up the Colquitz Creek and then tried to haul out," Ludlow told Victoria Buzz.

"Everytime it was bothered, it would obviously have a response and move. The poor thing ended up going up a bank and ended up behind Tillicum Mall and on the highway side of the creek."



The area the moulting elephant seal made its way to is circled in blue (Google Maps)

Ludlow, police and the other DFO officer tried to make a game plan to get the elephant seal out of the ditch and back down to the water, but unfortunately, moving an animal that weighed around 300 lbs proved difficult.

"Best case scenario would have been load it into a crate and relocate it, but because it was a good 250 to 275 lbs, there was really no way we could have," explained Ludlow.

"Maybe we could have gotten it into a crate, but we wouldn't have been able to get it into a truck."

Those on site contacted the DFO's marine animal expert who suggested the best course of action was to try to encourage it and guide it back down to the creek.

"We basically had to do its route in reverse, which took a little over three hours," Ludlow told Victoria Buzz.

"During that time, we had several off-leash dogs come and try to harass it to where we had to get pretty firm with people to get control of their dogs."

Ludlow explained there was one particularly difficult dog and dog owner who didn't even have a leash with them and refused to follow directions. She added that it is against city bylaws to harass marine animals.

"We were more concerned with this animal's safety than charging someone, but there's some pretty hefty fines and worst case scenario would be we have to stop the threat and get control of that dog ourselves, which is not ideal," said Ludlow.

"It was pretty disheartening, the lack of respect from the dog walker for wildlife."

Ludlow and the DFO plans on following up with the District of Saanich to recommend Colquitz Park become an 'on-leash' park for dogs.

"Humans and wildlife can coexist, we just have to be respectful," added Ludlow.

Ludlow, on behalf of the DFO and the elephant seals who moult in and around Victoria, wants to remind people to respect these animals' space and keep dogs away from them as they will be seen as a predator to the animals.

If you see a moulting seal, you can call the DFO's 24-hour phone line at 1-800-465-4336.

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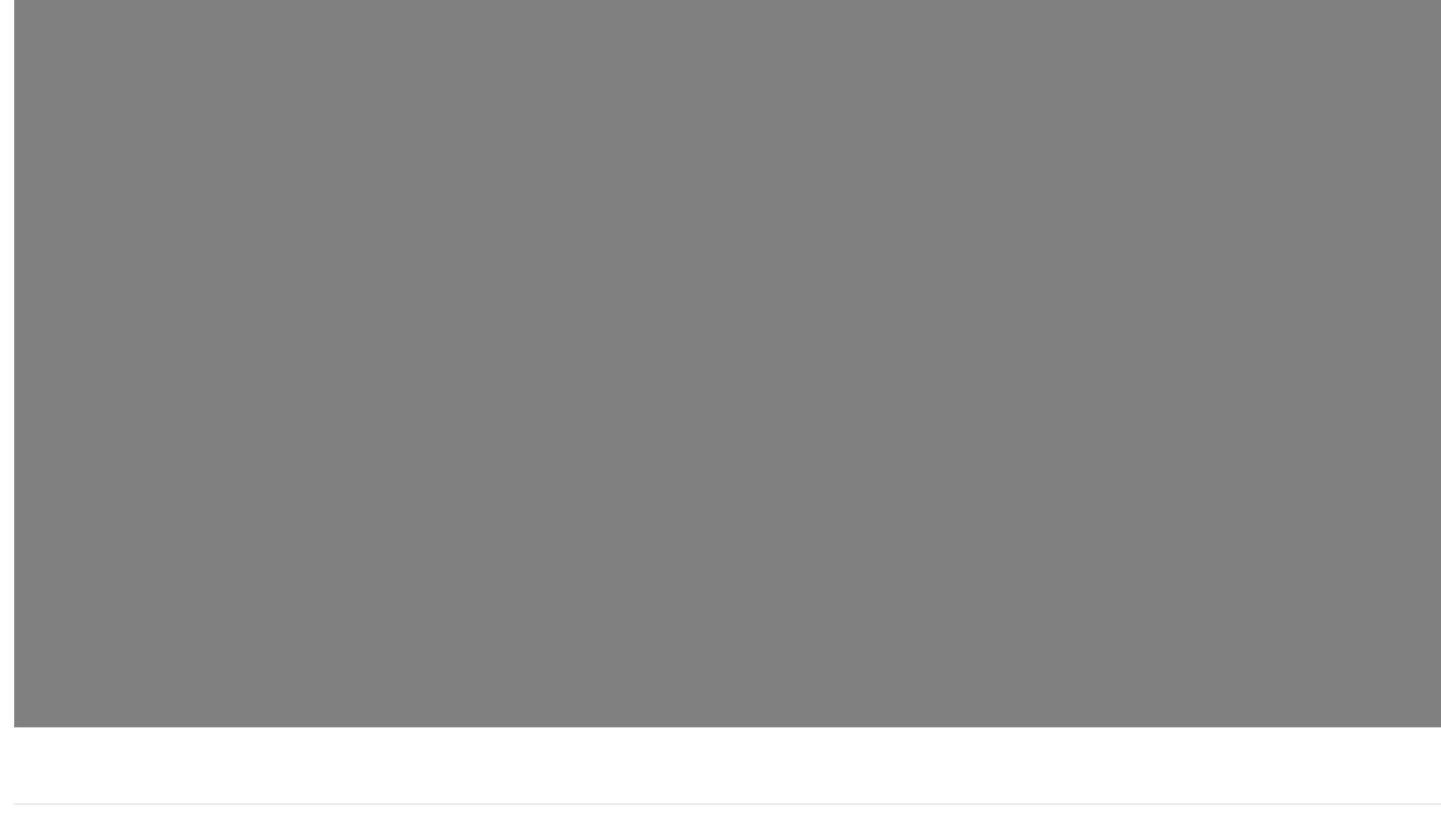
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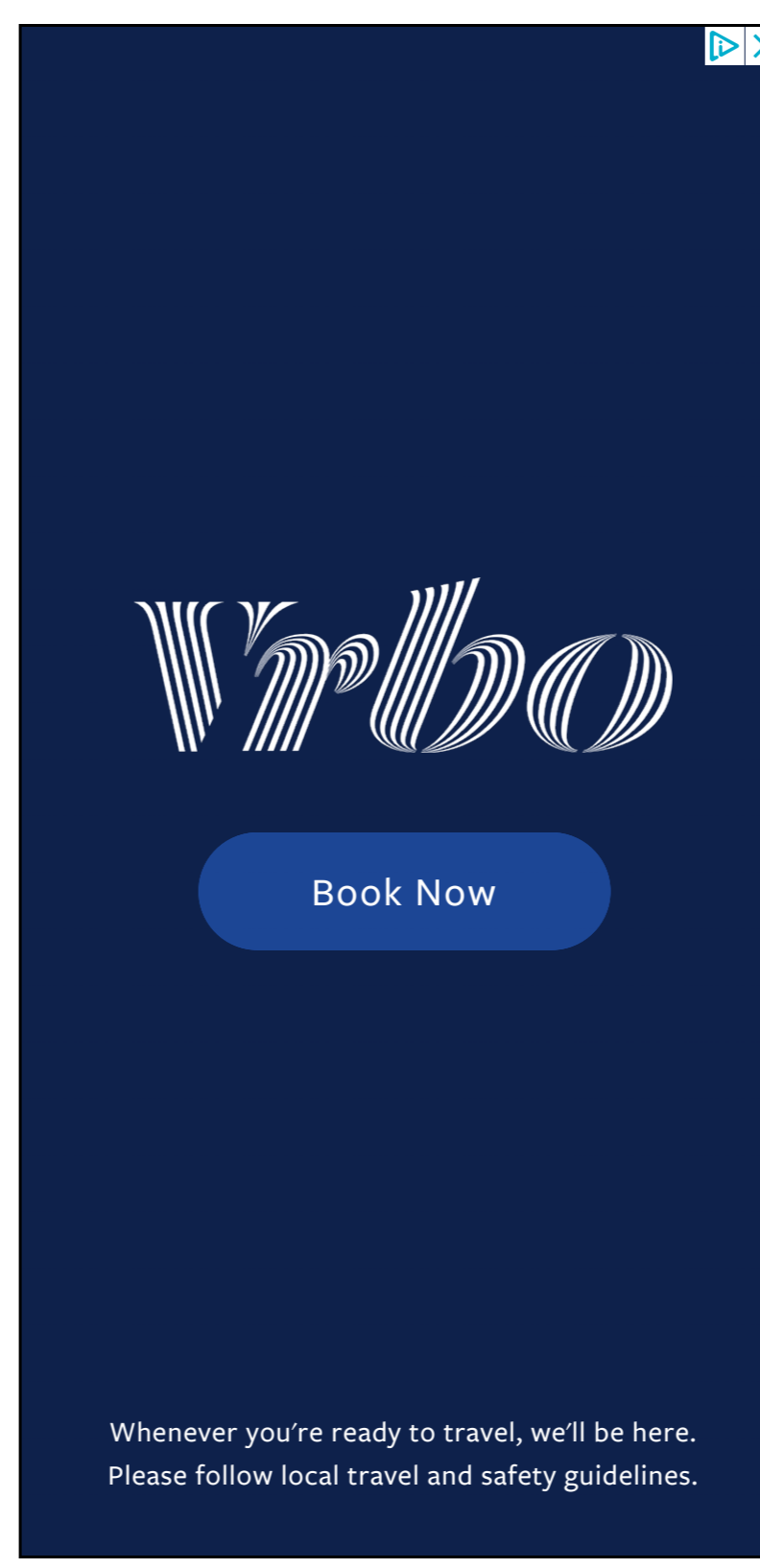
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