

Hermit priest keeps doing just what he loves

Book conservator doubles as a darn good self-taught photographer

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Record Staff

BLACK CREEK — A long and winding driveway off Catherwood Road leads to the home of Father Charles Brandt, a priest of the Roman Catholic Church who lives a solitary life on a 30-acre spread next to the Oyster River.

He is a hermit priest. A sliding glass door opens into a conservation lab at the front of a cedar house. It is where Brandt plies his trade as a book and paper conservator.

Along with an assortment of materials and tools, the lab contains a camera — evidence of a hobby at which the 88-year-old native of Kansas City, Mo. excels.

Upstairs is a library predominated by the writings of Thomas Merton — one of his heroes — and books about birds — one of his favourite subjects to photograph.

At the back of the house is the kitchen, where Brandt hosts twice-monthly meditation sessions with a small group.

It was through the sliding glass door in the kitchen where he once photographed a cougar that had followed him from the river.

Brandt recalls it had been “absolutely quiet” that day while he sat on a bench above the river.

“I couldn’t see him,” he said of the cat. “I

HONOURS AND ACTIVITIES

- Recipient of the Haig-Brown Conservation Award (Totem Flyfishers);
- Recipient of the Cal Woods Award (Steelhead Society of B.C.);
- Life member of the Haig-Brown Kingfisher’s Creek Society;
- Member of the mining committee of the Tsolum River Restoration Society.

heard these robins excitedly calling. I looked over my shoulder, and couldn’t see anything. I walk into the house and closed the door. Then I looked out. At first I thought it was a deer — that’s the path they come up — but there was a cougar. And it stayed around for a while.”

Using a digital Canon Mark 3 with 200-mm lens, he snapped a picture of the approximately 15-foot cougar, which promptly fell asleep in the shade underneath a tree at the bottom of the backstairs.

“There’s no vibration, so I can get pretty good shots,” said Brandt, whose face and physique bely his age. “I always

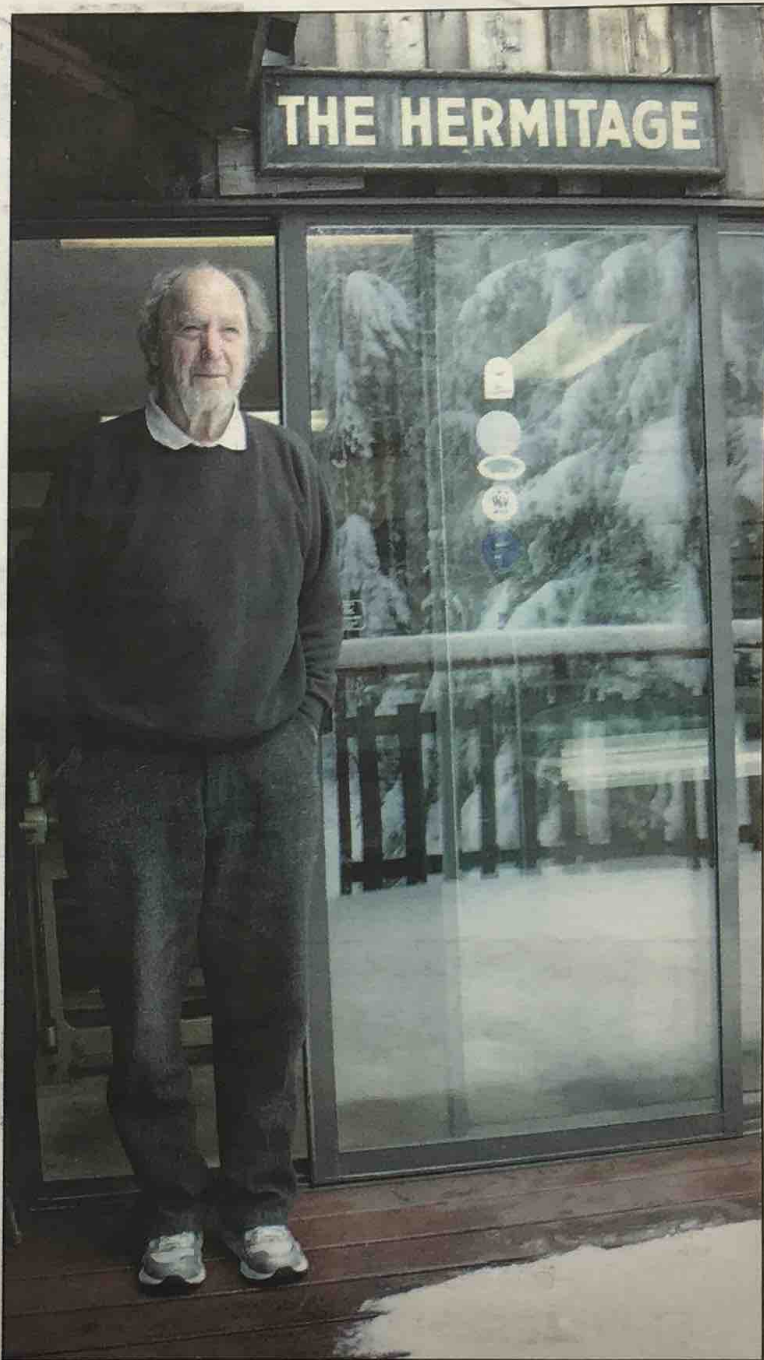
have a camera in the van, so if I see something I photograph it.”

Brandt started out by using a “simple camera” when he took a photography course at Cornell University in New York, from where he obtained a bachelor of science in ornithology. But he is mostly a self-taught photographer, as was his father.

Brandt became an islander in 1965. A year later, he was ordained to the Catholic priesthood at the Canadian Martyrs Church in Courtenay, which is now a theatre. He was mandated to live the life of a hermit priest.

“Which is pretty unusual,” he said. “I

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FATHER CHARLES BRANDT is pictured at left in his conservation lab inside his Black Creek home and also outside his Black Creek hermitage.

PHOTOS BY SCOTT STANFIELD

Lived here in self-built cabin near Headquarters Creek

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unusual," he said. "I came from the Trappist Monks, that's a Benedictine order. Everybody knew about the hermits on Vancouver Island from all over the world. It was a group that wanted more solitude that you couldn't find in the big order...I came from New Melleray Abbey (Iowa) to join the hermitage on the Tsolum River — when the mine was going in on Mount Washington."

As a member of the Hermits of St. John the Baptist, Father Charles first lived in a cabin he constructed near Headquarters Creek in the Tsolum River watershed before moving his hermitage to the banks of the Oyster River.

Prior to moving to Canada, Brandt had served as a navigator with the U.S. air force during the 1940s. He later graduated with the aforementioned BSc. and a bachelor of divinity from Nashotah House, a theological seminary in Wisconsin.

"I'm not just a hippie copping out of society," he said with a chuckle.

Every couple of years or so he will pack his van and journey south of the border to visit family and friends.

Besides his skill behind the lens, Brandt is also gifted with the pen. His published books include *Meditations From the Wilderness*.

He is also the subject of a chapter entitled A Hermit of the Rivers, which appears in the Stephen Hume book A Walk with the Rainy Sisters.

Hume, a writer for the Vancouver Sun, was among a crowd that squeezed into a Campbell River church in 2007 to celebrate Brandt's 40th anniversary as a hermit priest.

Hume writes: "Brandt represents an ancient tradition of wise men and women withdrawing from the world, the better to reflect upon how best to serve God."

Amen.

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THE CATHOLIC PRIEST gets a few guests at his rustic hermitage — some of them uninvited.

PHOTO BY FATHER CHARLES BRANDT