

Singing the bluebirds

Project coordinator Alina Fisher explains how the Bring Back the Bluebirds program on Vancouver Island is changing the tune for western bluebirds.

Photo by TJ Watt

SONGS FROM THE WOOD

Alina Fisher is the program coordinator for Bring Back the Bluebirds, a project to restore western bluebird populations on Vancouver Island. To date, the project has translocated about 70 birds.

Western bluebirds aren't difficult to recognize. Spotting them in the Garry oak habitats of Vancouver Island is another matter. Once common, the birds were declared extirpated in 1995. But things are looking up due to Bring Back the Bluebirds, a program led by the Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team Society. Project coordinator Alina Fisher explains.

What's the focus of the Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team Society?

We're a charitable group that formed officially in 2007 to support the work of the Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team (GOERT). It coordinates efforts to protect and restore endangered Garry oak — the only native oak in Western Canada — and their associated ecosystems. The recovery team formed in 1999. Our group grew out of a partnership between government experts, NGOs, academic institutions, First Nations, volunteers and consultants who shared an interest in conserving these ecosystems.

How did you become interested in western bluebirds?

Western bluebirds were once common in Garry oak meadows and savannahs throughout Vancouver Island, the southern Gulf Islands and nearby areas in Washington state, such as the San Juan Islands. Then the populations went into decline. In 1995, British Columbia placed the birds on the Red List, which meant they were extirpated in the province.

Their rapid decline, both here and in areas of Washington and Oregon, was probably due to a combination of loss of Garry oak habitat, removal of standing dead trees that provided cavities for nesting and competition for remaining nest holes with exotic bird species such as European starlings and English house sparrows. So it was a natural fit for GOERT to undertake the recovery project in conjunction with recovery programs for other at-risk species in the Garry oak ecosystem.

What are your goals with the bluebird project and how are you achieving them?

We want to re-establish a breeding population of western bluebirds on southeastern Vancouver Island and the southern Gulf Islands. Our main activities are replacing lost nesting cavities by providing nest-boxes in good habitat and releasing birds in our area that we bring in from a healthy population.

Our project is focused in the Cowichan Valley, near Quamichan Lake and Somenos Lake, where we've been releasing bluebirds since 2012 as part of a five-year program. We're continuing translocations of up to 10 pairs of

bluebirds each year. This year is the last of the program, and our goal is to have released 90 adult bluebirds in total.

How's the work going?

We're seeing many of our translocated birds returning every year. We still have a little way to go to meet our goal of 90 birds as a minimum viable population. But at the end of last season — 2015 — we had nearly 70 birds.

What are the highlights of the program?

For me personally, it's hearing about the sightings of our returning bluebirds. The idea that we have island-hatched bluebirds coming back year after year is so inspirational given how they were completely absent a few short years ago.

You're coming to the end of your five-year project. What happens next?

In terms of the bluebird project, we anticipate handing over the reins to a local group, the Cowichan Valley Naturalists' Society. However, we are assessing whether we could expand the area of our translocation program. If we do, the project will be run jointly through GOERT and our partners — the Cowichan Valley Naturalists' Society, Ecostudies Institute, Nature Conservancy of Canada and the province.

As I mentioned before, the bluebird project was taken on in conjunction with other programs, so we have a lot on the go. But no matter what we're working on, the goal remains the same — protecting and restoring Garry oak and their ecosystems. 