

## Bluebirds warm to Cowichan

By Judith Lavoie, Times Colonist, July 6, 2012

There are bluebirds over the Cowichan Valley, and those flashes of bright blue feathers have not been seen on Vancouver Island for 17 years.

The reappearance of western bluebirds is not an accident of nature, but the first signs of success for the Bring Back the Bluebirds project, led by the Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team, the Ecostudies Institute and the province.

Four pairs of birds from a healthy Washington state population were relocated to the Cowichan Garry Oak Preserve near Duncan in an effort to persuade them that the bluebird real estate on the Island is top-notch.

The first two pairs of birds inspected the nesting boxes and feeding stations before winging their way out of the area, but they are believed to be nesting in the Cowichan Valley, said conservation specialist Kathryn Martell, who works with the Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team.

"You can't tell them exactly what to do, but there have been many sightings around Providence Farm and Somenos Marsh, so we're confident at least one of the pairs is nesting in the area - we just haven't found the nest yet," Martell said.

The next pair, which came to B.C. with nestlings, was more co-operative and moved straight into a nest box. "Those two had read the script," Martell said.

The first four fledglings are now flying around, although they are not yet entirely self-sufficient. The pair has laid five more eggs, which are expected to begin hatching next week.

"We anticipate that, if the nest is successful and produces young, the young will return to the area next spring to nest on their own," said bluebird expert Gary Slater, of the Ecostudies Institute.

The fourth pair of bluebirds, which were also brought to Vancouver Island with nestlings, initially looked as though they were going to settle in one of the prepared nest boxes, but then moved on.

"They found some better real estate," said Martell, who believes the birds are nesting nearby.

The goal over the next five years is to bring about 90 bluebirds to Vancouver Island to help rebuild the regional population.

The birds were once common on Vancouver Island, but none have been known to nest in the area since 1995. Until this year, they were considered locally extinct.

The rapid decline is believed to be due to a loss of Garry oak habitat, reduction of insects due to pesticide use and competition with species such as starlings and house sparrows for nest holes.

[jlavoie@timescolonist.com](mailto:jlavoie@timescolonist.com) © Copyright The Victoria Times Colonist