

My nest or yours? The bluebirds are back

By Judith Lavoie, Times Colonist, May 11, 2012

[Photo: A western bluebird is tagged before being released from an aviary at the Cowichan Garry Oak Preserve.]

The nesting instinct was strong for two lovestruck western bluebirds released Thursday in a Cowichan Valley meadow, and delighted conservationists are planning house-warming gifts of mealworms.

"It was amazing. They just flew up and onto a branch of a little oak tree and then right to one of the nesting boxes," said Trudy Chatwin, a biologist with the Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team. The group is reintroducing western bluebirds to Vancouver Island and the first two pairs were released this week from aviaries on the Nature Conservancy of Canada's Cowichan Garry Oak Preserve.

Nest boxes are at strategic locations and volunteers have set up a mealworm delivery service in the hope of persuading the birds to stick around.

The release of the birds - brought to B.C. from Washington state - went more smoothly than the first pair, released Tuesday, which zoomed out of the aviary and disappeared.

"They flew up into a big oak and then just kept flying north. They were gone within 45 seconds," said Gary Slater, executive director of the Ecostudies Institute in Washington.

Slater, who has helped reintroduce western and eastern bluebirds in the U.S., said Thursday's release was textbook perfect, probably because the pair, unlike the first couple, started nesting inside the aviary. "These two went inside the box and were all excited and started flitting around. I hope we come back tomorrow and they're still in this area," he said.

Meanwhile, the hunt is on for the first two birds, which are banded, and anyone who sees them is asked to call the team at 250-383-3427 or email bluebird@goert.ca.

Western bluebirds, which disappeared from southern Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands in the mid-1990s, once thrived in Garry oak ecosystems.

A probable reason for their disappearance was competition with European starlings and English house sparrows for nesting cavities, said conservation specialist Kathryn Martell.

Habitat destruction also played a part, but it is believed there are enough open meadows in areas such as the Cowichan Valley, North Saanich, the Gulf Islands and Metchosin to persuade them to return, Martell said. Western bluebirds have been successfully reintroduced to the San Juan Islands.

The birds have bright blue feathers on their head, back and wings, rusty-red chests and soft grey bellies.

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