

# Melanerpes lewis

**English name** Lewis's woodpecker (Georgia Depression population)

**Scientific name** *Melanerpes lewis*

**Other scientific names** none

## Risk status

BC (Georgia Depression population): presumed extirpated (SXB); red-listed

Canada: unranked (N?); COSEWIC ranking for entire Canadian

population: special concern

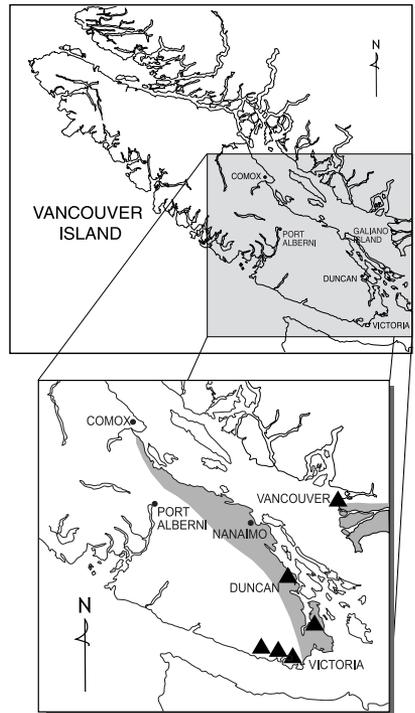
Global: not assessed (G5T?Q)

Elsewhere: Range wide, populations are thought to have undergone a decline of approximately 60% over the past 30 years; Washington, Oregon – vulnerable (S3B, S3N); California – imperilled (S2B, S2N).

## Range/Known distribution

The breeding range of Lewis's woodpecker currently extends from south-central British Columbia to California, Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado, although the species has been extirpated from much of coastal Washington and parts of Oregon. In Canada, the species has been extirpated from its former range in Alberta and the Georgia Depression and now only occurs in south-central British Columbia. Until the early 1960s Lewis's woodpeckers bred on eastern Vancouver Island as far north as Comox, and in the Fraser Valley from Vancouver to Chilliwack. Today, occurrences of this species in the Georgia Depression are restricted to occasional appearances of single birds on southeastern Vancouver Island and in the lower Fraser River Valley.

Lewis's woodpeckers are migratory, and usually overwinter in open pine and oak woodlands from southern Oregon to northern Mexico. Wintering individuals are occasionally recorded in the Okanagan Valley, and on southeastern Vancouver Island.



**Distribution of *Melanerpes lewis***

● approximate former breeding distribution

▲ recent records of non-breeding birds

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### Field Description

10 $\frac{1}{2}$ "-11 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". A **large**, crestless woodpecker with broad wings, **crow-like flight** and a dark red facial mask. Upperparts are a dark greenish-black, **breast and collar are grey**. The **pinkish-red belly** is unique among North American woodpeckers. Sexes similar; juveniles lack facial mask.

Foraging behaviour primarily consists of hawking for insects from vertical structures such as snags, nest trees, and telephone poles. Lewis's woodpeckers will also glean insects from vegetation and along the ground. Fruit, acorns and corn are also eaten, particularly in the fall and winter when insect availability is limited. Birds can sometimes be observed caching acorns and other foods in the crevices of power poles or the bark of standing trees.

### IDENTIFICATION TIPS

Lewis's woodpeckers are readily distinguished from other North American woodpecker species by their size, flight pattern, and unique coloration.



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### **Life history**

Lewis's woodpeckers are primary excavators of nesting cavities, although breeding birds generally re-use pre-excavated or natural cavities. Distribution of nest sites is often clumped and has been described as semi-colonial. The peak nesting period in the Georgia Depression probably extended from late May to early July. Clutches generally consist of four to six eggs, which are incubated by both sexes. Hatching occurs after 12 to 14 days, and fledglings leave the nest between 20 and 30 days of age. Both parents feed the young throughout the breeding period, and a single clutch is raised per season. The species is thought to be monogamous. Cooperative breeding behaviour sometimes occurs, with neighbouring pairs assisting in nest defence or more than two adults attending a single brood.

### **Habitat**

Lewis's woodpeckers inhabit open forests and grasslands with a few scattered trees. Optimal areas contain trees or snags for nesting and perching, nearby open sites for foraging, and a shrub layer for insect cover and fruit or berry production. The three habitat types described for this species — riparian forest and adjacent open areas; burned forest; and open woodland — all once occurred within the Garry oak ecosystems of the Georgia Depression. Regular burning for the production of camas (*Camassia* spp.) was historically carried out by the region's aboriginal peoples, and would have assisted in maintaining the open habitat favoured by Lewis's woodpeckers. As this species is a weak primary excavator, it requires accessible entry points such as de-limbed sites on a declining tree or a dead tree in an advanced state of decay. These structural attributes are often present in Garry oaks, and would have been enhanced by frequent fires.

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### **Why the species is at risk**

The extirpation of the Georgia Depression population of Lewis's woodpecker occurred at the same time as range-wide population declines. Threats to the species in coastal British Columbia are similar to those it faces elsewhere. Habitat loss and degradation are thought to be primary factors, with urban development, fire suppression, and removal of dead and dying trees being the greatest sources of reduced habitat suitability. Other threats, also associated with increasing urbanisation, likely include competition for nest cavities with European starlings\* (*Sturnus vulgaris*), depredation by cats, mortality from car collisions, impacts of pesticides on the insects used as food sources, and human disturbance of nest sites.

### **What you can do to help this species**

Management practices should be tailored to the needs of the species and its habitat. Potential management tools will depend on the specific circumstances and may require experimentation prior to implementation. **Before taking any action, expert advice should be obtained, and no action taken without it. Please refer to the introductory section of this manual.**

The above-mentioned threats may prevent re-establishment of Lewis's woodpeckers in the Georgia Depression. However, patches of suitable habitat still exist on southeast Vancouver Island, and general measures to restore and protect these areas may eventually permit natural or human assisted re-introduction. Nesting habitat will be maintained and increased by the retention of dead and declining trees and 'planting' of artificial snags. Such habitat enhancement would be of greatest benefit in concert with management of European starling\* populations. Steps should also be taken to control local pesticide use that negatively affects populations of flying insects. These measures will additionally benefit other avian species dependent on Garry oak and associated ecosystems in British Columbia.

### **References**

- Beauchesne, S.M. and J.M. Cooper. 2002. Lewis's Woodpecker stewardship account for the Garry oak ecosystems of southwestern British Columbia. Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team, Victoria, British Columbia.
- Campbell, R.W., N.K. Dawe, I. McTaggart-Cowan, J.M. Cooper, G.W. Kaiser and M.C.E. McNall. 1990. *The birds of British Columbia, Volume 2: Nonpasserines, Diurnal birds of prey through woodpeckers*. UBC Press, Vancouver, British Columbia.

For further information, contact the Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team, or see the web site at: [www.goert.ca](http://www.goert.ca).

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\*Refers to non-native species.