



Bring Back the Bluebirds Project - 2022 Summary Report

Executive Summary

It is the Bluebird Project's Tenth Birthday! Three of last year's translocated bluebirds returned to Vancouver Island and this year we brought two new pairs to the Cowichan Valley. These pairs have made a great start towards reviving the population, adding 12 new fledglings. Alongside supporting the bluebird pairs, we continued to improve, maintain and monitor the Nest Box trails established to replace lost nesting habitat. Our trail monitors and staff collected 1825 observations and found 75 nests of various native bird species using our boxes. We fostered stewardship of the Garry Oak ecosystems that bluebirds depend on through our outreach events.

Population Summary

Sightings:

- Three of the Western Bluebirds from last year's translocation were sighted on Vancouver Island with two of them returning to Cowichan Valley to establish territories
- One of the Cowichan-raised female Western Bluebirds returned to nest on San Juan Island again this year. This is a great sign for the future as one of the goals of reintroducing Western Bluebirds in the Cowichan area is to re-establish connected populations throughout the Georgia Strait area. Visit <https://sjpt.org/> to learn more about the San Juan Island bluebird recovery efforts.
- There was a quirky sighting this spring with a Mountain Bluebird/Western Bluebird pair! As well as one Western Bluebird that was sighted just once before disappearing mysteriously.

Translocation:

- Two pairs of Western Bluebirds were brought to the Cowichan Valley from a healthy population in Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington.
- One pair successfully established a territory and raised 10 fledglings.
- The returned male from the previous year's translocation paired with the female from this year's translocation and successfully raised two fledglings.
- Supplemental mealworms were provided to the translocated bluebirds on a daily basis, for 7 weeks.



- The spread of Avian Flu interrupted the translocation season and meant that further translocations were postponed until next year.

Nestbox Stewardship and Citizen Science

The Cowichan Valley Naturalist Society (CVNS) has developed a keen and skilled community of volunteers to monitor nestboxes.

- Volunteers attend a monitoring workshop early in the spring and have regular access to project personnel for advice/support.
- Monitoring nest boxes is a huge component to this project. Nearly 260 nestboxes are located throughout the Cowichan Valley. Over the breeding season of 2022, volunteers collected 1825 data points on the occupancy and status of these nest boxes.
- Much of this dataset contains information on the breeding status of many native passerines, such as the Bewick's Wren, House Wren, Tree Swallow, Violet-green Swallow, Chestnut-backed Chickadee and (of course) Western Bluebirds. This year we saw double the number of successful native spp nests over last year! This data collection will be submitted to the *Project NestWatch* database.

Protecting Bluebirds

With the current population of Western Bluebirds, even small, random predation events can be extremely detrimental to the recovery of this species. As a result, project personnel, nest box hosts and volunteers implement several *predator-guarding* techniques to deter carnivores and invasive species from accessing our nest boxes.

- 10 nest boxes were equipped with a hole plate to protect nest box occupants from House Sparrows and squirrels
- 12 new boxes were equipped with a sealed PVC sleeve that prevents mammalian predators (raccoons, cats, squirrels, etc) from climbing up and accessing the nest box. These efforts are critical in ensuring that our provided nest boxes provide a safe nesting habitat that will not increase the likelihood of predation.
- House Sparrows continue to pose a significant threat to nesting bluebirds and thus we encourage monitors to remove sparrow nests amidst construction. We are happy to report that this year had half the number of sparrow nesting attempts compared to last year!
- When bluebirds are nesting, nest boxes are equipped with a *Sparrow-spooker* that flutters on the top of the nest box and deters sparrows from accessing the box and harassing the bluebirds.



Victoria Activities

There is an established network of nest box trails in the Victoria area, including individual trails in the Blenkinsop Valley, Cordova Bay Golf Course, Uplands Golf Course, Sidney Island Air strip and Highland Golf Course. This year a new trail was added at Sandown Centre for Regenerative Agriculture. Over 30 nest boxes were monitored throughout the breeding season by Victoria Natural History Society members.

Outreach and Education

As over 95% of Garry Oak Ecosystems have been lost completely or significantly degraded, it is imperative that the remaining habitats are appreciated, studied and protected. The Western Bluebird is a very charismatic species that, through their conservation, draws attention to the many rare and often endemic plants, insects and other biota that thrive among Garry Oak Ecosystems.

This year's outreach was a mixture of online and outdoor as safety permitted. By inspiring the public to become involved in Western Bluebird conservation, we hope to encourage the restoration and preservation of the remaining Garry Oak Habitat the Cowichan Valley is so fortunate to have. To do such, project staff and volunteers hosted (or presented at) 15 events in 2022 that include:

- Zoom presentations through the Rocky Point Bird Observatory,
- Migratory Bird Day Event
- Cowichan Stewardship Roundtable Event
- Nature walks by Genevieve Singleton,
- Trail monitor gatherings
- Pathfinder Box Building Workshop
- End of season appreciation event.

Discussions and presentations at these events focussed on avian conservation, natural history and the ecology of the imperilled Garry Oak Ecosystem. Through these events the bluebird project directly interacted with over 500 community members, all of whom met the project with support and interest.

Sharing Information

Project staff wrote regular blog posts that discussed project updates and interesting information. These updates were distributed through our email list (230 individuals), Facebook (264 followers) and website (634 visitors over the year). Project personnel also published articles outlining recent project happenings that were featured in the Cowichan Valley



Naturalist's Newsletter. We have an Instagram page ([cowichan_valley_bluebird](#)) as well as a publicly available Facebook page ([Bring Back the Bluebirds](#)).

Community Building

This year's End of Season Appreciation Event marked all of the hard work that has gone into ten years of avian and Garry Oak conservation. We were so grateful to have beautiful art donations that we could share with the community of people that make this project possible. And of course, cake, can't have a birthday without cake!

Project Partners

This project is an international and collaborative effort. The British Columbia Conservation Foundation takes care of the project administration, ensuring project funds are spent responsibly and accountably. The Cowichan Valley Naturalist Society provides the volunteers that make this work. The Ecostudies Institute in Washington, and in particular ornithologist Gary Slater, performs the bluebird translocations and provides invaluable advice based on over a decade of avian reintroduction work.

A very special thank-you to our volunteers and supporters

In 2022 our volunteer community contributed 848 volunteer hours to the success of the Cowichan Valley's Western Bluebirds. Additionally, 68 nest box hosts contributed to Garry Oak meadow stewardship. A huge thank-you to Gary Slater, whose efforts to bring bluebirds across the border this year were met once again with incredible challenges and to Genevieve Singleton for helping so much with our outreach. Thank-you to our entomologist, Ted Leischner, for his many hours culturing high-quality mealworms to feed our bluebirds. We greatly appreciate the Cowichan Valley Naturalist Society and our many trail monitors, mealworm feeders and other field-workers: Alison and Grace Rimmer, Bruce Coates, Carol Blackburn, Carol Milo, Barry Hetschko, Hazel Nielsen, Angela Atkins, Bob and Helen Nation, Gill Radcliffe, Genevieve Singleton, Deb Cleal, Caroline Deary, Jim and Lyn Wisnia, Willie Harvey, Theresa Middlemiss, Jennifer Goodbrand, Dave Brummit, Bary and Joy Beck, and Ron and Moira Elder. Thank you to both our past and present staff, including Helen Anderson, Brielle Reidlinger, Ryan Hetschko, Hannah Hall, Braden Judson, and Julia Daly. Thanks to the Victoria Natural History Society and other Victoria volunteers who monitored their nest boxes and are helping us to expand our Victoria Trails including Ann Nightingale, Bryan Gates, John Costello, Jody Wells, Joan Richardson and others.



Acknowledgements

We would like to extend sincere thanks to the following funders for their financial contributions that supported this project in 2022: Habitat Conservation Trust Foundation, BC Conservation and Biodiversity Awards, TD Friends of the Environment Foundation, Sitka Foundation, Victoria Natural History Society, BC Ministry of Transportation, and numerous private donors. Many local supporters donate supplies, storage space and in-kind support including: Polster Environmental Consulting, Ecostudies Institute, CopyCat Printing Ltd., Pacific Northwest Raptors, the Cowichan Land Trust, the Nature Conservancy of Canada, and the North American Bluebird Society. Without such support, this project would not have been possible.

BCCF 2022 Summary Report written by Jacquie Taylor

For additional information visit www.cowichanbluebird.ca or contact us at cowichanbluebird@gmail.com.

You can follow us at <https://www.facebook.com/CowichanValleyBluebird> and you can also donate to the project online at <https://www.canadahelps.org/en/dn/58165> To learn about the history of the project, visit: <http://www.goert.ca/activities/bluebirds/> and to learn about the work of Ecostudies Institute, visit: <https://www.ecoinst.org>.

