

Spotlight on Species

Wildlife Trees and Woodpeckers

While all trees might be used by wildlife, not all trees are "wildlife trees." A wildlife tree is a standing tree (alive or dead) in a decaying state that provides valuable habitat for many species. In B.C., the wildlife trees become prime real estate for many species of birds, particularly woodpeckers.

What Makes a Tree a Wildlife Tree?

A wildlife tree is any standing dead or living tree with special characteristics that provide important habitat for wildlife. These characteristics include large (sometimes hollow) trunks, large branches, deformed and broken tops, internal decay and sloughing or loose bark. Wildlife trees are important because over ninety different plants and animals in British Columbia's forests need them for habitat.



Photo courtesy of Dick Cannings

In the South Okanagan-Similkameen, some examples of tree species that commonly make high value wildlife trees are Ponderosa Pine, Douglas-fir, Western Larch, Black Cottonwood and Trembling Aspen.

How are Wildlife Trees Created?

Trees do not simply die of old age, but are killed by insect attack, disease, fire, lightning, lack of light or poor growing conditions. The decay of standing live or dead trees may start from the centre of the tree or from the outside, in the bark. These different types of decay can provide different types of habitat for wildlife. Trees rotting in the centre may be hollowed out and used for nesting while rotting bark might provide food.

What are the Threats to Wildlife Trees?

Wildlife trees are becoming increasingly scarce as old forests are harvested for forest products or lands are cleared for agriculture and other types of development. In settled areas, wildlife trees are commonly felled because of liability concerns and a general lack of awareness that these trees have significant wildlife values.

Who Uses Wildlife Trees?

Animals that depend on wildlife trees for habitat may be divided into three groups: primary cavity excavators, secondary cavity



File photo

users and open nesters. Primary cavity excavators, such as woodpeckers and some species of nuthatches and chickadees excavate their own cavities.

Secondary cavity users are unable to excavate their own cavities and rely on cavities excavated by primary cavity excavators and on naturally occurring cavities. This group includes some of the owls, swallows, bluebirds and ducks, as well as mammals like marten, raccoons, squirrels and black bear. Open nesters are birds that build large, heavy nests on the tops or in the crooks of large wildlife trees. Ideal nesting conditions for birds like the Great Blue Heron, Osprey, Bald Eagle and large hawks and owls are created when trees are topped or broken from strong winds or from lightning strikes.



Photo courtesy of Laure Neish

Characteristics:

Lewis's Woodpecker is unique among the woodpeckers with a glossy greenish-black head, back, wings and tail; rosy belly; grey collar and breast; and red face. It has grey feet and legs, black bill and dark coloured eyes. Body length is 22 cm with a wingspan of 45 cm. This particular woodpecker species is a quiet bird, except for an occasional harsh "churr" call. Its flight pattern is distinctive from other woodpeckers. Lewis's Woodpeckers fly slow and direct, similar to crows or jays, with long glides. Insects such as ants, beetles, flies, grasshoppers, tent caterpillars, mayflies, and wild berries are the main food for Lewis's Woodpecker in the summer, with ripe domestic fruit and nuts consumed in the fall and winter. Unlike other woodpeckers, this species does not bore for insects but will flycatch and glean insects from tree branches or tree trunks; it also drops from perch to capture insects on the ground.

Habitat and Distribution:

In Canada, Lewis's Woodpecker is limited to the drier parts of the Southern Interior from the Chilcotin River to the East Kootenays. It is more abundant in the Okanagan Valley than in any other part of British Columbia. Lewis's Woodpecker prefers open ponderosa pine forests especially near water or within recently burned areas. Within this habitat, bushy areas are required for foraging and large wildlife trees are needed for nesting. It may also nest in live cottonwood trees, particularly when near ponderosa pine stands. It nests in self-excavated tree cavities, abandoned holes or natural cavities.

Threats:

Federally, the Lewis's Woodpecker is considered a species of Special Concern due to its small and locally distributed populations, restricted range, loss and vulnerability of habitat, and historical extirpation of coastal populations. It is estimated that there are fewer than 1000 in the province. Widespread clearing of ponderosa pine forests and cottonwood stands is likely responsible for much of the species decline in this century.

What you can do to protect wildlife trees and the woodpeckers and other wildlife that depend on them:

- ✓ Allow wildlife trees to remain on your property unless they pose a safety threat. Remove only unsafe branches and tops with the help of a professional arborist or tree service.
- ✓ Consider placing stewardship conservation agreements or covenants on your land to protect wildlife tree patches or important wildlife habitat.
- ✓ Do not use wildlife trees for firewood.
- ✓ Encourage your local government to incorporate wildlife tree protection into bylaws, zoning and Official Community Plans.
- ✓ Learn more about wildlife trees. Check out the WiTS website at www.wildlifetree.org
- ✓ Become involved with the Wildlife Tree Stewardship Program (WiTS). Help identify wildlife trees and monitor nests in the Okanagan-Similkameen. Contact witsos@shaw.ca for more information.
- ✓ Report sightings of these rare woodpeckers to Bird Studies Canada (250-496-4049) or Partners in Flight BC/Yukon (250-490-8286)

Text prepared by Lisa Scott

Presented by



Who are the Woodpeckers of the South Okanagan-Similkameen?

- Lewis's Woodpecker
- Red-naped Sapsucker
- Williamson's Sapsucker
- Downy Woodpecker
- Hairy Woodpecker
- White-headed Woodpecker
- American Three-toed Woodpecker
- Black-backed Woodpecker
- Northern Flicker
- Pileated Woodpecker

How the White-headed Woodpecker got his name

The white-headed Woodpecker (*tamskwist*) was a bird that was well known to the Syilx (Okanagan) people. Our legends tell of a time when *tamskwist* had a red head like



Photo courtesy of Jared Hobbs

other woodpeckers. He did not want to be like other woodpeckers who got their food from behind the bark of trees. He was ashamed to associate with his own kind. He wanted to be like *paqelqin*, the white headed bald eagle. He wanted to fly high like the eagles. He tried many times, but of course he could not fly as high as the eagles and always had to come back down and eat grubs from behind the bark of trees. Chief Coyote, who had special powers saw what he was doing and as a lesson to him gave him a head of white feathers. Now he is still a woodpecker of the woodpecker clan but with a white head. All of the other woodpeckers in the woodpecker nation have names that they are proud of while the white headed woodpecker has the name *tamskwist*, which means "No Name".

– Richard Armstrong

