

The Bluebirds are Back in Valley

By Judith Lavoie, Times Colonist April 19, 2013

A homecoming in the Cowichan Valley is thrilling bird enthusiasts.

Three of the Western bluebirds introduced to Vancouver Island last year have returned to the Cowichan Garry Oak Preserve - the first sign a complex reintroduction program is working.

"Since we are working to restore a self-sustaining population of Western bluebirds on Vancouver Island, we are very excited about the return of some of the bluebirds raised at the Cowichan Garry Oak Preserve in 2012," said Gary Slater of the Ecostudies Institute, the group helping relocate birds from Washington state to the Island.

Two of the returning birds were brought to Cowichan as babies with their parents last year, while the other hatched in Cowichan.

The five-year project, now in its second year, is being led by the Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team.

Technician Julia Daly was the first to notice the three bluebirds hunting in a field last week.

"I saw the three birds again over the weekend and have been putting mealworms out for them," Daly said.

Western bluebirds were relatively common on Vancouver Island until the 1950s, but numbers started to decline as Garry oak habitat shrank and as the birds faced competition from invasive birds such as European starlings and house sparrows.

Until last year, Western bluebirds had not nested on Vancouver Island since 1995 and were considered locally extinct.

Four adult pairs and nine juveniles were captured from the U.S. Army Lewis-McChord Base in Washington last year and rushed to the Cowichan Valley, where nestboxes had been prepared.

The family that produced the returnees was held in the aviary until the first babies fledged.

After they were released, the parents nested again. They stayed in the area all summer and the juveniles were seen teaching their younger siblings to hunt in the meadows.

The birds were last seen on the slopes of Mount Tzouhalem in late October, and it is presumed they migrated south for the winter.

"The return of both translocated bluebirds and bluebirds that fledged from a successful nest at the Cowichan Garry Oak Preserve indicates that they are bonded to the site and that our reintroduction techniques are working," Slater said.

This year, 10 pairs of birds, some with nestlings, will be reintroduced to the area.

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