



Wildlife Tree Stewardship Program – Okanagan-Similkameen SPECIES FACTSHEET

The Wildlife Tree Stewardship Program, also known as WiTS, is a voluntary program that conserves wildlife tree habitats through volunteer monitoring (of wildlife trees and bird activity), landowner agreements, and community education. It was first established on Vancouver Island through the Federation of BC Naturalists and has recently expanded to include the Lower Mainland and Okanagan-Similkameen. In the Okanagan-Similkameen, WiTS will focus on five bird species at risk. This fact sheet introduces one of our region's target species, the Lewis's Woodpecker. By identifying and monitoring nest sites for this woodpecker, WiTS aims to assist its recovery and help protect its habitat.



US Fish and Wildlife Service

Lewis's Woodpecker

What is a Lewis's Woodpecker?

Lewis's Woodpecker (*Melanerpes lewis*) is easily recognizable and fairly large for a woodpecker. In British Columbia, it 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. 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 fewer than 1000 individuals occur in the province.

SIMILAR SPECIES:

- **AMERICAN ROBIN** (*Turdus migratorius*). Close in size (23 – 28 cm) with a dark gray back and brick red breast.



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DESCRIPTION:

- Glossy greenish-black head, back, wings and tail; rosy belly; grey collar and breast; and red face.
- Grey feet and legs, black bill and dark coloured eye.
- Body Length: 22 cm; Wingspan: 45 cm.
- Quiet bird, except for an occasional harsh “churn” call.
- Its flight pattern is distinctive from other woodpeckers. Lewis's Woodpeckers fly slow and direct, similar to crows or jays, with long glides and aerial maneuvers.

DIET:

- Feeds on adult emergent insects (e.g. ants, beetles, flies, grasshoppers, tent caterpillars, mayflies) and wild berries (e.g. chokecherries, currant) in the summer and ripe domestic fruit and nuts in the fall and winter. Unlike other woodpeckers, it does not bore for insects but will flycatch and glean insects from tree branches or tree trunks; also drops from perch to capture insects on the ground.

HABITAT:

- Open ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) 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.
- May also nest in live cottonwood (*Populus spp.*) trees, particularly when near ponderosa pine stands.
- Nests in tree cavities: self-excavated, abandoned holes or natural cavities. Nests are 1-30 meters above the ground.

How can I help Lewis's Woodpeckers?



Habitat Restoration

Widespread clearing of ponderosa pine forests and cottonwood stands is likely responsible for much of the species' decline in this century. Increasing human development in British Columbia continues to result in the loss of important habitat for this woodpecker. Fire suppression in ponderosa pine forests is common practice in the province, and results in the development of dense stands that are entirely unsuitable for Lewis's Woodpecker. Management of these forests will be the main factor in deciding the future of the species in Canada.

Did you know?

Lewis's Woodpeckers tend to be semi-colonial. There have been reports of up to three pairs nesting in a single tree, but usually there is only one pair per tree. Some breeding pairs are formed for life and will cooperatively interact with neighbouring pairs.

Unlike other woodpeckers, Lewis's Woodpeckers are not well adapted to excavate their own cavities in hardwoods. They most frequently use cavities previously excavated by other woodpecker species (e.g. flicker) and will reuse the same nest cavity in a tree with multiple cavities for consecutive years.

You can help improve Lewis's Woodpecker habitat by:

- conserving existing open ponderosa pine forest and black cottonwood stands, particularly when large diameter wildlife trees are present.
- retaining large dead pine trees and live cottonwood trees within the preferred habitat. Wildlife trees should be retained wherever it is safe to do so. **Note – it is not necessary to remove standing dead pine trees that have been killed by pine beetle. At this stage, beetles have left and the tree is no longer contributing to their spread.**
- cutting firewood responsibly. Under the Ministry of Forests, *Free Use Permit for Firewood*, only standing dead trees less than 40 cm in diameter or 30 cm tall may be cut for firewood. Do not cut any trees with 'Wildlife Tree' signs, active nests or other signs of activity. Lewis's woodpeckers may re-use the same nest cavity in consecutive years.
- planting native trees and shrubs, or allowing natural vegetation to grow in the open understory of grazed woodlands and riparian areas. Bushy areas are required for foraging.
- placing stewardship conservation agreements or covenants on your land to protect wildlife tree patches and important wildlife habitat.

Monitoring

- Active April through mid-October and breeding late May through August. Clutch size 5-9 eggs.
- Most of the Lewis's Woodpeckers that breed in BC migrate to pine-oak forests in the western US or Mexico; however, some individuals may occasionally over-winter in the Okanagan; these birds are restricted to urban areas or orchards, feeding on nuts from ornamental trees or left-over orchard fruit.

For more information on WITS:

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To report woodpecker sightings:

Bird Studies Canada: (250) 496-4049, or
Partners in Flight BC/Yukon at (250) 490-8286



South Okanagan-Similkameen Stewardship Program

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