

The Songbird Project

The average Vancouver resident may find that he or she has new feelings about urban wildlife, especially birds, after Beth Carruthers and Nelson Grey finish their latest project. The aim of the Songbird Project is to make Vancouver the most bird friendly city in North America and represent a model for other cities to use to plan their green spaces. Bringing together local artists, birders, business people, environmentalists, and urban planners to advocate for the birds; the project creators hope to raise public awareness of the declining populations of songbirds in our area. A yearlong series of events will bring attention to the variety of threats facing the local migratory songbird population. It will also highlight the many ways concerned citizens can lend a hand to help out the birds.

Over a year ago Carruthers and Grey were walking in the East Vancouver twilight when the song of a Robin made them stop and think about the situation of songbirds in urban areas. With ever-increasing development, over-indulging consumerism, and uncontrolled fertilizer and pesticide use, the amount of habitat available for songbirds is shrinking, along with the quality of the habitat that remains. "People love and take for granted the presence of birds in their lives," says Carruthers. "People enjoy them and don't understand the impact they themselves can have on the birds' environment." Many people are also unaware that several species of local songbirds are named on B.C.'s Endangered Species list. As well, songbirds are a necessary part of the urban ecosystem. Not only are they enjoyable to look at and listen to, they also have an important role in the environment they live in. For example, several species of songbirds feed on insects; many people are not aware that flycatchers are a natural predator of aphids. They act as a natural biological control agent right in our gardens.

The Lower Mainland and the Fraser River Estuary provide a crucial stopover

site for migratory birds traveling along the Pacific Flyway. This is the route traveled by birds along the west coast of North America, when flying between summer and winter destinations. As many important stopover points on this route have disappeared in the recent past, maintaining and enhancing current areas are necessary for the survival of many species. The Songbird Project aims to not only maintain current habitat, but to also enhance the urban ecosystem.



As Carruthers and Grey are both artists, using the arts community to promote songbird awareness seems natural. Local musicians will write an oratorio of music inspired by the songs of five migratory species. Performers and artists have been encouraged to create plays and stories, as well as paintings and displays to complement the project. One local artist will be constructing an enormous bird nest on the grass at the Roundhouse Community Center. Members of the public are encouraged to add their own biodegradable decorations to the structure throughout the coming months.

The Gardens of Babylon Balcony Challenge will provide a fun challenge to the public to get involved with urban habitat enhancement. Over the next year residents are encouraged to plant vegetation that will provide forage or resting space to songbirds. In May 1999 prizes will be awarded in six categories based on how a participants efforts improve bird life in the city. The Challenge emphasizes that just a few window boxes added to an urban balcony can link up a

corridor of green space, which birds can use to travel throughout the city.

To explain the biological needs of songbirds, the Songbird Project partnered with Dr. Val Schaffer and the Institute of Urban Ecology at Douglas College. The Institute has been studying the needs of urban wildlife, including songbirds, in populated areas for several years and has been actively involved in promoting the creation of green corridors in New Westminster. Dr. Schaffer will be hosting

bird walks and nature tours throughout the duration of the Songbird Project. He will also be giving a workshop on planting native vegetation to launch the Gardens of Babylon Balcony Challenge.

The success of the project has already been seen at the Songbird Forum, held September 5th and 6th at the Roundhouse Community Center. The well-attended event, titled "The Living City" invited speakers from a variety of backgrounds to exchange their views on songbirds and to interact with the public. Further success in the enhancement of songbird habitat in the urban environment will benefit songbirds as well as many other urban wildlife species and will serve to improve the look and feel of the city.

For information about the Songbird Project, contact the Roundhouse Community Center, 604-713-1800, the Douglas College Institute of Urban Ecology, 604-527-5224 or check out the Songbird Project website, www.songbirdproject.org/events.html.

Public education about British Columbia's wildlife is important to ensure the protection and recovery of all endangered and rare species. The Northwest Wildlife Preservation Society (NWPS) offers exciting and interactive slideshow presentations for audiences of all ages. **For more information, please contact NWPS, 604-713-6687, email nwps@direct.ca.**

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