



Urban jungle

Creating a city that sings

by Dorothy Bartoszewski

IF WAILING CAR ALARMS OR POUNDING jackhammers wake you in the morning more often than a sweet bird song, it's not just your bad karma. Globally, 70 per cent of songbird populations are declining, due mostly to habitat destruction and fertilizer and pesticide use. The gradual loss of songbirds from our physical and aural environments is a subtle but profound diminishment. As Emily Dickinson wrote: "To hear an oriole sing / may be a common thing - / or only a divine."

In the Vancouver area, 27 songbird species are endangered or at risk, and 37 species are declining. Threatened birds include yellow-headed blackbirds, meadowlarks, and lazuli buntings. As the Lower Mainland's human population continues to climb and as developers convert more forests, marshes, and farmland into condos and asphalt, the survival of at-risk songbirds gets ever dicier. Migrating songbirds have the hardest lot - contending with habitat destruction here, then flying thousands of kilometres south only to find their winter habitat destroyed for coffee production or other agriculture.

To the rescue comes the SongBird Project, an ongoing series of events intended to inspire both action for and delight in songbirds. Artists and activists Nelson Gray and Beth Carruthers conceived the project, which aims to make Vancouver the

most bird-friendly city in North America. As Carruthers explains: "In early 1997 I'd been hearing about the songbird issue from different angles. Then one night, Nelson and I were walking in the Downtown Eastside, and I heard this song, so clear and so pure and so sweet. It just struck me, and convinced me that this was really important."

Gray and Carruthers organized the community-focused project in collaboration with Val Schaefer (head of the Institute for Urban Ecology at Douglas College in New Westminster), the Roundhouse Community Centre, local biologists, artists, and environmentalists. This disparate group patched together the project's funding - approxi-

mately \$175,000 per year - from arts funding bodies, nonprofit arts organizations, foundations, government agencies, and corporations.

Starting in the spring of 1998, the SongBird Project has included art exhibits, storytelling, kids "bird plumage" art workshops, and even a human-size nest made out of organic local materials that passers-by can crawl right into. At the SongBird oratorio this coming spring, Veda Hille and four other local musicians will perform self-written arias based on the songs of five migratory bird species, and members of the community will recite stories about songbirds.

Although the SongBird Project strives to entertain, its ultimate goal is more ambitious. "We want to change people's values," says Schaefer. "We want to catalyze behavioral changes that will make a real difference for the birds." To that end, the project uses celebratory art events as emotional "points of entry" to the issue. It also educates through print materials available at the events, the SongBird Project web site, community forums, birdcall and bird habitat identification workshops, urban bird walks, and media coverage.

The SongBird Project's organizers hope that teaching urbanites how to create songbird habitat will bring song back to the city. At its simplest level, habitat creation means provid-



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ing birds with food, shelter, and water in backyards, on balconies, or even on windowsills. Planting berry- or nectar-producing plants provides the food, but bird lovers can supplement these with hard seeds in a bird feeder. (Songbirds especially like black sunflower seeds. Bird feed high in grains like millet or rye appeals to fewer birds while attracting rodents.) Growing plants, especially native species, at different levels from the ground up creates a welcome shelter, and plant diversity sustains a wider range of birds. For drinking and bathing, a birdbath or even a dish of water will wet a bird's whistle.

Educating urbanites about what songbird habitat still exists in the city may protect it and encourage more. Says Schaefer, "We're hoping that if people know that a blackberry patch is not just a prickly monster, but is also important food and shelter for song-

birds, it will positively affect their choices."

Vancouverites can show off what they've learned in the Gardens of Babylon Balcony Challenge, which encourages them to create the lushest balcony gardens and best songbird habitat, establishing a miniature of the fabled Hanging Gardens of Babylon. The contest has started, and winners will be announced this coming spring.

The SongBird Project is also informing Vancouverites about global habitat. Most people don't think about songbirds as they slug back their morning java, but coffee plantations have provided a last refuge for birds whose original habitat has been destroyed along with the tropical rainforests. Coffee used to be grown under shade canopies – good songbird habitat. But current trends toward capital-intensive, "shadeless" plantations are eliminating the songbirds' last stop. By choosing

shade-grown coffee (brand names include Café Ético, Straight Coffee, and Songbird Coffee) and encouraging coffee retailers to do the same, a cup of joe can be a toast to songbird survival, rather than to their demise.

The project has already seen signs of its positive effect. For example, architects designing the new city hall called to find out how to minimize the impact on migrating songbirds. However, regardless of how long the project goes on (Carruthers sees it continuing "at least until the new millennium"), or what the project ultimately achieves, its development is, in and of itself, hopeful. For such an exuberantly celebratory series of events to come from a single bird song does suggest it may be "a thing divine" – and with the SongBird Project in full flight, those songbirds may just keep singing. □

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