By Laura Byrne Paquet

Songbirds, such as the American goldfinch (above), and beluga whales struggle against extinction with the help of caring Canadians.

What do birds and belugas have in common? Both have dedicated Canadian friends committed to preventing their extinction

For decades now, we've known that the earth's wildlife is in trouble. The passenger pigeon, the great auk and the sea mink have become extinct, and dozens of other animals across Canada are at risk. Scientists estimate that dozens of species are vanishing from the planet every day. Pretty depressing stuff.

Yet thousands of people across the country are working tirelessly to save sea otters, piping plovers, wolverines and whooping cranes. What drives them to keep going in the face of what might seem like insurmountable odds?

For Beth Carruthers and Nelson Gray, it all began with a robin.

Several years ago they were walking in Strathcona Community Gardens in Vancouver. Suddenly, rising over the noise of the light industrial area near the gardens, they heard the clear song of a robin. While both Carruthers and Gray were already aware that urban songbirds were in decline, the beauty of that song struck a deeper chord.

"You could hear it above everything, which was amazing, and I just said, 'Oh, this is really important.' Then Nelson started hearing a performance," says Carruthers.

That walk in the gardens helped spark The SongBird Project, a multifaceted plan to save songbirds, which Carruthers and Gray launched in spring 1998.

The term *songbird* encompasses many common city birds, such as robins, finches, sparrows, cardinals and swallows — just about any bird that perches and sings. As familiar as they are to our bird feeders and parks, however, songbirds face all sorts of threats. Storms, disappearing habitat and environmental or chemical contaminants all make life difficult for songbirds. And on top of these threats, it's estimated that domestic cats kill millions each year. There's some debate as to whether the figures from the 1970s and 1980s are as dire as they once appeared. However Environment Canada estimates that today, for some populations of songbirds, up to 76 per cent of the species in some habitats are in decline.

Both Carruthers and Gray are artists — she's a visual artist, while his background is in theatre — so they wanted The SongBird Project to include a creative component. But they also wanted to reach as many parts of the community as possible. As a result, such diverse individuals as biologists, businesspeople, social activists, urban planners, landscape architects and choreographers have become involved in The SongBird Project.

The members of The SongBird Project hope to run two or three major events each year. In May they will launch Vancouver's version of the Dawn Chorus, a worldwide movement that started in England in the mid-1980s. People are encouraged to get up at sunrise and actively listen to the birds singing in their gardens and parks.

Carruthers and Gray are also working with a group of Vancouver composers and singers to create the *Songbird* oratorio. This vocal work will include five arias written by five different composers, each based on a particular birdsong.

In 1998 the project held its first Living

City Forum, where participants discussed ways to make Vancouver more songbird-friendly. Another is planned for 1999.

Ironically, one of the major threats facing the songbird population in the Lower Mainland is an urban trend that preserves the outlying environment: intensification. Housing density in Vancouver is the third highest in the country, after Toronto and Montreal. But while intensification slows down urban sprawl, it also swallows up green space. So Carruthers and Gray approached the project's partners, the Institute of Urban Ecology at Douglas College in Vancouver, for help with solutions.

For years the institute had run the Backyard Habitat Enhancement Challenge, a contest that spurred suburban residents to make their backyards inviting havens for songbirds by planting native species and installing bird feeders. The institute also held free workshops to show people how to provide "stopping places" for birds in backyards or on decks.

But few of these measures were practical on the tiny rooftops and balconies common in downtown Vancouver. So The SongBird Project and the institute launched the Gardens of Babylon Balcony Challenge. Any green space — even a vine-covered wall — can serve as a haven for birds by attracting bugs and providing shelter, says Val Schaefer, director of urban ecology at the institute.

"It's not like it's a habitat that they're going to live and breed in," says Schaefer. But these small spaces can provide food and shelter for birds during storms or when food supplies in other areas are low, he explains. "It's a habitat that's available when birds are in crisis."

Carruthers and Gray hope that their contests and events will help people realize how much songbirds contribute to our daily environment. Besides making us happy, songbirds also perform vital ecological functions: they pollinate flowers, disperse seeds and eat bugs that damage trees.

"What they are is a very good indicator of ecosystem health. In other words, if there aren't any birds, we're in big trouble," Carruthers says.

The threats to wildlife habitat in southern British Columbia will probably continue to grow; between 1991 and 1996 the population of the City of Vancouver increased by 8.9 per cent. With more people resulting in more pavement and fewer green spaces, is it hard to stay optimistic and keep acting?

"It gets scary," admits Carruthers. But, she says, the alternatives are worse. "I couldn't sit around and watch things happen any more."

Almost on the other side of the country, another group of dedicated people is working to save a much larger animal: the endangered beluga whale of eastern Canada's St. Lawrence River.

"The story of belugas is strongly linked with the industrial age of the heart of America — the Great Lakes and large cities like Montreal," says Robert Michaud, research program director for the Marine Mammal Interpretation Centre in Tadoussac, Que.

In 1928, after fishermen argued that hungry belugas were putting too big a dent in the river's fish, the federal government offered a bounty and began bombing whales from the air.

The systematic destruction stopped in 1939 when one scientist proved that the beluga had no effect on fish stocks, but commercial and sport hunting continued, and the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway may have affected the river's water quality. And another threat began floating toward the beluga from the lands bordering the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes: toxic chemicals. The whales developed ulcers, aneurysms and other health problems as chemicals accumulated in the food chain. Today a St. Lawrence beluga is more likely to suffer from cancer than any other marine mammal.

In 1979 whale hunting stopped when the whales became officially protected, and in 1983 they were placed on the endangered species list. Over the last 20 years various federal agencies have been working hard to study and save the beluga.

Today, although massive efforts to clean up the St. Lawrence are beginning to work, the belugas are still in jeopardy. Scientists aren't certain how many remain in the St. Lawrence; estimates vary from 600 to 1,200. One thing is certain, however: the blubber of some dead whales is so contaminated with chemicals that they have to be treated as toxic waste.

The whales' plight captured Michaud's imagination in 1985. At the time he was researching fin whales and he stopped in Tadoussac to meet beluga researcher Pierre Béland. Michaud was hoping to borrow some equipment. Instead he stumbled into his life's work.

"When I went to ask Béland for some help, he essentially said yes, but he asked for something in exchange. He asked me to start looking at the live belugas," says Michaud. The research became his full-time work. "I haven't stopped since."

What was it about the belugas that intrigued Michaud? "They live year-round in the St. Lawrence and...offer a kind of ideal research situation," he explains. Many other types of sea mammals have a

The decline of urban habitat for birds, such as robins (right), led Nelson Gray and Beth Carruthers (above) to form Vancouver's SongBird Project.