

## BC's Coast Region: Species & Ecosystems of Conservation Concern

### Lewis's Woodpecker Georgia Depression Population (*Melanerpes lewis pop. 1*)

Global: G5TXQ, Provincial: SXB, SNA, COSEWIC: T, BC List: Red, Identified Wildlife



Notes on *Melanerpes lewis pop. 1*: A member of the family Picidae (woodpeckers, piculets and wrynecks). Named for Meriwether Lewis of Lewis and Clark fame, Lewis's Woodpecker is one of three species in the genus *Melanerpes* found in BC. Of the other two species (Red-headed and Acorn Woodpecker), Lewis's Woodpecker is considered to be closely related to the Red-headed Woodpecker. The Georgia Depression Population is the only subspecies of this genus in BC but is considered extirpated. Much about its biology is inferred from the species. Conservation concerns however are similar for other populations of Lewis's Woodpecker in the Pacific Northwest.

#### Description

**Length:** 26-29 cm. A relatively large woodpecker, Lewis's Woodpecker resembles a crow in flight. The chisel shaped beak is at least as long as the head. Adult plumage includes a blood red patch that covers the bird's eye and cheek area from side to side on the head and a blue-green crown and chin line. Other distinct characteristics include a silver-grey collar, glossy greenish-black back and wings, and a rose abdomen, flanks and sides. On juveniles the red face patch and silver-grey collar is lacking and the back and wings are more olive-brown in colour.

#### Diet

Foraging areas range from open, mature, mixed species forests of conifers and hardwoods, riparian areas and burns. This species "hawks" after flying insects from perches on vertical structures such as wildlife trees and wooden utility poles. Other food sources include seasonal nuts, seeds and berries. Birds will also glean insects from vegetation and the ground (similar to Northern Flicker) and can sometimes be observed caching acorns, beetles and other foods in the crevices of power poles or the bark of standing trees.

#### Look's Like?

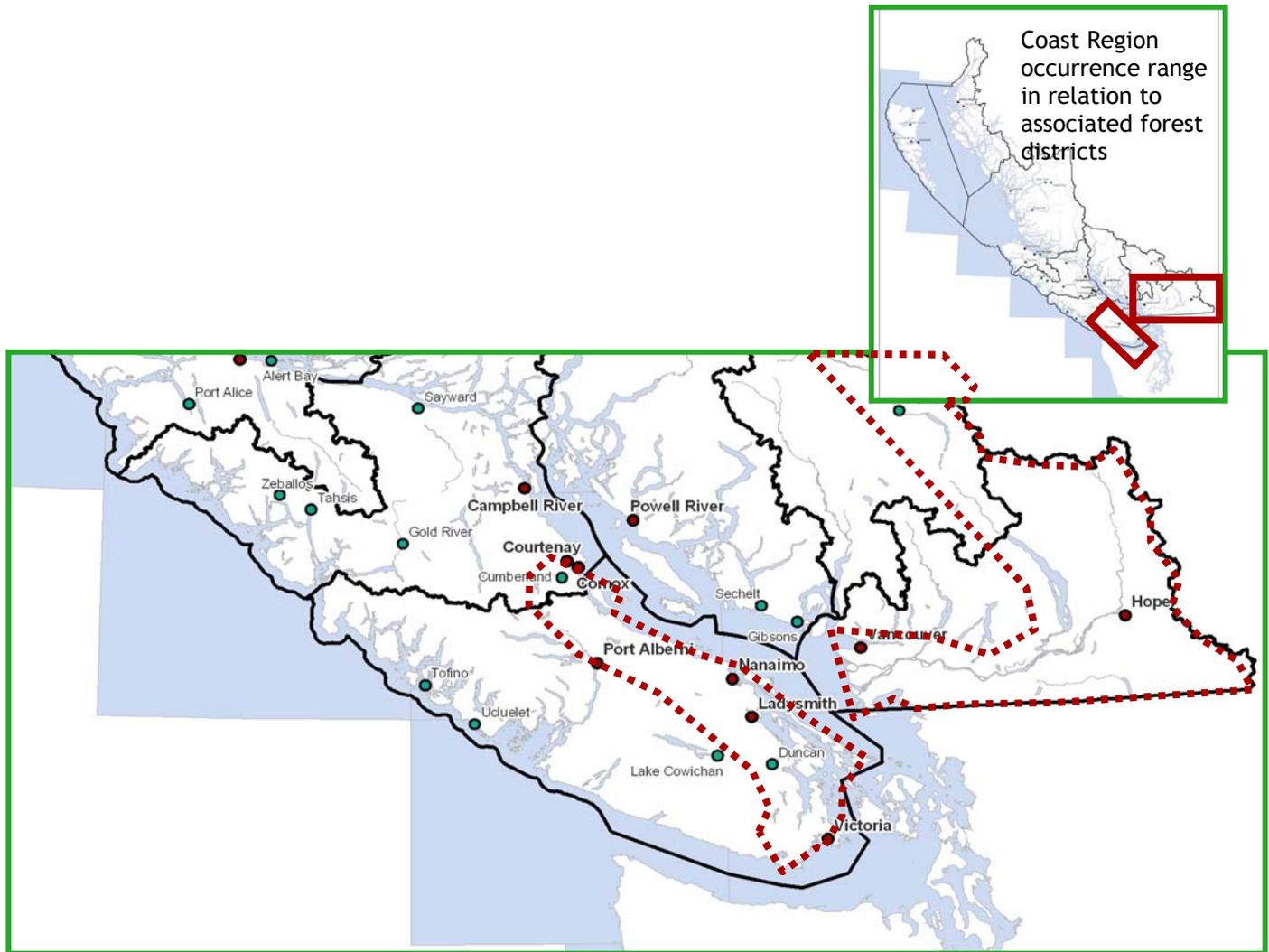
The distinct plumage (especially lack of any spotting or barring patterns on either sexes or juveniles) makes it unlikely this species would be confused with any other species of woodpecker occurring in the Coast Region.



Juvenile Lewis's Woodpecker (top)  
with Northern Flicker (bottom)

**Distribution**

*Elevations: 250-1160 m.* A migratory species, summer breeding populations of Lewis’s Woodpecker still occur in the Southern Interior, however the last breeding records for the Georgia Depression population date back to 1963 and the subspecies is considered extirpated. The subspecies historically ranged from southeastern Vancouver Island through the Gulf and San Juan Islands across to the Fraser Lowlands of southwestern British Columbia and south to the Puget Trough of western Washington (where it still occurs). Individuals from the US and interior are known to stray and have been found as far as Masset on Haida Gwaii. Occasional sightings still occur, especially during late summer and fall migration. In 2009 two juveniles were sighted at Maplewood Flats in the District of North Vancouver (Northshore). The most recent confirmed sightings are from the Metro Vancouver area (2010), at Colony Farm Regional Park and the DeBoville Slough area near the Lower Pitt River (Coquitlam/Port Coquitlam).



Lewis’s Woodpecker Georgia Depression Population (*Melanerpes lewis pop. 1*), historic breeding occurrence range for the Coast Region

**Habitat Preferences** Often found adjacent to, or at the edges of riparian areas, burns and meadows. Preferred forest community composition includes shore pine, Douglas-fir, Sitka spruce, black cottonwood and Garry oak. The presence of a dense understory of shrubs or native grasses is important to support insect food resources during the breeding season. It is unknown if this species will utilize artificial cavity boxes however it does exploit artificial structures such as wooden utility poles, fence posts and even building roofs.

**Critical Features** Nest cavities are excavated up to 30 m above ground. Abandoned woodpecker holes, natural cavities or hollows in wildlife trees are also utilized. Nests can range up to >1000 m elevation, often in association with burns and are occasionally semi-colonial. The preferred open stand habitat was historically abundant in the southern part of the Coast Region. Lewis’s Woodpecker is not as proficient as other woodpecker species in primary cavity excavation and requires accessible entry points such as delimb sites on a declining tree or a dead tree in an advanced state of decay. These structural attributes are often present in Garry Oak communities on Vancouver Island and would have been enhanced by frequent burns employed historically by First Nations to improve common camas bulb production.



Lewis’s Woodpecker nests and roosts in mature, mixed, open canopy stands where standing wildlife trees are readily available.

**Seasonal Life Cycle**

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
			Arrives in April. Breeding / Nesting								
			Eggs/Chick’s in nest								
Fledging (most migrate south starting in September, some remain resident)											

**Threats**

- ◆ Disturbance and loss of critical foraging and nesting features from development and logging are considered one of the most significant threats.
- ◆ Fire suppression in areas of this species historical Coast Region distribution may have reduced potential areas for populations to re-establish.
- ◆ Wide scale loss of nest trees through logging and other resource extraction activities remains an ongoing threat. Incremental loss of associated Garry Oak on Vancouver Island may have contributed to the decline and eventual extirpation of the subspecies there.
- ◆ Potential competition for cavity nests with introduced secondary cavity nesting species such as European Starling or Red Squirrel.
- ◆ Mortalities from vehicles in association with use of roadside utility poles and other artificial structures.

## Conservation & Management Objectives

- ◆ Apply conservation and management objectives as set out in the “Lewis’s Woodpecker Stewardship Account For the Garry Oak Ecosystems of Southwestern British Columbia.” Integrate complimentary measures as detailed in the Accounts and Measures for Managing Identified Wildlife - Accounts V. 2004. Lewis’s Woodpecker *Melanerpes lewis*.
- ◆ Assess, inventory and monitor using methodology set out in the Provincial RISC standards # 19 “Inventory Methods for Woodpeckers” (Version 2.0)

### Specific activities should include:

- ◆ Undertake comprehensive inventories to determine if periodic Coast Region sightings are migrating birds from populations outside of the Coast Region or the result of potential remnant Georgia Depression Population breeding pairs.
- ◆ Refrain from salvage or thinning of wildlife trees in areas where they occur in significant densities and work toward creating new wildlife trees through artificial placement or selective harvesting.
- ◆ Actions to protect critical features may eventually permit natural or human assisted re-introduction. Such habitat enhancement would be of greatest benefit in concert with management of European starling which can compete for nest cavities.
- ◆ Manage areas of existing and potential high habitat value by maintaining vegetated buffers and connectivity between sites.

The Georgia Depression subspecies of Lewis’s Woodpecker is listed under the Federal Species at Risk act (SARA), is subject to protections and prohibitions under the Federal Migratory Birds Convention Act and BC Wildlife Act and is Identified Wildlife under the Forest and Range Practices Act. Habitat for this species may also be governed under provincial and federal regulations including the Fish Protection Act and Federal Fisheries Act as well as Regional and local municipal bylaws.

## Content for this Factsheet has been derived from the following sources

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Every effort has been made to ensure content accuracy. Comments or corrections should be directed to the South Coast Conservation Program: [info@sccp.ca](mailto:info@sccp.ca). Content updated August 2010.

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