Impact Report

Williamson's Sapsucker Fund

290
New Wildlife Trees

263k+
Total Project Funds

Background

The Williamson's Sapsucker (WISA) is a medium-sized migratory woodpecker. They breed in coniferous forests in the mountains of western North America. In B.C., they can be found in three regions: Princeton-Merritt, Okanagan-Boundary, and East Kootenay. They were listed as Endangered under the *Species at Risk* Act in 2006, with habitat loss through the removal of mature forest being the primary threat to their population.[1]

Compensation Arrangement

In 2013, BC Hydro and the Habitat Conservation Trust Foundation (HCTF) signed the Williamson's Sapsucker Habitat Protection Contribution Agreement. BC Hydro was constructing the Interior-to-Lower Mainland Transmission Line, extending from the areas surrounding Merritt to Coquitlam. The route passed through an area that included at least one active WISA nest.

A mitigation plan was developed with the participation of the Upper Nicola Band and the Okanagan Nation Alliance to address the impacts on WISA habitat. This plan involved establishing a baseline number of

1 https://www.sararegistry.gc.ca/virtual_sara/files/plans/rs_williamson's_sapsucker_e_proposed.pdf

nests in the impacted area and monitoring for two nesting seasons after the line became operational. Because the number of active nests observed after the second nesting season was less than the baseline, a $250,000 compensation payment became due from BC Hydro. This payment was directed to HCTF and established the WISA Fund – a fund restricted to enhancing WISA habitat in the defined mitigation area.

The Project

HCTF held a call for proposals to conduct this habitat enhancement work, and the successful applicant was the Okanagan Nation Alliance (ONA). The project's objective was to enhance WISA habitat by increasing the density of potential nest trees in the Merritt area, Syilx traditional territory.

Williamson's Sapsuckers require mature trees with heart rot to excavate their nest cavities, but natural decay processes that result in heart rot can take upwards of 100 years. ONA used advanced methods of fungal inoculation combined with mechanical scarring, topping, and limbing to speed up the process, with the goal of trees becoming suitable in the next 5–10 years. This project was successful in creating 290 new potential wildlife trees in the areas surrounding Merritt to establish more suitable nesting habitat for WISA. ONA's work produced dead trees that will hopefully become suitable for Williamson's Sapsucker nesting in the short term and will also provide habitat for secondary cavity nesters in the long term.

The project spanned from 2020 to 2025. The same First Nations field technician was present each year during fieldwork for the creation of wildlife trees, collecting data on the ground and providing consistency with data collection. In the final year, ONA assessed as many trees as possible during the breeding season to see if WISA or other wildlife were using the trees. All the trees were dead and starting to decline, a promising sign that the trees were on their way to becoming suitable habitat for Williamson's Sapsuckers. This team effort allowed participants from all the years of the project to see the final outcomes of their work, and facilitated the transfer of knowledge between biologists and community members who have been critical in making this project a success.

In Conclusion

HCTF is honoured to have been able to support this project. Through our responsible investment practices, we were able to generate an additional 5.5% (over $13,500) to go towards the project, for a total of $263,500.

We consider this to be a positive example of how compensation funding can be used to mitigate the negative environmental impacts of human activities on wildlife and their habitats. Through partnerships and accountability, we can all support tangible, measurable, on-the-ground conservation outcomes for B.C.'s fish and wildlife.

Wildlife tree creation
credit: Okanagan Nation Alliance