



Al Martin HCTF Conservation Scholarship Recipient 2026



Megan Buers

Megan Buers is a PhD student at the University of British Columbia Okanagan, studying how threatened Western Screech-Owls (*Megascops kennicottii*) move through managed forest landscapes on Vancouver Island. She has spent nearly a decade researching birds of prey, working with Northern Saw-whet Owls, Burrowing Owls, American Kestrels, and more across Canada. It was during her master's research, examining how extreme heat in the Okanagan affected Western Screech-Owl behaviour and habitat use, that she first developed a fondness for the species.

Western Screech-Owls are medium-sized, nocturnal, forest-obligate owls that nest in tree cavities and favour riparian or mesic habitats, where they hunt everything from fish and small mammals to bats and birds. Two subspecies are currently recognized in Canada: *M. k. macfarlanei*, restricted to the province's interior, and *M. k. kennicottii*, found from the Lower Mainland north through Alaska (though absent from Haida Gwaii). Once abundant across Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland, the species has suffered significant declines due to competition and predation from the invasive Barred Owl, along with ongoing habitat loss and conversion.

Megan's PhD research centres on how forestry practices affect Western Screech-Owls. These owls are thought to depend on large, old-growth trees to persist, but how much old growth do they actually need, and how has landscape management shaped what remains available to them? Are owls in managed forests as healthy as those in contiguous old growth?

To answer these questions, Megan works with the province and numerous Nation collaborators to fit owls with GPS radio-transmitter backpacks, tracking their nocturnal foraging movements. Once tagged, the birds' movement data is transmitted remotely via satellite for analysis; data that will be used to map key habitat and forecast future conditions under different harvest scenarios, informing effective management and protection for the species.

Outside her research, Megan is passionate about connecting her community with science, volunteering with organizations such as the British Columbia Field Ornithologists and the Pacific Megascops Research Alliance. In her free time, she photographs insects and contributes to community science through iNaturalist.

By translating scientific discoveries into practical management tools, Megan hopes her research will help secure a resilient, science-based future for Western Screech-Owls in British Columbia.



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