

Green Scene: A Retrospective Review of Wildlife in the TriCities

by Elaine Golds

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I was recently asked to prepare some comments on local wildlife for Port Moody's time capsule. This request provoked me into thinking about some of the unanticipated changes in wildlife I have observed over the past 25 years.

For example, when our family first moved here in 1989, we had no gray squirrels in our neighborhood. At that time, these squirrels (sometimes also black in colour) were still radiating out from Stanley Park where they had been introduced from eastern Canada in 1909. We did have the delightful, but noisy, Douglas squirrels in our neighborhood. I could always count on their chatter to inform me if a cat was lurking in our yard around the bird feeder.

Douglas squirrels, which are slighter smaller than gray squirrels, were once the only type of squirrel commonly found in our area.

Bruce Brandhorst photo.

When the gregarious grays arrived in the early 1990s, to my dismay, the highly territorial Douglas squirrels retreated into nearby greenbelts. The increasing abundance of gray squirrels seems to have led to another change in local wildlife. Over the past 5 years, it has become not at all unusual for people to report seeing bobcats in their backyards. I can only surmise, with an abundance of gray squirrels, bobcats have now discovered what a tasty snack they make. Nature, it seems, could be striking a new balance.

Band-tailed pigeons, a species at risk which appears on the City of Port Moody's crest, were once so plentiful they were hunted in the Shoreline Park. By the time the *Burke Mountain Naturalists* undertook a flora and fauna inventory there in 1993, these migratory pigeons were only occasionally observed in the Park. With restrictions on their hunting in BC, their population is rebounding and these pigeons can now be reliably observed in the Shoreline Park and elsewhere in the Tri-Cities during the spring and summer. The tall conifers in our neighborhood attract these pigeons every summer where I enjoy their quiet cooing for several weeks. By early summer, these pigeons join with many other birds to feast on the berries of the red elderberry shrub. The return of these birds to their natural habitat is certainly a success story.

However, some birds have undergone precipitous population declines. Swallows were once common in local neighborhoods. Tree swallows nested in our neighbor's yard while barn swallows were regularly observed sweeping low over lawns to catch insects on the wing. Sadly, barn swallows are



now a species at risk and other members of the swallow family are also far less abundant. Exactly why remains a mystery but, given that swallows rely on insects for food, this suggests the use of pesticides could be part of the problem. It's shocking a bird once so common is vanishing so quickly from our skies without even the reasons for their decline being identified.

In contrast, the barred owl has become much more common in the past 25 years. Once restricted to eastern North America, this owl has been slowly expanding its range in BC. With its "*who-cooks-for-you*" call, it is often a welcome resident in local forests. It is also quite fond of eating rats, so, its expanding population has brought some unanticipated benefits with regard to rat control. However, the barred owl is aggressive; as a consequence, the smaller western screech owl has virtually disappeared in the last decade or so. In old growth wilderness areas, barred owls are, sadly, having similar impacts on the few remaining spotted owls in southwestern BC.

Not too long ago, there was little awareness of how much our natural environment had been altered by the spread of invasive non-native plants. Indeed, even the concept that some plants in natural areas were not native was not of interest to anyone but a few botanists and naturalists. However, with the formation of the *Invasive Plant Species Council of BC* and progressive programs in some municipalities, more people are getting involved in helping to remove invasive plant species. In the past five or so years, several volunteer groups have formed to remove invasive plants from natural areas in parks. For example, the *Friends of DeBoville Slough* in Coquitlam have undertaken a very successful program to control invasive knotweed without the use of pesticides. Other volunteers elsewhere are having a huge impact on some landscapes. While there is still much to do, I am beginning to think we are finally seeing some progress.

All of this makes me wonder what our parks will look like in 25 years when the Port Moody time capsule is opened. Will barn swallows still be swooping over the Inlet? Will a few secretive deer still be residing in the forested hillsides? Will red-legged frogs still be breeding in Bert Flinn Park? Will our parks be free of ivy and lamium? Without a doubt, there will also be some unanticipated changes beyond anyone's ability to predict. As they say, time will tell.