

Caring for your Conservation Covenant

A newsletter for Islands Trust Conservancy
Covenant Landholders



FALL 2023

Reflections from the 2023 Monitoring Season

To those of you who were able to join us for the annual monitoring survey this year—thank you. We always appreciate the opportunity to catch up, share observations about the land, and discuss any questions or concerns.

This year, one observation we made across all covenants and islands was dryness. Record-low rainfall last winter and spring meant that we saw lower-than-normal water levels and an exacerbated summer drought.

This climate trend is visibly changing the composition of pond and wetland plant communities, and shrinking habitat for plants and animals that rely on an aquatic environment for all or some of their life cycle. If you are concerned about a pond or wetland in your covenant, please let us know. There may be actions we can take together to enhance or restore these habitats for the species that depend on them.

Drought also continues to exacerbate wildfire risk. Fortunately, there is a growing number of resources available to help property owners differentiate between fire prone and fire-resistant landscapes and features, and local research into strategies that can reduce wildfire risk while improving ecosystem health. We look forward to sharing some of these resources with you in a future newsletter. In the meantime, please reach out to us if you have ideas for fire risk mitigation opportunities in your covenant.

The first steps are to get a risk assessment by your local fire department, if offered, and then to reach out to your covenant holder(s) so we can make a plan together.

On a brighter note, 2023 was a mast year [1] for Garry oak acorns. This abundance has drawn out wildlife that feed on these acorns, including species at risk we do not often see. One of these is the Band-tailed Pigeon.

You can identify Band-tailed Pigeons by the characteristic swishing sound of their feathers in flight and the dark band across the underside of their tail.



Band-tailed Pigeon © Doug Greenberg

Look out for our annual monitoring report, coming in the mail later this year, which will include observations and recommendations specific to your unique conservation covenant.

Thank you for being our partners in conservation.

Sincerely,

Jemma Green
Covenant Management & Outreach Specialist



[1] Every few years, certain tree species produce more nuts than usual. This evolutionary strategy, while energy intensive, produces more nuts than wildlife can eat, ensuring that some will survive to grow into new trees.

3 YEARS IN

Species at Risk Program in Action: Garry Oak Meadow Restoration



Islands Trust Conservancy manages habitat for at least 33 federally listed species at risk (and many more provincially listed species) across its network of 111 protected areas.

In 2020, ITC received a boost of funding from Environment and Climate Change Canada to help us conserve species and ecosystems at risk in our region. We immediately set to work with our conservation partners to learn more about where species at risk are located, assess their habitat needs, and make habitat improvements as needed. Several of these projects are taking place in conservation covenants, thanks to the cooperation of private landholders like you.



Mt Tuam restoration area in bloom © Laura Matthias

The Species at Risk (SAR) Program's biggest project to date is a one-acre meadow planted in the Mt Tuam Protected Area covenant on Salt Spring Island.

This privately owned covenant is part of a network of protected areas that make up the multi-jurisdictional Mt. Tuam Special Management Area, which harbours at least 38 species at risk. Prior to its protection, the area had been depleted of wildflowers and other native plants following decades of disturbance, including intensive grazing by sheep and native black-tailed deer.



© Kristen Miskelly

With local biologists, we developed an enhancement plan to increase native plants, with a focus on expanding populations of rare wildflower species and creating habitat for pollinators.

In the fall of 2021, 20,000 native meadow species were planted and over a million seeds were sown in a one-acre area that we protected with fencing.

As the meadow establishes, ITC is working to control invasive grasses while monitoring the response of a whole community of species at risk, from the plants themselves, to the butterflies, bees, and other insects that rely on those plants, to the birds and bats that benefit from (feed on) the insects.

Just this fall, modelled after the Mt Tuam project, we planted and seeded two smaller meadows in a private covenant on Sidney Island with the aim of enhancing native plant diversity and benefiting pollinators.

© Kristen Miskelly



Species at Risk Program in Action: Sharp-tailed Snake Surveys

The Sharp-tailed Snake is a tiny, non-venomous snake that spends most of its life in leaf litter, decayed wood and rock piles, or underground.

Sharp-tailed Snakes are federally listed as Threatened, primarily due to habitat loss from development, especially in the sunny south and west-facing Garry oak and Arbutus woodlands and rocky meadows they are thought to prefer.

The goal of our Sharp-tailed Snake project is to work with biologists and local conservancies to conduct surveys and monitoring to increase our knowledge of these secretive snakes, including where they are found, so that we can better manage their habitat in our protected areas.

The snakes naturally thermoregulate under rocks or within woody debris, so researchers place Artificial Cover Objects (ACOs)—asphalt shingles—on the ground in suitable habitat to attract thermoregulating snakes and find them without disturbing their natural habitat structures.

Since 2021, 75 ACOs have been placed and monitored in three nature reserves and two covenants on Galiano, Pender, Salt Spring, and Thetis islands.

© Christian Engelstoft



© Laura Matthias

ITC is excited to also support an innovative new method of detecting the snakes: environmental DNA (eDNA).

In addition to traditional surveys, biologists have been collecting and analyzing swabs of ACOs and soil samples taken from underneath ACOs to detect the snakes' DNA.



Sharp-tailed Snake found under an ACO © Laura Matthias

Although it can take years of monitoring to detect Sharp-tailed Snakes, we have already discovered either the snakes or their eDNA in both covenants where we hoped to find them!

Good News!



The federal government has extended funding for our Species at Risk Program for another three years. We look forward to sharing updates on our projects in conservation covenants in the years ahead.

Invasive Species Alert



There are a number of high-priority invasive species that we are starting to see for the first time in certain covenants. By detecting these species early, we can avoid an infestation that would have significant ecological impacts and require resource-intensive removal. Please be on the lookout for these species and report sightings to us by emailing stewardship@islandstrust.bc.ca (please include a photo, if you can).

American bullfrog



© Will_89

Due to their large size and voracious appetite, American bullfrogs are a serious threat to wetland wildlife: bullfrogs will prey on other frogs, young snakes and turtles, small rodents and even birds. They prefer warm, still water with lots of vegetation, like wetlands, ponds, and ditches. They can be identified by their large size, olive or bright green back and creamy white belly, and large ear drum behind the eye (the same size or larger than the eye). In many areas, bullfrogs are practically impossible to eradicate, but they can be controlled, which is important because a single adult female can lay up to 20,000 eggs per year.

Burdock



© annie roonie 2011

Common burdock is a tall plant with large, heart-shaped leaves and purple flowers that bloom in late summer before becoming large, clinging burrs (the inspiration for Velcro) filled with thousands of seeds. Not only is burdock an invasive species capable of displacing native plants, it can also be harmful to people, pets, and wildlife. Last year, the provincial government received several reports of bats entangled in the prickly burrs of burdock. Sadly, in each case the bat was found after it was too late. We can help prevent these little tragedies by removing this plant as soon as it is discovered.

Invasive Species Alert



Shiny geranium infestation © Jemma Green

Shiny geranium



© Joost J. Bakker IJmuiden

Shiny geranium spreads aggressively, rapidly reducing local plant diversity. It also increases erosion: its weak roots serve as a poor substitute for the native plants it displaces. This plant can be identified by its shiny bright green leaves, hairless stems which become pink or red when mature, and small pink flowers which bloom from March to July. Seeds are ejected up to 6+ metres, remain viable in the soil up to five years, and are spread by boots, paws, and tires as well as by wind and water. Shiny geranium plants are extremely easy to pull and, according to the [CRD](#), larger infestations can be smothered with cardboard and mulch.

English ivy



© janetgraham84new

English ivy is an evergreen vine that forms thick green mats that, if left unchecked, can quickly smother entire plant communities. English ivy is unmistakable with its waxy, green star-shaped leaves and trailing or climbing stems. Ground-nesting birds may nest in ivy during the spring and summer, so the best time to control this invasive plant is in the fall and winter. Fortunately, ivy is relatively easy to control by hand-pulling rooted trailing vines and by severing climbing vines (remember to wear gloves to avoid irritation, and bag and dispose of vines properly in a landfill, otherwise plants can set new roots).

Ways to Further Your Conservation Impact



Share Your Story

Many of you have already made a conservation impact, either by placing a conservation covenant on your property, actively caring for your covenant lands, or making other financial or volunteer contributions to conservation in your community. You can further this impact by sharing your story and inspiring others to take action. Tell your friends about what you did and why you did it, or reach a broader audience by connecting with Islands Trust Conservancy's Communications Specialist, Micaela Yawney, who can work with you to amplify your message through Islands Trust Conservancy's social media, or a feature in our quarterly newsletter, The Heron.

Join Us on iNaturalist

The iNaturalist app is a free online tool that anyone with a smartphone or computer can use to identify and learn about the diversity of life around us, and contribute research-quality data to help science and conservation efforts, like ITC's iNaturalist Project for covenants:

1. **Download the iNaturalist app or sign up online**
2. **Email us with your name, email and iNaturalist username so we can add your conservation covenant to the project**
3. **Join the project and start collecting observations**

Visit our project webpage to learn more!

Legacy Giving

When planning your legacy, you don't have to choose between your family and your love of nature!

As little as 1% of your estate can help protect the incredible biodiversity and landscapes of the islands in the Salish Sea.



Only \$125,000 in grants to projects has led to conservation protection for a whopping \$55,000,000 in appraised land value! You can bequeath cash, land, stock, or insurance, and your estate will receive a tax receipt for the amount donated.

Start a legacy that inspires your children, grandchildren, and future generations to give back to this very special part of the world.

We Want to Hear from You

This newsletter is written exclusively for you, ITC's community of conservation covenant landholders, with the purpose to inform and inspire. What do YOU want to read about in a future issue of this newsletter? Send your suggestions to stewardship@islandstrust.bc.ca.