



The mountain bluebird is one of many species being studied as part of the B.C. Breeding Bird Atlas project, which is gathering comprehensive, province-wide data about bird habitat in B.C.

# BIRD'S-EYE VIEW

LOCAL BIRDERS SURVEY B.C.'S DEEPEST BACKCOUNTRY

BY KIMBERLEY FEHR | PHOTOS IAN ROUTLEY

A **FALLEN TREE** stands between birdwatcher Heather Baines and a pile of bumpy rocks that is supposed to be a backcountry road.

It's the summer of 2009 and Baines, a retired doctor, has driven up the deactivated forest service road hoping to access the Gold Bridge area, north of Pemberton. Her mission: to survey the region for the B.C. Breeding Bird Atlas, a project that, for the first time, is gathering comprehensive, province-wide data about which parts of B.C. are most vital to local birds.

Her red Ford pickup bears the war-wounds of many 20-point turns on narrow backcountry roads like this one. It's red for a reason – she wanted it to be as visible as possible from the air should she break down in a place like this.

She steps down from the truck to survey the situation. After pausing for a moment, she turns back to the truck. The situation calls for a portable chainsaw, one of many helpful gadgets she happens to have in the back of her truck, just in case.

She rolls the tree to the side of the road and drives on, but only gets a few kilometres further – there has been an avalanche on the road to the lake. And that's that.

She planned to try again, but forest fires and electrical storms conspired against her, and she never did make it to Gold Bridge that summer. But Baines, who volunteers as regional coordinator of the B.C. Breeding Bird Atlas for the Pemberton area, managed to log over 400 hours of birding in 2009, and she still has three

more summers left of the project to explore the area.

This type of birding is more extreme than most, and it's done with a purpose. Over 950 birdwatchers across the province are coming together in an effort to survey the nooks and crannies of B.C.; the high mountains and forgotten valleys – places few people ever get to see.

Thanks in part to a \$50,000 grant from Vancouver Foundation donors to Bird Studies Canada (the non-profit organization leading this project), the online database is well underway, and is already being used in conservation planning decisions – as a record of what we have, and what we have lost. Peter Davidson, B.C. program manager for Bird Studies Canada, says the data is a veritable



Left: A Lewis's woodpecker at a nest cavity, in the 40-degree heat of a Lillooet summer. Vancouver Island used to have a population of these birds in the 1940s. But now they are found only in the Interior, with occasional non-breeding sightings on the coast.

Below: A long-billed curlew makes a "distraction display" to draw predators away from its nest. Many novice birders associate these birds with coastal Mexico, but they nest in the threatened grasslands of B.C.'s Interior.



While driving with the windows open, Di Corrado heard the song of the bay-breasted warbler, which sounds a bit like a high-pitched squeaky wheel. It was an amazing sound because the bird is on the B.C. government's Red List of endangered and threatened species, and according to Di Corrado, is generally an "east-of-the-Rockies species."

Later, at 11:30 p.m., he was camping in the Chilkat Pass and the birds were still singing. A pair of northern shrikes chased a grey-cheeked thrush for a midnight snack.

"At midnight it started to get darkish and there were some ptarmigans that started clucking – I was lying there thinking this could be kind of scary – they sounded like gremlins," he says.

Baines, who can also identify most birds by sound, brings her iPod Touch, complete with an online bird guide and song reference, a recorder to capture a song in case she doesn't know it, a camera, her binoculars and, often, her cardigan corgi, a tiny dog with a big bark that helps her avoid bears.

She says many birds are changing where they go, and their numbers are decreasing – for example, flycatchers – so it's important to document all of this so we can understand what we are doing wrong.

"If we change the world so much that something can't live here, we're changing it for us too," she says.

But the seriousness of the undertaking doesn't mean she can't birdwatch in style sometimes. "I was at Meager Creek lolling around in the hot springs, working hard trying to find band-tailed pigeons, and surprisingly I wasn't finding any," she says. "A forest service guy came and told me to get out of there quickly. I had noticed when I got in that Capricorn Creek did look very brown. He said there was a mudslide coming down and we had better get out of the area or we were going to be stranded. So I did." Just another day in the life of a dedicated birder. **VF**

For more information on the B.C. Breeding Bird Atlas project, visit: [www.birdatlas.bc.ca](http://www.birdatlas.bc.ca).