

Safeguarding the Delta

Trust preserves a way of life for farmers and birds

By KIMBERLEY FEHR



The short-eared owl is a vulnerable species that relies on Delta farmland for habitat.

Thick clouds hang overhead as David Bradbeer walks softly and silently across an unused farm field in Delta, orchard grass, red clover and creeping red fescue underfoot. Suddenly several short-eared owls burst from the grass in erratic moth-like flight, a flurry of mottled tawny feathers and flashes of yellow-orange eyes. Bradbeer, who is the program coordinator for the Delta Farmland and Wildlife Trust, says he has never seen so many in one place before. The seven owls circle in the sky, waiting for him to pass so they can return to roost in the field, at least for now.

The trust's bird surveys found that this type of field, of all the fields in Delta, is the choice of the short-eared owl, a vulnerable

bird whose national population fell 27 per cent over 10 years, and is on the B.C. government's Blue List, which inventories species of "special concern."

What makes this particular field special is that it's on the third year of a four-year vacation from production, thanks to the trust, which pays farmers to enhance their land for wildlife. They plant a proven recipe of grasses and clovers, which allows the owls' favourite food, the Townsend's vole, to proliferate madly, making the field a virtual smorgasbord.

The trust runs this and other programs with the goal of improving the quality of Delta farmland – which degrades with constant vegetable production – while enhancing habitat for wildlife.



David Bradbeer, Delta Farmland and Wildlife Trust program coordinator, makes a site visit to one of several farms currently lying fallow to generate habitat for birds and wildlife.

“We live in a world where we’ve lost a lot of natural areas; we’ve lost a lot of life and we will continue to lose it as development pressures affect what remains,” says Bradbeer.

Long before Delta was a city, the only map it was on was an imaginary map of birds. An estimated five million birds pass through the area each year via the Pacific Flyway, a highway in the sky for migrating birds such as the snow goose, which travels some 4,000 kilometres to summer at Wrangel Island in Siberia, and the rough-legged hawk, which breeds anywhere from here to the Arctic – as well as vulnerable species like the American Bittern and the fannini subspecies of the Great Blue Heron. And the short-eared owl.

The trust received \$2.25 million in 1993 from the Vancouver Airport Authority Habitat Conservation Program to compensate wildlife like the short-eared owl for habitat lost due to airport expansion. The money was used to establish a fund at Vancouver Foundation, which has “provided a steady stream of income for our work over the last

15 years,” according to Bradbeer. Vancouver Foundation donors have also granted \$75,000 over the years to fund various agricultural schemes for farmers.

Over 40 Delta farmers participate in the trust’s programs, including Jack Zellweger, who has partaken of every farm improvement scheme the trust offers. On this rainy day in May, Zellweger has the weight of water on his mind as he gazes at the thick, grey sky looming over his Westham Island farm, a slight furrow in his brow.

“One big rain is like 100 tonnes of water that comes out of the sky,” says Zellweger, 53, who has been a farmer all his life. “Think of how much that weight affects the soil. It makes a layer that doesn’t drain properly. It lies there and smothers everything. It leaches nutrients from the soil. It makes our land less capable of supporting things – ducks and everything.”

Zellweger received support from the trust for laser-levelling, which helps ease his water worries by evening out the land and preventing stagnant pools from gathering,

as well as for liming, which improves the soil’s pH balance.

“Development pressures mean more farmers can’t afford to own the land,” says Bradbeer. “It might not be worth their while to invest in expensive liming and laser-levelling if they don’t know if they’re going to have the land in five years.”

Much like the short-eared owls, farmers are feeling the pressures of change. Right now Zellweger is in a quandary. The food processing companies that bought his peas, beans and corn shut down their local operations, so all he has left is seed potatoes. Now he has to figure out what else to grow and how to sell it.

“I don’t know if there’s going to be any processing crops next year at all,” he says as he looks out over his fields. A nearby farm sold for \$100,000 an acre, and the buyer put radio towers on it. “They’ll never grow a vegetable on that land again,” he says.

Current farming statistics are hard to come by. Metro Vancouver’s Census of Agriculture report shows the number of farms in the region fell 24 per cent from 1996 to 2006. As of 2006, nearly half of Metro Vancouver farmers earned less than \$10,000. And they’re getting older: the number under 35 years old decreased by 66 per cent. Half rely on paid work off the farm.

“It’s still difficult to make the connection between the farmers producing the food out here in Delta and the city right next to it,” says Bradbeer. “It’s cheaper to buy food halfway around the world and ship it here, on a per-cost basis.”

In Delta, the report shows the size of greenhouse operations surged 300 per cent from 1996 to 2006, which means less farmland, and less habitat for birds.

“If we lose these farmers, we lose the capability to produce nutritious food close to our city,” says Bradbeer. “As time goes on, this may become an issue. At the same time, because of [our] location on the Pacific Flyway, farms here provide crucial habitat for a slew of migratory birds. And if we lose the farmers, we lose that too.” **VF**

To support the Delta Farmland and Wildlife Trust, call Kristin Helgason at Vancouver Foundation at 604-688-2204. To learn more, visit the organization’s website: www.deltafarmland.ca.