

## Endangered Species and Spaces

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### 4.14 Lewis' Woodpecker: *Melanerpes lewis* (Gray)

Order: *Piciformes*  
Family: *Picidae*

#### Status

Global Rank: G5  
Provincial Rank: S3B SZN  
COSEWIC: not addressed

Provincial Listing: [Blue list](#)



#### Distinguishing Features

Like all woodpeckers, this species is highly specialized for climbing tree trunks and for digging out insects. The bill is hard, straight and chisel-like. The tongue is slender with a horny tip designed to impale and withdraw insect larvae from deep cavities. The skull is extremely thick to withstand the shock of hammering. Both sexes of the adult Lewis's Woodpecker are similar. The upper parts are a glossy greenish-black with a narrow grey collar around the neck. The face is a dull red; the breast is grey shading into rose on the abdomen, sides and flanks. Steady flight (not undulating like other woodpeckers) Total length 27 - 29 cm (Godfrey, 1986).

#### Distribution

Columbia Basin: Throughout the Columbia Basin as far north as Revelstoke and Golden.

British Columbia: The Lewis's Woodpecker breeds in the southern interior from the Similkameen Valley east to the East Kootenay Trench and north to Revelstoke and near Williams Lake. The core breeding range is in the Okanagan Valley and Thompson Basin. Occasionally, small numbers breed beyond the normal limits of its range. Formerly bred in southeastern Vancouver Island and the lower Fraser Valley (Cannings et al. In prep.).

Global: Breeds in North America from s. interior British Columbia and sw. Alberta south to Arizona and New Mexico, and from coastal California east to Colorado. Virtually the entire Canadian population occurs in British Columbia. Winters from s. interior British Columbia (casually) south through the w. states to n. Mexico, but mainly in the sw. USA (Cannings et al. In prep.).

#### Habitat

Lewis's Woodpeckers prefer open ponderosa pine forest, open riparian woodland, and logged or burned forest. Structural attributes necessary to

provide good breeding habitat are a very open canopy and large dead or decayed trees or tree limbs. A brushy understory that provides abundant insects, perches, and ground cover may also be important. In British Columbia, typical habitat is ponderosa pine forest/grassland or riparian black cottonwood stands adjacent to grasslands. Where closed-canopy riparian stands are used for nesting, trees at the edge of a stand next to open areas are usually used for nesting. In old cottonwood stands, trees in the interior of the stand can be used. Other breeding habitats include burns, wooded urban and suburban areas, and orchards. (Cannings et al. In prep.).

## Threats

The provincial population was estimated to be a maximum of 600 pairs in 1990, but this estimate may be conservative. In 1998, 85 active nests were found in the East Kootenay. Long-term declines are documented, but populations may have stabilized in the last two decades. Loss of nest trees through logging or firewood collection is a significant local threat, as relatively very few trees are suitable for nesting. Fire suppression, which has allowed growth of thickets of Douglas-fir in stands of ponderosa pine that were previously kept open by repeated fires, has made some stands unsuitable for Lewis's Woodpeckers. Competition for nest sites with European Starlings may be a factor in declines. (Cannings et al. In prep.).

## Biology

The Lewis's Woodpecker eats a variety of insects, fruit, and seeds. Spring migrants return to British Columbia from mid-April through mid-May with the peak movement during the first two weeks of May. Fall migration peaks in late August and early September. In British Columbia, clutches contain 4-6 eggs. Incubation takes about 14 days and the nestling period is 4-5 weeks. Most broods contained 2-4 young. Lewis's Woodpeckers are known to nest in loose colonies in some regions, and this trait has also been noted in British Columbia (Cannings et al. In prep.).



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