

Nature's Comeback Story: Garry Oak Meadows at WSPR

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Garry Oak Ecosystems are one of the most unique and endangered in Canada. Found primarily in British Columbia, these meadows are home to an array of rare and threatened species. In recent years, the degradation of these habitats due to urban expansion and invasive species, has put immense pressure on native flora and fauna. To protect and restore these vital ecosystems, sections of natural protected areas surrounding some of the Garry Oak Ecosystem have been closed. The goal is to allow this area to recover, providing a sanctuary where native species can reestablish.



Camassia quamash (common camas), *Camassia leithtlinii* (Great camas) in Garry Oak Ecosystem.

We are starting small with a section below the library that we have stopped mowing regularly and have found some native plants return. This area, now fenced off, creates a safe haven for plants and animals, allowing for natural regeneration without disturbances from human traffic, pets, or invasive species introduction. By limiting access, we hope to encourage different native plants and animals to return to the area.

Once a common sight in Garry Oak meadows, the Western Bluebird has seen a dramatic decline due to habitat destruction and competition from invasive species such as the European Starling. WSPR staff started a nest box program, aiming to bring back stable breeding populations but have not seen any yet. Several butterfly species, such as the Taylor's Checkerspot and the Propertius Duskywing, are



of particular concern. These pollinators depend on native plants like Camas and Oregon Grape for survival. Restoring their habitat by removing invasive species and reintroducing native flora is crucial for their recovery.

Many native plants that thrive in Garry Oak ecosystems are now classified as endangered or threatened. Common Camas has historically been cultivated by Indigenous peoples as a food source. *Trifolium depauperatum* is a tiny clover that calls WSPR home with its small pink flowers. *Triteleia howellii* is a striking blue-flowered plant threatened by encroaching development has been spotted on site. By restoring the natural balance of Garry Oak meadows, these plants have a greater chance of survival and regrowth.

For thousands of years, Indigenous peoples have farmed Garry Oak meadows, cultivating them as vital sources of sustenance. The most well-known example is the cultivation of Camas bulbs, a staple food for Coast Salish and other First Nations groups. Camas was carefully harvested and managed through controlled burns, which helped maintain the health of the meadows by preventing encroachment from shrubs and trees. This practice also enriched the soil and promoted the growth of other native plants. Today, Indigenous communities continue to play an essential role in the restoration and protection of these landscapes, ensuring that traditional knowledge is brought to the younger generations.

One of the greatest threats to Garry Oak ecosystems is the presence of invasive species, which aggressively compete with native plants for resources. The staff at West Shore Parks (WSP) have been working to combat these threats by removal. Some of the most problematic invasive species include the following; Scotch Broom a fast-spreading shrub that crowds out native vegetation and alters soil composition with seeds that are viable for up to 60 years, English Ivy a vine that smothers trees and ground vegetation, preventing native plants from accessing sunlight, and Himalayan Blackberry that forms dense thickets that prevent the growth of native flora, but it does have a delicious fruit. WSP staff engage in removal efforts, but it is a hard battle to fight.

The decision to close off areas of the Garry Oak Ecosystem is a necessary step toward reversing degradation. By providing these ecosystems with the time and space they need to recover, park staff are working to secure a future where native species can thrive. Continued restoration efforts, coupled with public education and community involvement, will be essential in preserving the natural and cultural heritage of Garry Oak Ecosystem for generations to come.

Through these efforts, we hope to see the return of vibrant wildflower displays, the resurgence of bluebirds and butterflies, and the continued presence of culturally significant plants like the camas. The work being done now to promote a healthier, more biodiverse ecosystem, ensuring that this natural treasure remains protected and cherished.



Taylor Checkerspot



Triteleia howellii



Trifolium depauperatum