

Williamson's Sapsucker Surveys, Conkle Lake Provincial Park, 2019

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INTRODUCTION

BC Parks has proposed prescribed fire, fuel and or ecosystem restoration treatment units of just over 200 ha (Figure 1) within the north end of Conkle Lake Provincial Park, about 14 km northwest of Rock Creek, BC. I was contacted in late May, 2019, by Kirk Safford of BC Parks with concerns about the potential occurrence of Williamson's Sapsucker (WISA) within some of the proposed treatment units.

Only the south end of Conkle Lake Provincial Park was included in the Endangered WISA contiguous Area of Occupancy¹ because of habitat similarities to areas where WISA were detected within 1 km of the southern park boundary during the extensive surveys of 2003-2008. No WISA were detected at the north end of the park in the six Call and Drum Playback (CPB) survey pts within the park road and campground areas in 2004 or 2007. There is one historical eBird record of WISA in the park campground from June 10, 1984, but no records among the seven April-June recent (2010 or later) eBird checklists submitted.

While most of the treatment units consist of forest regenerating after the 1931 Camp McKinney fire, there are a number of veteran Western Larch in the area that could provide Williamson's Sapsucker (WISA) breeding habitat. Okanagan Wildlife Consulting was contracted by the BC Conservation Foundation (Contract #8110020-001) to conduct call- and drum-playbacks (CPB) in June, 2019, to determine if WISA were present in the area, and if there might be any effects of the proposed treatments.

¹ Environment and Climate Change Canada. 2016. Amended Recovery Strategy for the Williamson's Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus thyroideus*) in Canada. *Species at Risk Act* Recovery Strategy Series. Environment Canada, Ottawa.

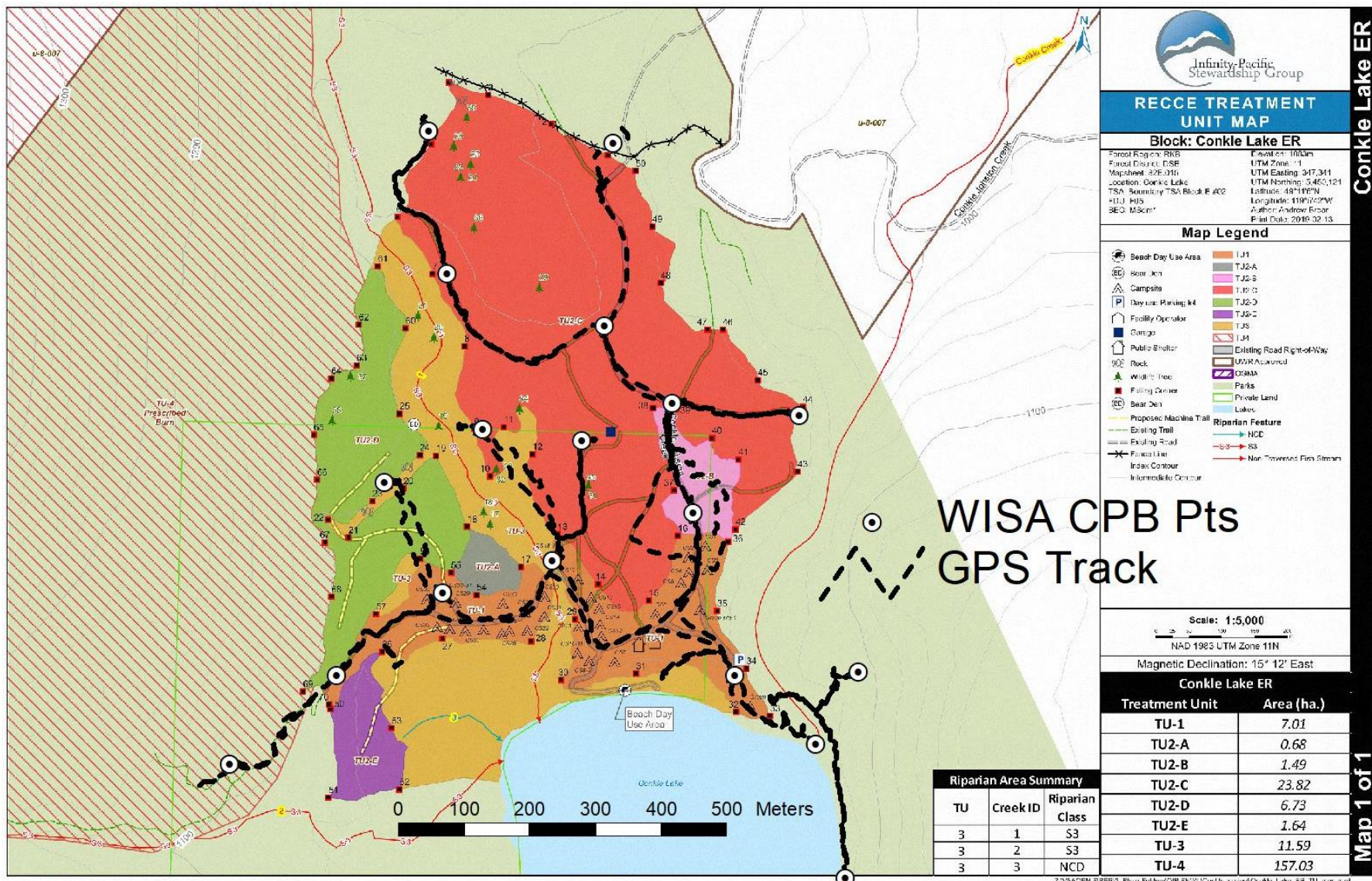


Figure 1. Conkle Lake Provincial Park proposed treatment units including Williamson's Sapsucker call playback (CPB) survey points from June 11, 2019. Background map provided by BC Parks.

METHODS

Call and drum playbacks were conducted in the early morning of June 11, 2019, to determine if WISA were present. The overall treatment areas were 207 ha, of which 53 ha is on the flatter area near the campground of Conkle Lake Provincial Park, and the remaining 157 ha is on steeper rocky slopes to the west. 18 CPB survey points were spaced out over the flat portion of the treatment areas using approximate 200 m between-point distance to cover the area thoroughly (Figure 1).

The standard WISA protocol² was used with each CPB point sample consisting of three broadcasts of a 10-15 second Williamson's Sapsucker drum and call combination repeated three times in three directions, and then a silent listening period of 3 minutes, for a total listening time of 4 minutes and 20 seconds. CPB equipment used was a FoxPro electronic game caller with WISA calls and drums played through an external FoxPro speaker with front bell diameter of 14-cm.

Location using GPS was recorded at each CPB point. For each WISA detection, I recorded the time (seconds) of the initial response from the beginning of the CPB; the sex (male, female, unknown or pair), the number and the type of responses (visual, drum and/or call), the estimated distance (m) and direction (degrees from a compass reading) to each WISA.

Notes were made on potential WISA habitat in each area surveyed. In particular, I looked for potential WISA nesting trees, i.e. veteran Western Larch trees with dbh of 60 cm or greater, during the entire survey including when walking or driving between or around points.

Field data was entered into the WISA Excel file template that was designed in 2007 in consultation with the Wildlife Species Inventory (WSI) for submission to the WSI Species Inventory (SPI) system of the BC Ministry of Environment. This file will be submitted to SPI by Okanagan Wildlife Consulting in conjunction with other concurrent WISA field surveys when the data entry and analysis is complete later this year.

² For example, see Gyug, L.W. 2014. Williamson's Sapsucker monitoring 2014: Okanagan, Boundary and West. Report prepared for Environment Canada-Canadian Wildlife Service, Delta BC.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

No WISA were detected in the surveys of June 11, 2019, in Conkle Lake Provincial Park. The treatment units on the flatter part of the park were covered thoroughly enough that I feel that there were no WISA present in the portions of the park surveyed on June 11.

Most of the treatment units on the flat area near the campground contained trees that had grown after the 1931 fire. These trees were all too small to be potential WISA nesting trees. The only exceptions among these young stands were Trembling Aspen stands near the northwest part of the flat treatment units and along the riparian areas. Trembling Aspen can develop rots that make the trees suitable for cavity nest excavation when as young as 60 years old in some cases.

The highest quality WISA breeding habitat seen was at the stream outlet of Conkle Lake, where there were a number of very large (>60-cm dbh) veteran Western Larch trees that survived the 1931 fires. This area was outside the proposed treatment units, but even in that area, where I did extra CPB survey points outside the treatment units, no WISA were detected. Additional scattered very large Western Larch could be seen in a number of spots around or near the entire lake shoreline.

I made an extra walk through Treatment Unit B (see Figure 1) doing informal CPB along the walking path at irregular intervals. This unit contained some trees that survived the 1931 fire, but these trees were all thrifty and middle-aged (i.e., >100 but probably not >200 years old). Based on the large old stumps observed in that unit, this unit had been logged in the distant past so that any suitable WISA nest trees that may have been there appeared to have been removed long ago. Remaining large trees were veterans, but were veterans that had survived only one fire, not the survivors of multiple fires that create the veteran trees with heart rot characteristics that WISA seek for excavating nests.

Treatment Unit D on the steep rocky hillside to the west of the other treatment units was not surveyed for WISA. The forests appeared to be too thin with many canopy breaks because of rocky ground, and very unlikely to provide good WISA foraging habitat. However, because of the steep and broken topography, much of that area appeared to have been missed in the 1931 fire, and many veteran trees could be seen when looking up the hill. As a current treatment unit, Unit D may also be difficult both to access and to burn given the steep broken rock topography. Given the density of veteran trees there in general, careful consideration should be given to how that area is treated for other cavity nesters, even if not for WISA, or whether it even needs any fuel-reduction treatments at all.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Most of the proposed treatment units can be logged and/or treated in almost any way without affecting current Williamson's Sapsucker nesting habitat. Williamson's Sapsuckers were not found in the area, and the habitat in most of the units is not suitable breeding habitat.

However, I recommend a long-term plan for enhancing WISA habitat, which would include retaining the largest Western Larch throughout the site as eventual veteran nest tree recruits, and with mature (>17.5-cm dbh) tree densities retained so as to be above 100/ha in all units after treatment.³

Exceptions to the above conclusions include the riparian treatment units or the portions of any units containing aspen stands where all mature aspen should be maintained in addition to the above recommendations for Western Larch and tree densities.

Possible treatments on the steep hillside of Treatment Unit D should consider the discussion outlined previously, i.e., whether any treatment is possible given the steep and broken topography, and whether any treatment would be beneficial to biodiversity given the higher density of older veteran trees in that unit.

The most likely habitat Williamson's Sapsuckers would use in the northern part of the park is the stand containing veteran Western Larch trees near the stream outlet of the lake. That area should not be included in any current or future treatment unit.

³ B.C. Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations. 2014b. Best management practices for timber harvesting, roads, and silviculture for Williamson's Sapsucker in British Columbia: Okanagan-Boundary Area of Occupancy. B.C. Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations, Nelson, BC. 15 pp.