

## CHATS IN YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD



**Yellow-breasted Chat**  
Photo Chan Robbins

**The chats' song consists of a jumble of harsh, chattering clucks and soft caws, alternating with repeated whistles.**

### What Is a Yellow-breasted Chat?

Have you seen a flash of yellow or heard loud whistles, chatters and squawks coming from dense, tangled thickets on your property? If so, you may be lucky enough to have a Yellow-breasted Chat living nearby. The population of this colourful bird is endangered and needs special attention to prevent its disappearance in British Columbia. Chats are also indicators of healthy riverside habitat, acting like the canary in the coal mine.

### What Do Chats Look Like?

The adult male bird has a bright yellow throat and breast, and white “spectacles” around the eyes. The back is greyish olive-green and the belly is white. The adult female bird looks similar, but her plumage is duller in colour. Including the long tail, chats are about 18 cm in length, roughly the size of a bluebird.

### A Syilx Traditional Story About the Yellow-breasted Chat

By Richard Armstrong of the En'owkin Centre Traditional Knowledge Program

The Yellow-breasted Chat is called x<sup>w</sup>aʔq<sup>w</sup>iləm' (Whaa-th-quil lem) in the Syilx language. X<sup>w</sup>aʔq<sup>w</sup>iləm' means many songs. A long time ago when all life lessons were taught to the young Syilx, the elders would take a young person out to the riparian chat habitat areas and would tell the teen to listen to that bird. X<sup>w</sup>aʔq<sup>w</sup>iləm' is a mimic and this bird takes snippets of other bird sounds and strings them together and sings it as one song. In Legend times X<sup>w</sup>aʔq<sup>w</sup>iləm' was a loud mouth and a braggart. X<sup>w</sup>aʔq<sup>w</sup>iləm' would even practice singing the snippets of other bird songs at night in the moonlight. In the morning he would be the first one up and find the highest tree and sit on top and sing out as loud as he could. His song is very loud and usually sounds terrible. After awhile the elder would ask the teen what he thought about the song of that bird called X<sup>w</sup>aʔq<sup>w</sup>iləm'. The teen would of course say that it sounded terrible. He also might say that he thought all birds were supposed to sound good. The elder would then tell him as a life lesson that he must not be like that bird. That if he sang the songs of others and tried to call it his own, it would never sound nice. He was then told that one must sing their own song to be the best that they can be. That is why the X<sup>w</sup>aʔq<sup>w</sup>iləm' is important to the Syilx.



*The original people of the Okanagan are known as the Syilx speaking people, current governance structure is the Okanagan Nation Alliance. The En'owkin Centre is an Indigenous cultural, educational, ecological and creative arts institution located in Penticton, B.C., which offers a culturally sensitive learning environment in a nurturing and challenging atmosphere.*



**Yellow-breasted Chat**  
*Photo Tom Munson*

## Where Are Chats Found?

In B.C., chats are found mainly in the valley bottoms of the Okanagan River from Okanagan Lake south to Osoyoos Lake, and the lower Similkameen River. Most known chat territories encompass dense, impenetrable thickets bordering these two rivers. Chats migrate south to winter in southern Texas, Mexico, and western Panama. Most have left B.C. by mid-August, and return in mid-May.

## What Do Chats Eat?

During the breeding season, chats search within dense thickets for insects. Insects are their preferred food because they are high in protein. In the late summer, after the young have left the nest, adult and juvenile birds eat mainly the berries from native shrubs.

## When Do Chats Nest?

A chat's bulky, cup-shaped nest is made of leaves, bark shreds, weed stalks, and other coarse materials, and is lined with fine grasses. The nest is usually well-hidden low down in dense thickets with a canopy of cottonwood or water birch alongside rivers, creeks and streams. Chats are making their nests, incubating eggs and feeding young from about mid-May to mid-July. Most of the eggs are laid in the middle of June.



**Yellow-breasted Chat nest and hatchlings**  
*Photo Rene McKibbin*



**Yellow-breasted Chat hatchling**  
*Photo Rene McKibbin*

## Other Birds With Yellow Colouring Which Could Be Confused With The Yellow-breasted Chat

-Bullock's Oriole (female)

### Common Yellowthroat



*Photo Michael Woodruff*

### Western Tanager (female)



*Photo Eric Rosenberg*

### Western Kingbird



*Photo Dan Garber*

### Nashville Warbler



*Photo Dick Cannings*



## Why Care About Chats?

In B.C., the number of chats has been declining since the 1960's. There may be fewer than 72 pairs now breeding annually in the south Okanagan. Nationally, the B.C. population of Yellow-breasted Chats is designated as endangered under the Species at Risk Act and it is on the provincial Red List in B.C. (an endangered species is one that is facing imminent extinction).

## Why Are There So Few Chats?

Chats live along watercourses in woodlands known as riparian areas. Since 1938, an estimated 87% of southern Okanagan valley-bottom riparian habitat has been destroyed mainly due to urban and intensive agricultural development, as well as flood control. The remaining riparian areas, some which should be suitable for chats, have been degraded and fragmented by activities such as urban and agricultural development, road building, livestock grazing, and logging.

## What Is A Riparian Area?

Riparian areas are shoreline forests. *Ripa* means shore in Latin. These forests are moisture-loving vegetation zones found alongside streams and lakes. These areas can vary in width depending on slope and other factors influencing moisture. In the south Okanagan and lower Similkameen, the canopy of riparian woodlands is composed of trees such as black cottonwood, water birch, mountain alder, and trembling aspen. The understory is composed of dense thickets of shrubs such as willow, red-osier dogwood and wild rose with lush ground-cover growth of native grasses and flowering plants.



**In the 1950's, much of the Okanagan River was straightened, narrowed, and diked. As a result, about 87% of the rivers riparian area and wetland habitat was lost. Photo Chris Bull**

**Riparian areas are protected by legislation. Please check your local regional district, municipal, and provincial regulations before logging, mowing, or destroying riparian area vegetation.**

# Why Are Riparian Areas Important?

Riparian areas...

- maintain water quality by filtering out agricultural and industrial pollutants before they enter the water course.
- regulate water quantity by acting like a sponge during floods and retaining water in the soil during droughts. Clean water and high water tables are important to agriculture and ranching.
- stabilize the banks of streams and lakes with the dense root systems of trees and shrubs, thus reducing erosion and sediment in watercourses, including fish-bearing streams.
- provide shade that helps to maintain the lower water temperatures needed by native cold-water fish such as trout and spawning salmon.
- supply fallen leaves and terrestrial insects that nourish the stream and the aquatic life it supports.
- provide wildlife corridors, enabling species to move along river systems.
- are very productive and provide a wide variety of habitats and foods for a diverse community of plants and animals.

Distinct associations of birds are found in riparian woodlands: in addition to the Yellow-breasted Chat you are likely to hear birds such as the Veery, Yellow Warbler, Gray Catbird, Black-headed Grosbeak, Willow Flycatcher, and Song Sparrow.



**Natural riparian area**  
*Photo Chris Bull*



## What Other Species Use Riparian Woodlands?

Maintaining and enhancing biological diversity and integrity is crucial, riparian areas are recognized as an essential part of that process. Despite the fact that they make up a small portion of our landmass, about 85% of all vertebrate species are dependent upon riparian habitats or use them regularly. Many of the insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals in our area make use of riparian woodlands for all or part of their life cycle, including breeding, feeding, shelter, and travel. Restoration of chat habitat will likely benefit many of these species. Examples of endangered and threatened species that use riparian areas are Lewis's Woodpecker, Western Screech-Owl, Northern Leopard Frog, and the Gopher Snake.



**Western Screech Owl**  
*Photo Michael Woodruff*



**Lewis's Woodpecker**  
*Photo Tom Munson*



**Gopher Snake**  
*Photo Paula Rodriguez de la Vega*

**Report Chat sightings to:  
B.C. Ministry of Environment,  
102 Industrial Place  
Penticton, BC, V2A 7C8  
Tel: 250-490-8200**



**Yellow-breasted Chat in rose thicket**  
*Photo Rene McKibbin*

# What Can We Do To Help Chats And Associated Species?

A significant portion of the remaining riparian habitat in the Okanagan and the Similkameen Valley is on private lands. Private landowners have a critical role to play and by working with conservation groups, you can help to ensure the future of the chat population and healthy riparian ecosystems.

## Conservation groups help in the following ways:

- Cooperate with researchers to learn more about the existing chat population and their habitat needs.
- Provide information and assistance to private landowners regarding riparian area conservation opportunities through individual landowner contact and community stewardship projects.
- Assist landowners with long-term protection of riparian habitat by providing fencing and tools such as conservation covenants.



**Exclusion fence to restrict cattle from trampling the creek and riparian vegetation.**  
*Photo by The Nature Trust*



**Volunteer Anthea Bryan planting red-osier dogwood to enhance riparian habitat.**  
*Photo by Paula Rodriguez de la Vega*

## Landowners can help in the following ways:

- Maintain and enhance riparian woodlands on your property. Even create it by planting chat-friendly native trees and shrubs. Avoid clearing or thinning this vegetation.
- Do not use pesticides.
- Install fencing to prevent livestock from trampling the vegetation, and use a grazing strategy designed to maintain intact riparian woodland understories and thickets. An alternate watering facility may have to be provided.
- Do not build roads or stream crossing through riparian areas where possible.
- Involve family, friends and neighbours in learning about chats and protecting and enjoying chat nesting territories.



**Cleaning up old agricultural garbage from riparian areas.**  
*Photo by Daris Piper*



## Habitat – What Do Chats Need?

- Breeding territories: 1 to 5 hectares free from pesticides.
- Management or exclusion of livestock by fencing is often necessary to prevent trampling and grazing of the understory of these areas.



15 to 45% of territory composed of very dense wild rose thickets for nesting, with each thicket exceeding 81m<sup>2</sup> in area and 2m in height.

*Photo by Richard Armstrong*

Dense ground cover of native grasses and flowering plants provide insect food and prevent weed invasion.

Intermittent overstorey of large native shrubs or medium-height trees, 8 to 15m tall.

### The shrubs and trees that Chats use for feeding and nesting include the following:

#### Shrubs

wild rose  
snowberry  
blue elderberry  
black hawthorn  
mountain alder  
willow  
saskatoon  
red-osier dogwood

#### Trees

water birch  
black cottonwood  
trembling aspen

#### Herbs

poison ivy  
white clematis  
various native grasses and flowering plants



wild rose

*Photo Richard Armstrong*

## For Further Reading About Chats And Riparian Woodlands:

B.C. Ministry of the Environment. 2004. Identified Wildlife Management Strategy. **Accounts and Measures for Managing Identified Wildlife: Yellow-breasted Chat.**

Website: [www.env.gov.bc.ca/wld/frpa/iwms/documents/Birds/b\\_yellowbreastedchat.pdf](http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/wld/frpa/iwms/documents/Birds/b_yellowbreastedchat.pdf)

B.C. Ministry of the Environment. 1998. **Habitat Atlas for Wildlife at Risk:** Okanagan Region: Yellow-breasted Chat *Icteria virens*.

Website: [www.env.gov.bc.ca/okanagan/esd/atlas/species/chat.html](http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/okanagan/esd/atlas/species/chat.html)

B.C. Ministry of the Environment. 2004. **Riparian Areas Regulation.**

Website: [www.env.gov.bc.ca/habitat/fish\\_protection\\_act/riparian/riparian\\_areas.html](http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/habitat/fish_protection_act/riparian/riparian_areas.html)

Cannings, R.J. 1995. **Status of the Yellow-breasted Chat in British Columbia.** B.C. Ministry of Environment, Victoria, B.C. Wildlife Bulletin No. B-81. Website: [www.env.gov.bc.ca/wld/documents/statusrpts/b81.pdf](http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/wld/documents/statusrpts/b81.pdf)

Cow and Fish: Alberta Riparian Habitat Management Society. **Riparian Health Assessment.**

Website: [www.cowsandfish.org/publications/assessment.html](http://www.cowsandfish.org/publications/assessment.html)

Fitch, L., B. Adams and K. O'Shaughnessy. 2003. **Caring for the Green Zone: Riparian Areas and Grazing Management - Third Edition.** Lethbridge, Alberta: Cows and Fish Program. Website: [www.cowsandfish.org/riparian/caring.html](http://www.cowsandfish.org/riparian/caring.html)

Partners in Flight British Columbia and Yukon. 2003. **Canada's Great Basin Landbird Conservation Plan, Version 1.0.** Partners in Flight British Columbia and Yukon, Delta, British Columbia, Canada. Website: [www.pifbcyukon.org/3c.html](http://www.pifbcyukon.org/3c.html)

Scott, L. and B. Delesalle. 2003. **The Value of Riparian Habitat and How to Care for It.** Brochure, Living In Nature Series. South Okanagan Similkameen Stewardship Program, Penticton.

Website: [blog.conservancy.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/The%20Value%20of%20Riparian%20Habitat-single.pdf](http://blog.conservancy.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/The%20Value%20of%20Riparian%20Habitat-single.pdf)

B.C. Nature. Important Bird Areas. Website: [www.bcnature.ca/pages/stewardship\\_projects/important\\_bird\\_areas.html](http://www.bcnature.ca/pages/stewardship_projects/important_bird_areas.html)

COSEWIC (Committee On the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada) Website: [www.cosewic.gc.ca](http://www.cosewic.gc.ca)

South Okanagan-Similkameen Conservation Program (SOSCP) Website: [www.soscp.org](http://www.soscp.org)

### SOUTH OKANAGAN-SIMILKAMEEN STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM

Helping private landowners protect and enhance natural areas on their lands.

For more information on private land stewardship, Yellow-breasted Chat conservation projects underway or how you can get involved, please contact:

**South Okanagan - Similkameen Stewardship Program**

**The Land Conservancy of BC**

#201-262 Main Street, Penticton, BC, V2A 5B2 Tel: 250-492-0173

The partners in this project are:



South Okanagan-  
Similkameen  
Stewardship  
Program

Partners in Flight



British Columbia and Yukon



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Date: March 2001

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