

Bluebird Ranch Habitat Enhancement Project

By David Hawke

Should you drive by Bluebird Ranch, you may notice the place looking a bit more “empty” than it did last summer. The reason for this is that several shrubs and small trees are being removed to create greater open space for nesting bobolinks and eastern meadowlarks.

These rare birds require not only a grassy area for nesting, but it has to be a big, open grassy area. It seems that bobolinks and meadowlarks prefer to have an 80 metre buffer zone starting at a forest edge and moving inwards on the field, meaning that they will use whatever grassy area is left after 80 metres is removed from the perimeter of the field’s edge.

Both of these species at risk have been documented as nesting on this property, but there is opportunity to increase their populations with a bit of habitat enhancement. This will also benefit other birds such as upland sandpiper and common snipe as well as some of the local sparrow species.

While bobolink nesting behaviour could be described as ‘loose colonial’, meadowlarks prefer their own bit of real estate per nest. The nesting habitat available to them on Bluebird Ranch is limited although large tracts of fairly open land is common on this property.

To enhance the grassland nesting areas, junipers, small cedars and clumps of trees are being removed from the interior parts of these meadows as well as intruding points of trees that are growing out from nearby forest stands. This will result in a greater area available for bobolinks and meadowlarks.

Next spring a seeding program of Little Bluestem grass (a native species) will take place in patches that are left bare due to tree removal.

Much of the brush that is being removed will be collected in large piles near the gate areas, and will be chipped. These chips will then be used as mulch on the nearby Sedge Wren Marsh Trail to smother some of the poison ivy that threatens hikers.

There is also a pad of gravel being installed in a wet area to assist the rancher in keeping cattle and feed out of the wetland thicket.

Bluebird Ranch is a 200 acre property owned by the Couchiching Conservancy which is located at the corner of Wylie Road and County Road #6 (Kirkfield Road), about 30 kilometers east of Orillia. Access by the public is restricted due to cattle ranching, however the property is easily viewed from roadsides.