



## Introducing the Benton County Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan



Fender's blue butterfly—photo by Alan D. St. John

The Willamette Valley is home to a number of rare and sensitive plant and animal species. Rapid growth in the Willamette Valley over the past 150 years has resulted in the decline of native prairie habitats that support these species. Less than one percent (1%) of Willamette

Valley native prairie habitat remains today. This habitat is considered one of the rarest ecosystems in the United States. In Benton County, the majority of native prairie is located on private property.

The native prairie habitats—upland and wet prairies— are home the endangered Fender's blue butterfly and its host species the threatened Kincaid's lupine. Approximately 15-20% of the Fender's population lives in Benton County.

Other listed plant species include Willamette daisy, Bradshaw's lomatium, and Nelson's checkermallow. Another butterfly species, Taylor's checkerspot, is even more rare than the Fender's blue butterfly, and is found in Oregon only within Benton County. Several bird species are rare in the Willamette Valley, including the Streaked Horned Lark, a species whose population is limited to western portions of Oregon and Washington.

As the population of Benton County continues to grow, there are added pressures to develop the remaining upland and wet prairie habitats. Additional threats include the continued spread of invasive species that compete with native species for light, water, and nutrients; succession—the encroachment of trees into the open meadows; and conversion of undeveloped land to agricultural uses.

What can be done to help protect these species and that habitats on which they depend?

### Endangered Species Act

The federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) is designed to protect species from extinction. The ESA does this by listing species as either threatened or endangered, and by prohibiting the "take" of a listed species. Take includes the harming or harassing of a species, in addition to killing or collecting the species. So what can a landowner do that will allow him to continue to manage his property in a lawful manner without jeopardizing the recovery of any threatened or endangered fish and wildlife species that may be present on his property?

There are several options available to private landowners to assist in the conservation and recovery of the species, while at the same time continuing to managing their property. Section 10(a)(1)(B) of the ESA allows non-federal landowners the opportunity to obtain a permit that will allow for the "take" of the species

so long as the take is incidental to otherwise lawful activities and the landowner agrees to avoid, minimize, and mitigate for any take the federal government allows. The landowner is required to prepare a "**Habitat Conservation Plan**" (HCP) that sets forth the conservation measures the landowner will undertake to avoid, minimize, and mitigate for any taking of the species allowed under the permit. The other options include the Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances and the Safe Harbor Act. In future newsletters we will discuss both of these options.



Streaked Horned Lark, photo by: Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife



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Benton County is seeking an incidental take permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This permit will allow the county to continue to manage its lands and issue land use permits without legal liability for the taking of a listed species. In return, Benton County is preparing a multi-species habitat conservation plan that will address what actions the county intends to take to reduce or eliminate the impacts of its operations on the species included in the HCP. Benton County's HCP will also allow private landowners whose activities are covered in the HCP to obtain a



“certificate of inclusion”. This voluntary action can save the private landowner both time and money. Without obtaining a certificate of inclusion, any private landowner seeking a permit from the County will need to get sign off from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service before the County

will issue a permit. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service may require the private landowners to obtain an incidental take permit and prepare their own HCP. While obtaining a certificate of inclusion from the county is voluntary, compliance with the Endangered Species Act is not.

The goal of the HCP is to ensure that development in Benton County has a minimal impact on the species within the HCP. Benton County anticipates that the process for preparing the HCP and related documents will take 3-years to complete, with another 6-12 months to actually obtain the incidental take permit.

A **HCP Planning Team** has been convened. Team members include: Benton County Natural Areas and Parks staff, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife staff, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff, and private consultants—the Institute for Applied Ecology and Parametrix. This team is responsible for preparing the HCP and related documents.

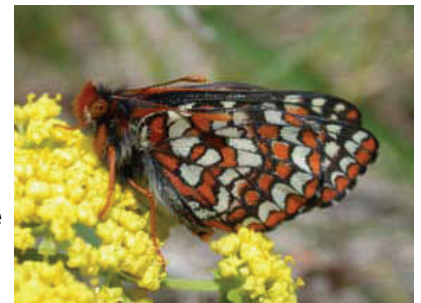
The county is establishing a **Technical Advisory Committee (TAC)**, made up of experts on Streaked Horned Lark, Taylor's checkerspot, Fender's blue butterfly, Kincaid's lupine, Nelson's checkermallow, Willamette daisy, Bradshaw's lomatium, and upland and wet prairie habitat restoration. The TAC will assist the HCP Planning Team in:

- defining the biological goals and objectives,
- reviewing baseline habitat assessment/field inventory analysis reviewing take analysis, and
- defining monitoring and management needs for long term viability,
- identifying conservation measures
- conducting formal and informal peer review for the HCP and related documents

The TAC will meet quarterly.

A **Stakeholder Advisory Committee (SAC)** is also being established. This group is made up of private landowners, advocacy groups (e.g. Audubon Society of Corvallis, Greenbelt Land Trust, Small Woodland) and local, state, and governmental agencies. The primary function of the SAC is to build consensus among diverse organizations and interests. The county is hopeful that the SAC will identify and seek resolution to issues before they cause delays later in the process. SAC meetings are planned for twice yearly.

As Benton County begins to prepare the HCP it will be seeking **public comments** through a series of public meetings. These meetings will be published on the County's HCP website and in the local newspapers. Public participation is important to us in order to have an HCP that addresses the needs of all Benton County residents.



Taylor's checkerspot—photo by Dana Ross