

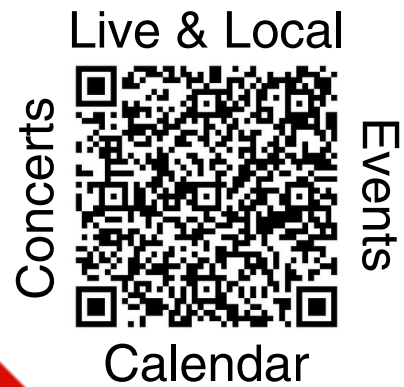
Cortes Island **Resonance**

Written by Roy Hales

The Call That Changed
Everything: Western Screech
Owls Return to Cortes Island



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The Call That Changed Everything: Western Screech Owls Return to Cortes Island



The only word I can find to describe that feeling...is gobsmacked,” exclaimed field biologist Sabina Leader Mense.

She was referring to the moment she heard a Western Screech Owl respond during a call playback survey near Bullock Bluff on Cortes Island.

It was nearly midnight, the final station of the night, and her team had conducted over a hundred surveys without a single response. This owl’s call — unmistakable and repeated 12 times — marked the first confirmed sighting since 2017.

What followed was disbelief, euphoria, and relief. “It instantly galvanized me into doing everything I could to protect them,” said Leader Mense.

That mission became more urgent just weeks later when she and her husband Dennis detected a second Western Screech Owl, confirming the species’ continuing, if precarious, presence in Cortes’ wild northern forest.



A Vanishing Voice

Once common along the BC coast, Western Screech Owls (*Megascops kennicottii kennicottii*) are now a species of special concern, with estimates suggesting only 1,500 to 3,000 remain in the wild. Surveys indicate a long-term population decline of 20–30%, driven by:

- Habitat loss, especially old growth forests with cavity-bearing trees.

- Urban development and road mortality.
- Predation by Barred Owls, a larger, more aggressive species that has expanded westward, often following human activity.



Their absence is not only ecological — it's acoustic.

“Our soundscapes are changing,” said Autumn Barrett-Morgan, who co-leads FOCI’s owl project. “We’re losing the sounds of the forest. The Screech Owl is now a missing sound.”

The Project Behind the Rediscovery In 2021, the Friends of Cortes Island (FOCI) launched a multiyear project funded by the federal Habitat Stewardship Program to search for and support Western Screech Owls across Cortes, Read, Maurelle, and Sonora Islands.

Key partners included:

- The Ministry of Water, Lands and Natural Resource Stewardship, which provided equipment, expertise, and data analysis for owl surveys across BC.
- Field leads Sabina Leader Mense and Autumn Barrett-Morgan, FOCI's core researchers and contractors.
- Community volunteers.



“We’re really lucky to be doing this work,” said Helen Hall, FOCI’s Executive Director. “This is the first time we’ve partnered this closely with the Ministry. The data is going back federally and provincially, putting Cortes at the center of an important conservation effort.”

What They Found Across three seasons of surveys and deployments, the team documented the following:

- Cortes Island - Two confirmed owl call responses from the remote northern peninsula. No Barred Owls detected in the area, suggesting it may serve as a refugia.



- Read Island - Confirmed call heard from Cortes, across the channel.
- Maurelle Island - One owl observed but killed (likely by predation).
- Sonora Island - Resident reports of annual owl calls in spring. ARUs deployed.

Throughout the project, youth and citizen scientists helped install autonomous recording units (ARUs) and build nest boxes. One highlight was a community event on Read Island where FOCI staff and volunteers, including Manuel Perdise, brought pre-cut kits across by boat for a hands-on nest box building day.

What's Next? The formal project wrapped in spring 2024, but FOCI has applied for a two-year renewal to continue surveys, expand habitat support, and advocate for stronger protections. The goal is to designate parts of the Discovery Islands as wildlife habitat areas under the Forest and Range Practices Act, restricting logging and ensuring nesting areas remain undisturbed.

As Helen Hall put it, "We don't want to see any more old growth forests cut down. This project is one more argument for a moratorium on logging those areas."

The next step includes deeper ecological analysis, further nest box monitoring, and community events like the March 25th listening workshop

at Linnaea Farm, where residents heard actual owl recordings and learn more about the elusive birds now confirmed to still live among them.

Photo Credits:

1. Bullock Bluff on Cortes Island - courtesy Sabiba Leader Mense
2. Sabina Leader Mense in the skiff at night
3. A Western Screech Owl peers down the tree trunk – photo credit Blair Dudeck
4. The Western Screech Owl Laurel Bohart recently mounted at Wild Cortes - Roy L Hales photo

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Roy Hales has been a published author since 1982 and has been the editor and owner of the local news website and daily radio program *Cortes Currents* since 2014.

Roy is also a former President of the Cortes Community Radio Society (2017-2021)

Visit Cortes Currents: www.cortescurrents.ca

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Cortes Island Resonance

Written by Roy Hales

Amplifying local voices and environmental themes through eight original reports promoted and distributed at Cortes Island's Village Commons Summer Concert Series 2025.

Environmental Reports

1. Restoring Life to Dillon Creek
2. Friends of Cortes Island at Mansons Landing Provincial Park
3. 30 Years of Foreshore Monitoring on Cortes Island
4. European Green Crabs Reach Cortes Island
5. Sabina Leader Mense and the Wolves of Cortes
6. Species at Risk
7. The Call That Changed Everything – Western Screech Owl
8. The Story of the Island's Streamkeepers

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