

Creston Valley Wildlife Management Area Annual Report for 2025-2026 (Year 7)



Environment & Climate Change Canada – Canada Nature Fund: Community Nominated Priority Places for Species at Risk

Kootenay Connect: Creston Valley Focal Area – March 2026

Western Skinks

Kootenay Connect is a project facilitated by the Kootenay Conservation Program



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Acknowledgements

All activities were conducted on the traditional and unceded land of the yaqan nu?kiy Peoples (Lower Kootenay) within the Ktunaxa Nation Territory. The habitat enhancement work and monitoring surveys were conducted by CVWMA staff and contractors within the boundary of the Creston Valley Wildlife Management Area (CVWMA). The activities were primarily funded by Environment and Climate Change Canada's (ECCC) Community-Nominated Priority Places for Species at Risk Program (CNPP) through the Kootenay Connect Project and facilitated by the Kootenay Conservation Program (KCP).

Cover Page Photo: Northern Rubber boa (*Charina bottae*) – Creston Mountain, ©CVWMA.

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Project Deliverables: Year 7

This document reports on the activities completed by the Creston Valley Wildlife Management Area (CVWMA), representing the Creston Valley Wildlife Management Authority, in Fiscal Year 2025-2026, as part of Kootenay Connect, and as agreed upon in Schedule A and Schedule B of Service Contract No. 2025/26-CV-01 between the Kootenay Centre for Forestry Alternatives (KCFA) and the CVWMA:

The reporting deliverables under Schedule A are outlined in Table 1. These deliverables are either provided as attachments to this report or as content.

Table 1. Service Contract No. 2025/26-CV-01 Project Deliverables

Project Deliverables	Dropbox Location
1. Short 1-2 pages interim updates of how the project has met the measurable outcomes as outlined, due on August 31, November 30, 2025, and January 31, 2026. Longer reports are acceptable.	Provided on respective dates. No report provided on January 31, 2026 as there were no changes from November 2025.
2. Brief 1-page Results Report of key quantifiable results and targets to inform Kootenay Connect's annual report to ECCC due on March 15, 2025. This deliverable could also be met in an Executive Summary within the Summary Report (below)	Table 2 (p.9) in this report.
3. Short 3-5 pages final Summary Report of how the project has met the measurable outcomes as outlined, due on March 15, 2025. Longer reports are acceptable.	Kootenay Connect ECCC/Year 7/Year 7 Final KC Deliverables/Creston Valley – Yr 7: CVWMA_Final Report March 2026_ECCC_CNPP.pdf
4. Report detailing completed restoration activities and monitoring action, conclusions, and any further recommendations for each restoration site.	Same as item 3.
5. Relevant spatial data in an appropriate format such as kml, kmz, or GIS shapefiles.	Kootenay Connect ECCC/Year 7/Year 7 Final KC Deliverables/Creston Valley – Yr 7: shapefiles
6. Minimum of 4 photos per project, including “before and after” photos for on the ground projects.	Photos provided in this report
7. Short 3–4-minute video (e.g., video footage, narrated PowerPoint, selfie, etc.) addressing: Why have you done this project(s)? What have you accomplished with this project(s)? What are the benefits to fish, wildlife, and ecosystems? What are the highlights of your achievements over the seven years of Kootenay Connect?	Provided on March 13th, 2026; Kootenay Connect ECCC/Year 7/Year 7 Videos/CVWMA_ECCC_CNPP_Yr 7 Mar 2026.mp4
8. Completed tracking sheet of all <u>in-kind</u> donations of services and <u>cash matching</u> funding by funder as per “Kootenay Connect CNPP In-Kind and Matching Funding Tracking.xlsx”.	Kootenay Connect ECCC/Year 7/Year 7 Final KC Deliverables/Creston Valley – Yr 7: /Creston Valley_Match and In_kind_ECCC_CNPP_2025_2026.xlsx

7CV Skink

The only project scheduled for Year 7 (2025/2026) was the continuation of the habitat enhancement project using mechanical treatments on the dry rocky slope habitat around CVWMA's Administration Office building. This project, initiated in Year 6, was conducted to enhance habitat for at risk bird and reptile species and for wildfire risk reduction. CVWMA staff continued the reptile monitoring on Creston Mountain as part of the habitat enhancement project and also monitored the use of the new artificial nesting structure for Barn Swallows (nicknamed the Swallow Resort) at the Duck Lake Nesting Area, which was built in the fall of 2024 as part of Year 6's activities. In addition, CVWMA staff continued the monitoring of Bobolink in the Frog Bear Conservation Corridor that was initiated as part of Year 5. Results for habitat enhancement and fire risk reduction activities as well as monitoring activities are summarized below.

Project and Monitoring Locations

The habitat enhancement and wildfire risk reduction activities were conducted on the lower slopes of Creston Mountain in the vicinity of CVWMA's Administration building and the area locally known as Balancing Rock Trail, over a total area approximately 15 ha in size. The reptile surveys were conducted within the same area (Figure 1).

Bobolink and Barn Swallow monitoring activities occurred west and south of the Duck Lake Nesting Area along the connectivity corridor through CVWMA's West Meadows Farm and Nature Conservancy of Canada's Frog Bear property (Figure 1).

Treatment: brushing, thinning, and tree felling

This year's main activity and objective was to continue the habitat enhancement and wildfire risk reduction work started in 2024/2025 and attempt to complete the work over the whole 15 ha project area. Just under three hectares were treated in 2024/2025 and the goal was to treat +/-10 ha in 2025/2026.

Bootleg Contracting Outdoor Services provided a crew of 2-5 workers and began the project activities in mid-December 2025 (Figure 2). Chainsaws and brush saws were used by the crew to thin out very dense patches of shrubs throughout the project area, remove coniferous tree saplings, and limb tree branches 1.5 to 2 meters from the ground (Figure 3). Branches, coniferous saplings, and brushing debris were piled and burnt, and we estimated 80-90% of the piles, approximately 2m² in size (Figure 4), were burnt during the project; the venting index offered better burning opportunities in 2026 than in 2025. Some brush piles were left for birds, small mammals, and other critters. The treatment activities were completed by the end of February 2026. The work was strategically implemented to reduce wildfire risk around CVWMA's infrastructure such as the Administration Office building by creating a buffer around structures while considering habitat improvements for reptiles and other wildlife species.

A certified tree feller was also brought into the project to remove dangerous trees and several snags around CVWMA structures and create ladder fuel breaks throughout the project area (Figure 5). The crew spent a significant amount of time cleaning up and bucking downed trees afterward which took time away from brushing over a larger area.

While the crew was only able to treat habitat over 3.3 ha of the targeted +/-10 ha, the area treated achieved the wildfire risk reduction goal around CVWMA infrastructure. Combined with last year's treatment, this year's work helped create a wide buffer around CVWMA's structures (Figure 6). Brushing was also applied along the upper portion of the Balancing Rock Trail, uphill and west of the CVWMA Administration building, to create "fire breaks" and open up habitat for Western skinks; several reptile observations were made along those areas both in 2024 and 2025 (Figure 7).

Wildlife Monitoring

Reptiles – Creston Mountain

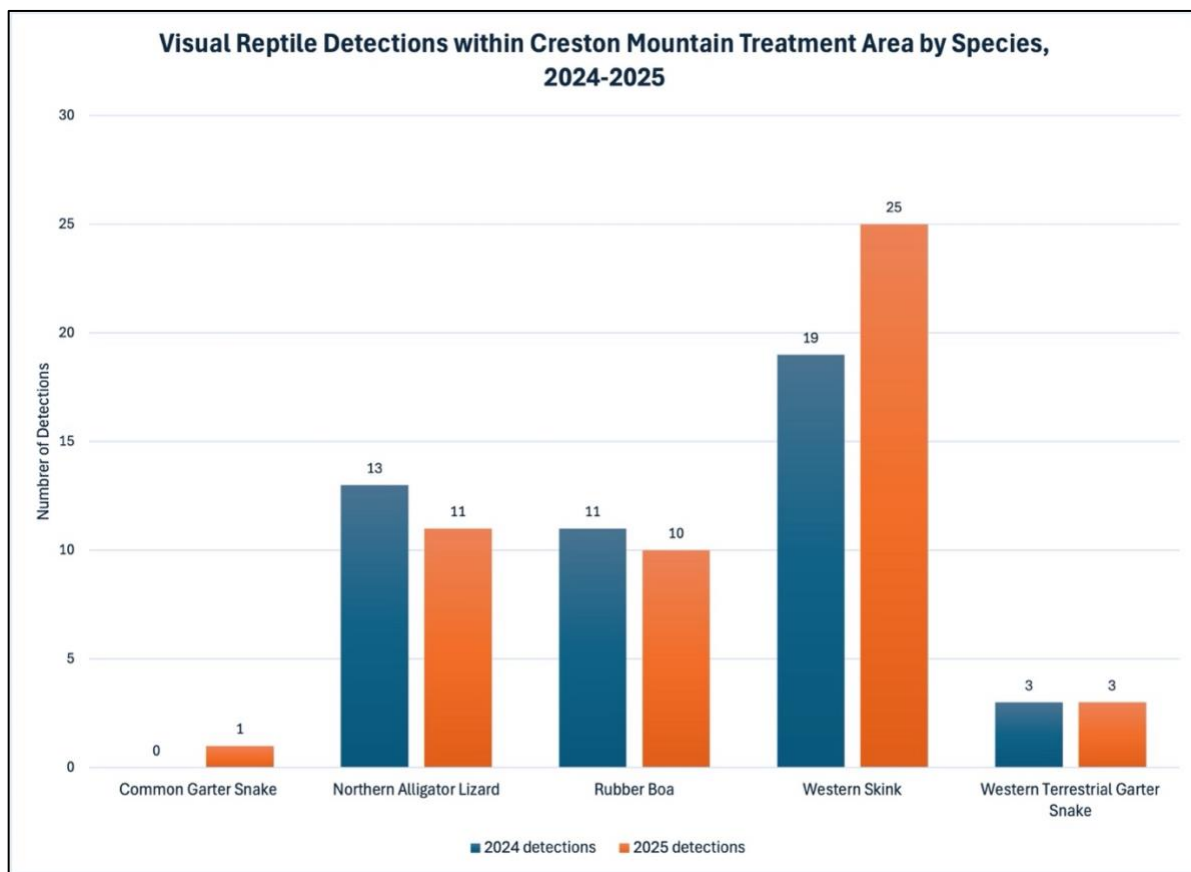
Reptile surveys were repeated in 2025, using the same methodology as 2024. Surveys started on April 24 and were completed on a roughly weekly basis until October 6; a total of 24 individual surveys were

completed. Surveys were predominately carried out by a single observer except for one survey in early July; survey effort totalled 82 person-hours (Figure 8).

All five species known to occur in the area were detected during surveys: Common (*Thamnophis sirtalis*) and Western terrestrial (*Thamnophis elegans*) garter snakes, Western skink (*Plestiodon skiltonianus*) (Figure 9), Northern alligator lizard (*Elgaria coerulea*) (Figure 9), and Northern rubber boa (*Charina bottae*). Overall, there were 50 reptile observations and four observations of snake skin sheds. Western skinks were the most observed species, with 25 observations. Northern alligator lizards and rubber boa were seen 11 and 10 times, respectively. By contrast, garter snakes were rarely observed, with 3 observations of Western terrestrial garter snakes and 1 observation of a Common garter snake. Graphic 1 below depicts reptile observations in 2024 and 2025. It is important to note that observations do not represent the number of unique individuals across all surveys, but rather repeated observations of potentially the same individuals from survey to survey, particularly if these observations were clustered in the same area over time.

Most of the observations were collected in the spring, with 28 reptile observations (56% of total) collected on surveys from late April to the end of June. The remaining observations were collected in the summer in July and August (15 observations; 30%) and relatively few observations were collected in the fall, with 7 observations in September (14%) and none on the last survey in early October. Across all surveys in 2025, surveyors recorded roughly 2 reptiles per survey.

Further work and improved survey methods over a longer monitoring period will need to be developed in coming years to better assess the effect of the habitat treatment and intact habitat patches on presence/absence or abundance of reptiles on the rocky talus slope. More open habitat makes it easier to search and detect reptiles and creates a sampling method bias. As suggested above, more reptile observations do not necessarily reflect an increase in number of individuals.



Graphic 1 Reptile observations on Creston Mountain for 2024 and 2025.

Common Nighthawk

While two nests were discovered in 2024, no Common Nighthawks were observed nor were any nests detected during reptile surveys conducted in 2025.

Barn Swallow Resort

The newly constructed Barn Swallow nesting structure at the Duck Lake Nesting Area, nicknamed the “Swallow Resort”, was monitored for the first time in 2025. A total of 20 individual nest checks were completed on a roughly weekly basis between April 23 to August 25, culminating in roughly 4.8 person-hrs of survey time (Figure 10). As reported in last year’s final report, the Swallow Resort was furnished with 72 wooden nest cups prior to the 2025 breeding season. In the spring of 2025, CVWMA staff applied mud to several nests before the birds arrived in an attempt to make them appear used, as evidence suggests that existing nest cups can act as a visual nesting cue for prospecting individuals. As well, at the end of the breeding season in 2025, four nest cups with nests built by Barn Swallow in previous years at the Swallow Hotel in Corn Creek Marsh were moved and installed as “bait nests” at the Swallow Resort, with the hopes that these nests will encourage Barn Swallow breeding activity in the coming years (Figure 11).

One Barn Swallow pair used the structure in 2025, nesting twice in one individual nest cup. Both breeding attempts were assumed to have been successful with young having fledged from the nest. A total of nine fledglings were counted overall, five from the first breeding attempt and four from the second.

Temperature and relative humidity inside the structure were also monitored through the breeding season, with strategic placement of monitoring devices (Onset Hobo data loggers - Figure 11). Two devices were deployed, one located roughly in the centre of the structure near the roofline and another at the height of the roof in the southwest corner, which may be the “hottest” location where swallows could choose to nest. With only one season of data collected, it is too early to compare temperatures with data collected at the Swallow Hotel in Corn Creek Marsh.

Bobolink Nesting Pasture

Bobolink surveys have been completed in the Frog Bear Conservation Corridor for the past four years (2022-2025). A summary of survey efforts (Table 2) and results is provided for 2023 through 2025, when seasonal grazing restrictions have been in place on the property following installation of the new electric fence. Overall survey methodology during this timeframe has remained consistent, with two surveyors walking methodically along established transects through the 16-hectare parcel and documenting observations of Bobolinks, taking care to avoid double-counting individual birds wherever possible.

Survey effort has expanded over the years. In 2023, roughly 44 person-hours were spent conducting Bobolink surveys. By 2025, the survey effort increased to 57.5 person-hours (Table 2). Survey effort increased due to several factors, including some changes in study design to improve the knowledge of the spatial distribution of birds and also due to the increasing number of birds detected over time, as discussed below.

Bobolinks were first detected in the study area around the middle to end of May across years. Surveys began before birds arrived, timed near the beginning of May, to ensure an accurate (within a week) estimate of arrival time. The number of unique male and female birds was estimated across all surveys, whenever possible. Overall, the number of males and females counted increased from 2023 through 2025, though counts in 2024 were slightly down from 2023. Spatially, Bobolinks were observed throughout the survey area, though observations were more clustered in the northern portion of the area through time (Figure 12). Interestingly, there have been Bobolink observations recorded outside the main survey area in all years. In 2023, a pair was suspected to have nested to the south of the survey area. In 2024 and 2025, it was suspected there was a pair that may have nested to the north of the survey area, though it is possible the pair had settled in the extreme north portion of the survey area as well.

Table 2. Summary of Bobolink Survey Effort and Observations, 2023 to 2025.

Year	Survey Effort				Survey Results				
	Season Start	Season End	No. Surveys	Person-hours	1 st Bobolink Detection	Est. No. Males	Est. No. Females	1 st Young Detection	Largest Group Size
2023	9-May	9-Aug	12	44	23-May	6	8	12-Jul	24
2024	8-May	1-Aug	13	56	31-May	4	4	18-Jul	45
2025	14-May	6-Aug	13	57	21-May	8 to 9	8 to 10	17-Jul	36

Notably, the first positive detection of fledgling birds occurred across a very similar timeframe in all years, around mid-July. Positively identifying sex and age of birds later in the season is very challenging, as females, molting males, and fledglings are quite similar in appearance and can be difficult to tell apart (Figure 13). Furthermore, birds begin to aggregate in flocks after fledging occurs, further complicating the identification of sex and age. Comparatively, the highest post-breeding flock counts, thought to be comprised of a mix of males, females, and fledglings, was recorded in 2024, followed by 2025 and 2023 (Table 2). The observation of fledglings along with post-breeding flock counts indicates that Bobolinks are successfully using the parcel for breeding.

Wildfire Risk Reduction and Benefits to Wildlife

As reported in 2024/2025, the limbing and thinning treatments conducted on Creston Mountain should decrease the intensity of a ground wildfire should one come through the area and help reduce transference of the fire from the ground into the canopy. Limbing should also improve sightlines throughout the project area and should benefit ungulates such as white-tailed deer, mule deer, and elk. Anecdotal observations noted during monitoring of the winter work activities already points to an increase in ungulate use within the area treated in Year 6. Fresh ungulate tracks, droppings, and evidence of browsing were widespread in the previously treated area.

While no Common Nighthawks were detected in 2025, we are confident that the additional treatments implemented in Years 6 & 7 will benefit this species in the short- and long-term, especially if more work can be conducted in the coming years to continue enhancing the forest to a more open state over a larger area.

Finally, though the relationship between habitat use and forest cover is complex for many species of reptiles, Western skinks and rubber boas should benefit from the treatment through an increased diversity of micro-habitats and micro-climates that may improve movements, foraging opportunities, and other important portions of their life cycle. As indicated earlier, survey methods will need to be refined to gain a better understanding of reptile abundance and distribution between treated habitat and intact habitat patches.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Monitoring surveys for reptiles, Barn Swallows, and Bobolinks met expectations for the purpose they were intended for, however, habitat enhancement activities conducted in 2025/2026 fell short of achieving the 10-ha target for Year 7 and the overall 15-ha target for the project area (over two years). Certain lessons were learned through the process:

- Setting achievable goals and realistic objectives for work in atypical habitat with no baseline data and unsurveyed/unmapped features (i.e., steep terrain with very high brush density) was very challenging. The +/-10 ha target for Year 7 should have been adjusted down after the treatment in Year 6.

- Limbing up to 75% of trees >25cm DBH up to 2m from the ground was very difficult without brushing due to shrub density encountered in Year 7 and access to trees for limbing, and limbing alone probably would not be effective in reducing wildfire risk.
- Felling trees was necessary for safety and wildfire risk reduction, but cleaning of felled trees was time consuming and impacted overall brushing activities.
- While hand treatment was intensive and slow, the rocky and sensitive nature of the site was not conducive to mechanized treatment with large machinery and the hand treatment resulted in very minimal to no ground disturbance.
- Some of the shrub patches brushed in 2024/2025 showed tremendous re-growth in 2025/2026, i.e., sprouts up to 2m in height, and fresh re-growth appeared to provide good browse for ungulates (Figure 14). Regular maintenance may be necessary in places if more habitat is to be maintained for wildfire risk reduction.
- Surveys to document presence and distribution of reptile species in the project area were useful to establish habitat patches before treatment began in 2024/2025; however, surveys were likely biased by detectability with respect to density of shrub and terrain accessibility. Future monitoring surveys in newly opened areas that were not initially surveyed due to difficulty of access (i.e., impassable shrub cover) may provide additional knowledge on habitat use and movement by reptile species present in the area and help develop better pre-treatment baseline survey methods that consider detectability.
- Contrary to some literature, the construction of new artificial nesting structures for Barn Swallows after birds have departed on fall migration does not completely preclude from birds successfully nesting in the structures the following spring/summer. Nesting structures built on CVWMA in the fall of 2018 (Corn Creek Marsh “Swallow Hotel” - not part of Kootenay Connect) and fall of 2024 (Duck Lake Nesting Area “Swallow Resort” - part of Year 6 projects) – were respectively occupied by one Barn Swallow pair that successfully nested in the subsequent breeding season following construction.
- Bobolink survey methods used in Year 6 and 7 appeared suitable to determine general time of arrival, breeding window, and departure from the nesting pasture in order to manage cattle grazing more effectively on West Meadows Farm. Determining fledging success was not an objective of the monitoring effort and would likely require much more intensive surveys and banding of nestlings as juvenile, female, and male Bobolinks are not easily identifiable by the end of the nesting season prior to migration. The highest number of individuals recorded (e.g., high count) in the last two weeks prior to migration in relation to the number of adults that were present before fledging may be a good indicator of nesting success though care needs to be taken if other breeding sites are known to occur nearby as Bobolinks tend to congregate prior to migration.

For the next 5 years, CVWMA should consider:

- Seeking additional funding to expand brushing and limbing to areas south of CVWMA's Administration office. There are many rocky outcrops that could benefit from tree removal and brushing to both benefit reptiles and reduce wildfire risks.
- Pursuing opportunities to conduct targeted small-scale low intensity burns to reduce deep coniferous litter where dense patches of conifers occur. This may also encourage native plant re-growth that has been suppressed by needles and cones for decades.
- Experimenting with brushing small, targeted patches of shrub re-growth during summer (i.e. during the flowering period) to see if this would reduce re-growth the following year. Appropriate measures would have to be taken to avoid potential conflicts with nesting birds.
- Refining reptile survey methodology to increase the ability to assess effects of brushing on habitat use and species distribution.
- Continuing to monitor Barn Swallow utilization of the Duck Lake Nesting Area “Swallow Resort” for at least three years, in parallel with the Corn Creek Marsh “Swallow Hotel” and establish a long-term monitoring plan as it may not be necessary to monitor both structures every year.
- Expanding the availability of habitat for nesting Bobolinks that is protected from the impacts of agricultural activities during the breeding season to enhance breeding success and increase overall Bobolink numbers.

Summary Table of measurables and outcomes for 2025-2026.

Table 3 Measurable outcomes of 2025-2026 activities.

Project and Activities	Target	Actual	Comments
1) 7CV Skink			
a. Hand/mechanical treatment to reduce encroaching vegetation and improve wildlife habitat.	10 ha	3.3 ha	Shrub/brush density was similar and/or higher than in the areas treated in 2024/2025 and while the work moved along well, the brushing, thinning, and limbing activities fell short of meeting the optimistic goal of 10 ha. However, approximately 0.3 more hectares were treated than in 2024/2025 and the work was strategically conducted and achieved the goal of creating a “fire-safe” area around CVWMA infrastructure.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Up to 75% of trees >25cm DBH limbed up to 2m from the ground. 		20-25% (estimated)	Limbing up to 75% of trees >25cm DBH up to 2m from the ground was very difficult without brushing due to shrub density encountered in Year 7 and access to trees for limbing, and limbing alone probably would not be effective in reducing wildfire risk.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 75% of brush piles burned (residual amount left for wildlife) 	75%	80-90% (estimated)	Conditions in winter of 2026 were more conducive to burning (more days with fair/good venting index than in winter of 2025) and the crews were able to burn many of the left-over piles from Year 6 and most of the new piles resulting from the work in Year 7.
b. Catastrophic fire risk reduced.	n/a	n/a	The treatment conducted will undoubtedly reduce the risk of a catastrophic fire in the area treated should a wildfire come through in the coming years. Regular maintenance will likely be necessary.

Figures

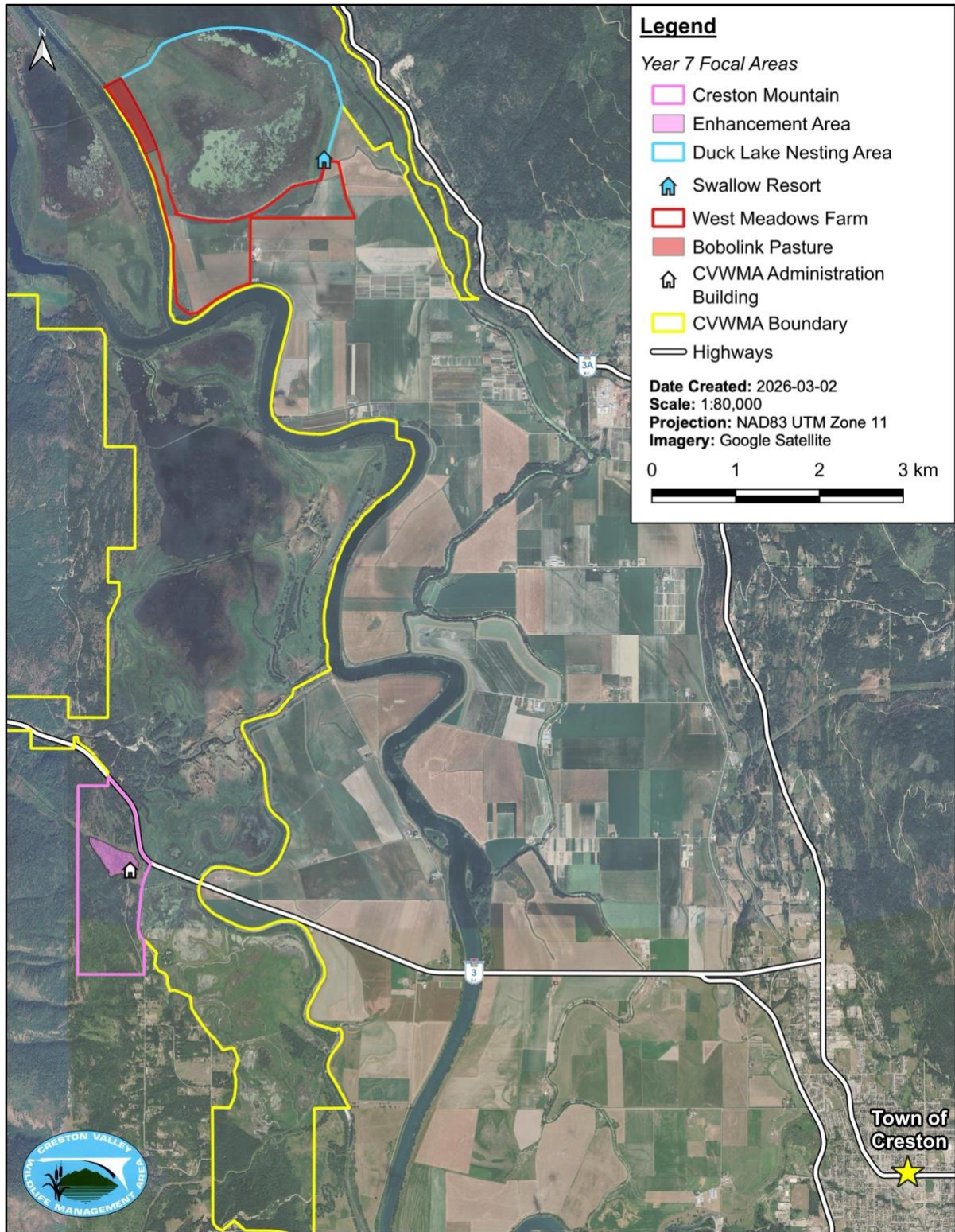


Figure 1 Locations of enhancement and monitoring activities in 2025/2026.



Figure 2 Crew member brushing and piling thick shrubs north of CVWMA Office building on December 18, 2025



Figure 3 Pre-treatment (left – Dec 9, 2025) and post-brushing (right – Jan 14, 2026) views around CVWMA infrastructure (storage shed). Marked trees (orange rings) were felled afterward.



Figure 4 Pre-treatment (left – Jan 14, 2026) and post-treatment (right – Jan 23, 2026) views of thick forested patch brushed and thinned, less than 40m northwest from the CVWMA Office building.



Figure 5 Pre-treatment (left - Dec 9, 2025) and post-treatment, including felled trees and snags, (right – Feb 24, 2025) views of area just north of CVWMA Office building,.



Figure 6 Pre-treatment (left – Feb 7, 2025) and post-treatment (right – Feb 24, 2026) views of slope and CVWMA Administration Office building.

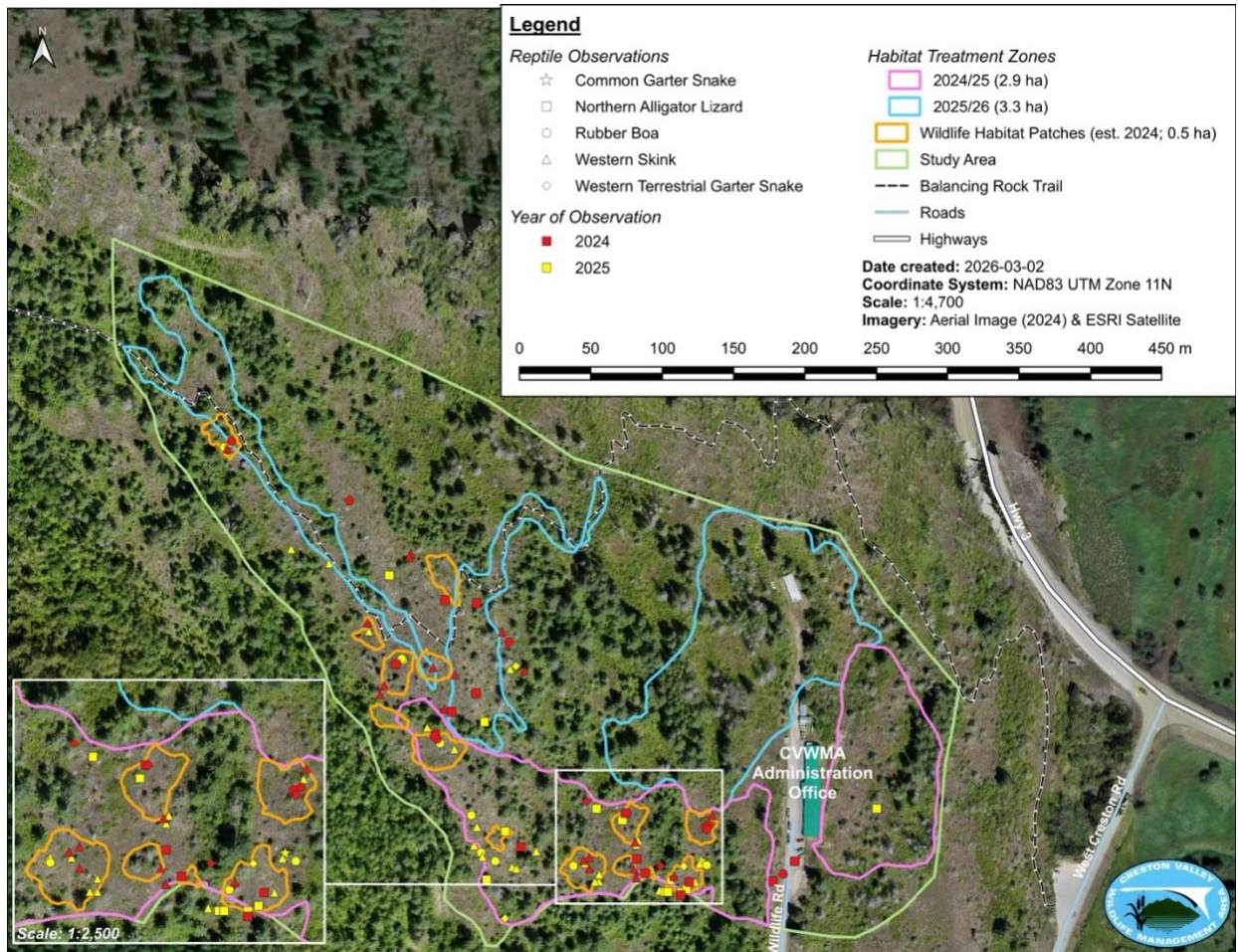


Figure 7 Map showing treated areas in 2024/2025 and 2025/2026 with reptile observations for Year 6 and Year 7 of the Project.



Figure 8 CVWMA staff Julia K. taking notes after detecting a Northern rubber boa on July 8, 2025.



Figure 9 Western skink (left) and Northern alligator lizard (right) observed on June 3 and September 5, respectively, during monitoring surveys in 2025.



Figure 10 Julia K. and Ivy W. monitoring nest cups at CVWMA's Swallow Resort on June 5, 2025.

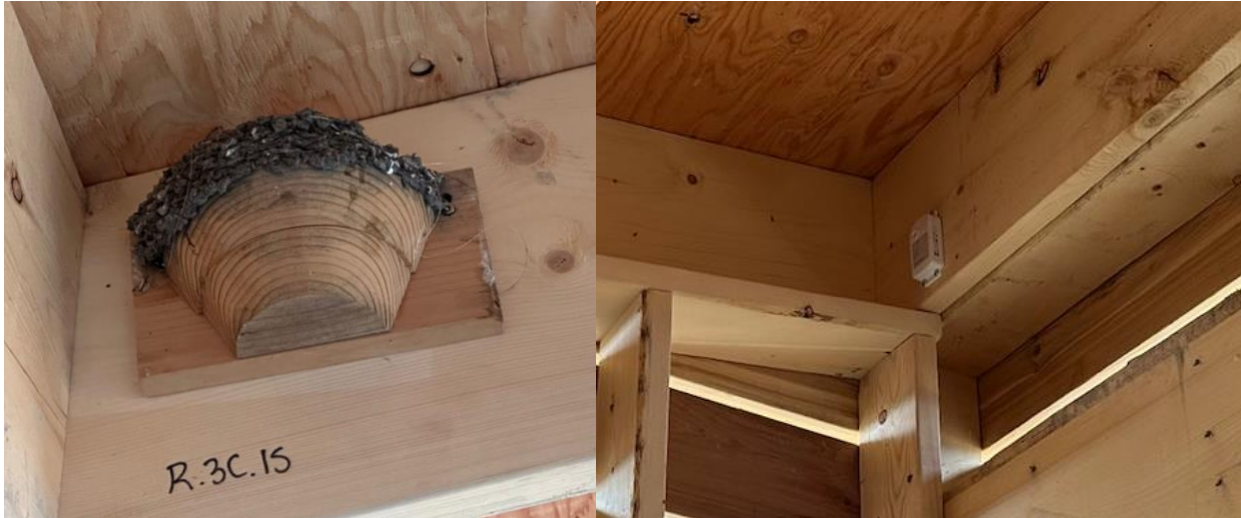


Figure 11 Bait nest in wooden nest cup (left) and temperature/humidity data logger (right) in the Swallow Resort.

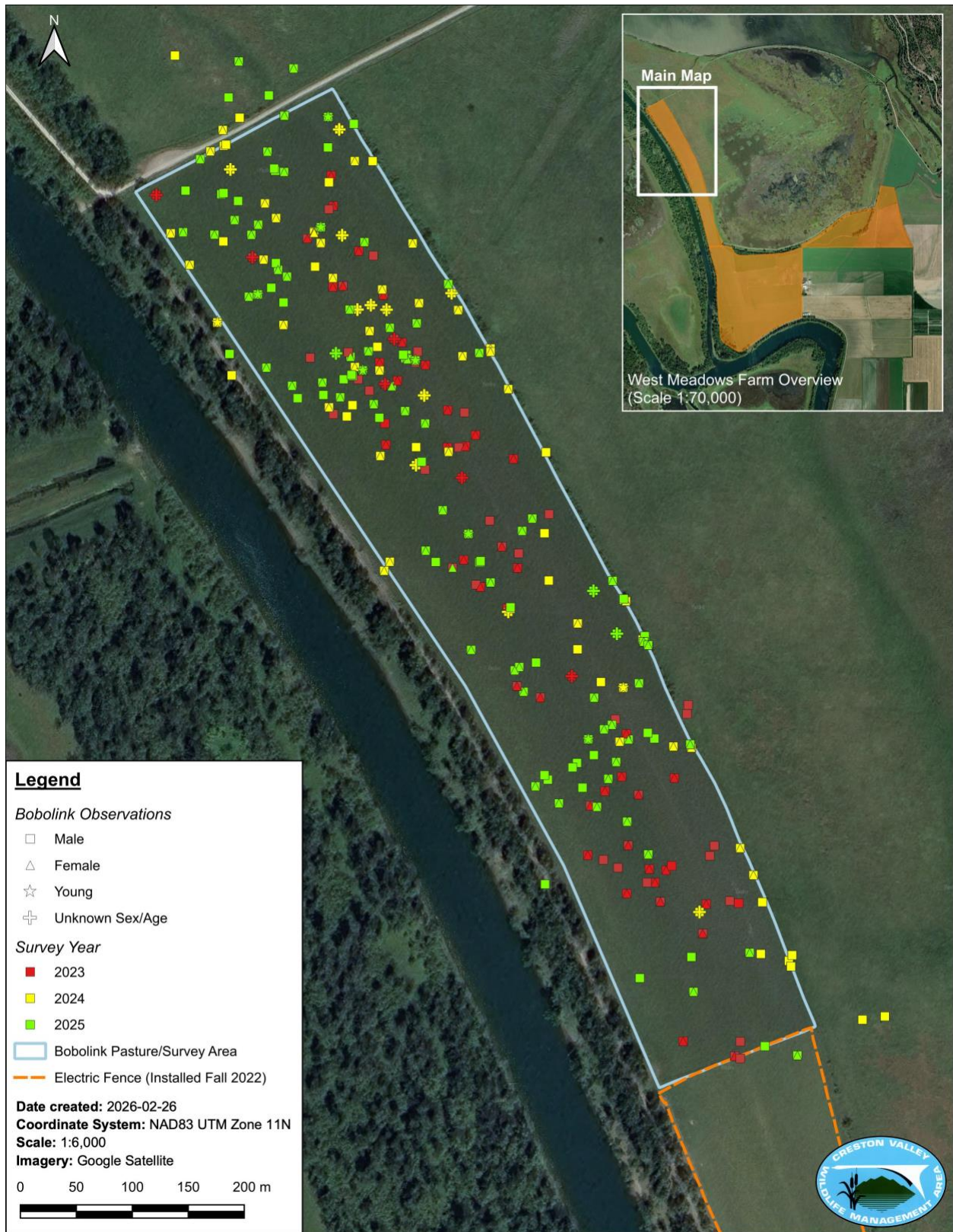


Figure 12 Summary map of Bobolink sightings by year, at West Meadows Farm’s north pasture.



Figure 13 Group of Bobolinks (undetermined age and sex) at north pasture, August 6, 2024.



Figure 14 Comparison of re-growth from 2024/2025 treatment (right half of image) to 2025/2026 treatment (left half of image).