



## Kootenay Connect: Wycliffe Focal Area 7WC SAR Restoration



March 15, 2026 Final Report



Kootenay Connect is a project facilitated by the Kootenay Conservation Program



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## 1.0 Project Summary and Goal

The Wycliffe Conservation Complex (WCC, Complex) encompasses 1109 hectares (2740 acres) of ecologically significant grasslands and forested habitat in the southern Rocky Mountain Trench, and is conserved and managed in a partnership between the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC), The Nature Trust of BC (NTBC), and the Ministry of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship (MWLRS) (the Partners). Throughout the complex, a mosaic of native grassland, open forest and closed forest provide a variety of habitat types to a suite of wildlife, including several species at risk (SAR). The goal of this project was to implement habitat restoration prescriptions that were developed in 2020 to enhance dry open forest habitats which benefit at-risk species on the Complex.

The focal SAR on the Complex include American badger (*Taxidea taxus jeffersonii*, Endangered, COSEWIC 2012), Lewis's woodpecker (*Melanerpes lewis*, Threatened, COSEWIC 2024), and Williamson's sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus thyroideus*, Endangered, COSEWIC, 2017).

As few as 100 mature badgers live in the East Kootenay region where they are vulnerable to increasing threats from roadkill. The loss of open areas to forest succession and urban development threaten badgers by contributing to ongoing habitat decline (COSEWIC 2012).

In Canada, the Lewis's woodpecker breeds only in British Columbia. Its population is small, with fewer than 1000 individuals, and there is evidence of ongoing declines in parts of its Canadian range where it has been monitored over time. Threats include habitat loss and degradation from increasing urban and agriculture development, and fire suppression (COSEWIC 2024).

The Williamson's sapsucker is a migratory woodpecker that depends on old-growth coniferous and mixed forests in the Southern Interior of British Columbia, with fewer than 1000 individuals breeding in two Canadian subpopulations. Its distribution is largely limited by the availability of large nest-trees, mostly several hundred years old. The main threat to this species is logging and forest harvesting, including the removal of dangerous trees for worker safety and in wildfire suppression (COSEWIC 2017).

At the Complex, changes to the natural fire regime caused by decades of wildfire suppression efforts have been the main reason for the reduction of high-quality habitat for the focal SAR. Grassland and open range conditions are gradually transitioning into conifer forests through in-growth and encroachment processes. With this change, many habitat attributes necessary to sustain populations of Lewis's woodpecker, American badger, and Williamson's sapsucker are being impaired. In Wycliffe, it has become clear that one of the most effective ways to improve habitat for these species is to reduce young forest densities and promote the transition to mature open forest stands.

The prescriptions for American badger (TATA) and Lewis's woodpecker (LEWO) include reducing conifer stem density through forest thinning. Based on previous prescriptions for Williamson's sapsucker (WISA), habitat enhancements include reducing tree density through thinning and creation of suitable colonial ant nest habitat by increasing downed woody debris levels.

This final report provides an update for projects that The Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) is leading on behalf of the Partners at the WCC in 2025-26, as part of the Kootenay Connect initiative.

## 2.0 Results

### **1. Wycliffe Recreation Management and Communications in Year 7**

In 2019-2020, the Partners agreed to develop a Recreation Management Plan, intended to be used as a document to provide high-level guidance recommendations for management of public recreation on the Complex. In January 2024, Cordillera Technical Services provided the Partners with the completed working version of the Recreation Management Plan, as well as corresponding spatial data. This document is for internal use by the Partners to guide management decisions.

Work in Year 7 focused on advancing towards implementation of the high priority strategies and actions from the Recreation Management Plan. One of the recommendations (Action 1.3) was the development of educational signage at trailheads and along trails at zone boundaries. We worked with Fuse Consulting Ltd, who were contracted in May 2024 to design a suite of interpretive signs to provide education and guidance around how to recreate responsibly in the Wycliffe Conservation Complex. These signs have been fabricated and are ready for installation at the MWLRS Potato Butte Conservation Lands. This area experiences high recreation pressure which impacts wildlife, including species at risk. Ungulate use of the area has decreased as recreation has increased, and there have been reported incidents of recreators disturbing badgers around natal dens. Effective messaging and clear guidance are required to reduce impacts on wildlife. In addition, these signs will guide recreators on which trails to take through the Complex, so that extraneous trails can be rehabilitated or reserved for wildlife movement.

Marty Williams was contracted to support with sign development as a Ktunaxa culture, language and history expert. Handspun Consulting was contracted to support with communicating the Recreation Management Plan to the public, sign review and development, and has been instrumental in coordinating further sign review and input from the ʔaąam Knowledge Holders and Language Speakers Committee and the ʔaąam Language Authority. In February 2025, Virginia Hermanson (NCC) and Becky Pelkonen (Handspun Consulting) met with the ʔaąam Language Authority to present the signage work and finalize Ktunaxa language to be included in the signs.

Marisa Phillips (ʔaąamnik Ktunaxa artist) was contracted in fall 2024 to design Ktunaxa artwork to be featured on the main trailhead kiosk. This artwork was completed and received in February 2025, and Fuse completed the signage designs in 2025. Signage was fabricated and prepared for installation in winter of 2025/2026.

The development of signage was seen as a key first step to implementing the Recreation Management Plan recommendations on the land, however, there has been other work taking place over Year 7. Handspun Consulting drafted a Recreation Management Communication Plan, as well as an FAQ document to be used as a communications tool. This work has been heavily informed by the sign development process in that the messaging utilized for the signage will be consistent through the FAQ document and through how information is shared via the Communications Plan.

An Open House to present this work and provide information about recreation guidelines at the WCC was held in 2025 with the support of Handspun Consulting. Approximately 43 community members attended this event and asked questions about the plans for the Complex. Feedback shared after the event was positive and most attendees were supportive of the actions being taken.

Cordillera Technical Services was contracted and developed a Monitoring Plan to acquire data on visitor use, as well as the installation of trail counters and wildlife cameras to initiate monitoring. Trail counters and cameras were installed in 2025.

NCC installed 60 visitor-use management signs in fall 2024 to guide appropriate recreation in Luke Creek Wildlife Corridor. The signs outline permitted and restricted activities throughout the property, as well as clarify which areas are open to non-motorized hunting. We anticipate developing and installing an informational kiosk at the parking area for

Luke Creek Wildlife Corridor in the coming years, and Bootleg Contracting completed the installation of signposts and kiosk structures in winter 2025/2026, in preparation for signage installation.

Measurable Outcomes:

- Completed and fabricated suite of interpretive signs for installation on the Complex. (In progress, signage will be installed spring 2026)
- Completion of a WCC Recreation Management Communication Plan. (In-Progress, anticipated April 2025)
- Completion of a WCC Recreation Management FAQ document. (In-Progress, anticipated April 2025)
- Completion of one community open house in 2025. (Completed, September 2025)
- Completion of a WCC Recreation Management Monitoring Plan. (In-Progress, anticipated September 2025)
- Installation of trail counters and wildlife cameras. (Completed)



Photo 1: Signage and boot brush installed at the entrance to LCWC to guide visitor use.



Photo 2: Attendees of the WCC Open House on September 24, 2025.

## **2. Forest Thinning Treatments to Benefit Species at Risk in Year 7**

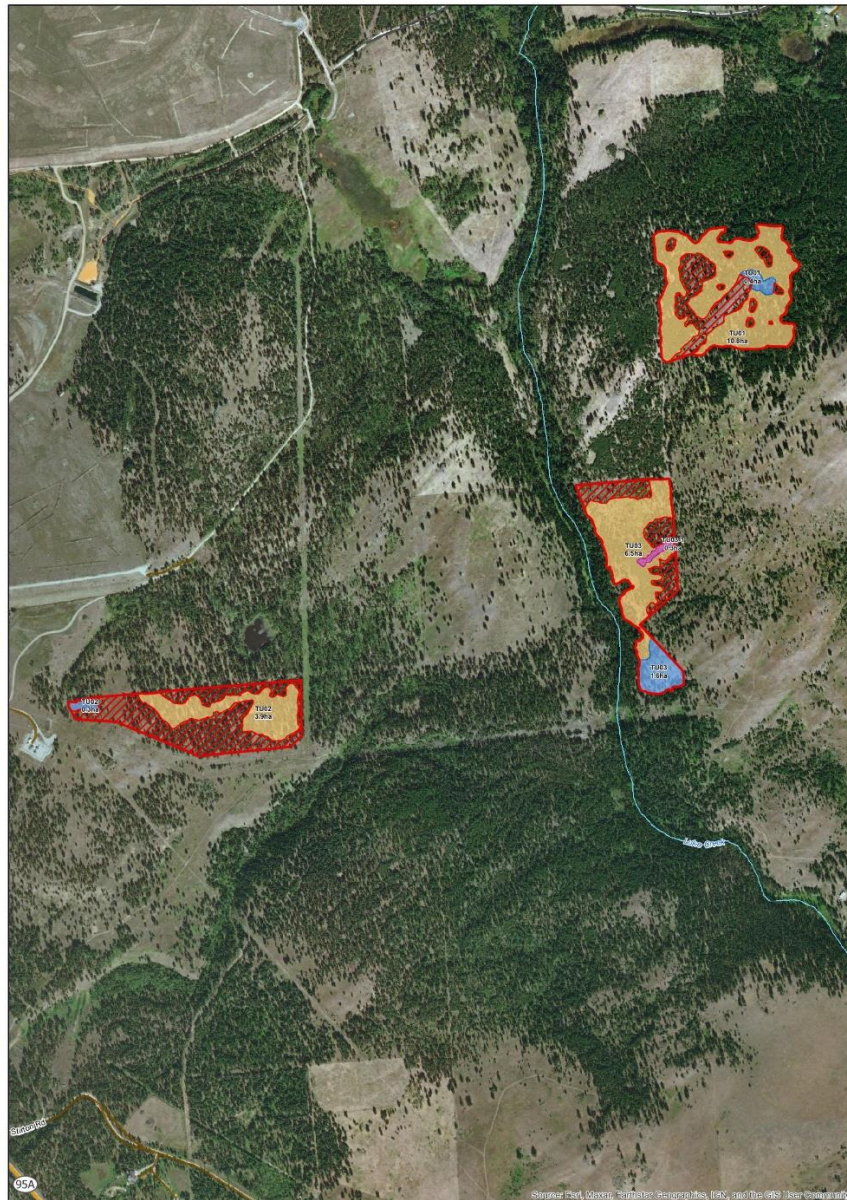
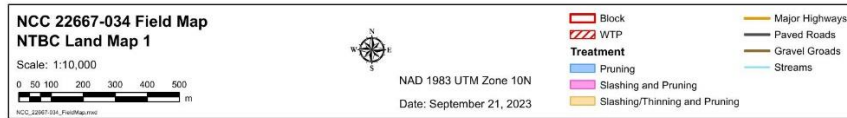
The WCC project manager initiated the thinning, pruning, or slashing of over 41 hectares. These treatment units were chosen based on their suitability for this type of habitat enhancement treatment, and the projected costs for their completion. Strategic Fire Control completed 41 hectares of thinning and slashing according to prescriptions developed by Red Dot Ranch for MWLRS lands.

The locations of the treatment units are illustrated in Figures 1, 2 and 3.

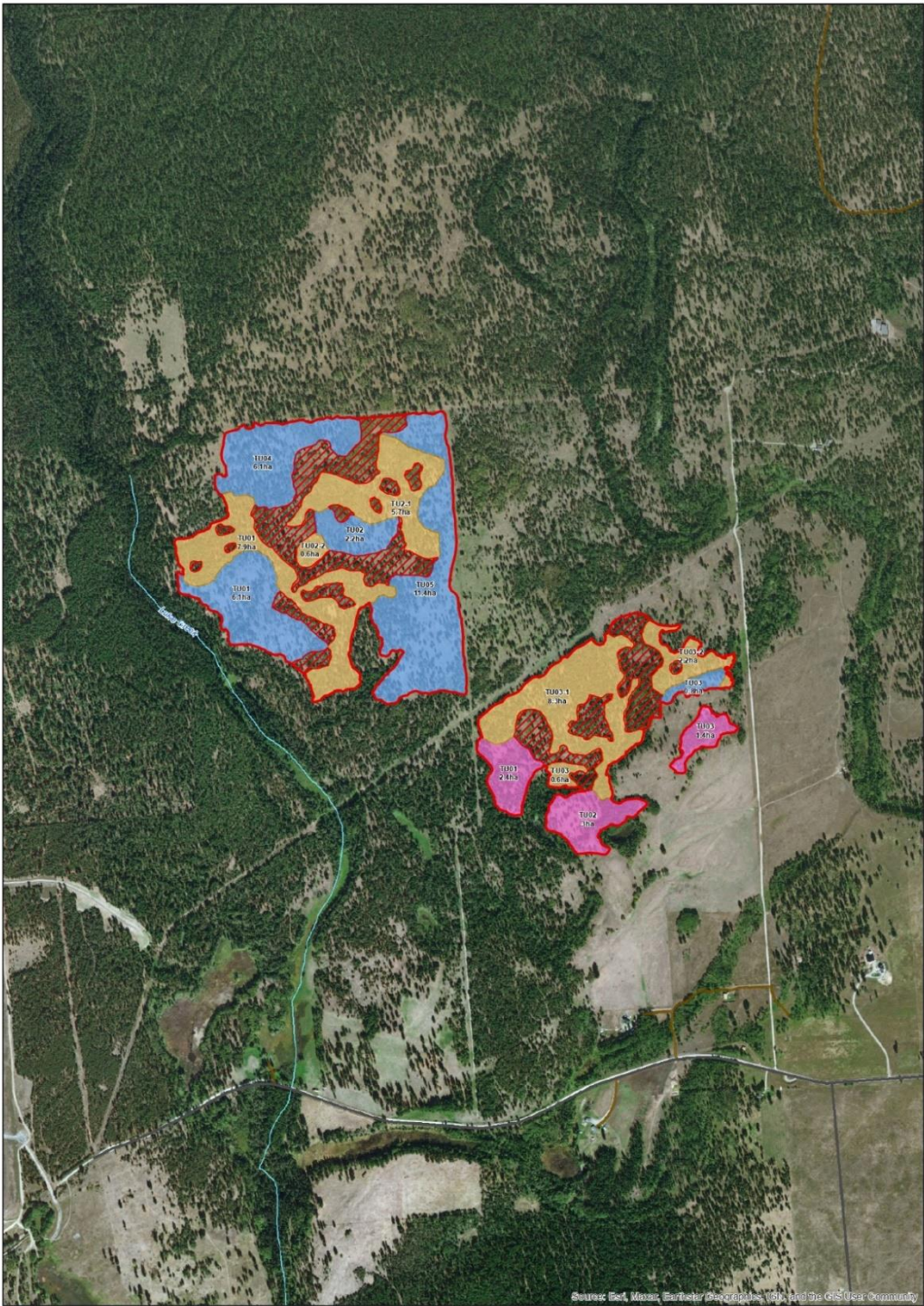
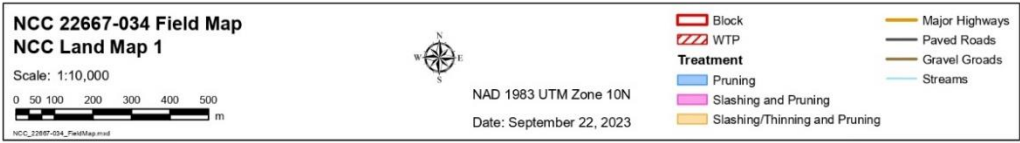
Treatment objectives included:

- Restore and maintain ungulate winter range and mid-seral ecosystems
- Increase line of sight for predator detection and increase forage abundance in winter range areas
- Reduce canopy cover, standing density, and encroachment of Interior Douglas-Fir and suppressed Ponderosa Pine to create an Open Forest type forest to benefit focal Species at Risk
- Maintain wildlife travel corridor identified in the Wycliffe Management Plan (2021)
- Maintain broadleaf species and dryland aspen stands within the TU's

The Measurable Outcome for Forest Thinning in Year 7 was the completion of thinning treatments in approximately 41 hectares of dry open forest. In Year 6, we completed the treatment of 48 hectares of forest thinning, pruning and slashing in the WCC.



**Figure 1:** Map of hand thinning treatment units TU 02-Pruning (0.3 ha), TU 02-Thinning (3.9 ha) NTBC conservation lands in the WCC.



**Figure 2:** Map of hand thinning treatment units TU 03-02 Thinning (2.2 ha), TU 03-Pruning (0.8 ha), and TU 03 Slash/Prune (1.4 ha) on NCC's Luke Creek Wildlife Corridor.

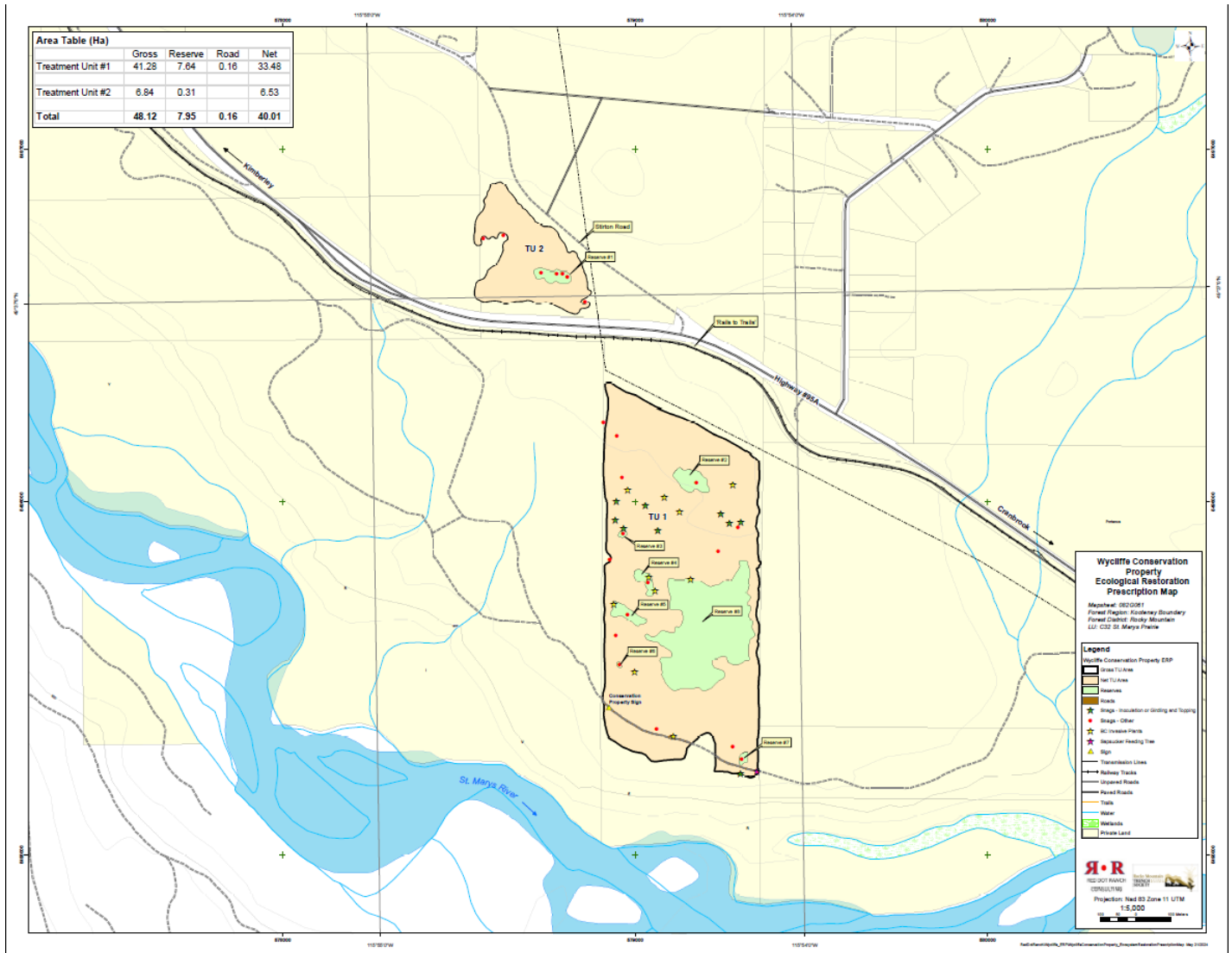


Figure 3: Map of hand thinning treatment units 1 (33.5 hectares) and 2 (6.5 hectares) on MWLRS Conservation Lands in the WCC. The two treatment units are bisected by Highway 95A.



Photo 3: Photo of thinned unit on LCWC. Smaller thinning debris was scattered as shown in this photo.



Photo 4: Photo from winter 2026 of a previously thinned area at Luke Creek Wildlife Corridor, showing a “biodiversity pile” of slashed stems which provide habitat and cover for rodents and other wildlife.



Photo 5: Before completion of Thinning Treatment Unit 03-2 on NCC's LCWC.



Photo 6: After completion of Thinning Treatment Unit 03-2 on NCC's LCWC.



Photo 7: Before completion of Thinning Treatment Unit 03-2 on NCC's LCWC.



Photo 8: After completion of Thinning Treatment Unit 03-2 on NCC's LCWC.

### 3. Monitoring and Maintenance

In 2025, the Range Health Reassessment of the Luke Creek Wildlife Corridor was completed. This reassessment determined that grassland health overall is improving, and that the current grazing schedule with recommended rest periods is appropriate and should be continued in order to maintain grassland health.

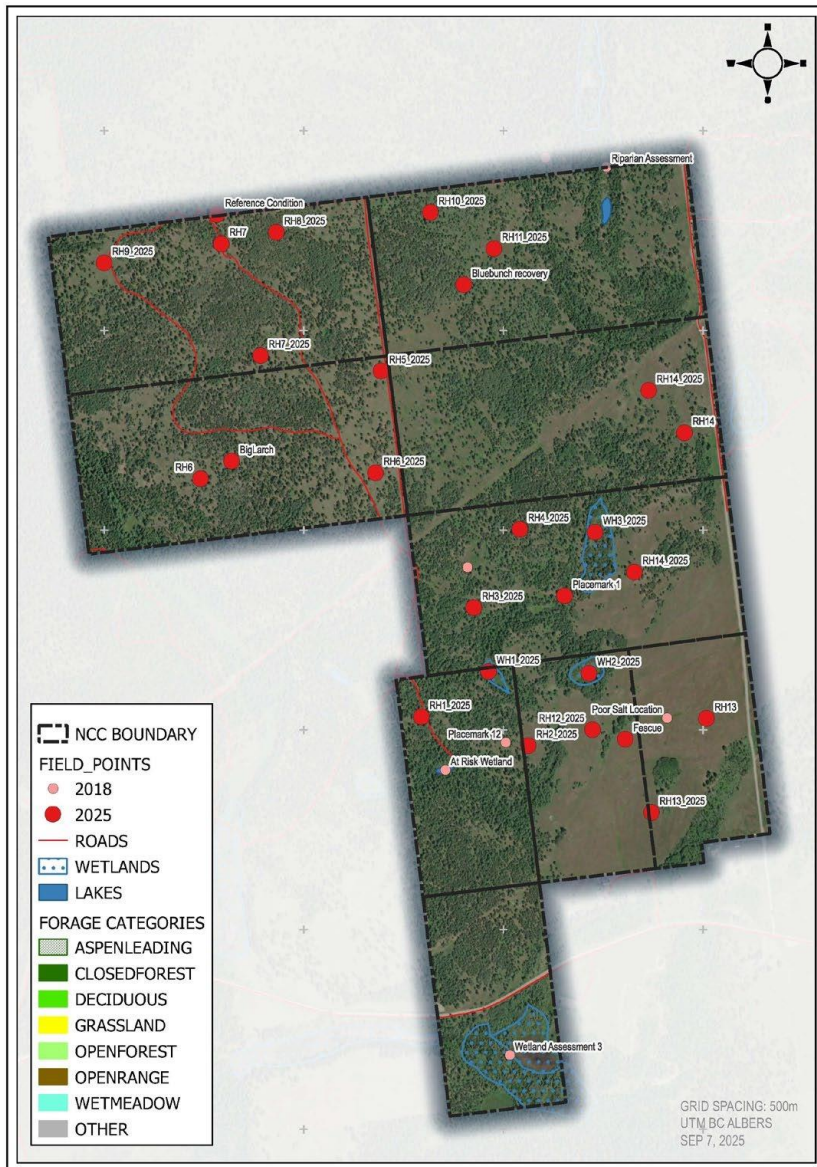


Figure 4: Map of rangeland health monitoring points on LCWC, originally assessed in 2018 and reassessed in 2025.

Annual monitoring of invasive plant treatment efficacy is completed by the East Kootenay Invasive Species Council. This work was coordinated and reported on by The Nature Trust of BC. All additional monitoring & maintenance work in 2025 was coordinated by The Nature Trust of BC.

Measurable Outcomes:

- Completion of annual invasive species monitoring and treatment efficacy by EKISC. (Complete)
- Completion of Range Health Reassessment for Luke Creek Wildlife Corridor. (Complete)

### 3.0 Summary of Measurable Outcomes

The key measurable outcomes of Year 7 are as follows:

- Treated 41 hectares of dry forest habitat for conifer ingrowth and recruitment of coarse woody debris
- Presented Recreation Management material and sign drafts to ʔaąam Committees and hosted a public open house in collaboration with Handspun Consulting
- Completed and fabricated signage for installation
- Completed and implemented Recreation Management Communication Plan
- Completed Range Health Reassessment of Luke Creek Wildlife Corridor

### 4.0 References

COSEWIC 2024: [Lewis's Woodpecker \(\*Melanerpes lewis\*\) - Species search - Species at risk registry](#)

COSEWIC 2012: [American Badger \*jeffersonii\* subspecies \(\*Taxidea taxus jeffersonii\*\), Eastern population - Species search - Species at risk registry](#)

COSEWIC 2017: [https://wildlife-species.canada.ca/species-risk-registry/species/speciesDetails\\_e.cfm?sid=869](https://wildlife-species.canada.ca/species-risk-registry/species/speciesDetails_e.cfm?sid=869)