

WHISTLER LAKES CONSERVATION FOUNDATION

Speaker Event Summary

Whistler's Wet Habitats

The Whistler Biodiversity Project

Guest Speaker: Bob Brett | Saturday, May 23, 2025 | Whistler Public Library



"Whistler's lakes – important for humans and critical habit for fish, animals, plants and other organisms."



Whistler's Wet Habitats

THE WHISTLER BIODIVERSITY PROJECT

JOIN US!

Saturday, May 23, 2:00 PM

Whistler Public Library

Whistler Lakes Conservation Foundation is holding its Annual General Meeting, followed by a public presentation by Guest Speaker Bob Brett, a professional biologist and forest ecologist who has researched Whistler's forests, wetlands, and alpine areas for over 30 years.

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The Whistler Lakes Conservation Foundation recently hosted biologist and forest ecologist Bob Brett for a wide-ranging talk on Whistler's wetland ecosystems, biodiversity, and the heroic role of beavers in keeping the valley healthy. The event followed the Foundation's Annual General Meeting at the Whistler Public Library.

Setting the Stage: What Even Is a Lake?

Bob opened by challenging the deceptively simple question of where a lake ends and a wetland begins. The answer, it turns out, is gloriously fuzzy. Wetlands, ponds, and lakes exist on a

continuum, and the distinction often comes down to purpose and scale. What matters more than labels is recognizing that it's all one connected waterscape.

Biodiversity in Whistler's Wet Habitats

Bob founded the Whistler Biodiversity Project in 2004, which now tracks over 5,500 species in the valley, growing by roughly 100 species per year. Wet habitats support a remarkable range of life, including:

- Fish: rainbow and cutthroat trout, sculpin, and others
- Birds: 17 at-risk species relying on shallow shoreline areas alone
- Otters, western toads, dragonflies, and a wide range of aquatic invertebrates
- Algae, diatoms, and slime moulds, including species still being discovered

One concern flagged for action: Chinese mystery snails, an invasive species now confirmed in Lost Lake, Alta Lake, and Green Lake. Removal efforts are planned in partnership with the Invasive Species Council of BC, requiring a wildlife permit. The snails are large, easy to identify, and relatively straightforward to remove manually, making them a promising candidate for a collaborative stewardship project with the WLCF.

The Case for Beavers

The highlight of the evening was Bob's passionate defence of beavers, often dismissed as pests but in reality the valley's most important habitat engineers. Key points:

- Virtually every wetland in Whistler's valley bottom was created or maintained by beavers
- Beaver dams slow water velocity, reduce erosion, and act as giant sponges that moderate both flooding and drought conditions
- With glacial melt declining and late-summer water levels dropping, beaver-maintained wetlands are increasingly critical for fish spawning habitat
- Wetlands don't burn, making beavers unexpected allies in wildfire resilience
- Bob currently tracks 59 active beaver lodges in the valley, concentrated in the River of Golden Dreams corridor

His practical prescription for coexistence: build trails and infrastructure high enough that beavers can do their thing undisturbed, and notch dams in fall rather than destroying them entirely.

Priority Habitats and Opportunities for Collaboration

Bob identified several high-priority areas deserving attention:

- Jane Lake: highest overall wildlife habitat value in the valley
- Miller Wetlands Wildlife Refuge: a critical concentration of wetland biodiversity
- Rainbow Wildlife Corridor: connects directly to the River of Golden Dreams corridor and could be a meaningful, achievable conservation win as protected Crown land

Shallow shorelines, often overlooked, were highlighted as critical nursery habitat for fish and key feeding grounds for at-risk bird species. Bob's updated mapping of these areas now provides a concrete basis for advocating with water users and recreational groups to limit disturbance in the most sensitive zones.

Looking Ahead

Bob closed by expressing genuine enthusiasm for deeper collaboration with the WLCF, noting strong alignment between the Foundation's mandate and his own long-term monitoring work. He extended an open invitation to join the Whistler Naturalists' annual Beaver Blitz events, including a guided beaver pond walk at Lost Lake.

He also flagged ongoing work on a Beaver Coexistence Project, aimed at helping municipal and recreational land managers find practical ways to live alongside beavers rather than removing them.

The WLCF extends its sincere thanks to Bob Brett for a genuinely eye-opening talk.

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