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Service members are not the only ones on Joint Base Lewis-McChord carrying weighted backpacks. In the autumn of 2016, biologists at JBLM fit tiny GPS backpacks and colored leg bands — as identifiers — on the western bluebird.

Biologists on JBLM are monitoring this small bird as a proxy for the endangered streaked horned lark so they can learn more about using the GPS technology before they are used on the endangered larks.

The small birds were caught in a mist net, banded and released.

“Bluebirds are calm birds and adapt to captivity very well, they also forage on the ground, like larks and, more importantly, they weigh about the same,” said Christa LeGrande-Rolls, a biologist. “Their weight is a critical component in the GPS tracking device because the weight of the device cannot exceed 3 percent of the animal’s body weight, so understanding how birds’ behavior is altered by this technology is important. In the meantime, obtaining more information on bluebirds and where they’re going is an added benefit.”

The information about the bluebirds should come back in the early summer months.

“We don’t currently have results back from the GPSs put on bluebirds, as they are all still not yet back from migration,” LeGrande-Rolls said. “We hope to have this data by June or July. We did observe the bluebirds’ behavior to ensure they were not being negatively impacted by the GPS after they were deployed, and we determined there was no visible effect.”

Although not endangered, species populations in the Pacific Northwest of the western bluebird have been declining due to habitat loss. A cavity nesting bird, it needs a wide area to nest in that features plenty of snags and tree hollows where they can live.

The rare South Sound oak prairie habitat found on JBLM is perfect for this. There are 278 active bluebird boxes on the installation. Bluebirds will occupy approximately 30 to 60 percent of these boxes in a given breeding season, which may mean there are approximately 125 to 200 pairs on the installation.

Nest boxes have been critical to the recovery of the bluebirds in south Puget Sound. Seventy new nest boxes were built by volunteers on National Public Lands day in September in anticipation of putting them up this spring around the installation to further benefit this burgeoning population.

“Building up the bluebird population in the south sound, will encourage populations to flourish in the north sound, with simultaneous partnerships to facilitate land management beneficial for the Bluebird,” LeGrande-Rolls said.

The population has reached a level where birds from JBLM are used to establish new populations in other historic areas such as San Juan Islands and Vancouver Island, in Canada.

These efforts are testimony to the dedication and coordination JBLM devotes to rehabilitation of training lands on one of the rarest ecosystems in the country, South Puget Sound prairies. Gary Slater, avian ecologist at the Center for Natural Lands Management, began spearheading this project 10 years ago with other major partners.

This project has been a success due to the partnerships established through the life of the project, including JBLM, the Center for Natural Lands Management, Ecostudies Institute, the San Juan Preservation Trust, and the Garry Oak Ecosystem Recovery Team. Biologists, foresters and Fish and Wildlife staff maintain JBLM’s prairies through active management and restoration to assist in the

recovery of all listed and candidate federal species in South Puget Sound region and meet Net Zero Land goals for Sustainable Training Lands.

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