

Clark Fork River-Grass Valley Important Bird Area



Grasshopper Sparrow



© Kristi DuBois

Erskine Fishing Access Site near Frenchtown features a rich complex of cottonwood forests, willow bottoms, and beaver ponds.

The Concern About Bird Habitat

The Missoula valley is a place where native plants and animals are a vital part of the living landscape. Wildlife and wildlands are never far from our door. These qualities enrich the lives of all who live here. Now, in the face of rapid growth and development in western Montana, these precious wildlife habitats are disappearing and those that remain are increasingly threatened. We often unknowingly contribute to activities that diminish the natural values that bring us here and keep us here.



© Bob Conway

Willow Flycatchers nest in dense patches of willows.

A first step in making sure that our landscape continues to support healthy populations of wildlife is to inform the public about the importance of habitat for the species that rely on it. Montana Audubon, Five Valleys Audubon, and Five Valleys Land Trust have teamed up to focus attention on birds that use riparian cottonwoods and associated wetlands and grasslands along the Clark Fork River near Missoula.



© Glen Tepke

Lewis' Woodpeckers inhabit open forests of mature ponderosa pine or cottonwood.

Riparian areas and wetlands occupy less than 4% of Montana’s land area, yet they are used by more than 80% of the bird species found in the state during all or part of the year. Cottonwood riparian forests are especially important in that no other habitat in the West supports a higher diversity of breeding birds, and many species that breed in other habitats forage in cottonwoods during migration. It is also a habitat that is under threat from a variety of sources. For example, interruption of natural flooding regimes from dams can inhibit the recruitment of young cottonwoods, as can overgrazing by livestock, deer, and elk. Invasion of exotic trees and grasses that out compete cottonwood seedlings is also a problem in some areas.

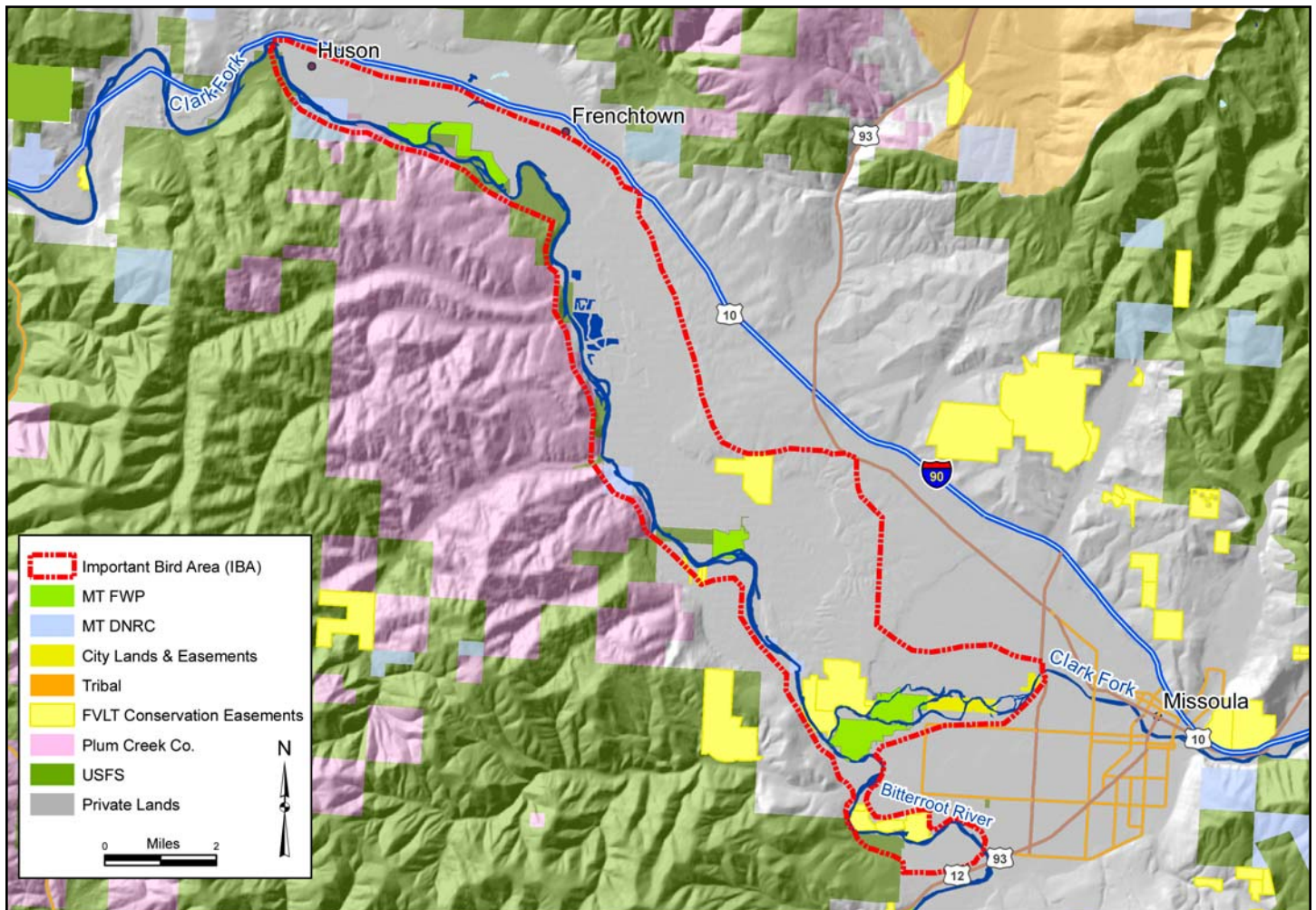
Not surprisingly, riparian cottonwoods and wetlands have been identified as “Tier I” priority habitats by Montana Audubon and as “Community Types of Greatest Conservation Need” by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. The high use of these habitats by birds, their natural scarcity, and the threats to their existence make riparian cottonwoods and wetlands critical components in the conservation of native birds in Montana and elsewhere in the West.



© Bob Martinka

Lazuli Buntings live in shrubby areas surrounded by grasslands.

The Clark Fork River-Grass Valley Important Bird Area west of Missoula, Montana encompasses city, state, federal, and private lands including lands protected by conservation easements.



The Important Bird Areas Concept

Since 2002, Five Valleys Audubon volunteers have monitored breeding birds on private lands (wetlands, grasslands and shrubby draws) in Grass Valley. In 2003 and 2004, these surveys were expanded to include three tracts of cottonwood gallery forest along the Clark Fork River between Kelly Island and Huson. We also monitored birds at the Smurfit-Stone Container mill near Frenchtown. The purpose of the work was to gather information to nominate this section of the river corridor as an Important Bird Area, or “IBA.” The IBA program is a global initiative to identify a network of sites that are critical for the conservation of birds. Since 1995, the National Audubon Society has taken the lead role in implementing the program in the U.S., and Montana Audubon directs the program in our state. IBAs help focus attention on habitats but are not legally binding and convey no regulatory authority. The concept is simple: identify areas that sustain healthy populations of birds (usually species of conservation concern), then focus attention on these sites to encourage conservation through habitat management, conservation easements, or other protective measures. Informing landowners about various conservation options is an important part of the process. By focusing attention on areas that have high value for birds, the IBA program can help set conservation priorities and contribute significantly to bird conservation over large areas.



© Glen Tepke

Hooded Mergansers use tree cavities formed by woodpeckers in large cottonwood trees for nesting.



© Bob Conway

© Kristi DuBois

Bald Eagles require mature stands of cottonwood, ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, or western larch for nesting and roosting.

Bird Surveys Find Important Species

As a science-based tool in bird conservation, an IBA can only be identified if sound data show (1) the occurrence of species of high conservation priority and/or (2) the occurrence of exceptionally high numbers of birds, or of a high diversity of bird species, in an area. Our recent surveys, plus information collected informally by Five Valleys Audubon volunteers over the last 20 years, showed that the Missoula Valley is a special place for birds. We documented the occurrence of 230 species of birds in the area, more than half of the bird species recorded for the entire state of Montana. Moreover, we found 13 species of conservation priority (as defined by the Partners in Flight Bird Conservation Plan for Montana) nesting in the study area, including six pairs of Bald Eagles and high numbers of Lewis's Woodpeckers, Red-naped Sapsuckers, Willow Flycatchers, and Red-eyed Vireos. In addition, we documented that the settling ponds at the Smurfit-Stone Container mill are used by 27 species of migratory shorebirds. More than a thousand shorebirds can be found there on a good day during the peak of southward migration. Several thousand ducks and geese frequent the area during migration.



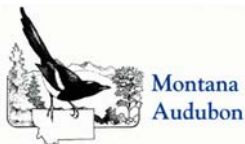
© Bob Martinka

Least Sandpipers stop over in the Smurfit-Stone Container ponds during migration.

Plans To Encourage Conservation

The Clark Fork River-Grass Valley IBA was approved as a State IBA in 2006 and as a Continental IBA in 2009 by the National Audubon Society because of its significance to species of conservation concern. Our conservation efforts begin by talking with landowners and other stakeholders about the IBA and the importance of protecting the unique habitat qualities of the Clark Fork River and surrounding uplands. Since work began on recognizing the IBA, 1,390 acres have been protected by conservation easements and 160 acres have been purchased for public use. We offer to help interested landowners who wish to develop a habitat management plan that is consistent with their ownership goals. In the end, the local community, our wildlife, and our habitats will benefit from the much-needed attention IBAs receive. Grass Valley landowner Jim Cusker protected his land with a conservation easement and fenced the riparian zone on his property. Mr. Cusker farms and ranches on the property and sees as many as 80 different species of birds there each year. He says, "It feels good to know that my family's farm will always be a place where agriculture and wildlife can thrive."

For more information about the Clark Fork River-Grass Valley IBA, contact the president of Five Valleys Audubon (www.fvamisoula.org), Montana Audubon (mtaudubon@mtaudubon.org), or Five Valleys Land Trust (office@fvlt.org).



This brochure was a cooperative effort by Five Valleys Audubon Society, Montana Audubon, Five Valleys Land Trust, and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. (February 2009)



© Nelson Kenter

Landowner Jim Cusker protected his property for agriculture and wildlife through a conservation easement.