

# Clark Fork River - Grass Valley Important Bird Area

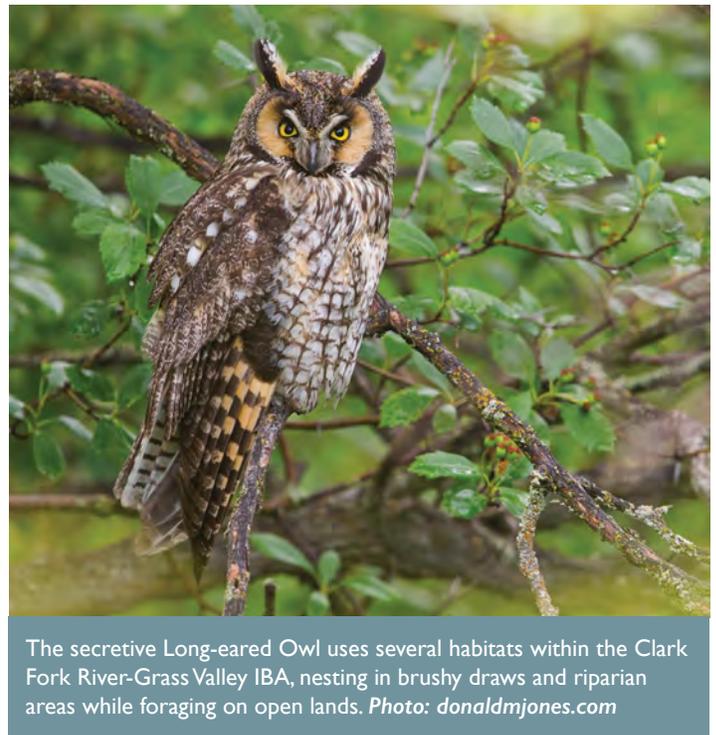
Willow Flycatcher. Photo: Cindy Swidler



## 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. Through better land stewardship and conscientious urban planning we can protect and enhance the natural values that bring us – and keep us – here.

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



The secretive Long-eared Owl uses several habitats within the Clark Fork River-Grass Valley IBA, nesting in brushy draws and riparian areas while foraging on open lands. Photo: donaldrmjones.com

wetlands and grasslands along the Clark Fork and Bitterroot Rivers near Missoula.



Lewis's Woodpeckers, a species of conservation concern, are commonly found in riparian cottonwood habitats of the Missoula Valley. Photo: Filip Panusz

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 outcompete 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. In addition, grassland birds show significant declines across the U.S. Local species, such as the Long-eared Owl, require brushy draws and nearby grasslands for nesting and foraging.

## The Important Bird Areas Concept

Since 2002, Five Valleys Audubon volunteers have monitored breeding birds on private lands (wetlands, grasslands, and brushy draws) in the greater Missoula 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. 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. The Clark Fork River-Grass Valley IBA was approved by the National Audubon Society as a state IBA in 2006.



A Species of Concern in Montana, Great Blue Herons nest in colonies, generally in cottonwoods along rivers including those within the Clark Fork River-Grass Valley IBA. Photo: Kristi DuBois

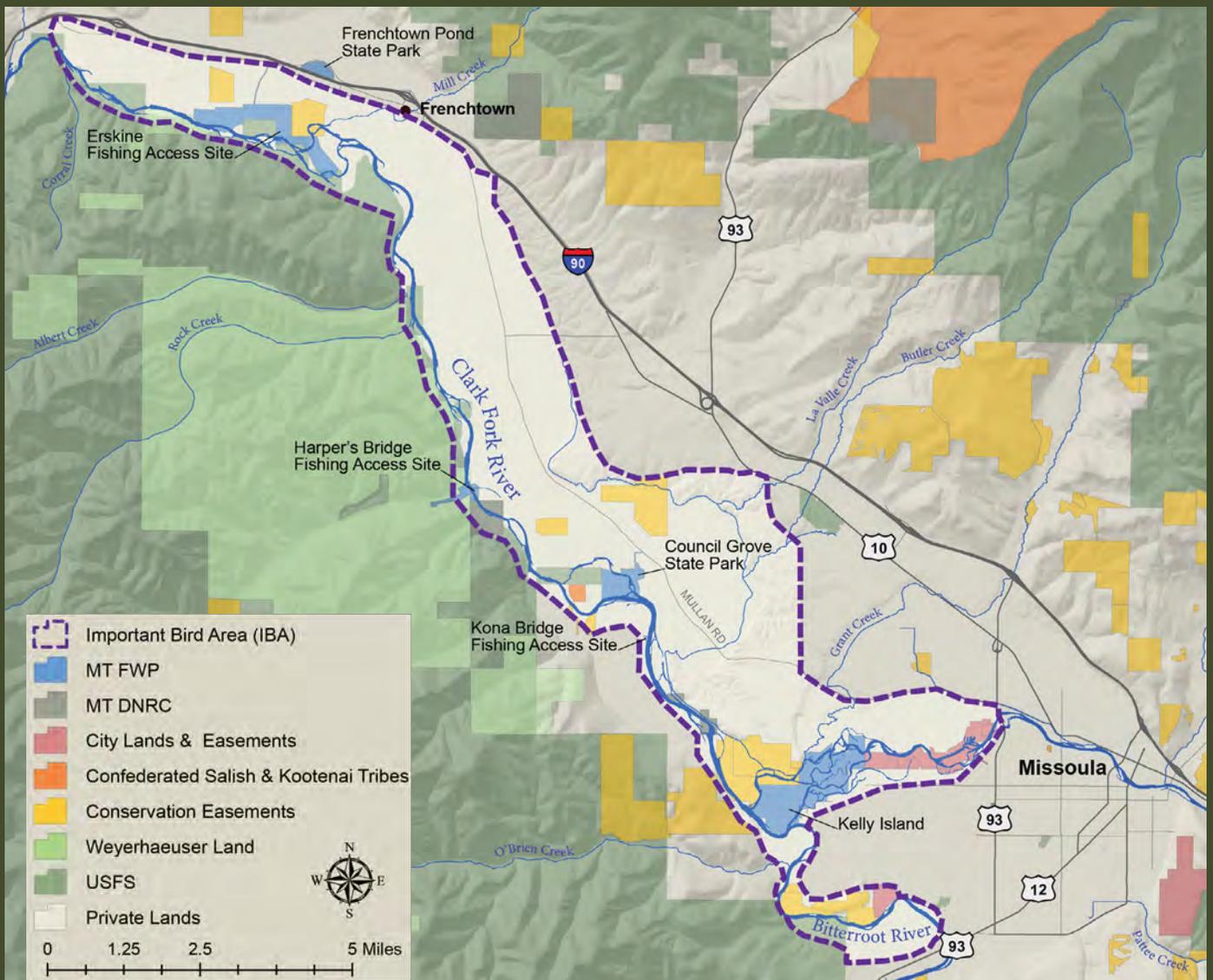
In 2009, its status was raised to one of continental significance due to the high numbers of Lewis’s Woodpeckers, a species of conservation priority.

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.



**Left:** Lazuli Buntings live in shrubby areas surrounded by openings of grass or forest. Photo: Bob Martinka **Right:** The Clark Fork River-Grass Valley IBA features a rich complex of cottonwood forests, willow bottoms, and grasslands with brushy draws. Photo: Jim Brown

# Clark Fork River - Grass Valley Important Bird Area



Coordinate System: NAD 1983 StatePlane Montana FIPS 2500 Feet Central Meridian: -113.5

Cartographer: Clint Whittle-Frazier, 2021

## 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. Five Valleys Audubon Society's 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 246 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. We also found that the agricultural lands, grasslands, and marshes in the Missoula valley support large numbers of wintering raptors of many species including Red-tailed and Rough-legged Hawks and the secretive Long-eared Owl.

# Conservation Success and Looking Ahead

Our conservation efforts begin by talking with landowners and other stakeholders about the Clark Fork River-Grass Valley IBA and the importance of protecting the unique habitat qualities of the Clark Fork River and surrounding uplands. Since work began on recognizing this IBA, 1,600 acres have been protected by conservation easements and 160 acres have been purchased for public use.

Trumpeter Swans, a Species of Concern in Montana, successfully nested in the greater Missoula Valley in 2016 for the first time in recorded history. For their nest site, the swans chose a working ranch that is protected by a conservation easement with the Five Valleys Land Trust. The ranch is within the Clark Fork River-Grass Valley IBA. The swans' decision to nest here signifies a major achievement in ongoing efforts to preserve valuable wildlife habitat and agricultural areas from future development.

Resources are available to help landowners who are interested in developing a habitat management plan that is consistent with their ownership goals.



These are the Trumpeter Swans that nested for the first time in recorded history in the Missoula Valley. Their nest was within the Clark Fork River-Grass Valley IBA. Photo: Grant Parker

Through this sort of collaboration, our wildlife, our wildlife habitat, and our larger community can benefit from the much-needed attention IBAs receive. Grass Valley landowner Jim Cusker conserved his land in partnership with Five Valleys Land Trust and fenced the riparian zone on his property to better protect it. 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."



Landowner Jim Cusker protected his property for agriculture and wildlife through a conservation easement with the Five Valleys Land Trust. Photo: Nelson Kenter

**For more information about the Clark Fork River-Grass Valley IBA, contact**

**Five Valleys Audubon**  
[info@fvaudubon.org](mailto:info@fvaudubon.org)

**Montana Audubon**  
[info@mtaudubon.org](mailto:info@mtaudubon.org)

**Five Valleys Land Trust**  
[office@fvlt.org](mailto:office@fvlt.org)



10% Total  
Recycled Fiber  
November 2021

**This brochure was a cooperative effort by**

