CLARK FORK—GRASS VALLEY IMPORTANT BIRD AREA

When you fly into or out of the Missoula Valley you cannot help but notice the river and surrounding band of cottonwoods that bisects the valley. The meandering Clark Fork River through cottonwood bottomlands and the adjoining wetlands of Grass Valley are some of the finest riparian and wetland habitat in western Montana. A rich diversity of birds occurs here and some of the species are particularly important because their habitat across the country is dwindling. Even the Bald Eagle and Peregrine Falcon can be found nesting along the River. For several years we have been encouraging the conservation of wetland and grassland habitats in Grass Valley. Our focus has broadened because we now realize that the Clark Fork bottomlands from approximately Reserve Street to Huson and the adjoining Grass Valley comprise exceptional bird habitat that deserves to be considered as a high priority for conservation.

The Five Valleys Audubon Society, Montana Audubon and the Five Valleys Land Trust are working together to demonstrate the importance of this area as habitat for birds and other wildlife and as open space and to encourage conservation actions. To help achieve recognition of these natural resource values we are seeking designation for this area as an Important Bird Area (IBA).

Important Bird Areas are sites that provide essential habitat for birds during some part of their yearly life cycle. The IBA program is a global effort initiated in 1985 by BirdLife International, a coalition of more than 100 country partner organizations. The National Audubon Society administers the program in the United States. In Montana IBAs have been designated for 26 sites spread across the state. IBAs help bring attention to crucial habitats but are not legally binding. To qualify as an IBA sites must meet certain criteria such as supporting species with restricted ranges, being important as a migration stopover, or supporting species of special concern (eg. threatened and endangered species, nesting colonies).

What makes the Clark Fork—Grass Valley area important? The chief reason lies with the varied riparian and wetland habitats. In Montana these habitats are critically important because they occupy only approximately 2 percent of Montana's land area yet provide homes to about 70 percent of Montana's bird species. The well developed cottonwood forests along the Clark Fork that provide valuable habitat to many birds are threatened by intensive land use throughout the State's major river systems. Alongside the Clark Fork River the Smurfit-Stone Container Corporation lands provide a large area of shallow ponds that are especially attractive to migrating shorebirds and waterfowl. In Grass Valley artesian springs provide a year-round supply of water that moves slowly through small ponds and marsh habitat. The clay hills that border the area are made up of woody draws and rolling grassland that provide different habitat niches. Altogether, the riparian, wetland and grassland habitats are attractive to a diversity of birds and other wildlife.

The observations of birders confirm that the area is rich in bird life. For example, during the Five Valleys Audubon Birdathon in early June 116 bird species were observed between Kelly Island and the Erskine Fishing Access. The bird list developed for Grass Valley over a number of years contains 153 species including 23 raptors. The Smurfit-Stone ponds are a migration stopover for some 25 species of shorebirds. These ponds have become a premiere birding location in the Missoula Valley. The IBA area supports breeding Audubon WatchList species such as Wilson's Phalarope, Willow Flycatcher, Lewis' Woodpecker, Calliope Hummingbird, White-throated Swift and Swainson's Hawk. WatchList species are those faced with population decline, limited geographic range, and/or habitat loss on breeding and wintering grounds. Additional birds identified as priority conservation species by Montana Partners in Flight also occur in the IBA area. They include Hooded Merganzer, Barrow's Goldeneye, Pileated Woodpecker, Red-naped Sapsucker and Red-eyed Vireo.

To meet IBA criteria and become designated as an IBA, documentation of the bird resource from systematic bird surveys is needed. We began bird surveys this spring for the entire IBA area. So far, we have surveyed lands owned by Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, Smurfit-Stone and several private properties in Grass Valley and adjoining the Fishing Access Areas. Our hope is that recognition of the Clark Fork—Grass Valley IBA will lead to conservation efforts through education and actions of individuals, working with land owners to protect habitat for key species, conservation easements and open space acquisitions.

Jim Brown