FIVE VALLEYS AUDUBON SOCIETY
P.O. BOX 8425
MISSOULA, MT 59807

March 5, 2010

Mr. Lorin Hicks
Plum Creek Timber Company
P.O. Box 1990
Columbia Falls, MT 59912

Dear Mr. Hicks:

As a follow up to our earlier phone conversation I am writing to you about our concern for an area of important bird habitat on Plum Creek land that lies adjacent to the Clark Fork River-Grass Valley Important Bird Area (IBA). Several species of Conservation Concern, especially the Peregrine Falcon and White-throated Swift are known to nest here. These species are considered by the National Audubon Society to be of Continental significance in the IBA program and of Priority Level II by Montana Partners in Flight.

The attached map shows an area of critical habitat for the Peregrine Falcon and White-throated Swift and a larger focus area that we believe is important to protection of the Peregrine Falcon and other species. The Peregrine has maintained an aerie in the northern set of rocky cliffs for many years. Our records go back to 1999, but I believe falconers knew of this aerie before then. The enclosed Peregrine observations made from the Smurfit-Stone property by Larry Weeks indicate that the aerie was active during most of the past 10 years based on the frequency of spring observations. In some years juvenile birds were observed in the cliffs. Prairie Falcons also utilize the cliff habitat particularly when the Peregrines are not present at the site. We believe Prairie Falcons nested in the cliffs before the Peregrines established their aerie. White-throated Swifts nest in the cliffs in the Critical Habitat Area and may also nest in the set of cliffs inside the southern boundary of the Focus Area. White-throated Swifts nest at scattered locations throughout western Montana. However, this is the only site in the greater Missoula Valley where they are known to nest. We plan to do bird surveys during the breeding season to better document bird activity in the area.

The area mapped as critical habitat for the Peregrine is an area where we believe that human disturbance needs to be minimal for the Peregrine to feel secure enough to continue nesting. The larger Focus Area encompasses an area where we believe intensive development would discourage nesting by the Peregrine so we believe protection from development is needed here as well. Some of the Focus Area also supports shrubby habitat sought by neotropical migrant songbirds such as the Calliope Hummingbird, Hammond's Flycatcher and Lazuli Bunting, which are considered to be species of Conservation Concern. In addition to providing important habitat for birds the Focus Area is receiving significant use by wintering elk.

We are also concerned about long term protection for the riparian-conifer ecotone along the Clark Fork River that extends along the entire span of the Clark fork River-Grass Valley IBA. This ecotonal zone occupies an area lying between the River and approximately one-tenth of a mile away from the River. A number of species of Conservation Concern such as Lewis's Woodpecker, Red-naped Sapsucker, Cordilleran Flycatcher, Willow Flycatcher, and Hooded Merganser nest within this zone.

We are anxious to pursue conservation actions that would protect this important habitat from development and would like to explore with you possibilities for achieving this. It may also be worth noting that there is widespread interest by the conservation-minded community in maintaining the natural resource values on the land adjoining the Clark Fork River. I would be happy to meet with you or others in the field if it would be helpful. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Jim Brown
Phone: 406-549-8052
Email: brownjs2@bresnan.net

Enclosures