Wildlife Habitat at the Western Montana Retriever Club Trial Grounds

On April 5, 2017 Larry Weeks and I (Five Valleys Audubon Society) met with Sarah Richey (FVLT) and June Lederer (retriever club president) to hike around the property and discuss wildlife habitat values found there particularly for birds. For many years I was a member of the club and trained and trialed Labrador Retrievers at the retriever grounds. Based on this visit and previous years of utilizing the area we believe the club grounds contain a diversity of wetland habitat niches and old growth cottonwood trees that are of significant value to a variety of birds. The ponds also support amphibians and fish. The habitat can be described as three different noteworthy types:

1. Wetlands. An old river oxbow on the south and east sides fills with water every spring and develops considerable aquatic vegetation including bull rushes. This provides hiding cover that allows some water birds to nest and remain even when the area is used for dog training and trials. The large pond is visited frequently by several species of waterfowl that move into and out of the area depending on disturbance. A series of smaller ponds and inlets at the north end provide particularly good waterfowl habitat that is utilized depending on degree of disturbance. Species that can be found utilizing the wetlands include Osprey, Sora Rail, Wilson's Snipe, Spotted Sandpiper, Great Blue Heron, Mallard, Gadwall, Cinnamon and Blue-winged Teal, Hooded Merganser, Canada Goose, Marsh Wren, Common Yellowthroat and several species of swallows.

2. River Riparian Edge. Shrubs and trees along the Bitterroot River are attractive to Warbling Vireo, Yellow Warbler, American Redstart, Song Sparrow, flycatchers and other species that move up and down along the River.

3. Old Growth Cottonwood. A small grove of widely spaced cottonwood trees at the northeast end of the property is particularly noteworthy. These trees provide significant cavity nesting opportunities for woodpeckers such as Downy, Hairy, Lewis's and Northern Flicker. Other species that may take advantage of these trees include Western Wood Pewee, Black-capped Chickadee, White-breasted Nuthatch, House Wren, Western Bluebird and possibly Hooded Merganser. The cottonwoods contain considerable cavities indicating a history of bird use. This area of the reriever grounds is seldom disturbed by dog training activities.

Jim Brown