

## **Peeps from the Board** by Jim Brown

It is my turn to "peep" so I thought I would tell you about our recent efforts to protect important bird habitat. In Montana critical habitats especially involve wetlands and grasslands. The Clark Fork River--Grass Valley Important Bird Area has been the focus of our efforts. This 25,000-acre area includes riparian, wetland, and grassland habitats that provide homes to a dozen or so species of conservation concern. Although the IBA has been the focus of our work, we have expanded our efforts to adjacent areas and other important bird habitats in Missoula County.

We completed a 5-year re-survey of breeding birds in the IBA and extended the surveys to several adjacent areas as well. One highlight was the observation of 55 nesting pairs of Lewis's Woodpeckers in the IBA. Such a strong showing of this National Audubon Society Watchlist species reaffirms the main reason this IBA was classified as a Continental Level IBA. Importantly, our surveys were conducted on several private farms and ranches where we were able to encourage long term conservation of bird habitat. A big thank you goes to the bird observers: Vick Applegate, William Boggs, Jim Brown, Amy Cilimburg, Bill Gabriel, Cynthia Hudson, Elizabeth Johnston, Gerhard Knudsen, Paul Loehnen, Poody McLaughlin, Joe Regan, Terry Toppins, and Larry Weeks.

One species of conservation concern found in and around the IBA is the Swainson's Hawk. We are fortunate to have a small nesting population of this grassland dependent raptor in the greater Missoula Valley. In Montana it is primarily found in the extensive grasslands east of the continental divide. Our Chapter supported Rob Domenech and his Raptor View Research Institute to do a study of Swainson's Hawk nest sites and nesting success so we can monitor what is happening with this fragile population. The Swanson's Hawk gets along well with people activity but must have grasslands and agricultural lands where it can forage for small rodents, the main food for raising their young. We want the Missoula community to know about the Swainson's Hawk and other raptors such as the Long-eared Owl that depend on grasslands in the Missoula Valley. We plan to advocate for

conservation of grasslands and agricultural lands that are threatened with development.

This spring Gary Knudsen and I examined a subdivision proposal for 59 lots on 200 acres along Blanchard Creek near Clearwater Junction. We thought that the proposed development called for too much development in the riparian habitat zone. Gary drafted a letter explaining our concerns that we submitted to the Missoula County Office of Planning and Grants. We expect to testify at a County Commissioner Hearing about our recommendation to reduce the number of lots (probably about 12) to protect the riparian habitat.

If you have birded with Larry Weeks at Smurfit Stone you have probably looked across the Clark Fork River to search for a Peregrine Falcon and White-throated Swifts in the rocky cliffs. Besides these species, the area around the cliffs supports a diversity of neotropic migrant songbirds such as Cordilleran and Hammond's Flycatchers, Warbling and Cassin's Vireos, Lazuli Bunting, Western Tanager and four species of warblers, all observed by Terry Toppins this June. This important habitat is owned by Plum Creek Timber Company. We have been exploring with Plum Creek, U.S. Forest Service, Nature Conservancy and Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks how protection of this area might be achieved. It will take considerable funding to acquire this significant habitat and place it in ownership where protection is guaranteed. We plan to continue pursuing a conservation solution here but expect it will require a long term effort.

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