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Ravalli County Commissioners

Bitterroot
AUDUBON



September 17, 2013

Dear Ravalli County Commissioners and Open Lands Board Members,

CC
Planning

On behalf of the Board of Bitterroot Audubon, I am writing to express our support for the use of Open Lands Bond funds to towards the proposed KBK River Property easement. We believe that this property:

- Provides a variety of relatively undisturbed vegetative structures that offer important habitat to birds and other wildlife.
- Provides valuable connectivity to wide-ranging wildlife species attempting to make movements between the Bitterroot and Sapphire Mountain Ranges.
- Enhances water quality on both Lost Horse Creek and the Bitterroot River.
- Allows for some levels of engagement and public access under past, current, and stated future management by current ownership.

We would also like to remind the Open Lands Board and the County Commissioners that although the vast majority of approved Open Lands Bond projects have had a strong agricultural component, the Open Lands Bond money can and should be used for projects that primarily support other values, including protecting wildlife habitat, protecting the water quality of streams and the Bitterroot River, and preserving scenic open lands. In the past, Bitterroot Audubon has supported agriculturally dominated Open Lands Bond projects even though they may currently represent marginal wildlife habitat. We support such projects because we value the role agriculture plays in our valley, and we see the potential for habitat improvement over time if lands are permanently protected. However, it is much more difficult to restore habitat to a high quality than it is to protect it in an intact state. We think it is highly appropriate and economically efficient to allocate a very small portion of our Open Lands Bond money towards a project that will protect currently intact wildlife habitat, unimpaired water systems, and undisturbed open space.

We are also concerned about the potential for future development on this property, given our County's lack of rules and regulations regarding land use planning. Though it is certainly not the desire of the current owners, we are concerned that without the permanent protection that a conservation easement offers, future owners may find ways to take advantage of the development potential of the site, given its attractive location adjacent to Lost Horse Creek and the Bitterroot River.

For all of the reasons outlined above, Bitterroot Audubon strongly encourages the Open Lands Board and County Commissioners to support the KBK River Property proposal.

For more details on our position, please see the supplemental information that accompanies this letter.

Sincerely,

Kate Stone
Kate Stone

Board Member, Bitterroot Audubon

Supplemental Information

Wildlife Habitat Value

Bitterroot Audubon has conducted many field trips in the area of the KBK River Property, using easements on the Ward Ditch and along the railroad tracks. A representative also attended the public site visit to the KBK River Property. These experiences allow us to comment directly on the value of this property as **quality habitat** for birds and other wildlife species. In particular, we would highlight the following habitat elements:

1. The property contains a **wide range of habitat conditions**, including open, mature ponderosa pine forests, clumps of regenerating conifers, wetland habitats, mature deciduous forest, and shrubby riparian areas. Habitat diversity leads to the ability of a landscape to support diverse wildlife communities and allows wildlife options as habitat conditions change. The lack of past disturbance like cattle grazing, major timber clearing, and human development means that the habitats on the KBK River Property are relatively undisturbed compared to many other properties adjacent to the Bitterroot River. Even though this property is outside of the boundaries of the Bitterroot River Important Bird Area (IBA), it contains all of the habitat elements as well as all five bird species that define the IBA (see Table 1). In fact, its habitat quality far exceeds much of the habitat currently within the IBA's boundaries.

2. Past and current management practices have allowed for **the retention of large snags and downed woody debris** on the KBK River Property. These habitat features are often eliminated by private landowners in an attempt to "clean up" a property. However, these features represent one of the most valuable and well-used habitat elements in our floodplain forests. Snags are used by any number of bird species (e.g., woodpeckers, nuthatches) for foraging and nesting, and the cavities created in them by birds may be used by other wildlife, including bats, northern flying squirrels, red squirrels, American marten, and other weasels. Downed wood provides shelter and foraging opportunities for birds, small mammals, reptiles like the Rubber boa, and amphibians like the Western toad.



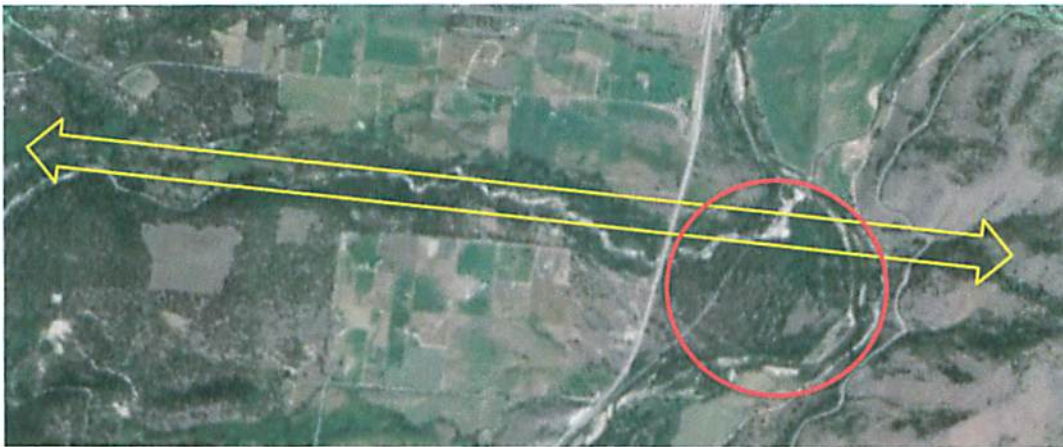
One of many snags used by birds on the KBK River Property

3. While on the property, we saw much evidence of **regenerating deciduous trees and shrubs**. Most private properties along the Bitterroot River, including many of those within the Bitterroot River IBA, suffer from overgrazing from cows or an overstocked white-tailed deer population. Grazing and browsing may not kill all current deciduous woody vegetation, but it often prevents the ability of shrubs and trees to sprout or grow in a way that will sustain them in the future. On the KBK River Property, we observed multi-aged aspen stands, young and sprouting cottonwoods, and young, unbrowsed shrubs like chokecherry and serviceberry- a truly rare sight in many areas along the Bitterroot River. Deciduous woody vegetation is a key habitat feature to many bird species, particularly warblers and other songbirds that rely on it for nesting and foraging on insects. It also provides appropriate cover and berries for migrating songbirds in the spring and fall. We saw evidence of migrants using deciduous woody vegetation on the public site visit of this property on 9/6/13, with detections of Yellow-rumped warblers, Yellow warblers, American robins, a Hermit Thrush, and Cedar Waxwings.



Sprouting aspen stand on the KBK River Property

4. We believe the KBK River Property contains wildlife habitat value beyond just the boundaries of the property itself. It secures an important **wildlife corridor** between the east and west sides of the valley. One of the most important concepts to sustaining viable wildlife populations is the ability of animals to move. Mobility allows wildlife to meet year-round life history needs and encourages the gene flow that allows populations to adapt to ever-changing environmental conditions. Wide-scale habitat conversion and the presence of human populations and associated changes (e.g., fencing, roads, pets) challenge the ability of wildlife to freely move. The Bitterroot Valley has limited options for medium- and large-scale wildlife to make movements back and forth across the Valley using existing vegetative cover, since most of the cover in the center of the Valley and along riparian corridors leading to the Bitterroot River has been altered by human development. The riparian corridor surrounding Lost Horse Creek, and its convergence with the Bitterroot River, represents one of only a few locations in the Bitterroot Valley that offer wildlife a secure place to make east-west or west-east movements under consistent, relatively undisturbed vegetative cover. Protecting this valuable corridor from future development is extremely important to wide-ranging and/or potentially dispersing species such as the moose, elk, black bear, wolverine, and gray wolf.



The Yellow Arrow represents an easy movement corridor for wildlife trying to move back and forth across the Valley. The Red Circle approximates the location of the KBK River Property, an important anchor in the viability of this wildlife corridor.

5. We have observed a diverse suite of birds and other wildlife on the KBK River Property. Table 1 lists the bird species members of Bitterroot Audubon have documented on or adjacent to the KBK River Property. Please note that we have seen all five of the bird species that define the **Bitterroot River Important Bird Area**: the Bald eagle, Lewis's woodpecker, Red-eyed vireo, Red-naped sapsucker, and Willow flycatcher. We have also documented five species designated by the state of Montana as **Species of Concern**: the Clark's nutcracker, Evening grosbeak, Great blue heron, Lewis's woodpecker, and Pileated woodpecker.

Table 1. Bird species detected on or adjacent to the KBK River Property by members of Bitterroot Audubon. Observations were made on: 4/30/08, 7/29/09, 10/22/09, 7/27/10, 8/13/13, 9/6/13.			
Species	Season [^]	Species	Season
American dipper	fa	Mountain chickadee	fa
American goldfinch	br, fa	Mourning dove	br
American kestrel	fa	Northern flicker	sp, br, fa
American robin	sp, br, fa	Northern rough-winged swallow	fa
Bald eagle*	br, fa	Osprey	sp, br, fa
Bank swallow	br	Pileated woodpecker+	fa
Belted kingfisher	sp, br, fa	Pine siskin	br, fa
Black-billed magpie	br, fa	Pygmy nuthatch	br, fa
Black-capped chickadee	sp, br, fa	Red crossbill	br, fa
Black-headed grosbeak	br	Red-breasted nuthatch	br, fa
Brewer's blackbird	br	Red-eyed vireo*	br
Bullock's oriole	br	Red-naped sapsucker*	sp
Canada goose	sp, fa	Red-tailed hawk	fa
Cedar waxwing	br, fa	Ruby-crowned kinglet	sp, fa
Clark's nutcracker+	fa	Rufous hummingbird	br
Common merganser	sp	Sandhill crane	sp
Common nighthawk	br	Song sparrow	sp, br, fa
Dark-eyed junco	sp	Spotted sandpiper	br, fa
Double-crested cormorant	fa	Swainson's thrush	br
Downy woodpecker	br, fa	Townsend's solitaire	sp
Eastern kingbird	br, fa	Tree swallow	br
Evening grosbeak+	fa	Western tanager	br, fa
Golden-crowned kinglet	fa	Western wood-pewee	br, fa
Gray catbird	br	White-breasted nuthatch	br
Great blue heron+	br, fa	White-crowned sparrow	sp
Hermit thrush	fa	Willow flycatcher*	br
House finch	br, fa	Wood duck	sp
House wren	fa	Yellow warbler	br, fa
Lewis's woodpecker*+	br, fa	Yellow-rumped warbler	sp, fa
Mallard	sp		
*Defining species of the Bitterroot River IBA +Species of Concern as determined by MT Fish, Wildlife, and Parks [^] Season: (sp= spring, br= breeding, fa= fall)			

While on field trips, we have also observed many other wildlife species, including Black bear, Moose, Red fox, White-tailed deer, and the Western toad, a **Species of Concern in Montana**.

Water Quality

In order to ensure high quality water systems throughout the Bitterroot Valley, we need to make efforts to improve currently impaired systems, and we need to protect intact systems when it is possible to do so. We would remind the Commissioners of their commitment to the concept of water quality. According to the **Ravalli County Natural Resource Policy** adopted 21 November, 2012, **"Water resources are fundamental to the economic future and the quality of life in Ravalli County."** One listed goal of this policy is that: **"Watersheds must be managed for water quality and seasonal quality"**. In approving this project under the Open Lands Bond Program, our Commissioners have an opportunity to put into practice one of the concepts they adopted when they signed the Natural Resources Policy.

With 1.5 miles of Bitterroot River and 0.3 miles of Lost Horse Creek frontage, we believe the KBK River Property provides valuable water quality functions that need to be protected, and which our Commissioners are under an obligation to protect.

Private-Public interactions

We believe that private landowners are the key to preserving most critical wildlife habitat in the Bitterroot Valley. Working with private landowners to assess a property's habitat value and to support habitat improvements is a primary action of our organization.

While attending the KBK River Property public site visit, we were able to visit with the Evans' family representative Dwayne Hinmen to discuss the family's vision for the property. We greatly appreciate the Evans family's primary past use of the property, and their stated hope for its future: "to protect the ranch from development and preserve it in its natural state".

Dwayne expressed a willingness to engage with Bitterroot Audubon and/or other conservation groups in working towards further habitat improvements on the property. He also supported the continuance of limited public access for educational reasons. In the past, the Evans family has allowed some public access for scientific and birding purposes, and the family intends to allow similar regulated use as long as they maintain ownership. **Very few of our approved Open Lands Bond projects have any component of public access to them.** Bitterroot Audubon looks forward to working with the Evans family on habitat improvement projects and any level of public access that they are willing to consider.



Bitterroot Audubon looks forward to further discussions like this one, between members of the public and a committed private landowner.