

# Bitterroot AUDUBON



RECEIVED

MAY 15 2014

Ravalli County Commissioners

May 15, 2014

Dear Ravalli County Commissioners,

On behalf of the Board of Bitterroot Audubon, I am writing to express our support for the use of Open Lands Bond funds towards the proposed Lazy Burnt Fork Ranch easement. We believe that the protection of this property offers many benefits to people, birds, and other wildlife. We disagree with a dissenting opinion expressed by one member of the Open Lands Board regarding the lack of importance of this site as wildlife habitat. Montana is home to a much richer diversity of wildlife than just big game species like elk and deer. Groups of species like birds, bats, small mammals, and amphibians are part of what makes Montana a unique place worth protecting, for the sake of residents, tourists, and the wildlife itself. Our observations on the property and knowledge of the ecosystems in the Bitterroot Valley suggest that the Lazy Burnt Fork Ranch provides important habitat for a wide range of species.

One of the main attractive features of this property is the diversity of habitat types, each of which supports a distinct ecological community. Habitat types include: sagebrush, cottonwood riparian, juniper and pine woodlands, aspen stands, and open grassland. Some of these habitat types are scarce in the Valley. Each supports birds recognized as Species of Concern in Montana. The property also boasts several landscape features that likely make it attractive to bats, including rock outcrops and old cottonwoods for breeding and roosting, and water sources for drinking. Bats provide significant ecological services to farmers, ranchers, and the general public.

On our site visit, we noted the presence of several birds of prey, specifically nesting Red-tailed Hawks and American Kestrels. While we believe this property supports locally breeding raptor populations, we also know the area is important at other times of year. Citizen Scientists from Bitterroot Audubon have completed two years of winter raptor surveys throughout the Valley. We have counted over 3,000 raptors in this time. The Middle Burnt Fork drainage boasts the highest density of winter raptors of any area we have surveyed. We believe this pattern is due to the large expanses of undeveloped land interspersed with riparian areas. This combination provides open space that support small mammal prey and have high visibility for easy hunting. Riparian corridors provide perches for hunting and roosting. Because many of the raptors are winter visitors that breed in more northern locations, the quality of our local habitat has population implications on a hemispheric scale. Protecting properties like the Lazy Burnt Fork Ranch will help ensure that such habitat is preserved in perpetuity.

We also support the strategy of neighborhood building that is occurring in the Burnt Fork drainage. The close proximity of several other conservation easements funded using Open Lands Bond Funds increases the importance of the Lazy Burnt Fork Ranch easement. By working with adjacent landowners in a certain area, we are able to protect more acreage collectively than separately, encompass larger swaths of wildlife habitat, and foster community interactions.

Finally, property owner Stephen Peckinpaugh expressed a willingness to engage in further habitat enhancements on the property, particularly in regards to improving habitat quality around North Burnt Fork Creek.

For the above-stated reasons, Bitterroot Audubon supports the use of Open Lands Bond funds to protect the Lazy Burnt Fork Ranch for current and future generations.

Sincerely,  
*Kate Stone*  
Kate Stone  
Board Member, Bitterroot Audubon



The diversity of habitats on the Lazy Burnt Fork Ranch, including sagebrush, cottonwood riparian, juniper and pine woodlands, aspen stands, and open pasture.



An area of North Burnt Fork Creek that could benefit from additional habitat enhancement projects.