

The Bitterroot River Important Bird Area



Photo by Leslie Nyce

The Bitterroot River: A Cherished Part of Our Valley

The Bitterroot River winds north between the Bitterroot and Sapphire Mountains through the valley it helped shape. Towering cottonwoods and pines, wispy willows, and ground-hugging grasses line the river. The Bitterroot is a focal point for the people of the Valley. We treasure the river and its streamside vegetation for their aesthetic value, the opportunities they provide for recreation—floating, fishing, hunting, and a place to cool off on a hot summer day—and their value for providing irrigation water and other services.

Less well known is how important the Bitterroot River is to birds and other wildlife. **Riparian areas and wetlands occupy less than 4% of Montana’s land surface, and less than 1% throughout the West, yet they support more than 80% of the bird species found in Montana.**

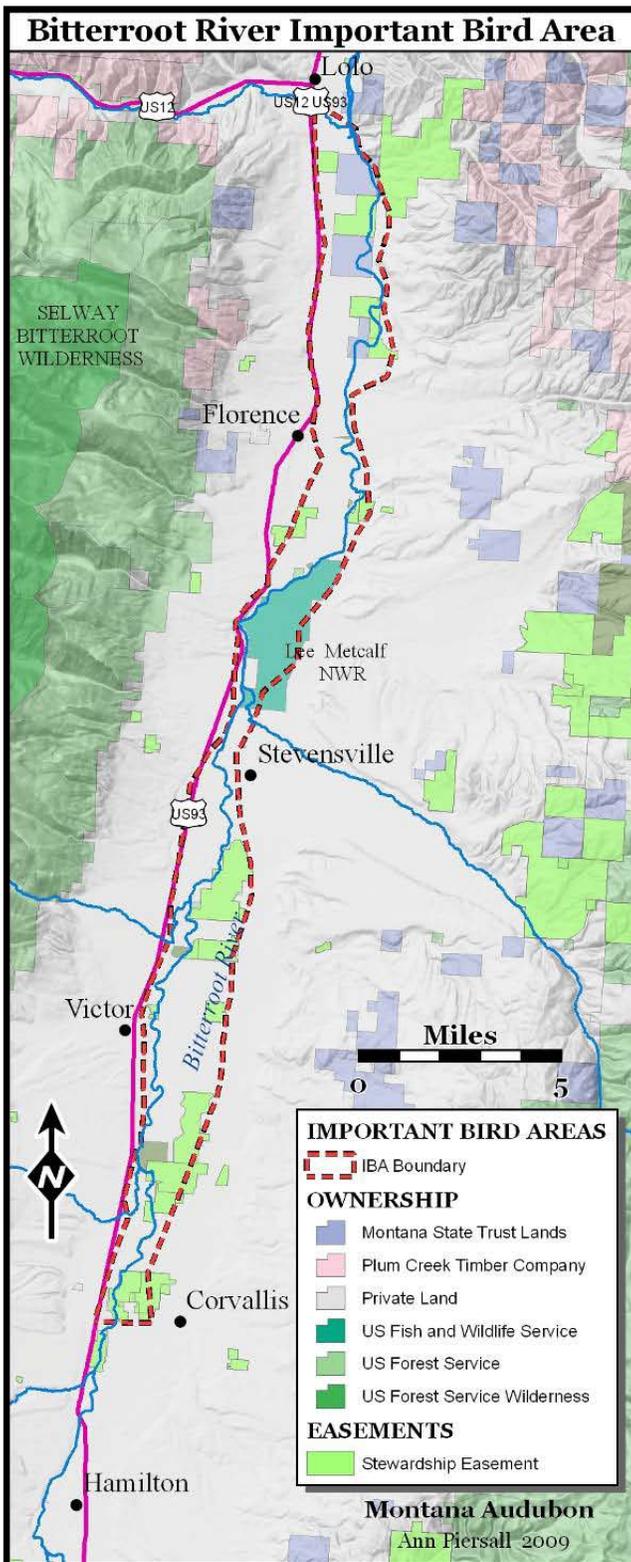
Cottonwood riparian forests are vital to birds. They provide a rich diversity of foods—insects, seeds, and fruits—important for both birds that nest here and migrating birds needing to refuel.

They also provide a variety of nest sites: bare rocks and sand for birds like Killdeer and Spotted Sandpipers; grasses and forbs for ground-nesting birds like Song Sparrows and Veeries; shrubs for Willow Flycatchers and MacGillivray’s Warblers; tree canopies for Bald Eagles, Bullock’s Orioles, and Red-eyed Vireos; and dead trees for Wood Ducks, Red-naped Sapsuckers and Lewis’s Woodpeckers.



Photo by Nickolas Nelson

Nine pairs of Bald Eagles nest in the Bitterroot Valley, requiring large, old trees that can support their heavy nests.



The Red-naped Sapsucker is a migratory woodpecker that nests in tree cavities. At least 100 breeding pairs occur within the IBA.

Photo by Bob Martinka

Bitterroot Audubon Society formally adopted the Bitterroot River Important Bird Area (IBA) in 2008 after Montana Audubon and National Audubon designated it as one of more than 2,000 recognized areas important to birds and their habitat. Bitterroot Audubon hopes to work with landowners to focus attention on the importance of native cottonwood river bottom habitat in maintaining healthy populations of birds. This brochure provides the reader with a description of the area and explains what an IBA is and is not.

What Is an “Important Bird Area”?

The Important Bird Areas Program, established by the National Audubon Society, is a global initiative to identify, monitor, and protect a network of sites that are critical for the conservation of birds and other wildlife. IBAs include sites for breeding, wintering, and/or migrating birds. They may be a few acres or thousands of acres, but usually are discrete sites that stand out from the surrounding landscape. Since 1995, 2,000 IBAs have been identified in the United States; 37 of them are in Montana.



At least 75 pairs of Willow Flycatchers nest in willow shrubs within the IBA.

Photo by Michael Woodruff

IBAs have the unique power to unite people, communities, and organizations in proactive bird conservation, one place at a time.

-- Frank Gill, Senior Ornithologist, National Audubon

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Because of its importance to birds, Montana Audubon and the National Audubon Society identified the Bitterroot River as an Important Bird Area for our state. This IBA may even qualify as “continentally significant” due to the abundance of certain key species that breed within its boundaries. The area identified includes the 500-year floodplain that runs 30 miles along the river from Woodside Crossing to just south of Lolo.

To qualify as an IBA, sites must satisfy at least one of several criteria. In 2005 and 2006, Montana Audubon and National Audubon surveyed the Bitterroot River to obtain bird population data. The Bitterroot River IBA was identified for these reasons:

- More than 240 species of birds observed,
- More than 115 of those breed along this stretch of the river,
- High numbers of two species of continental concern: Lewis’s Woodpecker and Red-naped Sapsucker,
- High numbers of three species of state-level concern: Bald Eagle, Willow Flycatcher, and Red-eyed Vireo.



Photo by Dan Ritter

A landowner discusses bird habitat management with a member of Bitterroot Audubon.



Migratory Lewis’s Woodpeckers nest in large pine and cottonwood snags. The IBA has at least 40 breeding pairs.

Photo by Margaret Rose Hiller

What Does It Mean To Have an Important Bird Area in Our Valley?

Most of the lands along the Bitterroot River IBA are private lands and it is important to clarify how it might affect landowners.

Protecting private property rights is critical, so first here is **what the IBA designation does not mean:**

1. It does **not** mean that bird watchers will flock onto private property to look for these birds.
2. This is a **non-regulatory** designation; no regulations or restrictions will be imposed.

What the IBA does mean is a host of opportunities for landowners:

1. Help finding resources and expertise on managing land to benefit birds.
2. Local experts to talk about bird species, identification techniques, and habitat requirements.
3. Information about protecting riparian habitats from threats such as noxious weeds, erosion, or over-browsing by deer.
4. Partnerships to obtain grants for habitat restoration, noxious weed control, or wildlife-friendly fencing.
5. Assistance with bird surveys and setting up conservation easements.

The Bitterroot River Joins a Global List of Important Bird Areas



Bitterroot Audubon hopes to promote and protect the Bitterroot IBA by:

1. Performing bird surveys to further document bird species and track population trends.
2. Holding educational and outreach programs.
3. Contacting and working with interested landowners.
4. Conducting field trips on the river and on public land along the river.

This brochure results from the cooperative efforts of Bitterroot Audubon Society, Montana Audubon, Allegra Print & Imaging, and the Rapp Family Foundation.



Montana Audubon

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For more information about Montana's Important Bird Area program, see <http://mtaudubon.org/birds/areas.html>

For more information about the Bitterroot River Important Bird Area, see <http://www.bitterrootaudubon.org/activities/importantbirdareas.html>