



**Flathead Audubon Society**

PO Box 9173  
Kalispell, MT 59904

July 8, 2019

Rick Northrup  
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PO Box 200701  
Helena, MT 59620-0701  
rnorthrup@mt.gov

Dear Rick,

On behalf of Flathead Audubon Society, composed of over 400 members from the Flathead Valley area, I am writing to support Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' and Flathead Land Trust's Forest Legacy Program application to help protect 800 acres of riparian/forest habitat at the mouth of Bad Rock Canyon near Columbia Falls, MT. Since the early 2000s, our Chapter has been a part of the local collaboration of federal, state, tribal, and private entities efforts, known as the Flathead River To Lake Initiative. The Initiative's purpose is to conserve critical lands along the Flathead River from Columbia Falls to north shore of Flathead Lake for the benefit of habitat, water quality, wildlife, and recreation. This project would be a great addition to the approximately 5,000 or more acres of lands already conserved through the River To Lake Initiative. It is also located in one of the most vulnerable and sensitive areas along the Flathead River due to existing location of railroad, major highway, and the rapidly growing community of Columbia Falls. The fact the project encompasses approximately 800 contiguous acres is only the result of corporate ownership that has kept this crucial area of land intact over the last 50 or 60 years.

Flathead Audubon Society, in partnership with Montana Audubon, already licenses and manages 442-acres of riparian habitat on Flathead and Stillwater Rivers near Kalispell from Montana Dept. of Natural Resources for conservation and education. The protection of another 800 acres of intact habitat that is crucial for bald eagle, osprey, peregrine falcon, great blue heron, cavity nesting birds, neotropical migrants, and a host of other fish and wildlife will greatly benefit wildlife connectivity and water quality along the Flathead River and into Flathead Lake. Further, the state's ultimate ownership and management of this land will greatly enhance outdoor recreation and conservation/educational opportunities in the northern area of the Flathead Valley.

The river/valley between Bad Rock Canyon and Columbia Falls is a nexus for many fish and wildlife species. Threatened adult bull trout that migrate from Flathead Lake must pass by this site to reach the upper Middle and North Forks of the Flathead for spawning and rearing. The young bull trout then later need to pass down through this narrow gorge to reach Flathead Lake. These and other species of native and non-native fish form the food web for many species of birds such as bald eagle, osprey, and great blue heron.



The cliffs of Bad Rock canyon support an active peregrine falcon nest site. Quality riparian habitat is essential near peregrine nesting sites to provide sources of prey such as waterfowl, black birds, and other bird species.

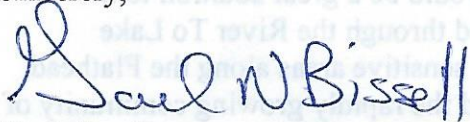
The two mountain ranges on either side of this project area, Swan and Apgar Mountains, are split by the Flathead River but connectivity across the river is crucial for known annual fall migration of raptors dependent on these ridges for flights. The rich riparian and forested valley areas provide needed foraging opportunities for migrating hawks, accipiters, eagles, and falcons.

The valley is also important for population and habitat connectivity for grizzly bears, moose, elk, wolves, wolverine, and other wildlife that historically and freely moved from one mountain range to another or up and down the river corridor. Protecting this piece of land from development will also reduce risks of human/wildlife conflicts on a highly productive piece of habitat.

Flathead Audubon Society has developed an outdoor bird oriented conservation/education programs for K-12 students in the Flathead Valley. We believe that this protected area could eventually serve as an excellent riparian forest educational site for both the Columbia Falls and Whitefish communities.

We strongly support this application and hope the project will be successful. Thank you for the opportunity to support this effort.

Sincerely,



Gael Bissell  
President, Flathead Audubon Society