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Welcome to the River to Lake newsletter.

A quarterly Newsletter

Issue 11 | April 2011

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River to Lake Initiative partners receive the Montana Wetland Stewardship Award

The *Flathead River to Lake Initiative* has been selected by the Montana Wetland Council to receive a 2011 Montana Wetland Stewardship Award. The *Initiative* is recognized for outstanding achievement in building a diverse partnership and working with private landowners to protect and restore critical wetlands, riparian habitat and productive farm land along the Flathead River and the North Shore of Flathead Lake.

The partnership has protected over 5,000 acres of critical lands, including 1,200 wetland acres, and restored over 5,000 feet of river banks. The award recognizes the Loudon family for its recently



Swans at Church Slough by Jim Williams

completed project in which eight family members voluntarily conserved 1,088 acres stretching along 3.7 miles of the Flathead River. Their contribution, like that of numerous other participating landowners, has been key to the *Initiative's* success.

The Montana Wetland Stewardship Award will be presented on Thursday, May 26 at the State Capitol in Helena. For more information contact Constanza von der Pahlen, Flathead Lakers, at 406-883-1341.

Conservation & Restoration Updates

Flathead River acquisition protects bull trout habitat

The Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes recently helped advance fisheries conservation in the Flathead River by purchasing a 146-acre property on the 100-year floodplain that provides important habitat for bull trout. The Tribes worked closely with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and River to Lake Initiative partners to conserve this critical river property. This conservation project adds to the growing network of protected lands along the Flathead River that helps sustain clean water and native fish and wildlife. To read more about this visit story our website at

www.flatheadrivertolake.org/index.php/success-stories.

Owen Sowerwine Natural Area update

The Department of Natural Resources & Conservation (DNRC) and MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) have formed a committee to discuss opportunities to trade certain lands they manage. The Flathead and Montana Audubon chapters will be encouraging the agencies to include the Owen Sowerwine Natural Area in a trade that would shift management of OSNA from DRNC to FWP to assure long-term protection of the area's unique natural features and amenities. For more information contact Linda Winnie at 406-755-1406.

Stream bank restoration projects update

Three restoration projects are moving forward this summer. Two projects on the Flathead River east of Church Slough are supported by NRCS EQIP and BPA funding. The third, at the FWP Foys Bend Fisheries Conservation Area, is funded by the MT Dept. of Transportation. The projects on private properties consist of restoring native plants along the river bank and 300-foot exclosures for deer protection. The Foys Bend project will consist of restoring the upland pastures back to native vegetation, restoring riparian habitat along the river bank, and biotechnical river bank stabilization. These are multi-year projects that will be completed by the landowners with assistance from partners as needed.

Flathead County River Commission reorganizes

The Flathead County River Commission has reorganized under the umbrella of the Flathead Conservation District. This will give the Commission more autonomy on membership and projects. The group plans to continue meeting the last Tuesday of every month. For more information contact the District at 406-752-4220.

No-wake zone proposed for Fennon & Church Slough

The FWP Commission proposed no-wake speed limits for boats at Church and Fennon Sloughs and a seasonal boat closure at Church Slough. The proposal was in response to a request from landowners concerned with the erosion of the banks and impacts to habitat and waterfowl during migration. FWP held a public hearing in March. No decision has been announced on the proposal.

Assistance for Landowners

Order native plants through the Flathead Conservation District

Need to order native plants to restore your streambank, improve wildlife habitat, or create a shelterbelt? The Flathead Conservation District can help you place an order with the Montana Conservation Seedling Nursery by bundling group orders. Contact Patti Mason ASAP at 406-752-4220 for information and if you wish to place an order.



Serviceberry

Funding for streambank restoration

The Natural Resources Conservation Service is accepting Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) applications through June 1. EQIP funding provides assistance to landowners to restore stream banks and wildlife habitat. For information contact Angel Rosario at 406-752-4242, ext.3.

Events

River to Lake Initiative meeting

The next River to Lake quarterly partner meeting is tentatively scheduled for Wednesday, June 15 from 9:00 to 12:00 at the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks office. For more information contact Constanza von der Pahlen at 406-883-1341 or criticallands@flatheadlakers.org.

Montana Wetland Council & Watershed Coordination Council Awards Ceremony

The Montana Wetland Council and Montana Watershed Coordination Council will hold their biannual awards ceremony on Thursday, May 26 at the State Capitol in Helena, from 9:00 to noon, followed by a luncheon celebration and council meeting. For more information contact Lynda Saul at 406-444-6652 or lsaul@mt.gov.

Reports

Ninepipe wetland restoration projects completed

Ducks Unlimited and FWP restored over 120 acres of wetlands in the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area

with funding secured by River to Lake partners from a “Glaciated Valleys of Northwest Montana” North American Wetlands Conservation Act grant. Ninepipe WMA is part of a wildlife habitat complex of over 4,000 acres including tribal, federal, and state lands south of Flathead Lake. The wetlands complex, the largest in the management area, is already providing significant habitat for numerous breeding and migrating wetland dependent species. The restored wetlands were used by an unusually high number and diversity of shorebirds during fall migration. Above average precipitation supplemented by irrigation filled the restored wetlands and hundreds of nearby glacial potholes.

Waterfowl spring migration surveys

Biologists with FWP and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service along with excellent birders from Flathead Audubon are out every week this spring counting migratory waterfowl in the Smith and Flathead Valleys. The three year survey will provide an estimate of the numbers of migratory birds, primarily waterfowl, which come through this part of the Flathead Basin. “We think of the Flathead and Mission Valleys as our version of Freezeout Lake”, said Jim Williams, FWP Wildlife Manager. We may not get 150,000 snow geese in one day, but we do see hundreds, if not thousands of swans, geese, dabbling and diving ducks, grebes, and other species a week come through our valleys’ wetlands as soon as the ice and snow melt, from mid-March through early May.” Although birders and biologists have been out viewing migratory birds in the spring for many years, no one has attempted to quantify the numbers, by species, and when they are present. The ground surveys will be supplemented by at least two aerial surveys.

“There are three major reasons we are doing this,” said Gael Bissell, FWP Wildlife Biologist. First, we want to estimate the number of days migratory waterfowl use the Flathead/Smith Valleys in spring so we can develop a bioenergetics model. We want to



Northern pintail by Mark Lasnek

find out how important these fields and wetlands are to these birds that need to stop and refuel on their way to breed up north. Secondly, we want to identify habitats important to migratory birds. And third, we want to identify important areas for conservation.”

The surveys are based on randomly selected routes that encompass lands from Flathead Lake to Columbia Falls and Whitefish west to Idaho Hill. These routes are run simultaneously one day a week. According to John Vore, FWP Wildlife Biologist for the Flathead, Smith, and Swan Valleys, “Last year was relatively dry with fewer birds staying in the valley.” Even so, volunteers counted about 45,000 migratory birds just on the survey days representing 25 species just on the survey days. “This is a much wetter and cooler spring than last year,” noted John. “The ground is saturated and we are thrilled that valley wetlands are being refilled and that there are temporary wetlands everywhere, making the valleys highly suitable for migratory birds.” It’s too early to tell if this year will be better than last year, says John, so stay tuned.

Please send news and information that you would like to share via the River to Lake E-News to criticallands@flatheadlakers.org. If your information or request is time sensitive, you can request that we send an "Action Alert" e-mail.

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