

Americas

The Madison Valley Important Bird Area Project

Location	Madison River Valley, Montana, USA
Rio Tinto company	Rio Tinto Minerals (RTM) Montana operations
Partner organisations	Montana Audubon, Madison Valley Ranchlands Group (MVRG)
Key people	Jeff Marks (Montana Audubon); Stephanie Rost and Rich Zazenski (RTM Montana); Lane Adamson (MVRG)
Habitats	Riparian cottonwood forests
Birds	Common Loon, Bald Eagle, Red-naped Sapsucker, Willow Flycatcher, Veery
Outcomes	IBA survey, identification, designation and protection

Montana Audubon, Rio Tinto Minerals America and the Madison Valley Ranchlands Group collaborated to survey and highlight the importance of the riparian forests of the Madison Valley as a site of bird conservation importance in the state. The result was a successful bid to recognise the site as a one of Montana's IBAs, with Madison Valley IBA being accepted by the state Technical Committee.



Red-naped Sapsucker

Project background and history

This collaborative research and consultation venture assessed riparian and lake habitats in the Madison Valley within the context of Montana Audubon's IBA programme.

Three separate stakeholders engaged in the project, with a focus on mutually held objectives of biodiversity conservation in southern Montana: Montana Audubon; Madison Valley Ranchlands Group; and Rio Tinto Minerals. Montana Audubon's primary mission, as the state affiliate of the National Audubon Society (the BirdLife Partner in the USA), is to conserve birds and their habitats. To this end the group administers the Montana IBA programme, part of a national and global effort to identify, monitor and conserve a worldwide network of priority sites for bird conservation. The Madison Valley Ranchlands Group works to maintain ranching as a viable way of life in the valley and seeks to ensure that traditional management recognises the importance of birds and wildlife. Rio Tinto Minerals (Luzenac America), a Rio Tinto subsidiary, operates the Yellowstone Talc Mine in Montana's Madison Valley and processes talc at several mills in the state. The company is interested in developing collaborative local partnerships for the conservation of biodiversity in ways that have wider benefits for the local communities within the valley.

Many bird species of conservation importance are found in the priority habitat of riparian cottonwood-box osier-willow woodland. The key bird species found include Bald Eagle, Willow Flycatcher and Veery. Ennis Lake, which is also included within the survey area, supports migratory waterfowl and is of particular importance for Common Loons during the autumn migration. Surveys were required to assess the status of tracts of riparian habitat in Madison Valley as potential IBAs for inclusion in the state programme. To undertake these surveys, analyse the data and implement the findings, a two-phase project was created, co-funded by Rio Tinto Minerals and the Rio Tinto-BirdLife International Programme.

Project details

Phase I (2003–2004): Avian inventory of riparian tracts

Dr Jeff Marks, Director of Bird Conservation for Montana Audubon at the time, managed two field seasons of bird surveys conducted by Avian Inventory and Monitoring teams. The teams were assisted by the local Sacajawea Audubon chapter, and used aerial photography, maps and GIS-aided field survey techniques to complete the two seasons of fieldwork.

Madison Valley was the first site to be nominated under Montana's IBA programme that focused on private lands. Crucial liaison with local ranchers and other private landowners required for land access was facilitated by the Madison Valley Ranchlands Group. Further data, access rights and survey help were provided by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, the Montana Outdoor Science School and the US Forest Service.



Common Loon with young

An impressive 145 species of birds were recorded during surveys. Significant among these were five pairs of Bald Eagle nesting in the riparian zone, at least three pairs of Ferruginous Hawk nesting on the uplands above the river, and at least three pairs of Sprague's Pipit (Vulnerable) on prairie flats immediately adjacent to the river.

Phase II (2005): IBA identification

With the surveys completed, the project entered Phase II, where the survey data were assessed to determine if Madison Valley qualified as a state IBA. Sacajawea Audubon and the Ranchlands Group, with the help of Montana Audubon, submitted a formal application to the Montana IBA technical committee seeking recognition of Madison Valley IBA. The submission was successful and the IBA was formally recognised as a state IBA.

"Without question, the study area provides important breeding habitat for several species of conservation concern in Montana such as Bald Eagle, Red-naped Sapsucker, and Willow Flycatcher" said Jeff Marks "as well as critical stopover habitat for Common Loons during spring and fall migration. The data we have gathered, which was made possible by excellent cooperation of the stakeholders, resulted in a very strong nomination package in support of formally recognising the Madison Valley as an Important Bird Area."

The future

Since the area was recognised as an Important Bird Area, Rio Tinto Minerals and the Madison Valley Ranchlands Group have held discussions on how to progress with the development of a community-based management plan for the IBA, engaging with a variety of landowners and other users of the river. The Rio Tinto-BirdLife International Programme will be on hand to facilitate this in due course.



Organising the Loon Count at Ennis Lake