

OPEN SPACE ADVISORY COMMITTEE
ABBREVIATED MINUTES

Oct 13, 2011
3:30 – 6:00 pm

Present:	Bob Clark	Ethel MacDonald	Absent:
	Tim Aldrich	Maureen Bookwalter	Mary Manning
	Bert Lindler	Gary Knudsen	Jenny Tollefson
	Jeff Stevens	Beth Hann, Park Brd Rep	Adam Liljebblad
	Jed Little		

Also Present: Jackie Corday, Open Space Program Mgr, Pelah Hoyt (FVLT), Jim Brown (Five Valleys Audubon), & Kristi Dubois (FWP)

Lemm Property in the Grass Valley Area – FVLT Fieldtrip

Pelah Hoyt from Five Valleys Land Trust led us on a tour of the 155 acre property beginning at the western edge of the long rectangular parcel off Deschamps Road just north of the Mastel farm. The property consists of rolling clay hills, huge "ripples" on the land formed from Lake Missoula draining numerous times over the centuries. The southern border of the property is the edge of the clay hills as they roll up from the flat farmland of Grass Valley. The property has many woody draws, one of which connects to LaValle Creek that runs along a portion of the property's SE border.



FVLT has been interested in seeing this parcel preserved for several years now due to its direct ecological connection to the various habitat types on the adjacent Mastel Farm, which itself has been the subject of many years of work to preserve through conservation easement (not achieved yet).

The following is a photo showing the connection to the Mastel Farm (the green fields to the right):



In 1999, the current owner received approval from the County to subdivide the property into approximately 30 five-acre lots. The development never occurred and now the plat has expired. The property has been listed for sale for several years for \$2,000,000. The broker has indicated to Pelah that the owner is interested in receiving a reasonable offer.

Jim Brown from the Five Valleys Audubon provided the following information during the fieldtrip:

The Lemm property is a unique place in the Missoula Valley due to the vegetation and wildlife found here. The rolling clay hills formed from rock flour deposited in Glacial Lake Missoula support a native grassland dissected by brushy draws. From the property the scenic view of the Missoula Valley where Glacial Lake Missoula can be visualized is impressive. This area was long known to Salish people for its abundance of bitterroots and today is still considered to have ancient traditional importance. Bitterroot remains abundant in the grassland along with several species of native grasses and scattered gray and green rabbitbrush. The woody draws are primarily comprised of Douglas hawthorn, chokecherry, serviceberry and snowberry.

The combination of woody draws and native grassland provides important habitat for birds and other wildlife. The area is especially significant for raptors and several species of neotropical songbirds. Raptors occurring regularly include Red-tailed Hawk, Swainson's Hawk, American Kestrel, Northern Harrier, Rough-legged Hawk, Long-eared Owl and Great Horned Owl. Voles dependent on grasslands are a major food source that attracts raptors to the area. The brushy draws provide roosting and nesting cover for some species.

A keystone species for the area is the Long-eared Owl, which breeds and winters on the property often in substantial numbers. Denver Holt with the Ninepipe Owl Research Institute has conducted research here on these owls for the past 25 or more years, which is the longest continuous study of Long-eared Owls anywhere in the world. His educational field trips conducted here have enlightened many people about the lives of owls. More Long-eared Owls are consistently found

on the Missoula Christmas Bird Count than on any of the approximately 2,000 counts conducted throughout the United States as part of the National Audubon Society (NAS) Christmas Bird Count Program.

Another raptor of considerable significance that has nested on the Lemm property and forages here regularly is the Swainson's Hawk, which is a NAS Watchlist species. This grassland dependent species maintains a small population in the greater Missoula Valley. This is notable because few Swainson's Hawks are known to nest west of the continental divide. The Short-eared Owl, another grassland species on the NAS Watchlist has nested on this property but does not occur regularly.

Songbirds known to nest on the Lemm property according to breeding bird surveys conducted by the Five Valleys Audubon Society over the past 8 years include Vesper Sparrow and Western Meadowlark in the grasslands. The woody draws support significant numbers of Lazuli Bunting, Clay-colored Sparrow, Yellow Warbler and Spotted Towhee. Other species occurring regularly include Dusky Flycatcher, Warbling Vireo and Bullock's Oriole. Mammals found here include cottontail rabbit, porcupine, red fox, badger, and white-tailed deer.

Because of the important wildlife values recreational use of the area would need to be managed in a way to avoid disturbance that would significantly diminish the wildlife values. Providing designated hiking areas and trails that avoid the draws would probably accomplish this. Restraining pet use on the area would be advisable. Perhaps the most difficult disturbance to avoid would be to foraging raptors.

Kristi DuBois of FWP also gave a presentation during the fieldtrip and provided this information:

The Lemm property is primarily native grassland with several large woody draws running through it. The native grasslands are dominated by bluebunch wheatgrass, prairie junegrass, probably with some rough fescue, indicating that they have never been plowed. Native grasslands are extremely difficult to restore, once they've been plowed and planted to crops or exotic grasses.

Grasslands like those found on the Lemm property once covered much of the Missoula Valley. These, along with other grasslands in northwestern Montana are considered by some to be "islands" of Palouse prairie, which is primarily found in Washington and Idaho. Other authorities classify our grassland valleys as Northern Rocky Mountain Foothill grasslands, rather than Palouse prairie.

Native grassland habitats are considered highly endangered habitats. Only about 1% of Palouse prairie is left in Washington & Idaho. Grasslands of the Great Plains have mostly been plowed and converted to croplands. In eastern Montana, native grassland loss by county ranges from 50-95%. No statistics available for foothill grasslands of the Northern Rockies, but these have been heavily impacted and degraded by subdivisions, weeds, and other developments.

Grasslands on the Lemm property are in good condition with relatively few weeds, compared to rest of Missoula valley. Grassland patches like this one that are in good condition can serve as important reservoirs for native plant restoration.

The "woody draws" on the property are dominated by hawthorn and other native shrub species. Functionally they are a type of riparian habitat, even though they don't have running water. The combination of the native grasslands next to these woody draws makes the area especially valuable for wildlife. Studies in eastern Montana found that in many cases, woody draws supported the highest density of breeding songbirds, even higher than many cottonwood riparian habitats. They provide the nesting and roosting habitat for raptors that forage in grasslands.

Native grasslands in Missoula Valley support one of only two identified Swainson's hawk nesting populations in FWP Region 2 (the other is in the Deer Lodge area). Although common in eastern Montana, Swainson's hawks are quite rare in western Montana. The Lemm property is an important winter roost site and nesting area for long-eared owls. Both these species need woody draws for nesting and native grasslands or hayfields for foraging. Both species tend to eat a lot of voles (short-tailed mice that live in thick grassy cover).

The Lemm property is bordered by open grasslands on the airport property to the east, and other native grasslands to the west. The grassland area to the north of the property is being developed, and will eventually be lost. The Lemm property

is an important piece for connectivity of the grasslands in this area. It is adjacent to several agricultural properties identified as high priority for protection as open space. The woody draws, in combination with LaValle Creek riparian habitats provide cover for movement and connectivity across the Missoula Valley for larger species of wildlife, such as white-tailed deer and black bear.

The grasslands of the Missoula valley formerly supported long-billed curlews. As the grasslands disappear, the remaining grassland birds will disappear. Only a few of the smaller bird species that can live on small, fragmented patches will remain if the remaining native grasslands continue to be developed.

The Lemm property is within the Clark Fork/Grass Valley Important Bird Area, designated by Montana Audubon and the National Audubon Society. This designation has no regulatory authority, but was done to raise awareness of its importance to sustaining viable populations of birds.

The Lemm property is also within the Bitterroot/Frenchtown Valley Terrestrial Focus Area identified in the FWP Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CFWCS) developed in 2005. Native grasslands and riparian & wetland habitats were identified as high priority for conservation efforts across Montana and in this focus area.

Managing the area for hiking on the west side, and limiting access to research activities on the east side would be a good strategy for protecting the high wildlife values, while avoiding disturbance of nesting and winter roosting areas for long-eared owls and other species.



The meeting adjourned at 6:00 pm with the next meeting date scheduled for 4:00–5:30pm on November 10th at Currents.