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[www.flatheadaudubon.org](http://www.flatheadaudubon.org)

January 19, 2018

Fred Bicha, Superintendent  
Lisa Simmer, Administrative Specialist  
Kalispell Parks and Recreation Department  
306 First Avenue East  
Kalispell, MT 59901

Hi Fred and Lisa,

We greatly appreciate your inviting Denny Olson, Flathead Audubon Society's Conservation/Education contractor, to your meeting about a possible National Fish & Wildlife Foundation grant that Kalispell City Parks and Recreation might apply for to enhance trails and conservation/education at Lawrence Park. Denny shared a summary of the meeting with the Flathead Audubon board and we have had quite a discussion over merits and potential issues. Below is a summary of our thoughts and concerns at this time. Flathead Audubon would like to be a part of the City's Lawrence Park future planning processes, but we cannot partner on this specific upcoming grant opportunity to develop trails or other activities for the reasons we outline below.

#### **Wildlife and Wildlife Habitat Considerations**

Many members of our board and organization were part of the original "Friends of Lawrence Park" and participated in the collaborative efforts to plan, develop, and protect Lawrence Park, including its 55 acres of unique habitats along the Stillwater River and backwater sloughs. At that time, the community valued not only the recreation potential, but also the values of the wetlands, floodplain, and cottonwood/steep slopes habitat in Lawrence Park.

Today, Lawrence Park houses one of the best examples of riverine and associated wetland habitats that are relatively viewable and accessible in the Kalispell Area. Flathead Audubon and City of Kalispell have coordinated many birding trips to Lawrence Park over the last 30 years. The bird diversity and abundance in Lawrence Park is rather outstanding due to the quality and abundance of habitats; these breeding and migratory birds all depend on healthy ecosystems. The wetlands and floodplain also protect Kalispell from large flooding events and are a good example to the public of the value of these places to protecting infrastructure and maintaining high water quality. There are a variety of native (and also non-native) plants that are useful for education. Many wildlife species also travel and depend on the Stillwater River and nearby wetlands and tributaries for cover and food. This is particularly true for wide ranging species such as river otter, mountain lion, bobcat, moose, white-tailed deer, bald eagles, and great blue herons. Lawrence Park also provides year-round habitat for mammals such as bobcat, red fox, raccoon, muskrat, mink, and white-tailed deer; cavity nesting birds such as pileated, downy and hairy woodpeckers along with black-capped chickadees; and other small birds such as song sparrows and brown creepers.

#### **Conservation/Education/Trail Considerations**

Flathead Audubon Society's mission is to: *conserve birds, wildlife habitat and ecosystem diversity; promote awareness and appreciation of the natural world through education and advocacy; work with diverse groups and agencies to achieve sound decisions on natural resource issues; provide community services such as school programs, work projects, and field trips.*



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To those ends, we clearly support expanding conservation/educational opportunities in appropriate locations as long as those activities do not significantly impact the habitats that support birds and other wildlife species. This can be a difficult balance at times and in certain places. We currently co-manage the 442-acre Owen Sowerwine Natural Area with Montana Audubon and have worked for over 20 years with Montana DNRC to develop and implement a public management plan that emphasizes conservation/education and outdoor recreation and minimizes impacts to wildlife that use that area. We think our experience with developing a trail system, addressing noxious weeds, illegal uses, and other similar issues on public lands, similar to those issues affecting Lawrence Park, might be of value in your addressing these issues and considering any new public uses in Lawrence Park.

### **Recommendation**

We encourage Kalispell Parks and Recreation to use this National Fish & Wildlife Foundation's potential grant opportunity to simply initiate collaborations with the local Lawrence Park neighbors, Flathead Audubon, and many other local interested organizations and citizens to first update the current Lawrence Park management plan with the idea of considering new conservation/educational opportunities along with meeting other critical park needs. Kalispell City Parks and Recreation should first complete thorough public vetting of current Park needs such as the removing/reducing/enforcing illegal users and uses of the property and securing, restoring, and ensuring habitat protection prior to adding or developing any trails or wildlife observation sites/activities. The area is so fragile and already degraded by social trails, inconsistent uses, and invasive species that any additional development could significantly impact remaining habitat and wildlife values. The worst case scenario is having the Kalispell City Parks and Recreation begin implementing infrastructure or other management strategies that might irreparably impact these unique valuable habitat resources and potentially preclude future well designed and thoughtful conservation/educational uses of this incredible park without proper planning and public input.

We greatly appreciate the opportunity that you provided us to learn about your thoughts on the future of Lawrence Park and we would like to continue to provide useful input into whatever future planning/discussions/meetings occur. Thank you.

Kay Mitchell, President  
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