FIRE ECOLOGY

FOLLOW THAT BLAZE

SOME PEOPLE FIGHT FIRES. OTHERS, LIKE Paul Belanger, state education coordinator for Montana Audubon, prefer scouring a burned area of the Bitterroot National Forest for birds. He’s not alone. This past summer Belanger led a team of nine citizen scientists that included local residents, high school students, and chapter members from Five Valleys Audubon and Bitterroot Audubon. Their mission: to count the black-backed woodpeckers, three-toed woodpeckers, and other cavity-nesting birds they were able to find in the charred hollows of trees in a recently proposed Important Bird Area (IBA).

“Early postfire habitat supports unique bird communities, and we’re interested in maintaining that biodiversity,” says David Lockman, a U.S. Forest Service biologist in the Bitterroot National Forest. In 2001 he nominated 10,000 blazed acres for IBA status; the area was part of 350,000 acres that had burned in the forest the previous year. (Today Montana Audubon is working toward nominating the entire Bitterroot forest as an IBA.) Pioneered by Montana Audubon and state officials, the potential IBA now serves as a conceptual model for a new class of IBAs known as “ephemeral” because the designation lasts only as long as the nesting birds rely on the burned habitat.

Although IBA status carries no regulatory standing, it is an effective way to protect threatened or endangered birds by formally drawing attention to critical habitat.

The groundwork for ephemeral IBAs was laid more than a decade ago when University of Montana biologist Dick Hutto began looking at bird communities in burned forests and found a surprising diversity of species, including many targeted for conservation. “We’re hard-pressed to find black-backed woodpeckers anywhere but in burned areas,” Hutto says.

Like black-backed woodpeckers, however, logging companies value the timber left standing after a fire. Belanger and his group of citizen scientists are determined to show that a burned forest is suitable for more than just salvage logging.

“We need to change the perception people have of fire and postfire habitat,” says Belanger. “We want to be sensitive to those who have been affected by fire, but we have to show this [fire] is what keeps a forest healthy.”

—Ken Kostel