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Montana Audubon Wins Two National Innovation Grants For Environmental Projects

*Funds Support Efforts to Engage Billings-area and Western Montana's
Rural Residents in Conservation*

Two of 48 newly-announced *TogetherGreen* national innovation grants will enable Montana Audubon to launch environmental stewardship projects in the Billings area and rural western Montana.

A \$26,482 grant will engage fourth and fifth graders, high school students, and adults from Billings to study, explore and improve the health of the Yellowstone River. Grant-supported activities include monthly hands-on science activities in Billings-area classrooms and schoolyards, field trips to gather data at the Audubon Conservation Education Center (ACEC), student and community workdays, a mentoring program, and a summer Naturalist-in-Training program for teens. The goal of the Billings project is to develop a team of naturalists who will lead efforts to reduce water pollution and restore wildlife habitat along the Yellowstone River.

Healthy wetlands and riparian areas in Billings will improve water quality, recharge wells, provide flood control, enrich open space, increase real property values, enhance fish and wildlife habitat, and improve recreational opportunities.

The future of Montana's two most important ecosystems, the sage-steppe and the cottonwood-willow riparian habitat, are threatened by a variety of land use activities such as overgrazing and subdivision development. By working with interested ranchers Montana Audubon hopes to pave the way to protect wildlife – and help create a healthy economy.

“The Audubon Innovation Grant is a great opportunity to engage students, the community and landowners to develop effective strategies that restore wildlife habitat and improve water quality in the Yellowstone River Basin,” said Paul Belanger, ACEC Director. “At the ACEC, students will study Yellowstone River ecology, sources of pollution, and strategies to reduce the impacts of water pollution. Our work with landowners combined with the work accomplished by students and the community will help restore healthy wildlife habitat and improve water quality.”

“Our students have excelled in the programs provided at the Audubon Conservation Education Center. This partnership with Audubon is so exciting because now our students will be able to close the loop of adaptive management by applying new knowledge to implementing conservation/restoration activities. This type of real world experience is invaluable to our students, stated John Miller, Billings West High School Environmental Science Teacher.

“We are so excited to partner with Audubon to offer Billings-area youth and families with a vast array of outdoor, nature-based learning and stewardship opportunities,” said Earl Guss, President, Yellowstone River Parks Association.

A \$5,000 planning grant will allow Montana Audubon to partner with the Western Sustainability Exchange to lay the groundwork for launching a pilot project with ranchers focused on creating financial market incentives to encourage outstanding stewardship of their land to benefit birds and all wildlife. This pilot project will identify critical areas in western Montana in need of sustained environmental stewardship, and determine how best to monitor the effects of improved ranching practices on habitat quality. Then Montana Audubon and the Western Sustainability Exchange will work with ranchers to help them find reliable markets for their “sustainably-produced” Montana beef, and help them enter into agreements with buyers to pay a premium for their beef.

The Montana innovation grants are part of \$1.1 million awarded by the *TogetherGreen* initiative this year. Audubon and Toyota launched the five-year *TogetherGreen* initiative in 2008 to fund conservation projects, train environmental leaders, and offer volunteer opportunities that significantly benefit the environment. Grantees were selected from scores of applicants across America. Funds were awarded to Audubon organizations that demonstrated exceptional innovation in working with other groups on projects that will produce tangible benefits for the environment.

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About *TogetherGreen*

Audubon and Toyota launched the five-year *TogetherGreen* initiative in 2008 to build the promise of a greener, healthier future through innovation, leadership and volunteerism. Nearly 90 projects totaling more than \$2.5 million dollars have received Innovation Grants to protect land, water, and energy resources nationwide. For more information, visit www.togethergreen.org.

About Audubon

Now in its second century, Audubon connects people with birds, nature and the environment that supports us all. Our national network of community-based nature centers, chapters, scientific, education, and advocacy programs engages millions of people from all walks of life in conservation action to protect and restore the natural world. To learn about Audubon’s nationwide efforts to conserve and restore natural ecosystems, visit www.audubon.org

About Toyota

Toyota (NYSE: TM) established operations in the United States in 1957 and currently operates 10 manufacturing plants. Toyota is committed to being a good corporate citizen in the communities where it does business and believes in supporting programs with long-term, sustainable results. Toyota supports numerous organizations across the country, focusing on education, the environment and safety. Since 1991, Toyota has contributed more than \$464 million to philanthropic programs in the U.S. For more information on Toyota's commitment to improving communities nationwide, visit www.toyota.com/community.