

# **Montana Audubon's Nature Play Area Funding Proposal**

*(March 13, 2015)*

## **Montana Audubon's Mission**

Our mission is to promote appreciation, knowledge and conservation of Montana's native birds, other wildlife, and natural ecosystems to safeguard biological diversity for current and future generations. Founded in 1976, Montana Audubon has built effective programs in public policy, education, and bird conservation to serve its members, Montana's nine community-based Audubon Chapters, and all of Montana's citizens and visitors who appreciate the state's scenic beauty and rich wildlife heritage.

## **Montana Audubon Center**

The purpose of the Montana Audubon Center, located in Billings, MT, is to connect people with nature, with an emphasis on underserved youth and families. The Audubon Center functions as an outdoor classroom/field science lab for students, and as an exciting place for exploration, education and recreation for the community. Our goal is to develop long-term relationships and make the Center an integral and permanent part of the fabric of the Billings' community. We strive to provide students with safe, educational outdoor learning experiences so they will grow into healthy, responsible citizens who are engaged in their local communities, and with nature.

## **Overview of Project**

The Montana Audubon Center is seeking funds to create Montana's first public, ADA-accessible Nature Play Area. A Nature Play Area provides a space where children can play outside and connect with nature in a safe, unstructured manner. By creating such a place in our community we hope to enrich the lives of untold numbers of children, benefiting their childhoods and futures in ways yet undiscovered. Nature Play improves every child's physical and emotional health, and complements important mental and social development stepping stones.

Nature Play Areas are designed to help bring youth back to nature; they are outdoor play spaces made of natural components such as logs, water, sand, mud boulders, hills and trees. These components represent the larger wild environment in a way that feels safe and manageable for young visitors. A few man-made components are carefully integrated to support creative play, encourage confident exploration, and help children develop a long-lasting affinity for the natural world.

The Audubon Center's new Nature Play Area will represent and mimic the natural components that are found throughout the Yellowstone River Valley. It will be free and open to the public. The Audubon Center also provides additional open space, free and accessible to the public, within rapidly expanding urban communities in close proximity to Billings' low-income south-side district. Parks and open space within urban areas improve everyone's physical and psychological health, strengthen our communities, and make neighborhoods more attractive places to live and work. Natural areas make urban neighborhoods more livable; they offer recreational opportunities for at-risk youth, low-

income children and families; and they provide special places in low-income neighborhoods that nurture a sense of community. Today's children are bombarded with electronic media, full schedules, and highly structured lives; an outdoor, natural play space will give them a place to take a break, have fun, and experience being kids. It can be a place of solace, imagination, creativity, mud pies, forts and fun!

### **The Design and Construction**

The Nature Play Area has been designed with extensive stakeholder and partner involvement, including local community members, parents, teachers and funders. In August 2014 a focus group met to brainstorm ideas for the project. The focus group included staff, volunteers, neighbors, parents and child participants of the Audubon Center. The first draft of the Nature Play Area design was created by Peaks to Plains (see attached design). The design was displayed at our fundraising event, *Evening Under the Big Sky*, in September 2014, and feedback was solicited from attendees. This draft design was reviewed by the original focus group for suggested changes (see attached photos). Suggestions and changes were then integrated into the final design.

Construction of the Nature Play Area will begin as soon as the snow melts. The one-acre plot will be prepared for construction of the play area elements. This will require earth-moving, excavation, relocation of trees and shrubs, and deposit of trail materials such as sand and gravel. This task will be done by Good Earth Works and our partner, Yellowstone River Parks Association.

After the site has been prepared, the Nature Play Area elements will be constructed by volunteers at our Earth Day Celebration, April 18, 2015. This event has averaged 150 volunteers for the past 6 years we have had the event. Any elements not completed on that day will be completed shortly thereafter by other volunteers, including businesses and student building clubs. We hope to have a ribbon-cutting event in mid-May to promote this new community resource.

***We must raise a total of \$62,000 to complete the project.*** As of 3/13/2015, we have secured \$43,000. We hope that you will consider supporting this project.