

GRASSLAND TODAY

The Grassland Wetlands Newsletter

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Poor Hatch, Lack of Birds Make for Empty Skies

Waterfowl hunters anticipated the late Oct. 30 opening day with visions of ducks filling the sky over the Grasslands Ecological Area. However, there were very few birds to see.

Ponds that had been brim full of northern pintail in September and most of October were generally void of the beautiful, sleek-appearing ducks by opening weekend. Reports from clubs revealed a mixed opener and through the first month of the season, things haven't changed.

"Pintail generally leave the Grasslands about the same time each year," said biologist Greg Gerstenberg of the California Department of Fish and Game, who has worked in Merced County the past 16 years. "We thought their departure was due to heavy hunting pressure. However, that's not the case this year as departure occurred prior to the opener.

"It's not a closed zone issue either," he continued. "The pintail just left."

Following a pair of heavy rains and accompanying wind, pintail departed en masse about 10 days before the season began.

Instead of looking up and seeing a sky full of birds, hunters had to search far and wide to see any ducks. What they shot were mainly green-winged teal and shoveler, but those populations quickly disbursed to areas where they were not being disturbed.

On opening day, Gerstenberg collected wings of four most-common species of ducks—pintail, shoveler, mallard, and green-winged teal—to determine the ratio of young-to-old birds. It's a study that has been carried on by Gerstenberg and his predecessor, John Beam, for 21 years. Wings were collected from seven private clubs in the north and south Grasslands and from five public areas. Results of the age survey of this year's wings are not promising. The opening weekend wing survey is, in part, correlated to the age

structure of the population. Wing surveys generally show the trends of species production and season-long harvest does not always correspond to the opening weekend age ratio.

The ratio of young to adult green-winged teal was just 1.3 to 1, the lowest in the 21-year history of the survey. The average is usually 3.7 young to old among the greenwings.

"I suspect if this ratio holds true we will have a reduced harvest in green-winged teal this season," Gerstenberg said. "Production in this species appears to have been very low."

The production of shoveler appears to be a little below average, but according to the wing samples, about the same as the last two years. Gerstenberg found the ratio to be 1.6 young to 1 adult. The average over the past 21 years is about 2.0 per adult.

"Even though production seems to be less than average, I believe shoveler production has improved over that of a few years ago," he said.

Assessing pintail is much more difficult because of the small wing sampling. Over the years Gerstenberg has sampled an average of 407 wings. This year he could analyze only 70 wings.

"There were no pintail here," he said. "I had such a small sample size, there were not enough wings to know for sure."

Among mallard, Gerstenberg found 7.2 young to adult. The average is about

6.6 young to adult, while in 2003, the ratio was about 8-to-1.

California mallards had a near-average production year, but lower breeding populations do not result in a significant increase in mallards.

New Landowner Program Aims to Boost Wildlife

California's Central Valley is not only world renowned for its agriculture, it is considered a wildlife mecca. Private landowners are key to the survival of species in the Central Valley, and a new program offers incentives for managing their lands with wildlife in mind.

The California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) has partnered with Ducks Unlimited to launch the California Landowner Incentive Program (LIP), a U.S. Fish and Wildlife initiative that awards grants to pay for land management activities designed to benefit California's declining plant and animal species.

"The Central Valley's very distinct and historic habitats remain crucial to hundreds of species of birds and other sensitive species that depend on wetland, native grassland, and riparian habitats," said Luke Naylor, LIP coordinator.

Participating private landowners will receive annual incentive payments in return for implementing management

(Continued, page 6)

Pacific Flyway is a Top Ducks Unlimited Priority

Ducks Unlimited has five top priorities for North America. No fewer than three of these "highest level" thrusts are aimed squarely at the Pacific Flyway—California's Central Valley, Canada's Prairie Pothole Region of eastern Alberta and western Saskatchewan, and the Western Boreal Forest of Alberta.

These are the key locations critical to sustainable duck and goose populations that migrate along the Pacific Flyway. Annually, more than 10 to 12 million birds follow this historic migration route into California and DU works with farmers, First Nation Tribes, and all levels of government in Canada and the United States to protect wetland habitat.

Grassland Today

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The Grassland Water District and the Grassland Resource Conservation District are dedicated to providing water and habitat protection for waterfowl, shorebirds, plants and other wildlife and in promoting associated educational and recreational opportunities.

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Oldest hunter on the marsh — Going strong at 92 years old, its none other than Gar Marsh, who bagged five ducks on opening day at the Salinas Club. Photo by Joe Fass.

GWD teams up with CWA, DU and NAWCA

During the 2004 construction season, Grassland Water District made major progress in improving drainage flows and wetland habitat, working jointly with Ducks Unlimited and California Waterfowl Association.

The Mud Slough Project, managed by Ducks Unlimited, located in the heart of the North Grassland and directly affecting over 2,600 acres of privately owned wetlands, began this past summer and much of the earth-moving activities have been completed. Portions of the slough that had been channelized in the past have been restored to natural conditions and sediment and associated emergent vegetation have been removed in the natural portions of the slough between Gun Club Road and the Kesterson Ditch. All that remains for restoration completion is the installation of a quality access bridge over Mud Slough for the Coast Cattle Club and improving the siphon under the Kesterson Ditch to allow the upper watershed of the Mud Slough system to flow more efficiently. Ducks Unlimited received funding for the Mud Slough Project as part of the Grassland Ecological Area III grant through the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, with non-Federal match funds coming from the California Department of Fish and Game, Grassland Water

District, Wildlife Conservation Board, and Ducks Unlimited.

California Waterfowl Association, working closely with GWD, completed the Los Banos Creek Project. The project consisted of cleaning a section of the Creek to allow for improved water delivery and drainage flows. The project site began at Gun Club Road and continued north to the start of Lone Tree Land and Cattle Duck Club. The work completed was the last phase in what amounted to almost 7 years of work on Los Banos Creek. "The Los Banos Creek drainage system is key to North Grassland; the effects of this project are felt over a wide geographic area," commented Scott Lower from GWD. In fact, 6,976 acres of prime wetland habitat drain into this system. Funding for the North San Joaquin Valley grant was also NAWCA, with non-federal match from California Dept. of Fish and Game, Wildlife Conservation Board, and Grassland Water District.

The Grassland Water District has agreed to take on long-term maintenance of both the Los Banos Creek and Mud Slough projects to ensure that landowners within both watersheds can adequately manage their seasonal wetlands for wildlife with decreasing flood damage during flood events. For more information, call Rich Wright, (209) 826-5188.

President Signs \$389 Million Bipartisan CALFED Reauthorization

President Bush has signed HR-2828, bipartisan legislation reauthorizing federal participation in the CALFED Bay-Delta program. The legislation, signed on Oct. 26, allocates \$389 million to the program through 2010 for water supply, water quality, flood control, and environmental restoration efforts.

The reauthorization comes just over eight years since the program received its first authorization in 1996, which expired in 2000. The Association of California Water Agencies, of which the Grassland Water District and Grassland Resource Conservation District are a part, issued a statement applauding the Presidential signing and extending its

thanks to senators Dianne Feinstein (D-California) and Barbara Boxer (D-California); House Resources Committee chairman Richard Pombo (R-Stockton); representatives Ken Calvert (R-Riverside) and Grace Napolitano (D-Santa Fe Springs); and the California Congressional Delegation.

Highlights of the CALFED legislation:

- Requires that if new surface storage projects are not authorized as contemplated under the Record of Decision, limits expenditures for all other programs until the program is rebalanced
- Includes water quality program to

protect and enhance water use by in-Delta water users

- Promotes greater CALFED accountability and congressional oversight
- Authorizes and directs development of new firm yield
- Directs re-operation of New Melones Reservoir and authorizes water acquisition program to benefit New Melones contractors
- Authorizes regional water supply projects for Sacramento Valley, San Joaquin Valley, and other regions of the state
- Promotes local groundwater projects
- Authorizes recycling and water conservation programs

CALFED Bay-Delta Legislation

What it Means to the Grasslands and Refuges South of the Delta

The reauthorization of the state-federal CALFED Bay-Delta legislation, HR-2828, passed by the U.S. Congress and signed by President Bush, has potentially serious implications for the Grassland Water District, Grassland Resource Conservation District, and refuges south of the Delta.

Don Marciochi, general manager of the water and resource conservation districts, believes the legislation is needed and provides something that could lead to a solution for California's water problems. However, he feels that the Grasslands and refuges south of the Delta are "unnecessarily singled out" under water quality provisions of the new law.

"The legislation requires refuges south of the Delta that receive water from the Central Valley Project Improvement Act—including the Grasslands—to implement Best Management Practices to reduce the impact of our discharges on the San Joaquin River," Marciochi said. "It implies that refuges (including Grasslands) are the largest cause of the water quality problems in the river."

This implication is directly opposite to published reports in 2002 by the Regional Water Resources Control Board which determined refuges south of the Delta contributed only about 10 percent of the salt load discharged into the river. The report stated 90 percent

of the salt load was coming from sources other than from refuges.

Marciochi believes refuges and Grasslands can best address the issue of salt discharges, however little they may be, by modifying the timing of when wetlands are drained in the spring.

"To determine our ability to change our draining schedule, we've filed for a grant through the State Water Resources Control Board to carry out a pilot program in conjunction with the California Department of Fish and Game," he said. "Our idea is to monitor the quality of water in areas that follow a normal wetland management regime and compare it to test areas where water will be held until at least April 15."

Between April 15 and May 15 the San Joaquin River has greater capacity to assimilate discharges from wetlands because of additional flows released from upstream reservoirs to aid in the restoration of threatened and endangered fish species. Typically, wetlands are drained from early February through the end of March to propagate moist soil plants.

"With a greater volume of water in the river, the impact of discharges will be lessened," Marciochi said. "That's why we'll study the pros and cons of draining later in the spring. We'll try to do our part to improve water quality in the river."

Refuges and the Grassland districts are already part of the West Side San Joaquin River Watershed Coalition and performing the water monitoring necessary to comply with the Conditional Agriculture Waiver needed to discharge.

"Critical to the pilot program are the biological impacts to vegetation and waterfowl use on ponds where water is held later in the spring," Marciochi said. "Staff from Grasslands and Fish and Game will be monitoring test areas—on private clubs in the north and south Grasslands and on state wildlife areas."

Marciochi thanked both Grassland districts and private landowners who wrote letters supporting the reauthorization of CALFED to the California congressional delegation.

"Collectively we realize both direct and indirect benefits from the implementation of the CALFED program, including more reliable water supplies, funding for local groundwater and water recycling projects, Delta water quality improvements, and funding for new flood control efforts," Marciochi said.

"In addition, the work of the CALFED program will perpetuate the valuable collaborative relationship between state and federal resource agencies," he continued. "This relationship is critical to helping California meet the many water supply and regulatory challenges ahead."



Too few — Local nesting pairs of mallards have declined in the Central Valley the past five years. New research at the University of California, Davis may provide answers to population limiting factors.

Resident Mallards are an Important Resource Research on Breeding Ecology of Mallards

In 2004 Ducks Unlimited and partner organizations initiated a two-year study to investigate the breeding ecology of mallards in the Sacramento Valley and to better understand why their populations have been decreasing the past several years.

The study is being conducted by Shaun Oldenburger, a graduate student of the University of California, Davis, Dr. John Edie of UCD, and Dr. Mark Petrie of Ducks Unlimited. They decided to examine the underlying factors

of population growth as the focus of their research.

Using similar methodology as past studies in prairie Canada and the Great Lakes region, 40 pre-breeding female mallards were radio marked in March and April in Colusa County. After marking, these females were tracked throughout the breeding season to estimate nest site selection, nest success, breeding probability, breeding survival, hen success, and brood survival.

Analysis of this year's data is ongoing, but preliminary results show there are similar nest success estimates (35 percent average) to past studies in California, but low breeding probability (65 percent) and extremely poor brood survival.

In 2005 the study will continue with 60 radio-marked hens, again in Colusa County. Ultimately, the results of this research will shed light on the life cycle of mallards during the breeding season in California, help calculate factors affecting population growth in mallards in the Central Valley, and help guide future management program planning.

Funding for the study is provided by the Central Valley Joint Venture, California Department of Fish and Game, and University of California, Davis, and administered by Ducks Unlimited.

Tree Cutting Planting Info

Landowners who are interested in planting cottonwood and willow cuttings this winter are encouraged to call GWD for instruction information and tree cutting sources. A 2-3-foot live wood cutting should be done during the month of February. Establishing tree lines on clubs can be particularly beneficial in providing buffers around roads and levees. Trees provide waterfowl shade during the early season and thermal protection during the winter months. Contact GWD Biologist Rich Wright for more information, (209) 826-5188.

Grassland Notes

• **A Grand Man** – Carter Harrison of Modesto was honored with a surprise 90th birthday party on Nov. 13 at Coast Cattle Company. Harrison is a former president of Grassland Water District and Grassland Resource Conservation District, and has served the resources in Merced County for a half-century. During the festivities he received a plaque honoring his service from Ducks Unlimited and Grassland Water District.

* * *

• **Water, water, everywhere** – Scott Lower, Assistant General Manager – Field Operations for Grassland Water District, says the October rainfall was a “big help” to the District’s water supply for the remainder of the current water year, which ends on Feb. 28, 2005. But, the rain also generated 8,600 acre-feet of runoff at a time when water was still being delivered to clubs for the waterfowl season opener. In addition, many delivery and drainage ditches were choked with primrose and water hyacinth, which caused some delivery slowdowns and drainage problems that kept the District staff hopping. “Thanks to the determination and dedication of the District staff, all the clubs were full for the opener,” Lower said.

* * *

• **Harvest hotline** – The California Department of Fish and Game has established a 24-hour recorded telephone hotline so hunters can get the latest statistics from state wildlife areas and national wildlife refuges in Merced and Fresno counties: (209) 826-6719.

* * *

• **75th Anniversary** – Los Banos Wildlife Area is 75 years old this year and will celebrate the milestone with a number of special events and tours, as well as the opening of the new site for the Grassland Environmental Education Center. In 1950 Los Banos was the first designated State Wildlife Area in California. Information: (209) 826-0463.

* * *

• **Ducks Unlimited** – The 34th annual DU dinner is Friday, Dec. 3, at the Los Banos Fairgrounds. Cocktails at 5:30 p.m., dinner at 7:00 p.m. Hosted bar, dinner & dessert catered by Espana’s. Tickets: \$55 single; gun tables are \$900 for 10 guests. Tickets available at Grassland Water District, (209) 826-5188.

A New Home for the Grassland Environmental Education Center

For the past nine years, the Grassland Environmental Education Center (GEECe) has been exposing thousands of students to the wonders of the Grassland Wetlands. GEECe, currently located on the property of Liberty Packing on Ingomar Grade in Los Banos, offers hands-on California curriculum standards-based indoor and outdoor activities for students. The program is geared toward fourth through sixth grade students, but all ages have participated over the years.

GEECe's site was formerly owned by Tri-Valley Growers and is currently owned by the Morning Star Company, where it operates its Liberty Packing facility. Both companies have been very gracious and accommodating to provide the location for the education center free of charge. Due to traffic hazards during the tomato season, field trips are limited to the packing plant's off-season, which is usually November through May. Without that time constraint, many more children would have the opportunity to take advantage of GEECe's unique program.

Plans are underway to move GEECe to a new educational marsh and nature trail at the California Department of Fish and Game's (CDFG) Los Banos Wildlife Area during fall 2005. In 2001, CDFG began planning the self-guided interpretive nature trail project, something the Los Banos Wildlife Area was previously lacking. It quickly became obvious that the new nature trail would be the ideal home for GEECe. The nature trail broke ground last summer with the excavation of the pond and construction of the trail. Two observation decks were built in September and new concrete picnic tables, benches, and trash receptacles arrived this fall. The text is being finalized for the interpretive panels that will guide visitors around the trail.

Funding for the restoration and construction of the pond and construction of the trail was provided by Proposition 99 funds (taxes on tobacco products), administered by the Department of Fish and Game's Comprehensive Wetland Program. Interpretive materials, such as the tables, benches, and signs, were furnished by the Wildlife Conservation Board. Logistics, engineering, and contracting were coordinated by Ducks Unlimited. The Grassland Conservation

and Education Fund has funded the design of the new GEECe building and Grassland Water District has provided additional support for the project.

A huge benefit of the new location is that it will allow the education center to host field trips year-round. Additionally, it will put GEECe more in touch with one of the program's primary missions: to depict the significant contributions made by waterfowl hunters toward wetland conservation. The Los Banos Wildlife Area has a long-standing tradition of waterfowl hunting.

The first phase of GEECe's relocation will involve moving the current modular building from its present home at Liberty Packing to the Los Banos Wildlife Area. Funding for development of a new nature trail parking area and other infra-

structure components will be applied for this spring from the Wildlife Conservation Board. The following phase will involve constructing a new state of the art building from the ground up. Jack Sparks, GEECe education coordinator, Grassland Water District, and CDFG have been working on the design of the new building with local Los Banos architect Bob Beharka, one of Frank Lloyd Wright's apprentices. The group plans to use the conceptual drawings to raise interest in potential funders. Tax deductible donations made out to the Grassland Conservation and Education Fund (GCEF) would be gladly accepted. Donations can be mailed to GCEF at 22759 S. Mercey Springs Road, Los Banos, CA 93635. A once distant concept is quickly taking shape.



Ideal home — Plans are underway to open GEECe at the Los Banos Wildlife Area in fall 2005. Nature trails are under construction, observation platforms have been built, and a new pond is in the works, funded by W.C.B. and project managed by Ducks Unlimited.



New Landowner Program Aims to Boost Central Valley Wildlife. . . (continued from page 1)

plans designed to benefit many of the special status species that spend a portion of the year in the Central Valley. Management activities include:

- Flooding wetlands for wetland-dependent species, such as shorebirds and wading birds.
- Native grass management, including noxious weed control.
- Managing riparian plantings to improve restoration success.

The Central Valley is 50 miles wide, spanning 400 miles from Redding to Bakersfield. The area is a bird haven. During spring migration, for example, the Central Valley is inhabited by upwards of 300,000 shorebirds. All of

these species and more rely heavily on the Central Valley's diverse habitats for survival.

Over the last century, however, 96 percent of the Central Valley's wetlands and upland and riparian habitats have been converted to cropland or developed, leading to the decline in many wildlife species. "With the help of landowners, the program's primary objective is to help reverse the decline of 'special status' species throughout the state," Naylor said.

"This program offers a unique opportunity to engage landowners in conservation efforts to enhance habitat for special status species, furthering land-

owners' valuable role as stewards of California's wildlife resources," said DFG Director L. Ryan Broddrick.

Three-Goose Limit

The daily bag for dark geese has increased this season to three. The bag may include not more than one Aleutian or cackling goose.

Aleutians have increased their numbers from a low of a few hundred birds to more than 50,000 today. Reason for the increase is the successful removal of non-native foxes from the Arctic breeding islands of the geese.

Thus, hunters may have one small species of Canada goose in the bag.

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