

# GRASSLAND TODAY

## The Grassland Wetlands Newsletter

Vol. 15, No. 1

[www.grasslandwetlands.com](http://www.grasslandwetlands.com)

January/February 2005

### *Grasslands Designated as a Wetland of Worldwide Importance*

Based on its distinguishing characteristics and its ability to support valued species and key wildlife populations—including more than 1 million migratory birds each winter—the 180,000-acre Grassland Ecological Area of Merced County has been designated a wetland of worldwide importance.

The vast historic complex of wetlands and uplands—the largest that still remains in the Central Valley—received the coveted designation on February 2 under the Ramsar Convention, the only international body dedicated to the worldwide protection of a particular type of ecosystem.

Currently there are 144 member nations working together to coordinate wetland conservation efforts. Because many wetland habitats span international boundaries and are used extensively by species that are migratory, Ramsar countries—including the United States—recognize the importance of supporting wetland management research, education, outreach and training programs.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Department of State are the administrative authorities for the Ramsar Convention in the U.S., where 22 designated sites that cover more than 3 million acres exist. Fish and Wildlife Service director Steve Williams said the Grasslands of Merced County have a rich legacy of value to wildlife, particularly waterfowl.

“This new designation is a tribute to local citizens and their partners who recognized the value of protecting this ecological treasure,” Williams said. “International recognition of the Grasslands raises the visibility of the wetlands and will provide economic benefits to the local community through increased tourism and recreational opportunities.”

The Grassland Ecological Area is composed of national wildlife refuges, state wildlife areas and a state park, with close to 60 percent of its vast acreage



*Foraging* — More than 2,400 breeding pairs of white-faced ibis dwell in the Grasslands. Photo by Gary Zahm.

owned by 200 privately-held parcels, most of which are waterfowl hunting clubs. These diverse interests work cooperatively to manage the wetlands toward a common goal—enhancing wildlife populations in the Central Valley.

“Grasslands has been recognized as a wetland of international importance because of the magnificent cooperative effort among landowners, agencies and conservation groups that strive to meet the habitat needs of more than 550 species of wildlife and plants,” said Kim Forrest, project leader of the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex in Los Banos.

“The Central Valley, including Grasslands, is literally the waist in the hour glass of the Pacific Flyway,” Forrest said. “It is a worldwide resource that is so essential for the tremendous bird populations that use the Pacific Flyway, from the Arctic to the tropics.”

While the Ramsar designation brings great tributes and worldwide acclaim to the Grasslands, the recognition does not carry burdensome regulations or precedence over privately-held duck clubs

and how they are managed.

For additional information on the Ramsar Convention, visit the website: <http://international.fws.gov/ramsar/ramsar.htm>, or contact Forrest at (209) 826-3508.

#### ***Harvest Results Needed***

The Grassland Water District is asking private duck clubs to voluntarily report their waterfowl harvest results for the 2004–2005 season. The district provides survey forms to summarize the harvest results.

Biologist Richard Wright said last year a record number of clubs participated in the survey, which is compiled into regional reports for the North and South Grasslands. “Harvest results of individual results is strictly confidential,” Wright said. “Our purpose is to put together statistics that reflect the waterfowl harvest of the entire Grasslands.”

To request survey forms or to ask questions about the harvest results, call (209) 826-5188.

## Grassland Today

The bi-monthly newsletter of the Grassland Water District and the Grassland Resource Conservation District, 22759 S. Mercey Springs Rd., Los Banos 93635.

Telephone (209) 826-5188 FAX (209) 826-4984

Website: <http://www.grasslandwetlands.com>

E-Mail: [veronica@grasslandwetlands.com](mailto:veronica@grasslandwetlands.com)

Articles may be reproduced without permission. For additional information or interviews, contact the Grassland Water District, publisher of the newsletter.

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.

### Grassland Staff

Don Marciochi, *General Manager*

Veronica Woodruff, *Assistant General Manager, Administration*

Scott Lower, *Assistant General Manager, Operations*

Peter Ottesen, *Editor*

Richard Wright, *Biologist*

### Cooperating Agencies

Greg Gerstenberg, (209) 826-0463  
*California Department of Fish and Game*

Loren Ruport, (209) 826-3508  
*U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

Malia Ortiz, (209) 722-4119 (x3)  
*Natural Resource Conservation Service*

### Grassland Water District

#### Board of Directors

Pepper Snyder, *President*  
*Clear Lake Land & Cattle*  
(408) 298-3134

Jeff Kerry, *Vice-President*  
*Deer Park*  
(510) 483-4211

Bob Nardi  
*Hollister L&C/WillowFarms*  
(510) 352-3059

Doug Federighi  
*Gustine Land & Cattle*  
(510) 635-1155

Tom Mackey  
*Riverfield*  
(510) 523-2425

### Grassland Resource Conservation District

#### Board of Directors

Duane Cosart, *President*  
*Exeter Club*  
(209) 592-2821

Walt Latham, *Vice-President*  
*Gustine L&C*  
(209) 826-2430

Keith Toon  
*Hollister L&C*  
(510) 352-6228

Don Dawson  
*Cherokee Land & Cattle*  
(209) 854-3638

## Fish and Wildlife Service Collects Birds for Study

The Grassland Water District and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are continuing a long-term scientific study this winter to determine the efficacy of remediating selenium contamination through the use of freshwater for wetland management.

Selenium contamination resulted from the use of poor-quality drainage water prior to 1985, said Don Marciochi, general manager of the GWD.

The ongoing study was initiated during the 1985 to 1989 period and found that selenium levels increased in wintering birds, peaking in early February. While selenium levels in wintering waterbirds declined during this five-year period as a result of freshwater management, they still remained above levels associated with reproductive impairment in laboratory and field studies for some species.

During 1994 the study was repeated and determined that, while selenium concentrations had further declined since the 1980s, concentrations continued to remain elevated in some species.

"The continuation of this study in 2005 will determine if selenium levels in wintering birds have further declined to safe levels," Marciochi said. "Results of this long-term study from 1985 to 2005 will assist the GWD and USFWS with maintaining current supplies of freshwater and securing additional sources of good quality water to benefit the entire Grassland Resource Conservation District."

To complete this important effort, uniformed personnel of the USFWS collected birds on private clubs during the week of Feb. 17-23. Results of the sampling and the levels of selenium found in the tissues of birds will be released later in the year.

## CWA Manages Grants for Grassland Wetlands Projects

The California Waterfowl Association is continuing to acquire and manage grants for northern San Joaquin Valley wetland habitat projects, many within the Grasslands.

Biologist Richard Wright listed private wetlands on which projects have either been completed or are currently under construction in 2004 and 2005. Funding for projects is largely through the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, State Wildlife Conservation Board, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the Hewlett Packard Foundation.

Projects include:

- South Grasslands — Frog Pond and Midway Land and Cattle, as well as the state-operated Gadwall Unit.

- North Grasslands — Eureka Farms and Clearwater Duck Club and Grassland Water District conveyances including Los Banos Creek and Santa Fe Canal #9 Weir.

- East Grasslands: Flynn Ranch, Dallas Duck Club.

- Southern San Joaquin Valley — Widgeon, Old Tulare, ECLA, and Visalia Duck clubs.

Information about these projects is available from Wright at (916) 275-1020.

## Ex-Grassland Official Focuses on Public Policy

Dave Widell, formerly of the Grassland Water District, has accepted the position of director of public policy at the Western Regional Office of Ducks Unlimited. He is filling the position left open when Ryan Broddrick departed DU to take the job of director of the California Department of Fish and Game.

Widell comes from the Gov. Schwarzenegger administration, where he served as assistant secretary of the California Resources Agency under secretary Mike Chrisman and was responsible for state parks, fish, game, and land stewardship and acquisition.

Widell also has been Deputy Director of California State Parks, a lobbyist with the California Waterfowl Association, served as director of government affairs for the Grassland Water District, and worked for the California State Legislature. "I'm greatly looking forward to working with the Grasslands, particularly on important water and policy issues," said Widell. "Ducks



*Dave Widell*

*(Continued, page 6)*

## ***Waterfowl Management Plan is Reauthorized***

Interior Secretary Gale Norton has reaffirmed the United States' commitment to international waterfowl conservation efforts by signing an update to the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. The plan is a public-private approach to manage waterfowl in Canada, Mexico and the United States. Partners have invested more than \$2.2 billion to protect, restore or enhance more than 8 million acres of habitat in the plan's history.

"The plan put in place an innovative, science-based, partnership driven approach to international bird conservation," Norton said. "Partners updated some of the scientific processes and priority analysis but the landmark approach they developed only 20 years ago to manage continental waterfowl is just as vital today. Wildlife managers use the plan's design to launch a new era in wildlife conservation, one based on partnerships to conserve shared natural resources."

With final approval from the Canadian and Mexican environmental ministries, the 2004 North American Waterfowl Management Plan—Strengthening the Biological Foundations will guide the three countries in waterfowl conservation. The plan calls on the partners to manage sustainable landscapes, consult

### ***Goose Survey Finds Good Young-to-Adult Age Ratio***

A survey of white geese—snow and Ross'—age ratios was completed on the Merced National Wildlife Refuge by biologist Greg Gerstenberg, who examined 668 birds. What he discovered was encouraging for snow geese, but not so positive for Ross' geese.

"Total age ratio for snow geese was 0.32 immature to adult," Gerstenberg said. "This represents a very good young-to-adult ratio and a sign that production last spring was good."

Since 1998 the snow goose ratio has varied from 0.61 to 0.05 immature to adult.

On the flip side, Gerstenberg examined a small sampling of Ross' geese and found a ratio of 0.02 immature per adult. "This represents a poor young-to-adult ratio," he said. "We'll attempt to examine additional Ross' to determine if this ratio is accurate."

and cooperate with partners and use strong biological foundations to make decisions.

Partners' conservation projects not only advance waterfowl conservation but also make substantial contributions toward the conservation of all wetland-associated species.

While the plan is international in scope, projects to advance the plan goals take place at regional and local levels. Success is dependent upon the strength of 11 habitat Joint Ventures in the United States—including the Central Valley Habitat Joint Venture in California—and three in Canada.

The specific goals of the plan are to establish continental waterfowl conservation objectives and priorities (for example, in the surveyed area, the breeding bird population objective is 8.2 million for mallards); to increase stakeholder confidence in the direction of waterfowl conservation; and to guide partners in strengthening the biological foundation of North American waterfowl conservation.

### ***McCreary to Take on DU Conservation Outreach Role***

Ducks Unlimited's regional biologist covering the states of Nevada, Utah and Arizona, Jeff McCreary, will take on the new role of Regional Biologist for Conservation Outreach on April 1, 2005.

McCreary will provide outreach in California on DU's conservation mission. Among actions, he will provide volunteers and Regional Directors conservation support for grassroots fundraising, give assistance to volunteers and staff working on major gift donations, and support DU's conservation work in the Pacific Flyway. He will also provide information on DU's conservation programs to writers, duck club members, conservation groups, landowners and others.

"Jeff knows conservation and he knows how DU's conservation programs work," said Dr. Rudy Rosen, Director of Ducks Unlimited's Western Regional Office. "His new mission will be to stamp out misunderstanding by explaining DU's approach to improving waterfowl, enhancing wetlands and preserving our waterfowling future."

## ***Grassland Notes***

• **Increased Public Hunting** — If approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, hunters will have greater opportunities on federal lands in the coming years. Bill Cook of the California Department of Fish and Game and Loren Ruport of the USFWS recently toured the Lone Tree, SnoBird and East Bear Creek federal refuges that are currently closed to public use, establishing the best access routes for each. They believe the Lone Tree unit will be open to hunting in time for the 2005–2006 season. Either SnoBird or East Bear Creek would be opened for 2006–2007, with the remaining unit to open in 2007–2008. Information: 826-0463.

\* \* \*

• **Vernal Pool Designation** — In compliance with a court order, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is reconsidering lands previously excluded from designation of critical habitat for threatened and endangered vernal pool species. Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act identifying geographic areas that are essential to the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and may require special management considerations. Included in the critical habitat designation are four types of freshwater shrimp and 11 plants that depend on seasonally flooded wetlands or vernal pools in more than 30 counties in California—including Merced County. Only national wildlife refuges and state wildlife areas will be reconsidered. Private duck clubs will not be affected by the court order nor included in the vernal pool critical habitat designation, said Kim Forrest, project leader of the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex. Information: 826-3508.

\* \* \*

• **Northern Pintail Depend on Klamath Basin** — A study by the U.S. Geologic Survey found that 77 to 87 percent of Central Valley pintail migrating north stopped in northeastern California and southeastern Oregon, in the general area of the Klamath National Wildlife Refuge. Biologist Mike Miller believes the information documents the critical importance of the region for pintails migrating out of the Central Valley. Since 1955 the population of pintail has fallen about 70 percent, from 10 million to 3 million birds.



### *Youth Waterfowl Hunts, Feb. 5-6 Getting Youngsters Involved in the Outdoors*

Private clubs throughout the Grasslands hosted boys and girls who held Junior Hunting Licenses for the annual “after season” Youth Waterfowl Hunts. State wildlife areas and national wildlife refuges also opened their gates to young hunters and their chaperones.

Here’s some happy youth who took part. Upper left: **Jordan Fedi** shoulders a limit. Center left: **Jilliane Jefferson** admires her green-winged teal. Bottom left: **Clinton Ferguson** hoists his two-day limit. Top: After the hunt at the Salinas Club, cousins **Michael Antle** (*left*) and **Teddy Bryant** and **Bo Bremer** (*center*) help club members **Alvin Christensen** and **Tony Rossi** barbecue 50 chickens. Bottom right: Getting ready for lunch at Clear Lake Land & Cattle were **Pepper Snyder** (*back left*) and **Rob Kocher** (*right*) with nine hungry youth hunters.



## ***Environmental Education Center at Volta Through 2006***

For the past nine years, the Grassland Environmental Education Center, located near Volta on lands owned by the Liberty Packing Company, has hosted more than 12,000 elementary-aged students and 2,000 adults, introducing them to the flora and fauna of Merced County wetlands.

Through tours, laboratory experiments and interactive lessons, the children learn about the key role hunter-conservationists and farmers play in protecting the critical open space needed by wildlife, including millions of waterfowl that winter here each year. The Grassland Conservation and Education Fund (GCEF) is a 501(c)3 tax-deductible organization.

Janae Scruggs, who possesses a strong biological background and was raised on a farm, is the center's director. A graduate of Humboldt State, she has completed technical field studies and will be taking reservations from school groups starting March 1. Previously, the center has attracted classes of school children from as far north as Stockton and as far south as Fresno, with the bulk of the students coming from Merced County schools.

However, change is in the wind. Under current operating agreements with Liberty Packing Company, the center is open only six months a year because of safety concerns during the tomato harvest when hundreds of trucks roll into the cannery each day.

"We'll continue to use our present site through 2006," said Veronica Woodruff, assistant general manager of the GWD. "Then we plan to move the center to the Los Banos Wildlife Area off Henry Miller Avenue. Now that we have our basic building plan, we need to find sponsors and donors who can make the dream of a quality environmental center for this area come true." Tax deductible donations can be sent to GCEF, 22759 S. Mercey Springs Rd., Los Banos, CA 93635. Tax ID #77-0312791.

Capstone of the relocation effort will be construction of a new environmental education facility designed by Robert Beharka, an apprentice of Frank Lloyd Wright, that will cost upwards of \$800,000. The specially-created structure will include exhibit and display areas, classrooms and a laboratory.



### **Mud Slough Restoration**

*Looking it over* — Rudy Rosen, Director of Ducks Unlimited's Western Regional Office, and Mark Biddlecomb, Director of Conservation Programs for the South Pacific Flyway, recently toured the Grasslands to check progress on the Mud Slough restoration effort that took place last summer. Accompanied by members of the Coast Cattle Club, **Jim Vella** (center) and **Bill Parham** (left), the group looked on as the slough was functioning perfectly, conveying the large amounts of rainfall that fell in early January. The project, funded through a NAWCA Grant received by DU, involved widening portions of the slough and generally improving the natural conditions to improve its flow capacity. In addition to the improved habitat conditions within the Mud Slough, the project will benefit over 2,600 acres of wetlands.

### **Wild On Wetlands Festival, April 16**

Wild on Wetlands is back for a one-day extravaganza April 16 in conjunction with the annual downtown Los Banos Street Fair, sponsored by the local chamber of commerce.

Originally a two-day festival to celebrate the 180,000-acre Grassland Ecological Area, Wild on Wetlands returns as a single-day affair following a year's absence. The free event will offer tours, educational displays and a plethora of activities that focus on California's largest historic wetlands complex that still remains in the Central Valley.

"This is our way to generate support and interest in our historic wetlands and associated uplands," said Veronica Woodruff, assistant general manager of the Grassland Water District. "We hope our private duck club owners will be active participants in this worthwhile, educational event."

Sean Allen, a Department of Fish and Game biologist, said five distinctly different tours of nearby state wildlife areas and national wildlife refuges will be given twice during the festival, once in the morning, once in the afternoon.

Tours afield will include bicycle trips through the Grassland wetlands, canoe trips along Salt Slough, bird-watching excursions, a wildflower walk at Arena Plains and trips through the

tule elk enclosure at San Luis National Wildlife Refuge.

Special events at a tent set up near Main and K streets will feature a tule boat maker, wood carver and a presentation by Burleigh Lockwood, the "Bat Lady." Agencies already committed to the festival include the Department of Fish and Game, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Stanislaus Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, California Waterfowl Association, Ducks Unlimited, Grassland Water District and others with a vested interest in wetlands and the wildlife that depend upon them.

To participate in or to learn more about the festival, contact Suzanne Palazzo at (209) 826-3831 or toll-free at (800) 491-8848.

#### ***Save the Date: May 21***

The annual Grassland Landowners meeting will be held May 21 at the Los Banos Sportsmen's, 13989 Mercey Springs Rd., Los Banos. The meeting will start at 9 a.m. A full agenda will include the 2004-2005 Harvest Results and updates on wetlands draining and other environmental issues. Information: (209) 826-5188.

# A Season for the Ages: Waterfowl Hunting Dramatically Improves

When the majority of northern pintail ducks were literally pushed out of the Grasslands by a major storm before the 2004–2005 season had even begun, many hunters believed the opening day on Oct. 30 was, perhaps, the worst in history.

However, three months later, following the Jan. 30 close of the duck season, hunters are in unanimous agreement that hunting was the best since the 1990s. Without question, more than a month of cold temperatures and a high fog cap were reasons that birds remained scattered throughout the Grasslands and became vulnerable to the gun. Green-winged teal, in particular, showed up handsomely in the bag.

Biologist Greg Gerstenberg, who flies aerial surveys and is responsible for the northern San Joaquin Valley component of the Mid-Winter Waterfowl Inventory, believes overall duck numbers were good.

His Mid-Winter Inventory, taken on Jan. 5, 2005, found 756,900 total waterfowl in the northern San Joaquin Valley, up from 553,655 in January 2004. That's an increase of close to 20 percent.

Dabbling ducks increased from 412,870 to 584,780, a jump of 40 percent. Among the species showing big gains over the past year, widgeon in-

creased by 30,000 to 76,390; shoveler increased by 85,000 to 207,545; and pintail up 63,000 to 117,695.

If there was ever a question that weather is a direct contributor to better shooting, especially for green-wings, this year's harvest results should remove all doubts. Gerstenberg counted only a 40-bird increase in teal on this year's flight, estimating there were 128,105 wintering in the Grasslands. Yet, hunters enjoyed the best hunting in many years and routine seven-bird limits. Teal comprised between 65 and 75 percent of a typical bag, a strong indication that chilly temperatures and fog are a great advantage to hunters.

Diving ducks increased as well, from 87,520 in 2004 to 107,045, a jump of more than 20 percent. Ring-neck ducks shot up by 27,000 to 47,370 and canvasback took a healthy leap of 16,000 to 21,015.

Geese numbers increased by 12,000 birds to 65,076. Snow and Ross made up 29,060 of the total, while Aleutian Canada geese numbered 30,645.

What did Grassland landowners say about the just completed hunting season? Benny Jefferson of the Salinas Gun Club said members increased their average daily bag by better than one bird. Roger Miller of the Underwood

Club said hunting was the "best in the last five or six years."

Bob Nardi of Wetland Concepts said, "Because of the favorable weather, most people seem very happy with this season." Tom Mackey of the Riverfield Club concurred that the "bird numbers were better this year."

Doug Federighi of Modesto Properties said, "Bird shooting was up substantially east of the San Joaquin River, perhaps as much as 40 percent." Veronica Woodruff said, "Hunting on Mar Land and Cattle was very good."

## Dave Widell Heads DU

*Post. . . (continued from page 2)*

Unlimited is committed to assisting the Grassland Water District, its landowners and state and federal refuges in securing long-term, reliable water supplies in an increasingly competitive water market."

He began his duties with DU in February and works on public policy issues such as water, mainly in California.

"We are excited to have Dave join us and look forward to having an even greater impact on wetlands conservation in California with his help," said Rudy Rosen, director of DU's Western Regional Office in Sacramento.

**Grassland Today**  
22759 S. Mercey Springs Road  
Los Banos, CA 93635

Return Service Requested

PRSRT STD  
U.S. Postage  
**PAID**  
Permit #47  
Stockton, CA

January/February 2005

