

# GRASSLAND TODAY

## The Grassland Wetlands Newsletter

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July/August 2005

### *Highest count in five years*

## *Estimates of Waterfowl that Breed in Grasslands Ecological Area Tops 66,000*

Spring and summer surveys of waterfowl in the Central Valley in 2005 reveal ducks enjoyed a very long nesting season and extremely high nest success in CWA's study plots, according to scientists from California Waterfowl Association and Grassland Water District.

The breeding counts for the Grassland Ecological Area are estimated at 66,875 ducks, up from 52,302 in 2004. "This is the second highest count in the last six years," said biologist Richard Wright. "Mallards comprised the largest amount with gadwall and cinnamon teal the next most-dominant species in the survey."

In wet years, scientific data shows the length of the nesting season increases, giving hen mallards a longer window in which to lay eggs and raise ducklings. Wright said juvenile-to-adult ratios also increase in years with strong local production.

Another key to estimating survival, production of young, and waterfowl distribution is banding. For the past 25 years CWA crews have aided the Department of Fish and Game with banding efforts in the Grasslands. This year gadwall numbers have shown a more than 200 percent increase during banding operations.

"Gadwall typically nest later in the breeding season than other ducks," Wright said. "In years where spring precipitation is high, uplands still have the necessary microclimate and structure for successful waterfowl nesting. Gadwall responded well to this late-season opportunity."

Statewide, DFG and CWA officials believe breeding waterfowl have responded to 2005's early and continued wet spring with impressive increases, similar to those in the Grasslands. California's breeding population of mallards increased by 21 percent, from 262,425 in 2004 to 317,868 this year. Total ducks increased by a whopping 49 percent from 412,798 to 615,240.



**Taking wing** — California's breeding population of mallards increased by 21 percent and total ducks nesting in the state increased by 49 percent this spring.

During annual waterfowl production surveys CWA field staff noted a very early nesting effort that brought about a 40 percent increase in the number of nests located in April compared to the previous year. From the Grasslands through the Delta and Suisun Marsh, up through the Sacramento Valley and into the Klamath Basin, observations of an abundance of broods have been reported, Wright said.

There is good news from prairie Canada that produces approximately 90 percent of the birds that are harvested in the Grasslands. It is extraordinarily

wet in Saskatchewan and wet in the parklands of Alberta where pond counts are 56 percent greater than in 2004 and 17 percent greater than the long-term, 50-year average.

Ducks Unlimited reported breeding ducks responded extensively to the improved habitat conditions on the Canadian prairies. Ducks settling in the prairies increased by 31 percent from the previous year, DU officials said.

The 2005 Waterfowl Breeding Population and Habitat survey conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said

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## *Grassland Water Supply Looks "Promising"*

The 2005 fall water year is looking very promising as of July, reports Scott Lower, assistant general manager of operations for the Grassland Water District. "Water acquisition for the earlier portion of this year was a big concern for the GWD but staff of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation worked diligently for Level-4 acquisitions and indicated they have secured enough water to insure a normal remainder of the water year. Clubs should anticipate operating as normal."

Lower urged clubs to perform their inspections of all intake structures and waterways to insure they are working properly and will transport water efficiently. "Take a moment to check inside the pipes to look for possible damage or obstructions," Lower said. "Be sure to check the gate structure for signs of wear and make necessary repairs. Lastly, make sure your ditches are clean and open for water transportation."

He said last year's maintenance

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## 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.

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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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## U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Proposes Additional Hunting And Fishing Programs on NWRs

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to add hunting and fishing programs on six national wildlife refuges including Stone Lakes NWR, south of Sacramento adjacent to Interstate 5.

“Fulfilling the intent of the 1997 National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act, the Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to expand compatible wildlife dependent recreational opportunities, such as hunting and fishing, on our national wildlife refuges. We welcome hunters, anglers, bird watchers, photographers, and others who seek to enjoy the extraordinary resources on this nation’s wildlife refuges,” said Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dale Hall.

In 2004, there were 2.3 million hunting visits to wildlife refuges and 7 million fishing visits. Among them are the Merced and San Luis NWR complexes, located in the Grasslands.

By law, hunting and fishing are two of the six priority wildlife-dependent



**Celebrating wetlands** — Merced County Supervisor **Jerry O'Banion**, left, receives the RAMSAR certificate from **Kim Forrest**, project leader of the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex. RAMSAR designated the Grassland Ecological Area as a wetland of international importance.

recreational uses on wildlife refuges. Kim Forrest, project leader of the San Luis NWR complex said the Refuge System provides opportunities to hunt and fish whenever they are compatible with the conservation goals of individual national wildlife refuges.

## Northern Tulare/San Joaquin Basins 1 NAWCA Status

In March, Ducks Unlimited submitted a multi-project proposal through the North American Wetlands Conservation Act to restore and enhance critical public and private waterfowl habitats in the San Joaquin Valley. Of interest to Grassland landowners are several projects developed in coordination with Grassland Water District personnel to improve water conveyance to private wetlands.

Six projects were developed and submitted as part of the Proposal for funding consideration, three in South and three in North Grassland, said DU biologist Chris Hildebrandt. These projects will provide major improvements to the water conveyance systems managed by the GWD.

“By improving water conveyance to landowner wetlands, GWD staff will be able to conserve critical water resources while improving water deliveries and flooding rates to landowners,” Hildebrandt said. “In addition, these projects will be designed to decrease maintenance effort, allowing water district maintenance staff more time to keep the water conveyance systems working at optimal levels.”

During their July 6 meeting the

North American Wetlands Conservation Council selected this proposal—along with 24 others across the nation—to be forwarded to the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission for final funding approval at their Sept. 21 meeting. MBCC has rarely turned down projects forwarded to them from the NAWCC.

For information on this project or other projects in the Grasslands Ecological Area III grant, contact Hildebrandt at the GWD office at (209) 826-5274.

## Two Seats on Grassland Board Up for Election

Two seats on the Grassland Water District board of directors are up for the election on Nov. 8. Directors with terms expiring are Jeff Kerry and Pepper Snyder. Each has taken out papers with Merced County seeking re-election.

Candidate forms are available at the GWD office, 22759 S. Mercey Springs Road, Los Banos, CA 93635 and at the Merced County Clerk’s office at 2222 M St., Merced, CA 95340.

Forms must be completed and filed with the County Clerk’s office not later than 5 p.m., Aug. 12, for the candidate to be placed on the November ballot.

## ***Ducks Unlimited Updates Grasslands Ecological Area III NAWCA Project***

Restoration of the Mud Slough in the North Grasslands began this past summer and much of the earthmoving activities have been completed. The goal of this project is to improve the capacity of the slough to improve water conveyance from adjacent private wetlands. Improving water conveyance in the slough will also benefit wildlife directly due to more natural conditions within the slough itself.

Portions of the slough that had been channelized in the past and provided little wildlife value have been improved and sediment and associated emergent vegetation has been removed in the slough between Gun Club Road and the Kesterson Ditch. Currently, Ducks Unlimited is working with Grassland Water District personnel and landowners to complete the project.

DU biologist Chris Hildebrandt said a crossing over Mud Slough will be improved to maintain improved flow rates in the slough and provide landowners access to their property. In addition, the GWD staff will oversee the replacement of siphon pipes under the Kesterson Ditch; this will greatly improve water flows for private wetlands upstream. Ducks Unlimited received funding through the North American Wetlands Conservation Act with non-federal match funds coming from the California Department of Fish and Game, Wildlife Conservation Board, Grassland Water District and Ducks Unlimited.

Mud Slough is an integral part of the management of over 2,600 acres of privately owned wetlands in the North Grasslands. The Grassland Water District has agreed to take on long-term maintenance of the completed project area to ensure that landowners within the Mud Slough watershed will be able to use the Mud Slough in management of their seasonal wetlands for wildlife while decreasing flood damage during flood events.

### ***Los Banos WA, Fields 63-66 Wetland and Riparian Habitat Restoration:***

This project involves restoration of semi-permanent wetlands and riparian corridors, seasonal wetlands, and upland grasslands. The project will conserve 260 acres that the DFG will manage to provide seasonal wetlands and upland forage for wintering ducks and geese, and maintain riparian habitat,

semi-permanent wetlands, and associated grasslands for locally nesting waterfowl such as mallard, gadwall, and cinnamon teal.

Most of the restoration activities for this project have been completed with grassland seeding to take place in the fall. The Los Banos WA is open to public hunting during season and the project area will include areas available for dove, pheasant, and waterfowl hunting.

The Volta Wildlife Area will be re-

ceiving a revamped water delivery canal to improve water conveyance to 1,800 acres of wetlands on the west half of the Wildlife Area. The improved Westside canal will convey more water and give Volta WA managers additional wetland flooding options that will help conserve water on this important wintering area. The Volta WA is open to public hunting during season and the project area will include areas available for dove and waterfowl hunting.



### **Mud Slough Restoration**

*Before and after* — Earthmoving equipment improves water conveyance at Mud Slough. Below, the finished product with water moving through restored banks of the slough, which have been sloped to create natural conditions.



### ***Grassland Water Supply “Promising” . . . (continued from page 1)***

problems that overwhelmed the GWD with aquatic vegetation, for the most part, have been resolved by the district staff’s early attack on aquatics and its continued spray plan throughout the summer months. Lower said there is still a long way to go to gain complete control over the weed problem but the district should be able to operate normally this year.

The installation of new pipes under Santa Fe Grade Road, and the excavation of the Slough in the South Grasslands should help reduce backup problems for those clubs affected by high levels of drainage and transport waters flowing through to North Grassland.

The construction of a new weir on

the Santa Fe Canal, north of Gun Club Road, will provide a better and more consistent delivery of water to those clubs in that area. The project will also have a major impact on winter flooding by increasing the capacity of floodwaters that flow through that portion of the canal.

The completion of the final stages of the Mud Slough North Drainage Project will help bring additional stability for club drainage through that area. Increased capacity under the Kesterson Ditch with additional siphon pipes will help lay the foundation for improved future drainage for that area.

For information about GWD operations contact Lower at (209) 826-5188.



## Grassland Notes

• **Water quality issues** — In efforts to reduce impacts on the San Joaquin River, Grassland Water District officials are developing “Best Management Plans” to optimally drain wetlands. The plans are required by federal law HR 2828 and will be presented to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation for inclusion in its agency report to Congress in October.

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• **Fall Festival 2005** — Auto Life Outdoors presents its 8th free seminar, Aug. 4–7, at 901 N. Carpenter Road, Modesto. Doors open at 8 a.m. daily. Featured guests include grand national goose calling champion Jeff Foiles and world duck calling champion Buck Gardner. The festival will be the site of two major competitions—The California State Duck Calling Contest at 2 p.m., Aug. 6 and California State Goose Calling Contest at 11 a.m., Aug. 7. There also will be junior duck and goose calling contests for boys and girls in two categories—ages 8 to 13 and 14 to 16 years—and a team “meat” duck calling contest. For a complete schedule, call (800) 499-1004.

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• **Economic Impact** — A recent study jointly sponsored by the Grassland Water District, Great Valley Center and Packard Foundation found that direct expenditures by public and private land managers in the 180,000-acre Grassland Ecological Area, combined with expenditures related to hunting and other recreational uses contribute almost \$50 million to the local economy and account for 800 jobs.

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• **Encroachment** — Don Marciochi, general manager of the Grassland Water District, is working on a long-term planning agreement with the City of Los Banos and the County of Merced to protect the Grassland Ecological Area from encroachment. In June Marciochi hand-delivered a letter to Supervisor Jerry O’Banion and Mayor Mike Amabile that proposed a memorandum-of-understanding among the three entities to protect the state’s largest, contiguous wetlands from threats from development and other kinds of encroachment. “We want to be part of the city and county’s master planning and, so far, our efforts have been well received,” Marciochi said.



### Legislative Shoot

*Taking aim* — Members of the California Legislative Caucus play a key role in preserving our outdoor sporting heritage. On June 8 legislators took part in a trap shoot sponsored by California Waterfowl Association. At left is **Sen. Dennis Hollingsworth** (R-Murrieta) and firing away above is **Assemblyman Tom Harmon** (R-Huntington Beach).

## Report Shows Harvest Has No Impact on Pintail

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has required reduced pintail harvest in the United States since 1988 in response to the declining North American pintail population. However, these restrictions do not appear to have had any impact in helping pintails. A report prepared by Michael Runge of the U.S. Geological Survey and Scott Boomer of the USFWS in February 2005 (Population Dynamics and Harvest Management of the Continental Northern Pintail Population) shows long-term stability in annual survival of pintails despite variable harvest regulations over time.

The Runge-Boomer report said average annual survival of adult pintails (74% in males and 64% in females) has not changed over the period from 1965 to the present, and first-year survival of young pintails increased slightly through the 1965 to 2003 period, which had both high and low bag limits; thus, these trends cannot be attributed to restrictive harvest. In addition, an upcoming paper in the July issue of the *Journal of Wildlife Management* by Chris Nicolai and his co-authors reports that 90% of surviving northern pintails banded on the important nesting area of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta returned there. Most of these pintails winter in California, suggesting a relatively discrete subpopulation, and these birds survived at very high rates that also have not changed over time despite

changes in harvest regulations.

Several years of excellent production of young, as evidenced by high pintail harvest age ratios during wet years in Prairie Canada, suggest that “super production” events produced and sustained high pintail populations during the 1970s. The Runge-Boomer report states that pintails no longer have the reproductive potential they did in the 1970s because of various types of upland and wetland habitat losses and long-term drought.

During the prolonged prairie drought of the 1980s and early 1990s, pintails counted in the prairies decreased precipitously. Pintails are known to seek northern regions of Canada and Alaska when preferred prairie breeding grounds are dry (the prairie “over-flight” phenomenon). As shown in the Runge-Boomer report, such movements are to the north and west, and as this occurs, many pintails fly out of survey regions, so the numbers counted during the annual May Survey show exaggerated declines. Runge-Boomer corrected for these movements and found that the underestimation was in the range of a few percent to as much as 80%.

The USFWS data show that harvest has had no impact on pintail survival during the past 40 years.

California Waterfowl Association has and will continue to lobby both biologically and politically to address the deficiencies in the overly restrictive pintail harvest model.



**Banded for life** — A female mallard is banded at the Gadwall Unit before being released. Below right, **Richard Wright**, CWA/GWD biologist, holds a map while **Steve Miyamoto**, manager of the area, discusses the value of a recently completed CWA project. Bottom right, biologist **James Laughlin** gives a tip to **Paul McHaney** of the Salinas Club on how to identify first-year birds.

## CWA Conducts Tour of Projects in South Grasslands

As he cradled a hatch-year hen mallard in his arms biologist James Laughlin looked over the brood habitat at the Gadwall Unit of the Salt Slough Wildlife Area. Then he smiled before clamping a band on the duck's leg and setting it free.

"It's been a good year for local production," Laughlin said, who has been banding ducks for the California Waterfowl Association for six years. "We're seeing more hatch-year birds than usual in our traps throughout the Grasslands."

Approximately 20 private wetlands managers and owners saw the banding demonstration and learned how to identify hatch-year birds and other principles of waterfowl ecology. They were part of a July 15 tour of the South Grasslands hosted by the California Waterfowl Association and underwritten by the Ken Grady Company.

CWA president Bob McLandress said, "The importance of spring and summer ponds is often overlooked because of the Grassland's importance for wintering birds." He focused on

brood ponds, introduction of wood ducks and banding projects during the three-hour tour.

"There are some very positive things that can be done locally to produce birds," he said.

First stop was the Frog Pond Club, a 200-acre property that features rotating brood ponds that produced numerous ducks this spring. Biologist Rich Wright, who is employed 50-50 by CWA and the Grassland Water District, said the key for a good brood pond is independent water delivery and drainage, and up-to-date water control structures.

Wright said 70 percent of the brood pond development was funded by the state Wildlife Conservation Board, 30 percent by the landowner. "The idea is to give back to the resource and to provide harvest opportunity," Wright said.

Next stop was the Backwater Club, where the landowner installed wood duck boxes, planted willow trees and CWA released 93 ducklings about one week before they could fly into what he calls "the last remaining riparian

habitat in the South Grasslands.

"We've got a good base of volunteers who want to see more wood ducks," said Wright.

McLandress said establishing a wood duck founder population often requires a multi-year effort. "Other areas of the state have seen populations increase rapidly with proper nesting boxes and summer water. It takes time to build up a founder population."

Wright cited the years it took to build up wood duck colonies at clubs in the North Grasslands.

Final stop was at the Gadwall Unit to see a CWA-sponsored North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) project. Wildlife area manager Steve Miyamoto said the effort produced "a sensational seasonal wetland complex."

"The project turned out to be a real jewel," Miyamoto said. "Our opening weekend averages were five to six birds per hunter, which is very impressive. Over the entire season, the Gadwall Unit carried a near three-bird average, the best among public areas in the Grasslands."





Return Service Requested

July/August 2005



### **Breeding Waterfowl. . .**

*(continued from page 1)*

total breeding duck numbers were relatively unchanged from last year at 31.7 million, slightly down from 32.2 million estimated in 2004.

“This is not unusual,” said Bruce Batt, DU’s chief biologist. “We expect a lag between increased pond numbers and duck populations because it takes more than one breeding season for the population to catch up with the increased habitat.”

Abundant water in prairie Canada should assure high brood survival for hens that successfully nest and encourage a strong re-nesting effort for mallards that lost nests early and persist to re-nest well into the summer. “The extremely wet conditions also are re-charging groundwater supplies which should help sustain many wetlands into next spring in 2006,” Batt said.

There are three species of ducks that are critical to the Grasslands with

breeding numbers above the long-term goal established by the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. They include shoveler, 80 percent above the long-term goal; gadwall, 45 percent above goal; and green-winged teal, 14 percent above goal.

Northern pintail are up 17 percent over the previous year but still 54 percent below the NAWMP goal, while widgeon are up 12 percent, but still 26 percent below goal. Continental mallards are off 9 percent from 2004 and 17 percent below goal.

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*Dan Yparraguirre, state waterfowl coordinator for the Department of Fish and Game, expects better production and a larger fall flight this year. He believes the Federal Framework prepared by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will allow a “liberal package” of regulations for Central Valley hunters. The framework likely will allow for a maximum 100-day season and a daily bag of seven ducks and three geese. A consensus of those attending the July 12 meeting of the Grassland Water District Board of Directors is recommending a 93-day straight season starting Oct. 29 and running through Jan. 29, 2006. The recommendation has been forwarded to Yparraguirre who will prepare optional seasons and bags for the Fish and Game Commission, who will take up the matter in September.*

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**Excellent brood habitat** — Upper left, merganser hen and babies. Above, top to bottom: broods hatched at Frog Pond Club; black-necked stilts; brood pond reaps dividends.