

GRASSLAND TODAY

The Grassland Wetlands Newsletter

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Mid-Winter Inventory Finds 30 Percent Increase Among Waterfowl

When biologists Greg Gerstenberg and Holman King took part in the Mid-Winter Survey, Jan. 3–4, they counted waterfowl from their aircraft for more than eight hours and made some profound observations. The East Grasslands was flooded—blanketed by sheet water from creeks that had overflowed their banks—and that’s where the majority of the widgeon and pintail were located.

Overall the northern San Joaquin Valley wintered a 30 percent increase in waterfowl this year with an index of 969,560 birds, far greater than the 756,920 counted in January 2005. These impressive figures pleased Gerstenberg.

“I was very pleased with the number of ducks found in the surveyed area for this time of year,” he said. “Usually, we have about half that number.”

Gerstenberg said the survey was taken mostly on a shoot day, when birds hold in closed zones. The East Grasslands held 331,740 birds, mostly on privately-owned lands that were flooded.

Species showing the greatest increases were northern pintail, up from 117,695 last year to 216,840 this year. Green-winged teal were up from 128,105 to 216,105; mallard from 13,480 to 45,925; ringneck from 47,370 to 58,040 and ruddy, up from 29,430 to 42,870. Other species of ducks remained pretty much unchanged.

Non-hunted, so-called indicator species also improved. White-faced ibis increased from 1,285 to 1,840 and sandhill crane took a big leap, from 1,335 to 5,505.

“The total index for northern pintail was pretty high for this time of year,” Gerstenberg said. “And, green-winged teal almost doubled their numbers from 2005. Flooded areas held most of them.”

Local Resources Available to Help Clubs Secure Grants

Many Grassland landowners and clubs have participated in grants where California Waterfowl Association, Ducks Unlimited or government agencies write proposals for state or federal money to cost share on wetland enhancement and restoration projects.

Typical state money is derived from the Department of Fish and Game’s Wildlife Conservation Board and federal dollars are accessed in the form of NAWCA grants, USFWS Partners for Wildlife and NRCS programs—WHIP and WRP. Sound confusing? Understanding governmental acronyms and funding patterns are not simple things.

For private clubs in the Grassland Water District good sources of information about wetlands restoration and enhancement projects can be found right here in Los Banos. Among these valuable sources are biologist Sean Milar of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at (209) 826-3508; Richard Wright, a biologist who splits his time between Grassland Water District and California Waterfowl Association, at (209) 826-5188; Chris Hildebrandt of Ducks Unlimited at (209) 826-5274 and Malia Hildebrandt at the Natural Resources Conservation Service at (209) 722-4119, ext. 3.

Currently one of the most suited grants for wetland projects is under the North American Wetlands Conservation Act program where enhancement of existing wetland habitat scores well in the funding process and the 30-year

contract agreements are generally adaptable to fit the landowner needs and in most cases are similar to already signed federal easements.

NAWCA grants are unique in that many smaller projects are combined into one proposal, allowing 10–15 wetland projects to be included that can help as many landowners in the GWD as possible.

CWA, for example, recently wrote a proposal that included 16 projects in the Grasslands. That grant application was ranked No. 1 nationally, a good indicator of the importance of our large historic, contiguous wetlands complex.

DU also applies for NAWCA grants and last September announced the funding for a \$1 million grant for Grasslands.

If landowners are interested in participating in projects that might qualify for state or federal funds it is a good idea to contact local sources early in the process. Biologists need time to assess the potential of a project and are very willing to perform a site visit, if asked. Bottomline: The more you involve local experts, the better your chances.

“Grants can often take a considerable amount of time to plan for and write, so the earlier you get in the process the better,” Wright said. “NAWCA grants are in two-year cycles and rely on non-federal funding match, most often spent by Department of Fish and Game. Having access to matching funds is often a key factor for a successful proposal.”

How to Obtain an Ag Burn Permit

Landowners and managers who wish to apply for an agricultural burn permit must call the Fresno office of the San Joaquin Valley Smoke Management System between 6 a.m.–11 a.m., weekdays, to speak with a live operator. The toll-free number is (800) 665-2876.

This new service is for persons applying for agricultural burn permits or for those attempting to learn if a particular day is a sanctioned “burn day.”

Formerly this information was only available through the San Joaquin Valley Air Quality District in Modesto.

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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Proposal to Fund Grassland Stewardship Plan

The Grassland Water District Area is one step closer to securing a \$400,000 grant from the state Department of Water Resources, through the CalFed Watershed Program, to develop a management plan to protect the Grassland Ecological Area.

GWD general manager Don Marciochi received the good news on Feb. 2. "We had submitted a preliminary competitive proposal that was evaluated against hundreds of other proposals," Marciochi said. "Ours is one-of-60 that made it to the second round. It's a big step and we are encouraged."

The GWD was asked to submit a more formal proposal to the DWR by March 17.

Marciochi credited Ducks Unlimited for producing a map (see page 5) that defined the Grasslands and the current problems faced by the ecological area to protect it from development.

"A picture is worth a thousand words," he said. "The GIS map is a key component of our project that is titled, 'The Grassland Stewardship Plan.' The same mapping effort will help us with

the City of Los Banos General Plan Update and the Merced County General Plan Update, which will have major implications for the long-term health of the Grasslands."

The stewardship plan developed through this proposal would develop community and science-based management strategies designed to ensure long-term protection and enhancement of compatible land uses within the GEA. The Plan will summarize the various efforts underway to manage and conserve the GEA. Long-term watershed management strategies will include ecological restoration activities, water quality monitoring, protection and enhancement of habitat for target species, and purchase of conservation easements by FWS, DFG or other entities, depending upon level of protection that is desirable for landowners. The Plan will identify strategies for creating a buffer of compatible land uses, such as agriculture, around the GEA to protect resource values within the GEA.

The GEA drains to an area that historically has had high salinity, and the

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Proposal to Annex Resource Conservation Lands

The Grassland Water District is proposing to annex private lands in the Grassland Resource Conservation District—with the consent of willing landowners—of properties defined as either Category 1 or 2 in the GWD Annexation Policy.

At their Jan. 10 meeting, the GWD board of directors agreed that landowners choosing to have their property annexed at this time will be charged a fee of \$1 per acre to partially cover the cost of annexation. The GWD will pick up the balance of the cost.

After extensive research the GWD estimated the real cost to annex properties would total between \$12,000 and \$14,000. The total includes Merced County Local Agency Formation Commission annexation fees of \$9,064 and an estimated \$3,000 to \$5,000 for engineering costs associated with preparation of a new legal description and Sphere of Influence map.

GRCD landowners with Category 1 & 2 property have been mailed a notice of the annexation proposal and a form indicating if they wish to be annexed

into the water district. They also received an invoice for their share of the annexation costs. For information or questions, contact Veronica Woodruff, assistant general manager for administration, by calling (209) 826-5188.

Boards Elect Officers for 2006–2007

The Grassland Water District board of directors has elected Pepper Snyder, president, Doug Federighi, vice-president and Don Marciochi, secretary, for the coming year. The GWD meets at 3 p.m. the second Tuesday of every month.

New officers for the Grassland Resource Conservation board of directors include Duane Cosart, president, Walt Latham, vice-president and Keith Toon, secretary. The GRCD meets at 1:30 p.m. the fourth Tuesday of every month.

Meetings of both boards are open to the public and held at the Grassland Water District office, 22759 S. Mercey Springs Road, Los Banos. Agendas for meetings may be requested by calling (209) 826-5188.

Marines Enjoy Well-Deserved Weekend Hunting in the Grasslands

They've already endured two tours of Iraq and were among the first Marines to enter Fallujah to root out terrorists, going house by house, block by block, in some of the bloodiest battles imaginable. Through it all the three buddies maintained their sense of humor while engaging the enemy, removing dead bodies and surviving on MRE—meals ready to eat—rations.

The Marines, barely 21 years old, forged a lasting friendship and kept a dream of going to a far-away environment—to go duck hunting together.

"We'd talk about duck hunting between fire fights with insurgents," said Jeremith Cummins of San Ramon, whose father Donal, belongs to the Hollister Duck Club in the north Grasslands. "Now, 2½ years later, my buddies and I finally got here to relax and shoot some ducks."

For Cummins, Matthew Thiemes of Minnesota and David Enright of North Carolina, taking a three-day December weekend away from their base at Camp Pendleton to spend time at a Central Valley marsh was like a dream come true. The days afield took their minds off the fact they would return to Iraq in January for a third tour of duty that wouldn't end until August 2006, just two months before their four-year commitment to the Marines will end.

"All of us joined the Marines right out of high school, with few experiences away from our own home towns," said Cummins, a machine gunner. "We've grown up fast, taking part in fire fights most every day and learning to have fun, even in the middle of an attack. These have been life changing experiences, something we'll never forget, but wouldn't change for anything."

Member of the Hollister Duck Club, including Donal Cummins, Mike McCabe, Sparky Johnston and Al Eleshio, took the Marines hunting, hearing their heartfelt stories and attempting to call them some birds. McCabe, a consummate duck hunter, has a special place in his heart for members of the armed services.

"I have a son who was in the military for 21 years so I was very pleased to be able to take these Marines out to the blind," McCabe said. "They were very keen to sport, extremely courteous and overall fine people. It was my

privilege to be with them, the unsung American heroes."

The guests enjoyed good shooting and, for Thiemes and Enright, who are M16 riflemen, it was "the best shoot of our lives." Not having grown up in California they had only heard about



Marine buddies — Hollister Gun Club hosted three U.S. Marines for a weekend shoot in December. Pictured from left: CPL Jeremith Cummins, LCPL Matthew Thiemes, and CPL David Enright. Currently the trio is back serving in Fallujah, Iraq, on their third tour in the war zone.

the immense waterfowl concentrations that winter in the Central Valley. At sunrise they eagerly went to the field and were overwhelmed by the clouds of ducks—pintail, shoveler, teal and widgeon—and the site of the vast marsh that is part of the 180,000-acre Grassland Ecological Area. Even under bluebird conditions they limited out by mid-morning and fulfilled a dream that had sustained them through the harrowing experiences of Iraq.

After the hunt the Marines demonstrated their field expediency, too, cooking antelope steaks and swapping yarns with their hosts. Around the dinner table, after members of the club thanked them for the sacrifices they are making, the servicemen held the old-timers' rapt attention, talking about modern weapons systems and stories of combat, hardship, successes and sorrow.

They belong to Indian Company of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment. Four of their 190-member company have been killed and "lots" have been wounded, Cummins said. But they seemed happy to share their stories and

to hear recounts of Vietnam, Korea and World War II from the elder duck hunters.

"It's fun to trade stories with the older veterans," Cummins said. "They understand what you are going through and are very sincere. Talking with them is a kind of tear-jerker, they're so overwhelmingly supportive. They kept asking what they could send to us. Others said they'd pray every day for us. This turned out to be much more than a duck hunting trip."

Cummins hopes to bring his buddies back for another duck hunt next season, after they complete their obligations with the Marines. "I think they'll (members of the Hollister Club) let us hunt again," he said. "It was such a great time and we really appreciate their hospitality and support."

McCabe said, "I've never seen these young men before but they're welcome in my blind any time. It's the least I can do. I know the other members of the club feel the same way."

(This story was excerpted from The Record, Stockton, California, and written by Grassland Today editor Peter Ottesen).

Stewardship Plan...

(continued from page 2)

District is currently carrying out a Real-time Water Quality Monitoring Project, a CALFED project funded under Proposition 50. The Project consists of design, installation, monitoring, implementation and evaluation of a pilot real-time water quality management program on private and State-owned seasonal wetlands in the GEA. Data collected during the term of the Project will indicate the salinity contributions of wetlands (which is likely to be minimal) and guide salinity management efforts in seasonal wetlands of the GEA. To the extent applicable, the GSP will use the water quality monitoring project findings to craft the water quality improvement measures for stewardship.

**Wild On Wetlands
Festival
April 8 in Los Banos
Call (209) 826-2495**



Real world study — Elementary grade students work on a habitat restoration exercise using puzzle pieces during a visit to the Grassland Environmental Education Center.

Jiminy Cricket's Environmental Challenge

Stephanie Sparks' fourth and fifth grade combination class from Charleston Elementary School (located in Los Banos) will be working with Los Banos Wildlife Area and Grassland Environmental Education Center to meet their goals for Jiminy Cricket's Environmental Challenge sponsored by the Walt Disney Company.

Mrs. Sparks' class at Charleston Elementary School would like to make a difference in wetland habitats, including educating the community members of Los Banos. Their formal proposal is due to Disney by March 1. They are scheduled to (1) pass out garbage bags to hunters in the Los Banos area in a cleanup effort for the final weekends of the waterfowl season, (2) speak before City Council, (3) conduct a letter writing campaign to local politicians, (4) door hangers regarding water conservation, (5) restoration of LBWA's nature trail and interpretative marsh, (6) a wetland guide for GEECe students, (7) fundraising for GEECe to be moved to Los Banos Wildlife Area and (8) assisting in activities at Wild on Wetlands Weekend! GEECe will be working closely with them on items 5-8, but will be available for the rest of the items.

They have scheduled three work days, not including potential volunteer days, to conduct some restoration work this fall around the Interpretative Marsh / Nature Trail at Los Banos Wildlife Area where GEECe is scheduled to be

relocated to by Fall 2006. This includes pulling non-native plants, planting some plants (including trees) and seeds to assist in maintenance of the trail in future years, and trimming up native plants. The class will also be developing a wetland activity guide for fellow students who visit the Grassland Environmental Education Center. The guide will be geared for students who have visited or are planning on visiting GEECe. The guide will be written by students for students that are at a fourth grade reading level or below. Topics of the guide include describing what a wetland habitat is, the importance of the San Joaquin Valley and the Grassland Ecological Area, and conservation topics of wetland habitats. The current plan is to include a write-up on how everyone must work together (biologists, farmers, ranchers, hunters, individuals, etc.).

GEECe, under the Grassland Conservation and Education Fund non-profit organization, puts on with the assistance of other local agencies and individuals of the community a Wild on Wetland Weekend where we emphasize the wetlands in this area. This year the event is scheduled to be on April 8th in conjunction with the city's street faire. Mrs. Sparks' students will be assisting our steering committee with overlooking games and activities for the many participants that visit WOW. On February 10, Mrs. Sparks' class will be hosting a

(Continued, page 6)

Grassland Notes

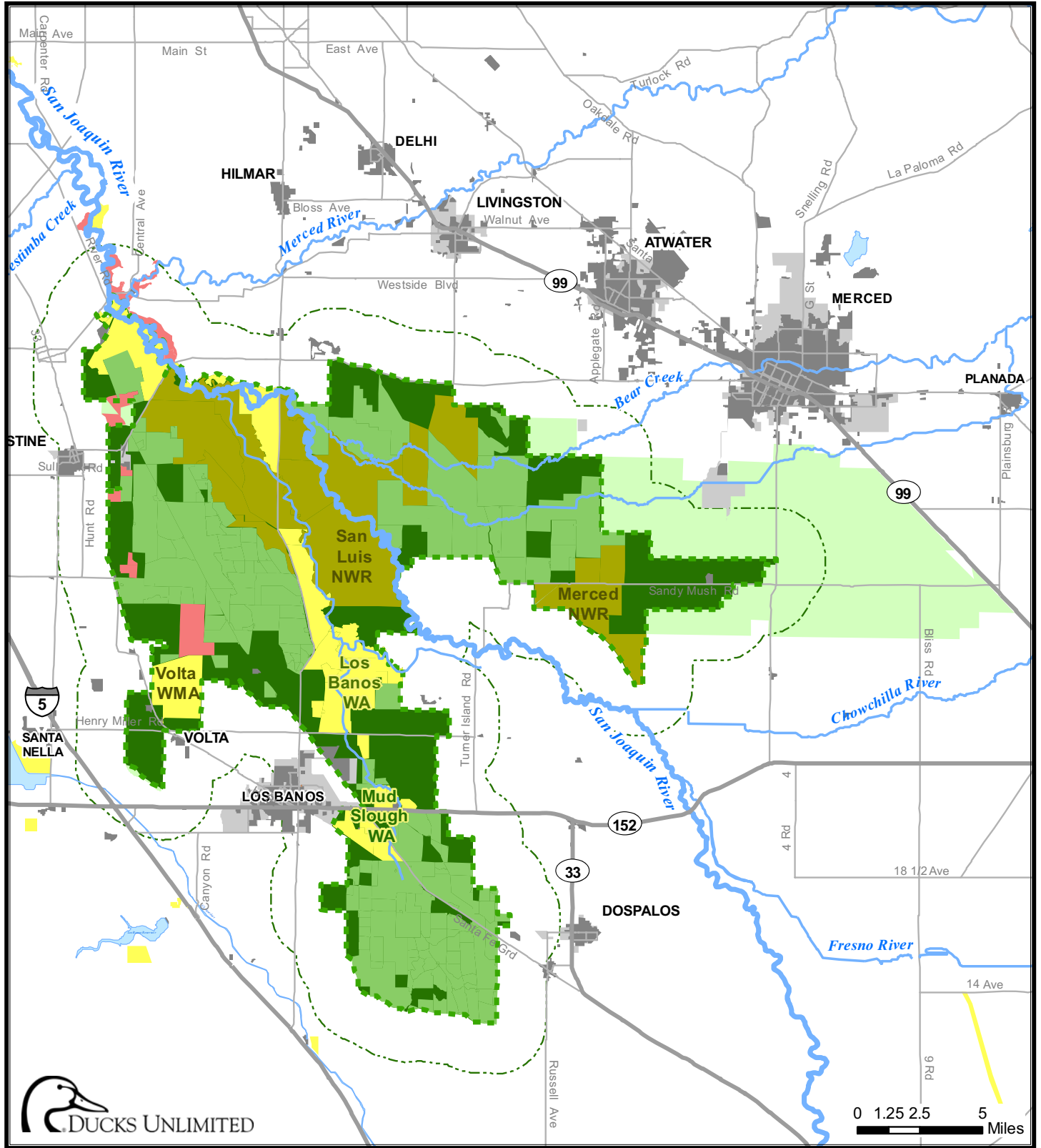
• **Supreme Court Case — Ducks Unlimited** has joined other conservation organizations by filing an amicus brief addressing whether the Clean Water Act protects wetlands adjacent to small tributaries that flow into larger bodies of water. A decision on the case, scheduled to be heard this month, could dramatically affect the future of more than half the 100 million acres of wetlands remaining in the United States, including some located in the Grasslands. The brief describes for the court how these wetlands and small tributaries are vitally important to the future of fish and wildlife conservation, and to the more than 82 million hunters, anglers and wildlife-watchers who spend \$108 billion annually in the U.S. pursuing their outdoors passions. For more than 30 years the Clean Water Act has protected these kinds of wetland and the fish and wildlife that depend upon them. Information: www.ducks.org

* * *

• **Cities Gobble Up Ag Land —** Between 1992 and 2000, approximately 294,317 acres of farmland statewide were lost to urban uses, according to the Department of Conservation. The San Joaquin Valley alone accounted for 64,435 of those acres, nearly 22 percent of the total. "The trend isn't slowing," said Don Marciochi, manager of the Grassland Water District. "That is why we are focusing efforts on development of the Los Banos and Merced County General Plans. Urban development, new highways and airports and the possibility of a High Speed Rail Project all impact wildlife and wetlands, requiring the GWD to have meaningful input on how our region will look in another 25 years. We must protect our existing wetlands and maintain a buffer zone so encroachment cannot occur."

* * *

• **Ducks and Geese Mean Big Bucks —** Some 37 million visitors to wildlife refuges across the U.S. fuel a \$1.37 billion economy according to a 400-page report published by the Department of the Interior. The report said refuges generate \$1.21 for every \$1 spent, with duck hunting, bird watching and scenic tours being the most common activities. In Merced County the money laid out for fees, lodging, food and fuel account for a \$13 million boost to the local economy each year.



Proposed Project Area for Grasslands Stewardship Plan

- | | | |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|
| Grasslands Ecological Area | Boundary (~185,000 acres) | Federal Ownership |
| Planned Expansion (~47,000 acres) | 2 Miles from GEA | USFWS Easement |
| State Ownership | WRP Easements | Urban or Built-up |
| | City Limit | |

Return Service Requested

January/February 2006



Notification Required Before Changes to District Canals

With activities on wetlands transitioning from waterfowl hunting to the off-season, when maintenance and construction projects take precedence, Grassland Water District officials are reminding landowners to review the policy on changing water control structures on district canals.

“We’re asking private landowners and club managers for their cooperation,” said Scott Lower, assistant general manager of operations of the GWD. “What they’re supposed to do—before working on banks, canals and water control structures operated and maintained by the district—is to let us know in advance before starting the project.”

Specifically the GWD must know what a landowner intends to do, who the contractor will be and to provide a plan that describes the specific project. “Our goal is to work with landowners to make sure any project is well-designed and compatible with district operations,” Lower said. “We endeavor to work with all parties for the best interest of the district and the landowner.”

A copy of the policy on banks and canals operated and maintained by the GWD may be obtained from Lower at (209) 826-5188.



Wild on wetlands — Students in Stephanie Sparks’ class use a flow chart to identify the different subtypes of wetland habitat at the Grassland Environmental Education Center.

Jiminy Cricket’s Challenge... (continued from page 4)

school-wide Read-A-Thon fundraiser for GEECe. Pledges will be sought out for how many pages they will read in a small portion of their day. Pledges will be collected by individual students. They will also open it up to entire classrooms, grade levels or entire school for interested donators.

The students of Sparks’ class challenges the landowners in the district to help them either by the means of a pledge or a flat donation toward their

fundraiser. They would like the landowners to match what they make during their Read-A-Thon.

GEECe, under the Grassland Conservation and Education Fund, has a non-profit number for tax purposes. If interested in the GEECe Read-A-Thon, please contact either Mrs. Sparks at Charleston Elementary School at (209) 826-5270 or GEECe Education Coordinator Janae Scruggs at (209) 704-4772.