

# GRASSLAND TODAY

## The Grassland Wetlands Newsletter

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March/April 2006

### *Sixth Wild On Wetlands Festival*

## *Los Banos is Ready to Go Wild on April 8 with Tours, Interactive Exhibits*

The sixth Wild On Wetlands Festival to celebrate California's largest, contiguous historic marsh—the 180,000-acre Grassland Ecological Area—will take place from 8:30 a.m.–4 p.m., April 8 in downtown Los Banos. Admission is free.

“The goal is to celebrate the wonderful wetlands that are found right in our own backyard,” said Jack Sparks, spokesman for the festival. “Grasslands has been recognized as a wetlands of international importance by the Ramsar Convention and the Western Hemispheric Shorebird Reserve Network, and we want local residents to realize what a unique area we have here in Merced County.”

Headquarters for Wild On Wetlands is Los Banos Intermediate School, near the corner of Main and 6th Streets, where a large so-called “outreach” tent will be filled with displays, exhibits and interactive children's activities that focus on the value of wetlands. Highlights include a children's art contest, live baby ducklings and a decoy carving demonstration by the Pacific Flyway Decoy Association, as well as exhibits and displays by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and California Department of Fish and Game.

“We invite everyone to learn about the unique ecology of our wetlands complex and to become active stewards to protect and preserve it,” Sparks said.

Wild On Wetlands also offers visitors an opportunity to go afield on three tours to enjoy the wetlands on a first-hand basis. Tours include: “Majestic Tule Elk” from 1 p.m.–4 p.m.; “Early Birding” from 8 a.m.–11 p.m. and “Grasslands Great Tour” from 8:30 a.m.–11 p.m. Pre-registration is recommended.

To sign up for a tour go to the website: [www.losbanos.com](http://www.losbanos.com). Then link to WOW and the online registration form. By telephone, register for tours by calling the Los Banos Chamber of Commerce, toll-free at (800) 336-6354.



*Plenty to see — Visitors tour San Luis National Wildlife Refuge during the Wild on Wetlands Festival. Photos courtesy of U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.*

### ***Annual Grassland Landowner Meeting is May 20***

The annual Grassland Landowner Meeting is scheduled from 9:00 a.m. to noon, May 20 at the Los Banos Sportsmen's Club on Highway 165, just north of the city. Admission is free and coffee and doughnuts will be served starting at 8:30 a.m.

Don Marciochi, general manager of the Grassland Water District, said some of the topics for discussion will include prospects for water availability, the 2005–2006 duck harvest report, information about burn permits, district habitat projects and reports from pri-

vate and governmental agencies.

About the duck harvest, Marciochi offered a sneak preview. “Our preliminary data shows hunters averaged about 4.3 birds per day in the North Grasslands and about 3.9 birds per day in the South Grasslands,” he said. “It's an important report that will give insights to wetlands managers.”

Following the agenda, Espanas will cater an optional lunch for \$12. Reservations for lunch must be made before 5 p.m., May 12, by calling the GWD office at (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.

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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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## DU Testifies In Support of Grasslands, CVPIA

Dave Widell, director of policy for Ducks Unlimited's western regional office and former assistant general manager of the Grassland Water District, testified on March 24 before the House Water and Power Subcommittee, chaired by Rep. George Radanovich. The oversight field hearing was conducted in Fresno.

With a focus on "Assessing the Impacts of the Central Valley Project Improvement Act," Widell testified to the benefit to wetlands and wildlife since the act became law in 1992.

Widell told the subcommittee, "The CVPIA provides key wetland basins with sufficient water supplies for the purpose of achieving optimum habitat management in all but the most critically dry years. To date, the CVPIA remains the most important legislative action ever taken to protect and restore Central Valley wetland habitat. The CVPIA also laid the foundation for many significant and beneficial conservation activities in subsequent years.

"Since 1992, delivery of water supplies of adequate quality and quantity to certain national wildlife refuges, state wildlife areas and the private wetlands of the Grassland Resource Conservation District through CVPIA has improved wetland habitat quality and benefited many wetland-dependent wildlife populations, including waterfowl, shorebirds, colonial water birds, and several threatened and endangered species. These benefits have been documented in annual

reports to Congress and a variety of studies and reports conducted by individual refuge units. Highlights of the most dramatic improvements realized to date include:

- 300% increase in wetland food production within the Grassland Resource Conservation District;

- 89% reduction in avian disease outbreaks on Sacramento Valley Wildlife Refuge since 1992;

- 49% increase in fall shorebird use Central Valley-wide;

- During first year of CVPIA implementation, bird use days on private lands in the San Joaquin Valley increased from 38,000 to 115,000; today, the San Joaquin Valley hosts 500,000 to 1 million birds each year;

- Heron and egret rookeries increased by 50% in the San Joaquin Valley;

- Increased refuge visitation during fall migration period. Sacramento Valley National Wildlife Refuge reported a 61% increase in visitor use within the last 13 years;

- Increases in non-waterfowl species including some listed species, including the western pond turtle, tri-colored blackbird and giant garter snake;

- Marked increases in white-faced ibis and sandhill cranes. At the Sutter National Wildlife Refuge, white-faced ibis populations increased from 1,000 birds in 1991 to 15,000 in 2002;

- The San Luis National Wildlife Ref-

(Continued, page 6)

## USFWS Approves Four Nontoxic Shot Types

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently approved four new nontoxic shot types for waterfowl.

The approved shot types are:

- A formulation of tungsten-iron-copper-nickel (TICN) shot, composed of 40–76 percent tungsten, 10–37 percent iron, 9–16 percent copper and 5–7 percent nickel produced by Spherical Precision, Inc. of Tustin, California;

- A formulation of iron-tungsten-nickel (ITN) alloys composed of 20–70 percent tungsten, 10–40 percent nickel, and 10–70 percent iron produced by ENVIRON-Metal Inc. of Sweet Home, Oregon;

- A formulation of tungsten-bronze (TB) shot made of 60 percent tungsten, 35.1 percent copper, 3.9 percent tin, and

1 percent iron produced by Olin Corporation of East Alton, Illinois; and

- A formulation of tungsten-tin-iron (TTI) shot composed of 58 percent tungsten, 38 percent tin, and 4 percent iron produced by Nice Shot, Inc., of Albion, Pennsylvania.

## Grasslands, Tulare Basin Receive \$1M Grant

California Waterfowl Association has succeeded in obtaining a \$1 million grant from the North America Wetlands Conservation Act, with habitat improvement projects to begin in May. Biologist Richard Wright said \$400,000 will be used in the Grasslands, with \$600,000 ticketed for the Tulare Basin. Information: (209) 826-5188.

## ***New Procedures for Prescribed Burning***

Waterfowl habitat managers in the San Joaquin Valley are advised that new procedures are in place for prescribed burns.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has modified its rules in order to meet new state mandates that limit open burning. District Rule 4106, Prescribed Burning and Hazard Reduction Burning, allows the use of "prescribed fire" to assist with watershed rehabilitation, vegetation manipulation, and ecosystem management, among other land-management objectives.

Under old rules, a prescribed burn could be conducted with a valid burn permit on any "burn day." Under the new rules, burners must submit a plan well in advance and must receive authorization for the day they wish to ignite a burn.

At least 30 days prior to a proposed burn, a Wildlife Habitat Improvement Plan must be submitted to the Air District for review and approval. Forms are available online at [www.valleyair.org](http://www.valleyair.org) under the Compliance menu or by calling the District's compliance depart-

ment at (559) 230-5950. The plan must be accompanied by a letter from the Department of Fish and Game certifying that the burn is desirable and proper. The District-approved plan becomes the permit to burn.

The burn may only be ignited upon final authorization from the Air District. The authorization may or may not be granted for the specified burn day, depending on the following factors: local and regional air quality forecasts and meteorological conditions; the total estimated emissions generated from the burn; the effect of the burn on air quality in the area; and the proximity to sensitive receptors.

Fees are \$5 per burned acre for broadcast burns and \$3 per treated acre for pile burning. Burns of 40 acres or less are exempt from fees.

The Air District's jurisdiction covers Stanislaus, San Joaquin, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and the Valley portion of Kern counties. For more information, contact the Air District's compliance department at 559-230-5950.

## ***Byron Hisey is New Water District Director***

Byron Hisey of Newman was elected in November to a four-year term on the Grassland Water District board of directors. Hisey, who retired after 32 years with the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Department, got started hunting ducks on the Buena Vista Land & Cattle Club in the south Grasslands in 1968.

Since 1987 he has been a member of the Hollister Duck Club, having served as its president the past three terms, and founding an egg salvage program that has resulted in more than 200 ducks

being raised, banded and released.

About being elected to the board of directors Hisey said, "I felt I had the knowledge and experience to make a difference (on the board). Ducks and wetlands are kind of a second life to me, if you will. I take the position very seriously. I'm up on the issues that face us and strive to be very approachable, and willing to be contacted directly by landowners in the Grasslands."

Hisey can be reached by calling (209) 862-2174.

## ***Harvest Varies on Merced County Public Hunting Areas***

Waterfowl harvest on Merced County's state wildlife areas and national wildlife refuges varied in 2005-2006. Most public areas were open Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays from Oct. 22-Jan. 29. Exceptions were two federal units—West Bear Creek, which didn't open until the third weekend in November and Merced, which is open only on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Six areas yielded better than two birds per day. Gadwall Unit topped the list with 3.17 birds per hunter, followed

by Merced, 2.52; San Luis, 2.42; North Freitas, 2.41; West Bear Creek, 2.36; and South Freitas, 2.29.

San Luis hunters harvested the most ducks, 9,105, followed by Los Banos, 7,543; Kesterson, 4,431; Gadwall, 3,412 and Volta, 2,867. Top goose-producing areas were Los Banos with 147, followed by Merced, 78 and San Luis, 24.

Overall, 19,355 hunters harvested 39,623 ducks, 353 geese and 459 coots, good for a 2.09 birds per hunter average.

## ***Grassland Notes***

• **Bird Banding Effort** — In summer 2005 crews from the California Waterfowl Association and state Department of Fish and Game used bait traps to catch and band 1,180 ducks in the Grasslands. Trapping took place on San Luis, Merced and Kesterson National Wildlife refuges; Los Banos, Salt Slough, Gadwall and Volta Wildlife areas and seven privately-managed wetlands—Backwater, Coast Cattle, Fraser, Frog Pond, Hollister, Tri-Cities and Webfoot. CWA spokesman James Laughlin said 929 mallards were banded, by far the most-numerous species. Also getting banded were 171 gadwall, 53 redheads, 13 cinnamon teal, 9 wood ducks, 2 widgeon, 2 ring-necked ducks and one each among pintail, ruddy duck and pintail. State-wide crews banded 7,556 ducks last summer, with mallards accounting for 81 percent. Sixty-two percent of the mallards were hatch-year birds, a response to excellent spring conditions. Since 1985, CWA/DFG crews have banded more than 100,000 ducks. Information: (916) 648-1406.

\* \* \*

• **Pintail Flight Chronicled** — In 2003-2004, scientists from the U.S. Geological Survey's Western Ecological Research Center used satellite transmitters to track spring migrations of adult female pintails from the Central Valley. Data shows pintails departed during late-February to mid-March, and 77 to 87 percent stopped first in the region of south-central Oregon, extreme northwestern Nevada and northeastern California. There they deployed various migration strategies to reach the northern breeding grounds. For instance, after leaving the important Southern Oregon-Northeastern California staging region in late-April to early-May, most pintails migrated directly over the Pacific Ocean to Alaska or made stops along the coast on their way to Alaska. Others that stayed in the region to late-March and mid-April migrated directly to southern Alberta in the Canadian prairie. If birds migrated from early to mid-March they flew toward the prairie with stopovers in southern Idaho and western Montana. To obtain a copy of the report, write to: USGS, Dixon Field Station, 6924 Tremont Rd., Dixon, CA 95620.

# *Real-time Water Quality Management in Grasslands Ecological Area Wetlands*

by Nigel W.T. Quinn

The first CALFED-sponsored real-time water quality management project, which was led by a project team comprising Berkeley National Laboratory staff and Grassland Water District personnel, was completed in June 2004. A final report of the study will be available on the CALFED website <http://calwater.ca.gov/Archives/Archives.shtml> later this year. The objectives of this first study were as follows:

- Determine the impact of saline wetland drawdown return flows on water quality conditions in the San Joaquin River.
- Investigate the flexibility of wetland drawdown management to be responsive to San Joaquin River assimilative capacity
- Develop techniques for measuring and monitoring possible impacts due to changes in seasonal wetland drawdown scheduling.
- Attempt to perform annual water and salt balances for a typical seasonal wetland.

The investigations undertaken as part of this project were at two different scales. The first tier of investigations selected the Northern Division of the Grassland Water District and installed state-of-the-art flow and water quality monitoring stations at five drainage outlets into Mud Slough, which captured more than 90% of the wetland drainage from Grassland Water District into the San Joaquin River. The inflow station along Volta Wasteway was also monitored for flow and electrical conductivity. The second tier of investigations focused on a single duck club. The Board of the Salinas Land and Cattle Club and their resident manager and wetland biologist Tim Poole were kind in allowing our project team to install monitoring stations at the three major drainage outlets from the club and at the inlet off Mosquito Ditch.

The network of telemetered flow and water quality monitoring stations provided 15 minute stage, flow, electrical conductivity and temperature data that was automatically downloaded at a computer workstation housed at Berkeley National Laboratory and the data parsed, error checked and corrected using specialized software before being

posted to the project website, [http://esd.lbl.gov/people/nwquinn/Grassland\\_website/sanluis/index.html](http://esd.lbl.gov/people/nwquinn/Grassland_website/sanluis/index.html). The website was operational for over 3 years. These stations have since been folded into the Agricultural Waiver Program and continue to be operated and maintained by Grassland Water District staff. One of the stations at Los Banos Creek also provides data to researchers active in the San Joaquin River Dissolved Oxygen TMDL.

The monitoring at the Salinas Club was also successful but exposed early on some distinct limitations to the current flow measurement technology that was available at the time. Although the stage and water quality data obtained from the various sites in the club was good, the acoustic meters deployed in the drain culverts were too insensitive to obtain accurate discharge data.

However, valuable experience was gained in this project which helped improve monitoring station design in a

subsequent project in the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge and a current State Board-sponsored project within the State Wildlife Management Areas and in the Ducky Strike Duck Club in the Southern Division of Grassland Water District.

Two valuable work products resulted from the work in the Salinas Club. The first was a publication of the botany of common wetland moist soil plants in the Grassland Ecological Area which borrowed heavily from the expertise of Tim Poole at the Salinas Club and from federal wetland biologists Brandon Jordan and Mike Ennis.

The second were a set of remote sensing techniques, the first using high resolution remote sensing imagery and medical imaging software known as E-Cognition to develop accurate generalized areal maps of wetland moist soil plant associations in the Salinas Club and Northern Grassland Water District.

## *Interesting Facts from Duck Hunter National Survey*

A 2005 survey of duck hunters was conducted in the 49 U.S. states having duck seasons. A random sample of 29,862 duck hunters was contacted, of which 10,887 hunters responded (40% response). Of those who responded, 10,219 were "active" duck hunters.

Nearly three-quarters of respondents said duck hunting was one of their most important (58%), or most important (14%), recreational activities.

Roughly one-third (29%) started hunting ducks before 1970, another third (36%) between 1970 and 1988, and the remaining third (35%) after 1988.

Almost two-thirds (65%) spent over \$250 each year on duck hunting; and one-fifth (20%) spent over \$1,000 each year.

Forty-three percent of duck hunters spent 10 days or less hunting ducks each year over the last 5 years; 30% spent 11 to 20 days; 17% spent 21 to 30 days; and 10% spent more than 30 days.

In the Pacific Flyway, over three-fourths of duck hunters felt the bag limit for ducks was about right over the past five years, and 70% felt that the season length was about right. How-

ever, 65% of hunters in the flyway felt that the overall quality of duck hunting has stayed about the same, or declined a little. In California, the number was higher, with 79% of hunters feeling that quality has declined or stayed the same, and 50% of hunters felt that quality has declined.

Again for the Pacific flyway, when it came time to describe the number of places hunters have to hunt, only nine percent felt there was any improvement, others felt there was no change or that there was a decline. Hunters in the Pacific Flyway also felt the pressure of other hunters, with 62% of hunters feeling there was more crowding at hunting areas and 59% of hunters feeling that there was more hunting pressure. It was interesting to compare results of hunter satisfaction between flyways. In general, hunters in the Pacific Flyway seem to need more ducks in the bag for satisfaction, and say they would give up hunting if bag limits were reduced.

A majority (53%) of duck hunters indicated that they think spinning-wing decoys "should be allowed," 23% said "not allowed," and 24% had no opinion.

## *Pacific Flyway Scientist Opines: "It's a Great Time to be a Duck"*

The annual Mid-Winter Inventory of Waterfowl—an aerial survey flown in early January by U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and California Department of Fish and Game personnel that covered more than 7,200 miles—found more than 4.91 million ducks, geese and swans.

It was the second consecutive year, surveyors said, that waterfowl numbers hovered around 5 million birds, prompting a top federal scientist to proclaim, "It is definitely a good time to be a duck."

Mike Wolder, supervisory wildlife biologist at the Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge Complex near Willows, and Dan Yparraguirre, waterfowl coordinator for the state Department of Fish and Game, coordinated the survey. They concluded waterfowl populations on the Pacific Flyway—the primary north-south migratory corridor in which waterfowl fly in western North America—are maintaining stable numbers, with most species showing increases above long-term averages.

"California and the Central Valley, in particular, drive the overall flyway numbers," Wolder said. "We have more than adequate habitat for the waterfowl populations we have right now. It's a great time to be a bird. The wintering habitat here is in as good a shape as I've ever seen it."

Most species of ducks are far ahead of 10-year averages. The inventory found mallards are up 21 percent, gadwall 25 percent, widgeon 34 percent and green-winged teal 17 percent above the long-term and securely above goals set by the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. Northern pintail is the noteworthy exception, up 1.8 percent but well-below NAWMP objectives.

Wolder said waterfowl spread out immediately after the close of waterfowl hunting season on Jan. 29. When it came to surveying the birds earlier in the month he encountered "little flocks most everywhere, they had so many options." He said it's amazing how often the birds come to the Central Valley, return to the Klamath Basin in northeastern California and then come back to the valley, again.

"They are very mobile, and their movements are triggered by habitat conditions and the availability of food," he said.



**Waterfowl populations increase** — Ducks and geese wintered in the Grasslands and throughout California in increased numbers, totaling approximately 5 million birds statewide. Photos courtesy of U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

All these positives notwithstanding, Wolder also issued a warning.

"While we have more than enough flooded habitat right now, I wonder what the future will bring us," Wolder said. "Right now we have enough flooded rice and historic managed wetlands to support waterfowl populations. But as we see urban development gobbling up field-after-field and an unmitigated human population flooding our state and demanding drinking water and other natural resources, the future health of waterfowl certainly isn't set in stone."

For the present, however, Wolder waxes about the number of ducks and points to impressive gains in goose numbers, as well. White-fronted geese jumped from 400,000 to more than 500,000 in the fall 2005. "That's a real big number, a true milestone," Wolder said. "It's the first time on record that white-fronts have exceeded a half million birds."

He also cited record numbers of Aleutian Canada geese—once fully protected as a listed endangered species—that now support a daily bag limit of four. Most of these small-sized Canadas winter in Stanislaus and Merced counties.

Merced County, which annually ranks first or second among all U.S. counties for its duck harvest, accounted for nearly twice as many birds during the Mid-Winter Inventory. Fish and Game's Greg Gerstenberg, who has

flown transects for close to 20 years commented, "The Grasslands wintered nearly twice as many ducks in 2006 than usual," adding that good, moist soil food production the past summer combined with heavy rains in December to provide "excellent habitat" for the birds.

Scientists believe good local production of ducks—mallard, gadwall and cinnamon teal—bolstered numbers of ducks from Alaska and Canada that make up the bulk of the population that winter here in the Central Valley. In 2004 the ratio of locally-reared ducks—the ratio of immature-to-adult birds—was 1.37. But in 2005, that figure improved to 2.1.

"That's a good increase in the number of young in the population," Wolder said.

All the data makes Wolder seem pretty content, at least for the present.

"The long-term population averages are what I tend to look at when I evaluate the health of waterfowl," he said. "Basically, all species are on an upward trend, and that's very positive." Wolder can be contacted at (530) 934-2801.



Return Service Requested

March/April 2006



## ***DU Testifies In Support of Grasslands, CVPIA...****(continued from page 2)*

uge has witnessed a 30% increase in wetland acreage (2,640 acres) directly associated with CVPIA water supplies;

- Flooded wetland acreage on Kern National Wildlife Refuge has increased from 2,200 acres to 6,400 acres due to CVPIA water deliveries;

- Hunter-use-days at Kern National Wildlife Refuge have increased from 900 in 1991 to 3,100 in 2005 due to increased wetland acreage and associated increased hunter capacity;

- The Agricultural Waterfowl Incentives Program of CVPIA funded the flooding of an average of 40,000 acres of agricultural lands (winter-flooded rice) each winter since passage of the CVPIA (total of approximately 250,000 acres), providing a substantial portion of the annual waterfowl energetic needs within the Pacific Flyway.

“Despite these successes, we are concerned that this recovery cannot be fully realized without the Bureau of Reclamation being given the resources to meet their statutory Level 4 refuge water supply obligations, and could be further impacted in future years due to the rapid increase in water costs and competition for CVPIA Restoration Fund dollars,” said Widell. “This concern has been recently magnified with the potential settlement associated with the restoration of the San Joaquin River and the possible use of restoration funds to meet the obligations of that settlement. In attempting to meet that pending obligation, and others, Congress should give consideration as to how

existing CVPIA obligations, such as refuge Level 4 water supply acquisition, will be met. In our opinion, a long-term strategy which involves long-term funding will

be necessary to ensure that full refuge water supplies are delivered, not to mention that the legal obligations of CVPIA in that regard are met.”

## ***Applying Pesticides Requires Permit, Training***

Since the rules and guidelines for the application of pesticides within the State of California are very complicated, the Grassland Water District would like to give a little guidance to those clubs that are planning on applying chemicals around their duck clubs. The GWD recommends that they first contact the Merced County Agriculture Commissioner’s office. All registered chemicals that are sold through a chemical company require a licensed person be available before any delivery can be made.

Most clubs are looking to control broadleaf plants with the use of 2-4-D (Weedar) or Garlon 3-A or 4-A. These chemicals require that you report their use to the Co. Ag. Commissioner’s office prior to application. If you are planning on treating open water areas to control aquatic vegetation, the District recommends the use of Rodeo, AquaMaster or any Glyphosate based product. Glyphosate products still require reporting to the County Ag. Commissioner. Many of the clubs already have licensed personnel within their membership or retain a wetland manager with the proper license, but for those clubs who do not possess a private applicator’s license they should

contact the Co. Ag. Commissioner’s office, (209) 827-2030, prior to applying any chemicals to ditches, roadways or fields; these areas are considered agricultural in nature.

Clubs just wishing to spray around the cabins for insects or weeds can use any commercial chemical that can be purchased from a hardware or garden outlet. These chemicals do not need county approval and can be applied at any time.

The purpose of these regulations is to protect the applicator and or those persons that may come in contact with the chemicals. They are also there to protect against potential drift that may cause damage to agricultural crops or the environment. The best advice is to contact the Co. Ag. Commissioner for assistance and guidance prior to applying any pesticides or herbicides.

Any and all chemicals should be applied as per the label instructions and precautions such as eye protection and chemical resistant gloves should always be used regardless of the chemical applied. “I have found that the personnel at the Ag. office are very helpful in providing you with any guidance that you may need,” said Scott Lower, assistant general manager of the GWD.