

GRASSLAND TODAY

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Private Clubs Post Solid Averages During 2005–2006 Waterfowl Hunting Season

Results of the annual waterfowl harvest survey of private clubs found hunters averaging 3.56 birds per day in the North Grasslands and 3.9 birds in the South Grasslands. Forty-four clubs participated in the voluntary, confidential survey, conducted by Grassland Water District.

District biologist Richard Wright, who compiled the data, said the averages posted on private clubs were good. “We had better than average hunting,” Wright said. “It wasn’t quite as good as in 2004–2005, but that was a tough year to follow since we didn’t get much help from the weather—fewer days with either north wind or fog.”

In the previous three seasons hunters in the north averaged 3.25, 3.41 and 4.31, while in the south, they averaged 2.59, 3.41 and 3.69.

“The past season found a good distribution of birds between the north and south portions of the Grasslands,” Wright said. “Early August water helped the birds to establish tradition in all areas.”

He said the season also was punctuated by an improved age ratio of juvenile per adult, with increases in young-of-the-year birds among every species. The pintail ratio was the highest in the past five years. The January Mid-Winter Inventory found close to 1 million birds using the Grasslands, the best total since the 1997–1998 season.

For the 10th consecutive year green-winged teal were the no. 1 bird and shoveler the no. 2 bird in the bag. Widgeon were the no. 3 most-harvested duck in the Grasslands, a position it has held in four-of-five of the most recent seasons. Only in 2003–2004 did mallard gain the no. 3 rating.

South Grassland hunters averaged one-third a duck better than their northern counterparts. The percentage breakdown of harvested species between the two areas appears in the box at right:



Good Recruitment — Northern pintail enjoyed their highest juvenile-to-adult ratio in the last five years in 2005.

Trends among ducks were indicated by the harvest. Mallards and pintail were most prevalent during the early part of the season and then declined as the 100-day session wore on. Green-winged teal hunting was good throughout the season. Widgeon became more available late in the season.

In comparison with private duck clubs, the waterfowl harvest on public

hunting areas was more modest. Areas with the top birds-per-hunter averages included: Gadwall Unit, 3.19; Merced, 2.53; North Freitas, 2.50; San Luis, 2.42; South Freitas and Mendota, 2.37; and West Bear Creek, 2.06. Other public areas averaged less than two birds per hunter.

For further analysis of the data, contact Wright at (209) 826-5188.

Waterfowl Harvest Comparison

Species	North Grasslands	South Grasslands
Green-winged teal	50.2%	53.7%
Shoveler	15.2%	11.8%
Widgeon	8.4%	8.8%
Mallard	4.0%	4.0%
Pintail	7.5%	6.8%
Gadwall	5.1%	4.2%
Cinnamon teal	4.8%	3.4%
Ring-necked duck	0.4%	1.5%
Redhead	0.5%	0.6%
Canvasback	0.4%	0.7%
Geese, mixed	0.6%	0.9%

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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Good Turnout for Annual Landowner Meeting

More than 125 landowners, governmental and non-profit agency representatives attended the annual Grassland Landowner Meeting, held May 20 at the Los Banos Sportsmen's Association. The session was sponsored by the Grassland Water District.



Sharon Wedro

Highlights:

• **Burn permits** — Sharon Wedro of the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District in Fresno said, "At least 30 days in advance of the proposed burning an applicant must submit a completed wildlife habitat improvement plan; an operational plan for managing a specific burn to achieve resource benefits and specific management objects." At minimum the plan must include the facility name and location, contact information, project objective, fire prescription including smoke management components, personnel, organization and equipment. Department of Fish and Game certification and final ignition authorization are required. Information: (559) 696-7789; sharon.wedro@valleyair.org.

• **Use of sprays, chemicals** — Loren Lamb of the Merced County Agriculture Commission explained what landowners need to know about weed management and the approval needed to use restrictive materials under the California Food and Agricultural Code. Information: (209) 385-7431.

• **Avian influenza** — Fritz Reid, Ph.D. of Ducks Unlimited said it

wasn't a question of "if bird flu will reach the United States. It's a matter of when." He recommends clubs use a 10 percent bleach solution to clean basins, chopping blocks, knives and cutting boards daily, once bird cleaning is completed. Reid also noted there is no record of bird flu being transmitted from wild birds to humans. Information: www.ducks.org or www.calwaterfowl.org.

• **Political action** — Bill Gaines of California Waterfowl Association introduced the newly established California Outdoor Heritage Alliance, a 501(c)(4) political action committee. He said 100 percent of the funds given to the PAC would be used for lobbying in Sacramento and Washington, D.C. Donations are not tax deductible. Information: (916) 648-1406; www.calwaterfowl.org.



Loren Lamb

• **Resource protection** — Osha Meserve, an attorney with the law firm of Adams, Broadwell, Joseph & Cardozo, gave an update on the long-term urbanization and resource protection efforts in the Grasslands Ecological Area. Her firm represents the Grassland Water District on matters dealing with environmental issues, encroachment, development and other threats to the 180,000-acre GEA and its one-mile buffer zone (*see page 5*).

For additional information about the Landowner Meeting contact Veronica Woodruff, assistant general manager of the GWD/GRCD at (209) 826-5188.

No. 1 Rated Proposal Receives \$1 Million

In March the California Waterfowl Association received a \$1 million grant from the North American Wetlands Conservation Act to fund its North San Joaquin Valley Wetland Project Phase II. The CWA proposal that will directly benefit the Grassland Wetlands was ranked No. 1 in the nation during the competitive process to secure funding.

will also work with neighboring clubs to improve their drainage.

Lastly, the 216 Drain project in the North Grasslands helps stem chronic drainage problems on the west side. Clubs benefiting from the work include the Salinas Duck Club and several smaller clubs to the south.

The NAWCA grant also embraces



Project Underway — Major work on the Santa Fe Canal will improve water flows to critical wetlands.

The project includes work on privately-held wetlands, water conveyances within the Grassland Water District and public hunting areas on local state wildlife areas lands.

Biologist Richard Wright said projects within the GWD include work on the Sorsky weirs, extension of Eagle Ditch and the 216 Drainage Project.

“The project in the South Grasslands on the Sorsky Ditch replaces crossings, large weirs and helps the overall delivery and drainage capabilities of the clubs that rely on the conveyance,” Wright said. “Clubs directly benefiting are those located along Wild Duck Road and others located upstream that use the 240 Ditch, which eventually drains into the Sorsky.”

He said the project in the North Grasslands completes the tail end of the Eagle Ditch system. Presently the Eagle Ditch ends a quarter mile from its eventual drain, with unwanted water dumped on Lone Tree Gun Club. This project

nine private land wetland enhancement projects on the following clubs: Cherokee Land and Cattle, Sprig Haven Farms, Frasher Farms, Lucky “K”, Mesquite Sportsmen’s Club, Oh So Hi Duck Club, Riverfield Land and Cattle, Sand Lake Hunting Club, and Valley Land and Cattle.

Wright said work on private duck clubs primarily focuses on upgrading water delivery and drainage capabilities.

Projects on state land include construction work on Ruth Lake at Los Banos Wildlife Area. The lake is popular among recreational users and is an important summer water wetland for wildlife.

NAWCA will also fund work on North Grasslands Wildlife Area, including the Salt Slough and China Island units. China Island work will restore 80 acres of riparian habitat by creating braided channels and sloughs and enhance existing levee infrastructure to

(Continued, page 6)

Grassland Notes

• **Top Quacker** — Stuart Mattos of Gustine has won the 2006 Grasslands Regional Duck Calling Contest held recently at Auto Life Outdoors in Modesto. Mattos out-dueled a field of strong callers to qualify for the National Duck Calling Championships in August in Stuttgart, Arkansas. Finishing in second place was Stuart McCullough of Los Banos, followed by John Stanley III of Reno, Joe Clark of Palmdale and Tim Hudson of Los Banos. Information: Tom Lucas, (800) 499-1004.

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• **Wildfowl Art Festival** — Pacific Flyway Decoy Association presents its 35th annual show, July 15–16 at the Doubletree Hotel in Sacramento. “The festival promises something for everyone, whether you are a carver or wildlife artist seeking to compete nationally, or a collector of fine art,” said spokesman Jim Burcio. The PFDA was established in 1971 and is a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and enhancing decoy art and sculpture. The festival is open to the public. Admission is \$2. Information: jburcio@comcast.net.

* * *

• **Public Shooting Area Results** — Hunters who plied national wildlife refuges and state wildlife areas bagged 203,824 birds during the 2005–2006 waterfowl hunting season, an increase of 9.7 percent over the previous year. The harvest would have been even greater if flooding hadn’t closed Grizzly Island, Sutter, Yolo and Little Dry Creek, denying public access for periods of time. The goose harvest increased 33.4 percent for the season while the take of pheasants increased 88 percent. Among ducks, the mallard harvest increased by 6.1 percent and the pintail take jumped by 50.6 percent. The overall daily average on the 40 public areas was a robust 2.25 birds per gun. Overall there were 94,877 hunter visits, an increase of 1.4 percent. Information: www.dfg.ca.gov/shoot/shoot.html.

* * *

• **USFWS Website** — The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s California and Nevada Operations Office has launched a new website to highlight activities on national wildlife refuges in the two states and the Klamath Basin. The website: www.fws.gov/cno.

Malia Hildebrandt Receives Martin J. Winton Award

When Malia Hildebrandt first came to Merced County in 1986 as a soil conservationist with the Soil Conservation Service—now known as the Natural Resources Conservation Service—she was fresh out of college and didn't even know the Grassland Resource Conservation District (GRCD) existed.



Malia Hildebrandt

Her initial assignment dealt mainly with farmers and ranchers, helping them to implement conservation practices to improve water conservation and reduce soil erosion. It wasn't until Hildebrandt was given the primary task of working with the Water Bank Program, of which the NRCS had technical responsibility, that she came in contact with the Grassland Water District and the GRCD.

She recalled, "Mr. Winton was board member on the GRCD and I knew, at my first meeting, that this man was someone who could make a difference for the resource. He most certainly did. Mr. Winton fought for the most critical component of wetlands—water!"

Hildebrandt was inspired by Winton for his commitment to the Grasslands and has worked hard to make a differ-

ence of her own. Currently the District Conservationist, Hildebrandt was honored by the GRCD board of directors at the May 20 Landowners meeting in Los Banos, who presented her with the coveted J. Martin Winton Conservationist of the Year Award.

She was cited for assisting landowners in becoming partners in the Conservation Reserve Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program and Wetland Reserve Program. Her husband, Chris Hildebrandt, a biologist with Ducks Unlimited, accepted the award on her behalf.

In a personal interview with *Grassland Today*, she offered these comments: "I cherish the Grasslands and appreciate and respect those stewards of the land who take care of it to provide habitat for waterfowl and other wetland-dependent species 365 days a year," Hildebrandt said. "They do this because they love the land and want to see it remain in wildlife habitat for future generations. Because of my experiences here (in Grasslands), I will always be an advocate for wetlands and wildlife habitat.

"I am humbled to be given this prestigious award, thinking of the many people deserving of this recognition, including the many partners in governmental agencies and non-profit organizations, as well as folks in the GRCD who make wetlands projects a reality. NRCS programs are a success because we can all work together to do what is best for the resource."

J. Martin Winton would have been proud.

Read-A-Thon Fundraiser for GEECe Nets \$7,000

Charleston Elementary School's Read-A-Thon fundraiser for GEECe exceeded expectations by most. The students organized, gathered pledges and conducted their Read-A-Thon in less than a month to bring in a profit of \$4,073. Landowners in the district matched the funds at \$3,010.

Stephanie Sparks's fourth and fifth grade students were the organizers behind the scenes at Charleston Elementary School. The combined classroom of students approached GEECe Education Coordinator Janae Scruggs in their desire to support GEECe's move to the Los Banos Wildlife Area through a fundraiser. From that point on, it expanded to the entire school becoming involved and challenging the Grassland landowners to match the money raised during their fundraiser.

Sparks's class supported GEECe in many ways throughout the past year. The students created an activity guide for fellow students who visit GEECe. It includes information on the wildlife found in the Grassland area wetlands along with a conservation note recognizing the contribution of hunting.

Last month, the class assisted the steering committee of Wild on Wetlands with activities for kids who visited the street faire in downtown Los Banos. The students developed five activities for participants to teach them about the importance of wetlands.

Sparks's class also competed in the Jiminy Cricket's Challenge sponsored by Disney. The "Crazy about Wetlands" project was carried out over a four-month period during which the students concentrated on wetlands. The January/February issue of *Grassland Today* outlined all the activities within the class's project. Sparks's class was awarded a State Finalist in the challenge.

GEECe will be relocated this fall to the Los Banos Wildlife Area. WCB approved funding at their May 25 meeting to assist in the move. The relocation will ensure GEECe being open to the public year around.

For further information or questions, please contact GEECe Education Coordinator Janae Scruggs at (209) 704-4772.

Grassland Water District Completes Water Conservation Plan

The Grassland Water District has recently completed and adopted its 2006 Water Conservation Plan, a requirement of the 25-year water contract with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

The process of completing the Conservation Plan involved a three-year effort to develop the criteria for water conservation on state, federal and private wetland areas within the Grasslands and was a joint effort among the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, California Fish & Game, Grassland Water District and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

"The plan will become a living document that will help guide the GWD in development of efficient, economical

and practical uses of its water supply during the duration of the 25-year contract," said Scott Lower, assistant general manager for operations.

He said the Conservation Plan has been accepted by Reclamation and is posted in the Federal Register for public comment.

"After the 30-day posting, the document will become a finalized plan," Lower said. "The District will be required to update the plan on an annual basis. These updates will include present and future projects designed to improve water conservation."

For information about the Water Conservation Plan contact Lower at (209) 826-5188.

Urbanization, Sprawl and the GWD's Long-Term Resource Protection Efforts

By Osha Meserve

The District's landowners are very familiar with what a special and valuable place the Grasslands of Merced County are. Encroachment from incompatible development proposals is, however, an ongoing concern in the District and in the Grassland Ecological Area (GEA). The District's 2001 Land Use Study recommended that only resource beneficial land uses occur within one mile of the GEA and resource neutral uses occur within two miles of the GEA. This is because urban land uses, even on the perimeter of the GEA, can introduce impacts that degrade the quality of habitat within the GEA.

One of the many challenges the Grasslands face is simply getting on the map, so that when new projects are planned, potential impacts on the Grasslands are taken into account and minimized. Despite the immeasurable ecological and other values of the GEA, it does not appear on most planners' maps. Five separate planning and permitting jurisdictions have existing or projected planning boundaries that intersect with the GEA or that extend into sensitive transitional lands. No regional or state planning process guides or coordinates local land use decisions, or otherwise protects the GEA from incompatible development. As a result, the burden often falls on the District and others concerned with the effects of development on natural areas (such as DFG, FWS, Ducks Unlimited, and California Waterfowl Association) to protect the Grasslands.

The District leadership has a long history of concern and involvement in land use planning decisions in the vicinity of the GEA because ensuring that only compatible uses occur is essential to the long-term viability of the resource. The land use challenges the District faces now are only going to increase in the future. By 2030, Merced County's population is expected to double to almost 250,000 people. The eight-county Valley as a whole is expected to grow from 3.3 million people to almost 8 million people by 2050.

Ranchette Threat

According to a recent report by the American Farmland Trust (AFT), "The Future is Now: Central Valley Farmland at the Tipping Point?" (<http://www.farmland.org/reports/futureisnow/introductionX.html>), the biggest immediate threat to agriculture in the Valley is ranchettes. These 10-20 acre parcels are an inefficient use of often formerly productive farmland, and are incompatible with surrounding areas devoted to agriculture or open space uses.



Protectors of the Resource — Fritz Reid, chief biologist for Ducks Unlimited, discusses long-term protection for the Grasslands Ecological Area with water district attorney Osha Meserve at the annual Landowner Meeting.

In Merced County, agriculturally zoned land can often be divided into 20-acre parcels when the County determines that the smaller parcels are still "viable" for agricultural uses. According to the AFT report, the County developed very inefficiently in the 1990-2000 period, serving only about 9 people per acre developed.

Retaining land in agricultural use creates an excellent buffer around the GEA. One of the ways to advance long-term protection of farmland near the GEA is to partner with other groups interested in preserving Merced County's agricultural productivity to curb the pace of ranchette conversions.

Regional Planning Hopes

Two regional planning efforts are attempting to improve the quality of life in the Central Valley and to provide planning guidance to local communities: (1) the Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley, and (2) the San Joaquin Valley Blueprint Project. These processes recognize the challenges facing the San Joaquin Valley are not limited by jurisdictional borders but are interdependent. These regional planning efforts must recognize and call for the protection of unique Grasslands resources

while accommodating projected population growth. Once these guidance plans are complete, it will be critical for local entities to carry them out.

Recent Projects in the Vicinity of the Grasslands

In just the past year or so, there were two proposals to subdivide agriculturally-zoned lands into 20-acre parcels, two proposed residential subdivisions, and three major infrastructure projects in or near the GEA. The District became involved in the planning processes for all of these projects. The District's comments helped lead to: (1) project modifications to reduce impacts on the Grasslands, or (2) withdrawal of the project application.

Particularly in light of a probable northern route for the Los Banos Bypass, there is critical need to establish a permanent open space/agricultural buffer between the Bypass and the GEA. Many of the District's various efforts are aimed at creating such a buffer, including work on the Los Banos Bypass itself, and the Los Banos and Merced County General Plan update processes.

Conclusion

By actively participating in planning processes and collaborating with other entities with similar concerns, the District is getting the Grasslands on the map and taken into account. Only by vigilantly continuing this work will long-term protection of Grasslands resources be achieved.

Return Service Requested

May/June 2006



High-Quality Water Delivered to Wetlands

This spring the Grassland Water District is experiencing the benefits of some exceptionally high-quality water running through its systems. With the unusually heavy snow pack in the high Sierra-Nevada, the Mendota Pool is inundated with above normal flows from the San Joaquin and Kings rivers.

“This results in exceptionally good-quality water at our doorstep,” said Scott Lower, the GWD’s assistant general manager of operations. “In normal years, our water supply is banked in San Luis Reservoir, with its source coming from the Delta. However, this year, since snowmelt is high, the GWD is required to use water off of the Mendota Pool.”

Currently the majority of the water in the Mendota Pool is provided by the Kings River. The normal electro con-

ductivity (EC) of the Delta water averages around 450 EC. The Kings River water averages around 40 EC and is much clearer.

Lower said a side benefit of the clean water appears to be its ability to suppress some aquatic plant growth in GWD canals.

“The colder water seems to be suppressing the growth of water primrose and water hyacinth,” he said. “There may also be another benefit because there are fewer nutrients in the water, thus restricting the growth of the hyacinth.”

He said the high-quality water with fewer nutrients is not expected to have an adverse effect on swamp timothy irrigations.

“The main growth of the plant comes after drawdown,” Lower said.

No. 1 Proposal...(from page 3)

protect the area from flooding. Salt Slough work is targeted in Field 8, where levees and water control structures will be rebuilt.

Project partners including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Grassland Water District, California Department of Fish & Game, Natural Resource Conservation Service, California Waterfowl Association and private landowners put up more than \$2.8 million in matching funds to help secure the NAWCA grant.

“All construction work is on lands that are hunted, something CWA and the GWD strive to achieve in the San Joaquin Valley,” Wright said. “It’s a team effort.”

Information about the NAWCA grant or future proposals is available by calling Wright at (209) 826-5188.