

### CELEBRATING A LIFE



On Saturday January 7, 2012, family, friends, colleagues, and dignitaries gathered to celebrate the life of GWD General Manager and Director of Governmental Affairs, David L. Widell, who passed away unexpectedly last August at the early age of forty four. The Los Banos Community Center quickly filled as people from all walks of life arrived, some still wearing their camouflage from their morning duck hunt. Though solemn as they entered, guests smiled once they heard the David L. Widell memorial duck calls being blown.

The celebration began with words from Dave's closest friend, Dean Kwasny, who served as master of ceremonies for the afternoon. To lighten the mood, Dave's son, Ty Widell, presented a list of his favorite "Dave Widell Quotes," honoring his father's practice of reading top ten lists at Grassland events, a tradition that Dave started many years ago. Beautiful poems, personally written by those who read them aloud, funny and heart-warming stories, laughter and tears were shared in memory of Dave. The most touching moment was

Dean Kwasny's slideshow of pictures of Dave with Ty, friends, and colleagues, as well as his companion retrievers Cherry and Taurus, all beautifully set to Dave's favorite songs. The presentations ended with closing remarks from Pepper Snyder, President of the Grassland Water District, and Ty Widell. All in attendance felt Dave's presence as they enjoyed food, drink, and grand memories.

Dennis Campini, Stillbow Duck Club member, GRCD director, and good friend of Dave left us with these words - a quote from the film *It's a Wonderful Life*, "Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives. When he isn't around, he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?" On behalf of the Grassland Water District and Grassland Resource Conservation Boards of Directors and staff, we would like to extend a special thank you to the speakers and guests who joined us in celebrating the life of the man who left us far too soon.

### GRASSLAND FUND FUNDRAISER BBQ

By Elizabeth Stone

Waterfowl season began with a bang this year with the 2nd Annual Grassland Fund Opening Weekend BBQ hosted at Sprig Haven Farms. On October 22nd over 250 Grassland Fund supporters gathered to enjoy good food, great company, and opportunities to acquire some novel items.

Guests enjoyed two events that were new to this year's fundraiser, the Shotgun Shuffle Raffle and live auction. The Shotgun Shuffle Raffle gave guests the chance to win a shotgun for only \$20. The idea was

inspired by the emphasis of this year's fundraiser -- to encourage new and youth hunters to get involved in the sport. As the cost of hunting continues to rise, fewer new hunters are taking up the sport. "The Shotgun Shuffle was our effort to make good quality shotguns available to new hunters of all ages," stated Dale Boust, Fundraiser Committee Chairman.

The live auction offered guests an opportunity to go home with one of twenty-five unique items, including custom made

*Continued on page 2*

### WHAT'S INSIDE

- CWA [pg.2](#)
- Opening Weekend Results [pg.3](#)
- 2012 Volunteer Planting [pg.3](#)
- COHA [pg.4](#)
- Ducks Unlimited [pg.5](#)
- Billing Information [pg.5](#)
- New General Manager [pg.5](#)
- GEECe [pg.6](#)

The quarterly newsletter of the  
**Grassland Fund**

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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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## GRASSLAND FUND FUNDRAISER BBQ *CONTINUED...*



Proceeds of the Annual Grassland Fund Opening Weekend BBQ are dedicated to the Grassland Fund that is devoted to protecting Grassland Wetlands through legal advocacy and educational outreach.

duck calls, limited edition artwork, and a Remington shotgun fired by John Madden. In addition to the raffle and auction, guests enjoyed the chance to win one of more than thirty door prize packages, composed of donated items ranging from hunting knives and shotgun shells to Grassland Fund aprons and shirts.

All contributions to the Fund stay in the Grasslands and are committed solely to Grassland issues. Tax-deductible\* donations can be made to the Grassland Fund, 22759 S. Mercey Springs Road, Los Banos, CA 93635.

\*The Grassland Fund is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization tax ID 77-0312791, dedicated to conservation, education, and legal defense of the Grassland Wetlands of Merced County. All donations are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

The event took a somber tone before dinner, as dignitaries celebrated the memory of Grassland Water District's former General Manager and Director of Governmental Affairs, Dave Widell. Several of Dave's friends and colleagues came to the podium to recall old memories and tell stories about a man who made a career out of defending and preserving the Grassland Wetlands for future generations. In attendance was Dave's son, Ty Widell, who was honored with resolutions made by elected officials and agency representatives close to his father. Dave established the annual fundraiser to raise awareness and support for the Grassland Fund.



## CWA IN THE GRASSLANDS

In January 2012, a new one million dollar NAWCA grant was funded for the Grasslands area. This includes projects for the Grassland Water District, Los Banos and O'Neill Forebay Wildlife Areas, as well as private lands in the North and South Grasslands. Construction on projects will begin in 2012 and continue through 2013. In the event that a non-federal match is

available, CWA will submit again in late 2012 & 2013 for funding for habitat work in 2014 and 2015. If you are interested in habitat work on your property, contact Rich Wright at 916-275-1020.



Photo by Gary Zahm

# CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH & GAME

## OPENING WEEKEND RESULTS FOR THE LOS BAÑOS AREA

Hunter use was controlled through a check station located at Los Baños Wildlife Area and also through four other check stations controlling use on eight other State Wildlife Areas and Federal Wildlife Refuges. Results for these areas for the weekend of October 22 and 23 are as follows:

Area	Date	Waterfowl Hunters	Ducks Taken	Geese Taken	Coots Taken	Total Waterfowl	Average
Los Baños	10/22/11	257(258)	964(797)	3(2)	1(5)	968(805)	3.77(3.12)
	23	153(166)	303(256)	0(0)	1(3)	304(259)	1.99(1.56)
Volta	10/22/11	210(203)	884(826)	0(4)	3(0)	887(830)	4.22(4.09)
	23	120(108)	341(326)	0(0)	0(0)	341(326)	2.84(3.02)
Salt Slough	10/22/11	117(92)	424(224)	0(4)	0(0)	424(225)	3.62(2.45)
	23	61(43)	103(60)	0(0)	0(0)	103(60)	1.69(1.40)
Gadwall	10/22/11	30(36)	132(176)	0(0)	0(1)	132(177)	4.40(4.66)
	23	22(26)	54(46)	0(1)	0(0)	54(47)	2.45(1.81)
China Island	10/22/11	49(38)	126(130)	2(0)	0(0)	128(130)	2.61(3.42)
	23	32(26)	49(89)	0(0)	0(0)	49(89)	1.53(3.42)
San Luis	10/22/11	154(172)	575(386)	6(0)	0(0)	581(386)	3.77(2.24)
	23	95(84)	282(281)	0(0)	0(0)	282(281)	2.97(3.35)
South Freitas	10/22/11	26(32)	87(88)	0(0)	0(0)	87(88)	3.35(2.75)
	23	7(19)	12(38)	0(0)	0(0)	12(38)	1.71(2.00)
North Freitas	10/22/11	36(40)	130(96)	0(0)	0(0)	130(98)	3.61(2.45)
	23	22(21)	107(84)	0(1)	0(0)	107(85)	4.86(4.05)
Kesterson	10/22/11	92(104)	322(379)	2(1)	2(0)	326(380)	3.54(3.65)
	23	57(64)	141(223)	0(0)	0(0)	141(223)	2.47(3.48)
Merced	10/22/11	33(29)	144(79)	0(0)	0(0)	144(79)	4.36(2.82)

(2010 Opening Weekend Results)

## 2012 VOLUNTEER PLANTING DATES

The San Luis National Wildlife Refuge, Merced National Wildlife Refuge, and San Joaquin River NWR will be hosting several Saturday volunteer days to plant native shrubs, grasses, and trees at restoration sites. We have lots of plants to put in the ground and are hoping for many volunteers to participate! The volunteer days are terrific opportunities to learn about the refuge first hand from staff and get a glimpse of habitat management activities; learn about vegetation planting design, to understand why we plant native plants and how we match plant species to sites; see some unique areas of the refuge that are typically closed to the public; and learn about new refuge programs and facilities coming down the pike. Instructors have found that the volunteer work days make great extra credit opportunities for students.

### Schedule of Dates:

**February 18, 2012** - San Joaquin River NWR - Meet at the Beckwith Road observation platform at 9:00 a.m.

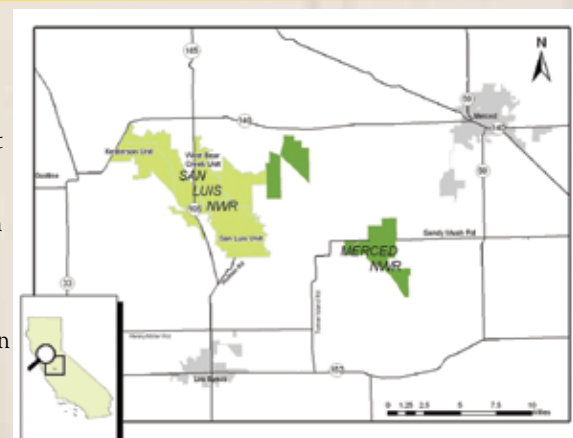
**February 25, 2012** - Merced NWR - Meet at main entrance parking lot/kiosk off of Sandy Mush Road at 9:00 a.m.

**March 3, 2012** - San Luis NWR - Meeting location To Be Determined (check back or call for details)

**March 10, 2012** - Merced NWR - Meet at main entrance parking lot/kiosk off of Sandy Mush Road at 9:00 a.m.

Driving directions to these locations are available on our website <http://www.fws.gov/sanluis/driving%20directions.htm>

Unfortunately we are no longer able to provide a barbecue lunch on the volunteer days, but we encourage volunteers to bring a sack lunch and/or snacks and water. Please be certain to wear warm clothing that can get muddy, as well as sturdy, waterproof footwear (for example, hiking boots or rubber boots). Please phone or email Jack Sparks to confirm attendance and obtain additional information. (209/826-3508 or [jack\\_sparks@fws.gov](mailto:jack_sparks@fws.gov))



# COHA LEGISLATION WRAP-UP 2011

By Mark Hennelly

The California Outdoor Heritage Alliance (COHA) is a union of conservation organizations, outdoor industry and individuals who support wildlife conservation and the preservation of our hunting heritage. COHA, which was formed by California Waterfowl Association in 2006, is the only political advocacy organization dedicated solely to influencing legislative, regulatory, administrative and local government policy decisions in California which impact wildlife conservation and our outdoor heritage.

Below is sample of some of the State Legislative issues COHA worked on during the 2011 Session.

For information on other COHA activities, please visit our website at [www.outdoorheritage.org](http://www.outdoorheritage.org)

## 2011 COHA-Sponsored Legislation

### AB 1162 (Chesbro) - Enhanced Penalties for Poaching

AB 1162 would create enhanced penalties for serious poaching violations – including those incidents where poachers knowingly target trophy big game outside the regular season, with the aid of artificial light, or with the use of bait or other illegal methods. The bill would also ensure that increased revenues generated from higher fines are used to support game conservation and public hunting activities.

AB 1162 is currently in the Senate Appropriations Committee and will be next heard in January 2012.

### AB 606 (Gatto) - Landowner Protections for Hunting

COHA was pleased to join forces with Assembly Member Mike Gatto (D-Los Angeles) on AB 606, state legislation which would ensure that private landowners who enroll their property into a conservation easement or wildlife habitat conservation program – such as the California Waterfowl Habitat Program, and the Landowner Incentive Program – can continue to hunt and fish on their land without additional restrictions or regulations.

AB 606 remains on the Assembly Floor.

### SB 752 (Berryhill) - Sportsmen's Group Check-Off Box

SB 752 would have allowed members of the public an opportunity to voluntarily release their contact information to nonprofit conservation groups of their choice when purchasing a hunting license via the Department of Fish and Game's (DFG) Automated License Data System (ALDS). This bill was intended to help support hunting-related organizations by educating more sportsmen and women about their important game conservation efforts and building their memberships.

SB 752 was vetoed by the Governor. However, the Governor directed DFG to work with Assembly Member Berryhill and COHA on a new bill for 2012 after more complete implementation of ALDS.

## Other 2011 State Legislation

### AB 809 (Feuer) – Long Gun Registration - OPPOSE

AB 809, which was signed into law by the Governor in early October, will expand the current handgun registration law to include all long guns by requiring a permanent registry of all firearms purchasers. Under the bill's provisions, those who purchase, or even transfer a shotgun or rifle to family members, will be required to register that firearm by submitting their name, address, place of birth, phone number and occupation to the California Department of Justice.

The provisions of AB 809 will go into effect January 1, 2014.

### SB 34 (Simitian) – Water Fee – OPPOSE

SB 34 would impose an annual charge on each retail water supplier in the state, including a charge based on each acre of land that is irrigated for agricultural purposes. COHA opposes this legislation because it would impact the ability of both public and private landowners to flood their lands for waterfowl habitat purposes, including the flooding of managed wetlands and post-harvest agricultural fields (e.g. rice, corn).

Due to opposition from COHA and other water interests, SB 34 has been tabled for 2011 and is a “two-year bill”.

### SB 328 - Protection of Conservation Easements – SUPPORT

SB 328 (Kehoe), which was signed into law by the Governor, will help ensure that the public resource values of a conservation easement on private land are fully considered should a public agency attempt to condemn the property, and, if condemnation proceeds, help ensure adequate mitigation to benefit wildlife.

COHA was pleased to actively support this bill.

### SB 436 (Kehoe) – Nonprofits and Mitigation Endowments – SUPPORT

SB 436 (Kehoe), which was signed by the Governor, will authorize, until January 1 2022, state or local agencies to provide funds (i.e. endowments) to a nonprofit organization to acquire land or easements for mitigation purposes, subject to certain requirements.

This bill would allow for the more efficient use of land management conservation funds (e.g. endowment accounts) by expressly permitting nonprofits that are directly overseeing the lands to also administer the mitigations funds. In doing so, the bill would ensure a readily accessible and reliable funding source for nonprofits to manage mitigation lands.

### SB 917 (Lieu) - Ban on Sale of Dogs in Public Places – OPPOSE

SB 917 (Lieu), signed by the Governor earlier this year, will make it a crime for any person to sell, or even display for sale, a dog in certain public places. COHA opposed this measure because of its adverse impacts on dog breeders and conservation groups which sell dogs at their fundraising events.

# DUCKS UNLIMITED

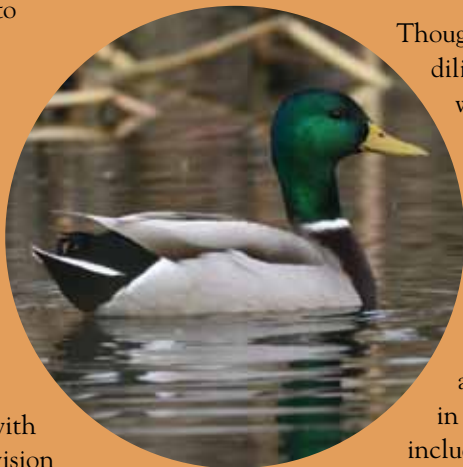
A Celebration of Wetlands and Waterfowl Conservation in the Grasslands.

By Derek Mynear and Chris Hildebrandt

Fledged in 1937 during the dry dust bowl years, Ducks Unlimited (DU) was formed by hunters that shared a passion for waterfowl and wetlands, realizing that efforts were needed to help waterfowl populations that were declining due to landscape level habitat changes. As DU celebrates its 75th year, having conserved over twelve million acres of waterfowl habitat, it is prudent to reflect on all that has been accomplished for wetlands and waterfowl, both in the Pacific Flyway as well as continent wide. These accomplishments have only been made possible through the dynamic partnerships formed with those who share our vision of wetlands sufficient to fill the skies with waterfowl today, tomorrow, and forever. While we need to take a second to bask in the fruits of our labor, we understand that waterfowl and wetlands face tremendous challenges much as they did when DU was formed.

The landscape level changes to our nation's wetland ecosystems are evident, and across the Grasslands of California's Central Valley, we have been witness to some of the most severe threats to these systems. At the turn of the century, a contiguous vein of wetlands ran nearly the entire length of the central valley, a vast wetland complex of unaltered beauty that was surpassed by no other. Thanks in large part to private landowners, the

Grasslands is the largest remaining complex of wetlands in California and provides some of the most vital habitat for waterfowl in the south Pacific Flyway. Threats to our state's critical water supplies, human population growth, and the demand for open spaces continue to put pressure on our beloved wetlands and waterfowl.



Though we must stay diligent in fighting for wetlands rights here in the Grasslands and across the country, we can reflect and celebrate our accomplishments. Since 1986, DU and our partners in the Grasslands, including the Grassland

Water District, have

collaborated on over two hundred twenty nine projects, spending nearly twenty million dollars that has gone to protect, restore, or enhance over one hundred twenty thousand acres of critical habitat. This habitat supports not only waterfowl, but also a myriad of other species at all levels of their annual life cycles. We value our partnership with the Grassland Water District and the landowners, and pledge our commitment to wetlands conservation here locally, and in other vital waterfowl habitats across the nation. We are extremely thankful to those who share the passion, and encourage all to pass it on.



## NEWLY APPOINTED GENERAL MANAGER

Ric Ortega Appointed General Manager

After serving as Interim General Manager following the sudden passing of Dave Widell, Ric Ortega was officially appointed to General Manager on January 10, 2012 by the Grassland Water District Board of Directors. In 2005, Ric first joined the District as an Environmental Scientist while conducting his graduate research in the Grasslands. Under the direction of Dave Widell, Ric served as Water Quality and Science Programs Manager focusing on wetland water policy and governmental affairs. His education, experience, and integrity equip him for the future challenges associated with the continued protection of the Grassland Wetlands. Our next issue of the Grassland Explorer will feature a full biography of Ric.



Photo by Gary Zahm

## BILLING INFORMATION

Looking ahead to 2012-2013 Duck Season? We are in the process of preparing the 2012 Standby/Water Service invoices for mailing by the end of February, 2012. This annual billing reflects your fall flood-up water for the 2012-2013 Duck Season. The first installment is due upon receipt and delinquent if paid after May 1, 2012. The second installment is due May 1, 2012 and delinquent if paid after June 29, 2012. If your club has any changes to your billing contact and/or billing address, please submit these changes to the GWD office in writing Attention: Diane, by mail to Grassland Water District 22759 S. Mercey Springs Road, Los Banos, CA 93635, by email [dwright@gwdwater.org](mailto:dwright@gwdwater.org), or by fax to 209.826.4984. If you have any questions, please call 209.826.5188. Thank you.

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## FIRST GRADERS TRY OUT THE NEW WADERS AT GEECE

By Candace Sigmond, GEECe Education Coordinator

*Photos by Sondra Lujan*



The Grassland Environmental Education Center (GEECe) recently played host to two first grade classes from Volta Elementary. Mrs. Leila Gurgen and Mrs. Raylene Casson-Bourma scheduled their first field trip tour of the wetlands just in time to try out GEECe's new waders. GEECe is fortunate that each year the Central Valley Joint Venture donates funds dedicated to the purchase of equipment and materials for the center. This year the Joint Venture's contribution was used to purchase sixty waders that will keep the students dry and nearly mud-free.

Field trips to GEECe begin with the students enjoying five fun classroom activities based on grade-level appropriate natural sciences. Students then embark on a biologist guided tour of the Van Atta Interpretive Marsh at the Los Banos Wildlife Area. "Gotta Luv the Mud" is the theme as students walk along the ponds hoping to net a few big critters such as crayfish, diving beetles, tadpoles, or mosquito fish. On the tour visitors are shown how to identify wildlife through tracks, scat, dens, nests, fur, feathers and bones. For many students this is their first opportunity to explore outdoor

habitats and learn more about our local wetland wildlife. With this mild winter weather, now is a great time for teachers, Boy Scout leaders and Girl Scout leaders to set a date for a GEECe visit. What a great way to learn more about wetland habitats, wildlife conservation, and our remarkable Pacific Flyway! For further information, contact Candace Sigmond, GEECe Education Coordinator, 209-704-4772.

