



How “Natural” is the Wildlife Area?

by Ann Brice, Co-Executive Director

As you look out over the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area in the fall and winter, you'll see lots of wetlands, but make no mistake, every pond, island and shoreline has been carefully planned. Each swale is designed to carry water from one pond to the next so that no water or fish will be left behind when it's time to draw the water down in the late spring. Each island is constructed to be inviting for waterfowl and shorebirds. This is a completely managed system to benefit wildlife.

Jeff Stoddard, the Manager of the Wildlife Area, says, "I think in five year blocks of time. You've got to with such a large, complex property." His goal is to "reset" the seasonal and permanent wetlands every three to five years. By that he means that Fish and Game employees drain a given pond, then go in with an excavator to remove overgrown vegetation, disc it, and, finally, add water. Jeff wants to redo 20-30% of the ponds each year, thus the five-year time horizon to rotate through all of them.

The Fish and Game crew has worked hard this summer to get a significant part of the auto tour loop reset. For example, the first big pond east of Parking Lot A has turned out to be too shallow for a permanent pond and was clogged with tules and cattails, which thrive in shallow water. Now, thanks to Jack DeWit, the Wildlife Area rice farmer, and his crew, parts of that pond have been deepened and loafing islands have been added, which should result in better bird habitat.

The seasonal wetlands south of A have been disked with special attention to terracing the west side to make it more attractive to shorebirds. The seasonal and permanent ponds around B and south to D and the hunter



L-R: Fish & Game employees Waylon Wittry, Vern Ladd, and Scott Miller take a break from their recent habitat maintenance at the Demonstration Wetlands.

check station were drained and cattle brought in to knock down the taller plants, and then finally disked. This removes the perennial vegetation and encourages annuals, which produce seed for wildlife.

Habitat management is not without its setbacks. The pond east of B and north of C had almost been drained when the beaver brigade filled in the drainage sites, and overnight the pond was filled again. Now it's too late to drain it once more and let it dry before the fall rains start. Instead the Fish and Game crew have decided to cut a few viewsheds through the vegetation so that people can get a glimpse into the open water with its avian activity, and they'll plan to start over next summer.

In the good news category, Jack DeWit did a great job with the shorebird ponds this summer. Jack employees a shorebird pond rotation, which he and former Wildlife Area Manager Dave Feliz came up with several years ago. Over a three year period Jack rotates his fields in the following pattern: wild rice the first year, white rice the second,

and fallowed, flooded habitat the third to attract shorebirds. This is not as easy as it sounds. The fields have to be disked multiple times, so the soil is just the right texture before flooding, and then the water level has to be watched regularly to ensure that water isn't so low that the pond fills with vegetation or so high that the birds don't like it. This year it all went well, and hundreds of birders enjoyed the walk from C out to the shorebird ponds where they were treated to the sight of Long-billed Dowitchers, Least Sandpipers, Black-necked Stilts, American Avocets, and Wilson's Phalaropes, to name a few of the species seen.

Farther south in the Wildlife Area there's a lot of activity too. The number of crops planted for wildlife, like milo and safflower, was doubled this year, resulting in record dove numbers this fall. New gates were put in, and a new pump to get water from the Toe Drain to the Tule Ranch was installed.

At the Demonstration Wetlands located at the Headquarters, Fish and Game staff have completely cleaned out the seasonal pond to get it ready for the school children who arrived at the end of September. An auto-float has been installed to keep the water levels more consistent and thus help suppress emergent vegetation. Mary Schiedt, Fish and Game's native plant expert, has big plans for replanting around the ponds.

Fall is here, and water is being brought up a little at a time to stay in compliance with the mosquito district requirements. Soon thousands of wintering waterfowl will arrive along with birders, hunters and nature lovers. When people come to visit the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area, they seldom realize all the hard work that goes into making it look "natural"! 🌿

The Elegant Northern Pintail



by Yolo Basin Foundation Staff

The most graceful and elegant duck to winter in the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area is the Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*). The male is easily recognized by his long slim neck, brown head with a line of white feathers reaching from the chest up both sides of the neck and a pointed tail with long central feathers. The female Northern Pintail also has a pointed tail and a slender neck. These swift flying ducks are among the first migrants to the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area arriving as early as August. The distinctive whistle of the males' call can often be heard. Listen for their mellow whistled "kwee" sounds. The females quack.

Northern Pintails winter in shallow inland wetlands and intertidal habitats. They are dabbling ducks, feeding mostly on grains including rice, corn, wheat, and seeds of aquatic plants as well as some small invertebrates. Over half of the North American Northern Pintails migrate through California, with the majority of those wintering in the Sacramento Valley.


Prior to the 1980's the Northern Pintail was one of the most common ducks in North America, second only to the Mallard, and may have even outnumbered Mallards at times along the Pacific Flyway. These numbers have dropped significantly over the past three decades due to several factors both in their nesting grounds and wintering locations.

Most Sacramento Valley pintails nest in Alaska and the prairie pothole region of Canada. Those that travel to the prairie potholes have faced problems such as conversion of native grassland to agriculture, the reduction and elimination of the practice of leaving fields fallow, and severe drought in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Approximately 95% of the wetlands in the wintering grounds of the Central Valley have been drained and converted to farmland or urban development. The thousands of acres of managed wetlands and 1500 acres of rice fields at the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area provide important Northern Pintail habitat. These ducks especially favor the large open ponds found on the Wildlife Area.

Scientists at the US Geological Survey Western Ecological Research Center, Dixon Field Station in Dixon conducted a study of Central Valley wintering pintail migration patterns from 2000 to 2003. They outfitted randomly selected female pintails with satellite telemetry devices. They tracked these birds to determine migration routes, timing and destinations. A handful of the birds spent some time at the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area. Birds left for nesting grounds from late February through mid-April. The departure time correlated with the migration route and annual weather conditions.

The birds traveled along three main migration corridors. One route included stopovers in Northeastern California/Southern Oregon on the way to nesting habitat in the prairie pothole region of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Montana and the Dakotas. Other birds traveled directly to the prairie potholes and then moved on to British Columbia, Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut, or Alaska. Another group of birds traveled along the Pacific Coast making numerous stops on the way to nesting grounds in Alaska. A previously unknown route included one where birds flew directly from the Central Valley to Alaska over the Pacific Ocean. Some of these birds even nested in eastern Russia.

The next time you visit the Wildlife Area, stop and enjoy the sight and sounds of these wonderful international travelers. 

The Central Valley Shorebird Survey (CVSS)

Help count shorebirds if shorebirds count to you! The CVSS is a regional survey of the larger Pacific Flyway Shorebird Survey (PFSS), a multi-partner monitoring program led by PRBO Conservation Science. The goal is to inform management and conservation of wintering shorebirds in the Pacific Flyway. Annual winter survey data are entered online and stored in the California Avian Data Center. Want to participate? Here's what you will need:

- A passion for shorebird conservation
- Shorebird identification skills
- Binoculars and scope
- Reliable transportation
- Computer and internet skills
- Time commitment: 3 days

Training Day: Attend a protocol training session and get your site assignment. TBD.

Scouting Day: Become familiar with your site, make sure you know the access points and how long it will take to cover the area. Do this on your own.

Survey and Data Entry Day: One day between November 15th and December 15th.

Take this survey to let us know when you are available:

www.surveymonkey.com/s/CVSS2012

To learn more, get involved, or ask a question please contact:
Monica Iglecia, miglecia@audubon.org,
916-649-7600 x115

Or visit the website: prbo.org/pfss

Jack DeWit, Rice Farmer at the Wildlife Area

by Heidi Satter, Volunteer Coordinator

Gazing south of the causeway, the northeast corner of the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area is a changing quilt of colors, textures and patterns. A green sea of young rice matures to the yellow-gold of mature plants. Harvested fields are flooded blue-grey and dotted with waterfowl. Receding water exposes rich, dark brown earth and decomposed stubble, ready to be disked, leveled, plowed and planted next season. No one knows the cycles of this slice of land better than rice farmer and Yolo Basin Foundation Board Member, Jack DeWit.

The decision to incorporate agriculture into the Wildlife Area's business plan dates back to 2001 with the purchase of 13,000 acres of the Tule and Causeway Ranches. Through the Dixon Resource Conservation District (RCD), parts of the property are subleased to tenants for farming and grazing. Enter Jack DeWit, owner of DeWit Family Farms, a producer of cultivated rice throughout Sutter, Yolo and Sacramento Counties. DeWit Farms has been growing rice in the Bypass for over 20 years and currently leases about 1,500 acres on the Wildlife Area from the Department of Fish and Game. Jack sums up his relationship with Fish and Game, "I am a tenant. They are my landlord. It's a good relationship."

DeWit Family Farms grows wild rice, short and medium grain rice as well as other grains. But in the Bypass, Jack grows only wild rice and short grain. "It's too cool for medium grain rice (in the Bypass). The evening Delta breeze makes it pleasant here in the summer evenings, but the cool night temperatures make it difficult to grow." Jack is often asked if he grows brown rice. The short answer is yes. "The stage of processing determines the color. It's the same rice. With the bran fiber, vitamins and minerals removed, brown rice becomes white rice."

However there is a difference between white rice and wild rice. The wild rice grown in the Wildlife Area is native to North America. This difference can be seen when driving through the Wildlife Area in mid-summer. The public tour route drives right through Jack's work-

ing rice farm. On one side of the road stand uniform, deep green fields of short grain rice. Across the road, reddish-brown grain on feathery ribbons of wild rice wave in the breeze. The difference is also observable in the grain itself: the shorter, thicker and softer grain of the white compared to longer, darker, slender and harder wild grain. According to Jack, "Botanically, white rice and wild rice are both grasses.

But wild rice is not wild or rice. When Europeans came to North America and saw it growing in water, they called it rice." While wrapping up the wild rice harvest, Jack confirms another difference. "The short grain rice won't be

harvested until later in October." Wild rice has a shorter growing season and thus is planted later and harvested earlier than white rice.

The farmer isn't the only one active in the field at harvest time. Wildlife abounds. Rice fields double as habitat for wildlife. In the process of determining which fields will be planted, Jack states that "shorebird habitat is determined first." These are special fields that are fallowed and shallowly flooded for shorebirds during their migration in the late summer.

Land management practices of rice farmers can directly influence wildlife habitat for breeding, migrating and wintering birds in the Pacific Flyway. Agricultural fields dedicated to rice can provide essential wetland habitat for shorebirds, wading birds and waterfowl year round: flooding rice fields after harvest helps decompose the rice straw. The flooded fields also provide an important food source with the rice that is left after harvest. Jack views this aspect of farming in the Wildlife area as "growing rice to feed the birds". Wild rice is harvested wet and ibis, egrets, herons, and hawks follow the harvesters to take advantage of the exposed smorgasbord of frogs, fish, small mammals and invertebrates. The wildlife ben-

efits of rice have proven to be an unexpected benefit to Jack, too. "I value the education I've received over the years about birdlife."

When asked if rice farming requires lots of water, Jack was clear. "No, water usage per acre is similar to alfalfa or almonds, from A to Z, down to zucchini. The perception is wrong. If you look at the amount of water per serving, compared to the water used to produce a hamburger or other foods, rice shines brightly." Also, Jack continued, "the water is reused again and again. Rice is an efficient water user."

In addition to farming, Jack dedicates a significant amount of his time to the Yolo Basin Foundation as a Board Member and a spokesman for the Wildlife Area and its agricultural practices. Most recently he accompanied YBF Executive Director, Robin Kulakow, on a tour of the Wildlife Area for James Peterson, Legislative Assistant - Environmental Affairs for U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein. And his donation of a wild ride in the wild rice harvester is a favorite item at the Bucks for Ducks live auction.

"...Wild rice is not wild or rice."



Jack DeWit readies his special wild rice combine header for harvest.

There are inherent benefits to knowing and working the land, providing food for people and providing habitat for wildlife. There is a lot of just plain hard work too. When I asked Jack what he enjoys most about rice farming, he laughed and without hesitation said, "Harvest! It only happens once a year, and it's our payday!" 🌾

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The Yolo Basin Foundation is a non-profit public benefit corporation dedicated to the appreciation and stewardship of wetlands and wildlife through education and innovative partnerships.

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 *Bucks for Ducks 2012*
a fundraiser for yolo basin foundation

Friday, November 9, 2012 • 5:30 - 9:00 pm • Veterans Memorial Center – 203 East 14th St., Davis, CA
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