

Drought—What does it mean for the Wildlife Area?

by Ann Brice, Co-Executive Director

On January 17th, Governor Brown issued a “Drought State of Emergency Declaration.” He called for an immediate implementation of water use reduction plans for all stated-owned facilities. On January 27th the Department of Fish and Wildlife instructed all its facilities to reduce water usage by at least 20%.

Jeff Stoddard, the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area Manager, said, “The reality is that most of the water currently visible at the Wildlife Area is irrigation water from the Davis Drain or water from the Toe Drain that is recycled through our ponds and flooded rice fields multiple times before going back into the Toe Drain and on to the Delta.” Stoddard went on to say that was still essential to comply with the request, so he plans to begin slowly drawing down water earlier than he would normally. “The less water that we use here,

the more that reaches the fish in the Delta,” he added.

In a non-drought year the water draw down starts around the first of March. This year it will be a month early. Brood water for ducklings will also be affected. Stoddard guesses that there will be one less brood pond than normal, but last year there weren't any due to lack of funds to run the pumps. In addition, at the Headquarters there are plans to let the lawn die and to drain the permanent pond, which needs cleaning out anyway.

On the positive side, Stoddard said, “Hopefully, we'll be able to get more ponds disked this year after the water is drained. I definitely saw an improvement in waterfowl numbers this winter in the ponds we had disked last summer.” He also expects better shorebird habitat in the spring with mudflat exposed earlier. 



Speed Bumps Are Back!

Over the winter Jeff Stoddard, the Wildlife Area Manager, and staff at the Yolo Basin Foundation office began receiving emails about people driving too fast at the Wildlife Area. There had been speed bumps put in place years ago to encourage drivers to slow down, but they gradually disappeared. Jeff decided to take action and had his crew put the bumps back. With YBF's assistance, he also posted temporary notices of the speed limit, which is only 15mph, and he's now having permanent signs made. Next time you're at the Wildlife Area, take the opportunity to slow down and enjoy this amazing resource!



The grace of swans... This winter there were hundreds, and at times even thousands, of Tundra Swans on view at the Wildlife Area. These elegant birds finally left by the second week in February. We hope to see them again next year!

Rick and Oleta Melnicoe

by Michael Herrera, Volunteer Coordinator

As it is with many of our volunteers and donors, Rick and Oleta Melnicoe were first introduced to Yolo Basin Foundation thanks to the bats. It was 2006 when they attended their first YBF event, a *Bat Talk and Walk*. Ever since, they have been active supporters of Yolo Basin Foundation and its programs. “We really believe in what Yolo Basin Foundation is doing,” comments Rick. “The staff and other volunteers we work with are wonderful people. Education has always been important to both of us.” Oleta adds, “We believe in the importance of giving back, and it’s something we enjoy doing together. We get to meet new people with similar interests, and you see something new and different on each tour.”

As guests, the Melnicoes attended *Gaggle of Gatherings*, *Flyway Nights*, and *Bucks for Ducks*. They joined the volunteer corps in 2011 when Oleta saw a training announcement for City of Davis Wetlands docents in the Davis Enterprise. She attended the training and started assisting with tours. It was the perfect opportunity to explore her nature interests. Although Rick didn’t take the training until the following year, he was essentially grandfathered in since he regularly joined Oleta on the tours to help ID birds. In 2013 they attended the training for Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area tour docents and now regularly lead or assist with YBF wetlands tours.

According to Rick, “We’ve been serious birders for about 8 years. We’ve always been outdoor people.” They chose birding because it blended well with two of their other hobbies, hiking and photography. “It was something we could do together and continue to do in retirement. Our anniversary gift to each other was our scope.”

Rick and Oleta met while attending Sacramento State. They’ve been together ever since, spending the last 16 years in Davis. Oleta is a Vice President for Technology Sciences Group. She’s worked there for 20 years. Rick is retired from

UC Davis where he was the Director of the Western Integrated Pest Management Center for 21 years. Rick donates blood regularly and is a member of the 15 Gallon Club. In addition to volunteering for YBF, Oleta also donates her time to the Sacramento Food Bank and the Yolo County Animal Shelter.

Since their first serious birding adventure to Australia, Rick and Oleta’s vacations often are spent on the search for more ‘life birds’. Rick comments that, “On every trip, we’ve been fortunate enough to see some interesting birds; Cassowaries in Australia, Cotingas in Costa Rica.” They have plans

docent. “I’m a pond specialist. I like that it gives me a chance to use my biology background. My favorite question to ask, ‘What do mosquito fish eat?’ Sometimes the kids get the right answer.” Rick goes on to say, “The small size of groups allows you to make sure everyone has a positive experience. One boy was having a bad day, not being able to catch much in the nets. I asked him to help empty the water and bug filled trays back into the pond. He was pretty excited about that.” Rick often joins the students on their tour of the Wildlife Area. He enjoys encouraging the kids’ enthusiasm about birding. “The best birders we know all started birding around 8-9



Photo credit: Michael Herrera

to visit the Brazilian Pantanal this August. When birding a bit more locally, they frequent the Wright’s Lake Area where they’ve spotted White-headed Woodpeckers, Clarke’s Nutcrackers, Brown Creepers, and feel lucky to have caught a Common Merganser floating along with chicks on her back.

Recruited by fellow volunteer Nancy Gelbard, Rick also spends a few mornings a month as a Discover the Flyway

years old.” Rick’s favorite comment, “This is the best field trip ever!” “We hear it often.”

We do hear it often. Whether it’s a DTF field trip, an informative *Gaggle of Gatherings*, or a birding tour of local wetlands, YBF often receives positive comments about the quality of outings. It’s because of the commitment from passionate and knowledgeable volunteers like Rick and Oleta that Yolo Basin Foundation offers the “best field trips ever.” 

Light Geese of Yolo

By Corky Quirk, Education Associate

Every fall large flocks of light geese appear in the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area. They spend several months wintering here and fattening up to make the return to their nesting grounds in the far north. While here their numbers and their cacophony of honking during take-off and landing is quite impressive.

The term “light or white geese” refers to both Snow Geese (*Chen caerulescens*) and Ross’s Geese (*Chen rossii*) including both white and blue color phases, and the Lesser (*C. c. caerulescens*) and Greater (*C. c. atlantica*) Snow Goose subspecies. All but the Greater Snow Goose occur on the same wintering grounds in California. The adult Lesser Snow Goose is white overall with black primary feathers at the wing’s end. Another important distinguishing feature is its heavy pinkish bill with a dark line called a grin patch. The Ross’s Goose is a smaller species that resembles the Lesser Snow Goose. Its bill is shorter and lacks the grin patch. In addition the head of the Ross’s Goose is rounder.

Each species may have a blue or dark phase, which is much rarer than the normal white phase. When viewing large flocks at the Wildlife Area, one can see the occasional blue goose.

The light geese have adapted to feeding in agricultural fields and can be seen in the late fall and early in the winter just in front of the rice flood up, consuming large quantities of rice grain which is left behind after harvest. Since female Lesser Snow Geese have strong fidelity to winter areas, likely family groups return year after year to the Wildlife Area.

The adult diet is entirely vegetarian, consisting of grasses and grains grazed from damp soils or even shallow water. The heavy bill is used to dig roots and tubers for food.

Once they have eaten their fill of rice, or the fields have completely flooded, the light geese move from the main part of the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area further south to the Tule Ranch. The Tule Ranch has historically been pasture land for cattle and continues to be grazed. When the green grasses begin to sprout, the geese move in. Being in a wildlife area, the cattle have to share. The large quantity of geese can consume much of the pasture grasses and will dig at roots completely stripping plants from the land.

As spring approaches in late February, the flocks move to “staging” or gathering locations. They move as large groups making their way back to their nesting locations in the north. At times they will travel 15-18

hours non-stop. This difficult trip was a limiting factor for light geese populations, prior to cultivation of agricultural land. Now when spring comes the geese are fat and healthy, with fewer than normal winter fatalities.



Ross's Geese

Geese begin to arrive on arctic nesting grounds in late May. There, females forage up to 18 hours a day at the nesting grounds since they will eat little for 24 days once they begin incubation. Long days within the Arctic Circle with nearly 24 hours of sun help goslings to grow rapidly.

The populations are growing at a rate of 5% annually and are now out of balance with their fragile arctic nesting and brood-rearing areas. This has resulted in serious long lasting—if not permanent—damage to the arctic habitats where they summer. The delicate tundra vegetation is being over-grazed, and other species are losing nesting territory as the snow goose population grows.

As the days grow shorter and colder, the Snow Geese begin staging in northern Alaska for their trip south. They take long flights with substantial staging stops as they make their way to their wintering grounds in California. And flocks of thousands can once again be seen in and over the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area. 🌱



Our Newest Staff Members

Michael Herrera became the Foundation’s Volunteer Coordinator almost a year ago. He has a background with non-profits and held the title of Volunteer Manager with RedRover, where he coordinated volunteer deployment for emergency animal sheltering. Shoshana Zeldner joined YBF last October as the Fund Development Coordinator. She has a strong background in event planning, non-profit program management and fundraising. We’re excited to have them on the Yolo Basin Foundation team!

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Staff

Executive Director: Robin Kulakow
(530) 756-7248 robin@yolobasin.org

Co-Executive Director: Ann Brice
(530) 758-0530 abrice@yolobasin.org

I.T. Coordinator: Joy Elson
jelson@yolobasin.org

Office Manager: Lori Hewitt
(530) 757-3780 lori@yolobasin.org

Bookkeeper: Guadalupe de la Concha

Volunteer Coordinator: Michael Herrera
(530) 758-1018 mherrera@yolobasin.org

Education Coordinator: Heidi Satter
(530) 757-4828 hsatter@yolobasin.org

Education Associate: Corky Quirk
(530) 902-1918 cquirk@yolobasin.org

Development Coordinator:
Shoshana Zeldner
530-757-4842 shoshana@yolobasin.org

Street address:
45211 County Road 32B, Davis, CA
95618

Mailing address:
P.O. Box 943, Davis, CA 95617

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.

To become a member of Yolo Basin Foundation, go to:
www.yolobasin.org and select "Join/Donate Now"

CALIFORNIA
DUCK DAYS
2014



Northern Shoveler
Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area
photo by Jim Dunn

Friday, February 21:

Duck Days Welcome Reception and Student Wildlife Art Show
5:30-7:30 pm • Davis Art Center • 1919 F Street, Davis

Saturday, February 22:

Workshops, Field Trips & Activities all day • Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area Headquarters
45211 County Road 32 B (Chiles Road), Davis

For a full schedule of events and to register for Duck Days go to www.yolobasin.org.

For more information call Yolo Basin Foundation at 530-757-3780.