



YOLO FLYWAY



Volume 20, Issue 3, Fall 2011

A Publication of the Yolo Basin Foundation and the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area

Who's Minding the Shop?

By Robin Kulakow, Executive Director

It's the beginning of fall. Shorebirds are here. The early Northern Pintail have arrived by the thousands and hundreds of Cinnamon Teal are moving through on their way south. If we listen carefully, we might be lucky enough to hear the Sandhill Cranes traveling high overhead. The fall flood up of the wetlands began September 15th. By mid-September the wild rice harvest was complete and the regular rice harvest was a month away.

It's a typical autumn at the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area but who is in charge? Eric Larson, Fish and Game's Region 3 Biological Programs Manager, took over the reins when Dave Feliz left in July. Until Dave's position can be filled, Eric is working here at the Yolo Bypass rather than his office in Yountville two to three days a week to oversee the Wildlife Area's daily operations.

Eric has worked for Fish and Game for 17 year starting in the Marine Region after his graduate studies in estuarine sciences. He transferred to what was then called the Central Coast Region (now the Bay Delta Region) in 2006. His current duties include the oversight of the fisheries, wildlife, land management, hatcheries, and interpre-



Acting Wildlife Area Manager Eric Larson checks in with Fish & Game's Waylon Wittry.

tive service programs within the Region's 13 counties, including the Napa-Sonoma-Petaluma Marsh Complexes, Suisun Marsh, San Francisco Bay tidal and salt pond areas, and the coast from Santa Cruz to the Mendocino County line.

Although a Bay Area native, Eric also has a background in agriculture having run his family's farm while an undergraduate at the University of Minnesota where he studied Soil Science.

Eric reports that he is happy to be working out of the Yolo Headquarters and finds the depth and complexity of all that goes on here fascinating. Eric was overheard telling the staff at the Wildlife Area that "there is everything a biologist could want here, from direct hands-on wildlife and land management activities, to hard sciences such as research in mercury management and habitat restoration."

According to Eric, the Department is actively looking to fill the Wildlife Area Manager position from within the ranks of Fish and Game. Until that happens, we're very lucky to have someone as committed as Eric tending the shop. 🦉

What a Difference 13 Years Makes!



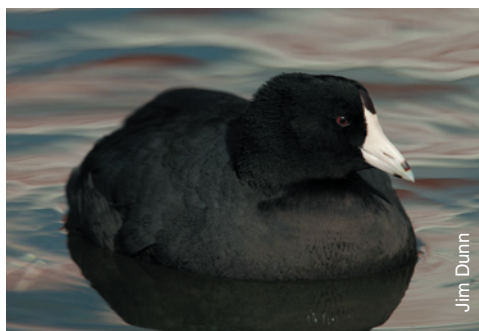
Before (1998) and after (2011) photos of YBF's Demonstration Wetlands, which were created for the Discover the Flyway school program.

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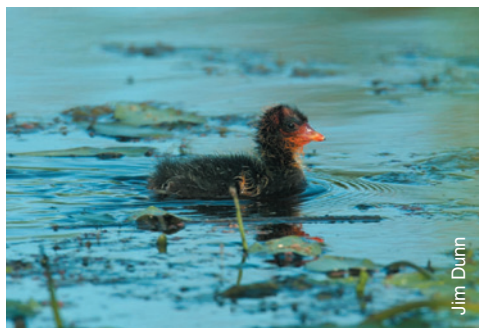
“Is a coot a duck?”

by Ann Burris, Education Coordinator

Is a coot a duck? This is one of the questions we ask students during the popular Discover the Flyway activity, Animal Tracks, Scat and Signs. Many of the students often answer “yes”. To many, an American Coot, the chunky slate-colored bird with a whitish bill, looks like a duck when it’s observed swimming and dabbling in the water. But the correct answer is no, a coot is not a duck. The simple explanation we give the students is ducks have webbed feet. Coots do not. Coots have large greenish colored feet with lobed toes. They allow the coot to walk on land where it eats green vegetation, worms and insects. Coots dabble in shallow waters



Jim Dunn



Jim Dunn



Lisa Cox

eating seeds, algae, snails and aquatic insects. They also have the ability to dive using their large lobed feet to propel themselves underwater where they look for aquatic vegetation and small fishes. It is said that a coot can feed at a depth of 25ft. and stay underwater as long as 16 seconds.

Yes, I know that many of you knew the right answer, but what else do you know about this commonly seen bird? Here are some interesting facts about the American Coot.

American Coots are members of the *Rallidae* or Rail family along with Common Moorhen, Sora, and Virginia Rails. Coots are unique within this group in that they have lobed feet. They are commonly seen during the fall and winter throughout the Sacramento Valley.

Coots are conspicuous, noisy, and aggressively territorial. They are often seen in large groups, and because they are easily viewable their territorial behaviors can be easily spotted if we take the time to really notice what is going on.

Coots have a repertoire of at least 14 displays they use to communicate among themselves. They vary body postures, adjust the position of their white undertail feathers, and alter the degree they arch their wings over their backs, change the angle of neck feathers and, when agitated, swell the frontal “nose” shield.

Aggressive patrol swimming towards intruding coots may turn into a charge that ends in a splattering, rapid run across the water’s surface. Sometimes these confrontations can lead to combat. A Coot can actually sit back on the water and grab its opponent with one long-clawed foot while attempting to slap the contender with its free foot and jab it with its bill. Apparently, the aim is to push the opponent onto its back and, in some cases hold it underwater. This behavior has been seen in coots four days old. Not all displays directed toward unfamiliar coots are antagonistic, however. Coots communicate distress to each other by exposing their undertail feathers or displaying an enlarged shield when alarmed by potential dangers such as hawks, airplanes, or predatory mammals.

Approached, or harassed by people, coots will assert themselves by raising their feathers so that they appear larger than life.

American Coots are opportunistic feeders. In addition to hunting for themselves, they also feed commensally by taking leftovers from other species such as dabbling ducks, or they pirate plants brought to the surface by diving ducks such as Canvasbacks. Groups of up to five juvenile coots have been seen pirating aquatic vegetation from the bills of ducks and swans.

Coots become completely flightless for about a month when molting to replace their flight feathers. During this time period, they must escape their enemies by running, swimming, diving, or hiding. They are very secretive during this time period.

April to August is the nesting season for California’s coots. Nests are built by both sexes and are made using stems of marsh plants on a foundation of the same materials. The nest floats on water attached firmly to reeds or other standing plants, partly or well concealed in tule or cattails. The hen will lay 6 to 16 tan colored eggs covered with dark specks. Incubation begins when the first egg is laid and continues for 20 to 25 days per egg. Only one clutch of eggs is laid annually. Both the male and female share in incubation and brooding of the young. As the young depart the nest, one parent will continue incubation and the other will lead the young. Newly hatched coots are covered with dark colored down with orange or red hair like feathers on the head and neck. Their bill is red with a black tip.

Young coots have been observed being chauffeured around on their parent’s back. The young initiate the ride and are able to hang on by clamping their bills over the feathers of the adult. The chicks can fly about 50 – 60 days after hatching. A banded wild coot was found to have lived nine and a half years.

The next time you’re at the Wildlife Area, slow down and watch the coots. They’re much more interesting than you may have thought! 🦆

Thanks to Bob Shaffer

by Heidi Satter, Volunteer Coordinator

The big brown box that arrived at the YBWA headquarters last July brought more than “oooohs” and “ahhhhs” from YBF’s Education Coordinator Ann Burris. Packed with child-sized rubber boots, a large dipping net, aquatic microscopes and more, it was stuffed with gifts for the Discover the Flyway program. “It’s from Santa Bob!”, explained Education Associate, Corky Quirk, unwrapping the package.

Bob Shaffer, affectionately known as “Santa Bob” around Yolo Basin Foundation, is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Coordinator for the Central Valley Joint Venture (CVJV), a self-directed coalition consisting of 21 state and federal agencies, private conservation organizations and one corporation. Its mission includes the conservation of migratory birds and their habitat for the benefit of wildlife and the public. Nationwide there are 18 habitat Joint Ventures serving the needs of all migratory bird species by habitat conservation. Bob has been the Coordinator of the CVJV since 1999, but his involvement with YBF goes back before that, spanning two decades and “the early days” of YBF.

“As I recall, my first involvement with the YBF was as the Manager of the Bureau of Reclamation’s Wetland Development Program. I had heard that there was a need for financial assistance to construct the educational wetlands behind the DFG visitor center and provided funds to help move the project along. In addition, my program provided sponsorship for the first and successive other California Duck Days events.” The Wetland Development Program also provided grants for the early years of the *Discover the Flyway* program.

Bob has been able to facilitate donations to YBF because of federal programs that promote such activities. Agencies like the Bureau of Reclamation, Fish and Wildlife Service and CVJV have made it possible to help YBF, and other organizations, provide opportunities for habitat conservation, education and wildlife viewing.

Bob Shaffer has a warm smile and a strong handshake. He has a salt and pepper beard and his blue eyes twinkle when he laughs.

He was at YBWA headquarters recently on a warm, clear September morning. He had invited Stacey Smith, Deputy State Director for Senator Barbara Boxer’s office, to join Robin Kulakow, and CVJV Board members Chris Unkel (Ducks Unlimited) and Dan Taylor



(California Audubon) to the Yolo Wildlife Area for an overview of the Joint Venture. Their agenda also included a discussion of the Delta and Yolo wildlife, water and habitat issues followed by a tour of the Wildlife Area. In typical style, Bob was bringing people together at the regional level to discuss needs for habitat conservation, something he has done his entire professional life.

An equal measure of an appreciation of natural resources and service to others seems to be a theme that flows through Bob’s life. Originally from Riverside, California, Bob spent 1968 to 1972 in the Air Force stationed in Texas, Virginia and Okinawa. He was a crew chief on a C130 cargo plane flying missions in Vietnam and around Europe. He moved to Northern California in 1972 to attend CSUS where he earned a BS in Natural Resource Management followed by an M.S. in Recreation and Park Administration. During his years as a student, he worked as a Park Ranger educating the public while protecting the American River Parkway.


Bob is married and has four daughters. His wife, Christie, recently made the bold move to go back to school and is studying nursing. His daughters range in age from 22 to 42. He has two grandchildren who live in Cumming, Georgia. Always an outdoor enthusiast, he enjoys fishing, backpacking and traveling.

Bob is dedicated to the work he does. “I have spent most of my federal career building and assisting partnerships to conserve Central Valley wetlands and associated habitats. It’s been very gratifying to know so many individuals in agencies, organizations and foundations that desire to collaborate in this effort.”

In regard to CVJV’s donations to YBF, Bob sums it up this way: “The CVJV has supported YBF in many ways for over a decade. We think highly of the DTF program, as it offers tremendous educational opportunities due to its juxtaposition to large urban areas. We provide funds yearly to support various activities that DTF provides. In addition, we have supported Duck Days for many years.” Numerous CVJV partners also contributed to the acquisition, restoration and enhancement of thousands of acres of the Wildlife Area.

The most current wish list item supported by “Santa Bob” is for materials to build a shade structure in the Demonstration Wetlands for the DTF program, the very same area Bob was involved in creating over twenty years ago!

Bob shared some personal thoughts about his experiences with YBF. “I believe that the importance of the Discover the Flyway Program cannot be overstated. Young people are our future voters, and educating them about the value of wetlands and agriculture for wildlife is necessary to ensure continued conservation of those habitats.”

Bob Shaffer’s dedication to Central Valley wetlands and the support of the CVJV, directly contributes to YBF’s mission by supporting our education program and encouraging innovative partnerships. Thank you Bob, for the many gifts you have facilitated over the years and for your involvement since the beginning. 



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Friday, November 18, 2011 • 5:30 - 9:00 pm • Veterans Memorial Center – 203 East 14th St., Davis, CA

\$50 per person (\$60 at the door). For a full listing of the evening's activities and to purchase tickets, please go to www.yolobasin.org or call 530.757.3780.

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