

## Sacramento Valley Type A Wildlife Areas 2020 Preseason Hunter Outreach Results

In August, 2020 CDFW and USFWS solicited comments and recommendations from licensed hunters on the Sacramento Valley's Type A wildlife areas and their public hunting programs. This process replaced the annual in-person preseason hunter outreach meeting as a result of safeguards and limitations necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. CDFW requested questions/comments for Gray Lodge Wildlife Area and Upper Butte Basin Wildlife Area (including Little Dry Creek, Howard Slough, and Llano Seco units) within CDFW's North Central Region (NCR). The USFWS requested questions/comments for the Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge Complex, which includes Sacramento, Delevan, Colusa, and Sutter national wildlife refuges.

The following are questions/comments received and the responses to those questions/comments from CDFW's North Central Region (NCR) and the USFWS.

### CDFW North Central Region

- *Question/Comment #1:* My question is to why the willow trees were cut on road zz to Howard slough check station?
  - *NRC response:* We are working with the county to improve drainage on Road ZZ to try to limit the impact of flooding on the road. The willows were obstructing equipment from being able to properly clean cattails from the ditch, which blocked flow.
- *Question/Comment #2:* For Gray Lodge WA: more emphasis needs to be placed on improving pheasant habitat and numbers including the stocking of pheasants as was done in the past.
  - *NCR response:* There are multiple reasons for the decline in pheasant population numbers, including lack of reproductive success and declining habitat conditions. Over the past 10 years we have restored over 740 acres of upland habitat on Gray Lodge with help from our partners, and we are planning on doing more in the future. This habitat work has been done to benefit both upland species and waterfowl nesting, but we haven't had much success getting pheasant populations to recover. CDFW will keep working at the problem and hopefully we can reverse the trend in the future. It's important to note that pheasants also depend on habitat adjacent to the wildlife area for escape cover and forage. Pheasants have been planted in the past to offer additional hunter opportunity on the wildlife areas and will likely continue.
- *Question/Comment #3:* For all WAs: Recognize that outdoor recreation is a minimal COVID-19 risk to participants; therefore, no reduction in hunting days should be proposed. Of course, employee precautions and physical distancing at the check stations may be necessary.
  - *NCR response:* Currently, no reduction in hunt days or opportunity is being proposed. The main reasons an in-season closure would be considered are a COVID-19 outbreak within the check station staff, or the normal weather/flood events that occur. If one person on the check station staff contracts COVID-19 then we may have to close the area to hunting if there are no additional staff available to replace them. We will be depending on the hunters visiting the area to practice all COVID-19 precautions including wearing of masks and proper social distancing and hygiene.
- *Question/Comment #4:* I recommend retaining same hunter quotas, both in reservations drawn and lottery backfills as prior years to extent possible. May need to reduce numbers slightly to accommodate any spacing limitations in hunters per blind or parking slots. All hunters to follow social distancing protocol at check station, including wearing mask and maintaining safe distance. Perhaps assigned pit blinds could be limited to two hunters. Assigned ponds could allow three

hunters. Allow spaced overnight camping at Howard Slough, other reservations allowing overnight camping. Consideration should be to only allow one lottery application per person per hunt day. Enforcement needs to be maintained and hunters held accountable for any violations. Thank you. A concerned hunter.

- *NRC response:* Gray Lodge and Upper Butte Basin should have similar quotas for hunters on the opener as in years past for both the number of reservations drawn and lottery and sweat line backfills.
  - The pit blinds quotas at Upper Butte will remain the same as past years: 3 people per party for both the blinds and the assigned ponds.
  - Overnight camping will still be permitted at Howard Slough prior to the hunt day. So camping will be permitted on Tuesday, Friday and Saturday nights. All trailers must be removed at the end of the hunt days on Wednesdays and Sundays. This and other overnight camping will be contingent on what is happening with COVID-19. We will be following the state and county guidelines from the health department. Social distancing and mask protocols will be in effect for the camp sites.
  - Each hunter will be permitted to enter only 1 area lottery, per person, per hunt day; this will include all state and federal areas. This means that if a friend is putting you in one wildlife area or refuge lottery you can't be putting them and yourself into another area or refuge lottery. To accomplish this all Type A areas in the northern Sacramento Valley will begin the lottery registration process at 7pm and conduct the drawing at 8pm. Gray Lodge will begin handing out sweat line numbers at the same time: 7pm. Gray Lodge will continue to hand out numbers after 8pm through the night as normal.
- *Question/Comment #5:* Please consider opening wetlands to falconry that are now open to other hunters for waterfowl. I've been to joint stakeholder type meetings hosted by CDFW and USFWS and was told falconry isn't a legal take method for waterfowl over many areas with blinds for gun hunters. Let us fly a hawk or falcon on a non-shooting day or two a week.
    - *NRC response:* On Type A and Type B wildlife areas, raptors may be used to take legal game only from the first Saturday following the end of the waterfowl season through the end of the falconry pheasant season. Raptors may be used only on Saturdays, Sundays, and Wednesdays. The falconry pheasant season runs through February 28<sup>th</sup> so, post season, there should be time for you to fly your birds and hunt on the areas open to raptors for hunting waterfowl. One of the purposes of the wildlife area is to allow the wildlife to rest and recover from their migrations. To allow hunting of any type to occur during non-shoot days would increase the pressure on the birds and potentially reduce their fitness and affect their ability to return to the breeding grounds in good condition. Changing falconry regulations requires a formal regulation change through the CA Fish and Game Commission.
  - *Question/Comment #6:* Hi sirs, one issue that emerges is the lottery hunters that travel to several refuges to get a number. I know you gave up on that a few years back but opening weekend there is a mass of humanity at the refuges. They speed down the roads getting numbers for friends at several places while their friends are doing the same. Lots of exposure and long lines. I see no need for masks while hunting in the fresh air. Most folks are distancing unless hunting with a friend. Might need masks around the building and sanitizer for the writing instruments. Maybe washstands near port-a-potties.
    - *NRC response:* The current plan for lotteries this season is just as you suggest. Hunters will only be permitted to put in for 1 lottery per hunt day across all the Type A wildlife areas and federal refuges. Hunters will have to choose the area they would like to hunt the most, and that is the lottery they will be participating in for that shoot day. A hunter's name may only appear on one lottery list each day, and we will cross reference the lists from all areas to ensure compliance with the 1 lottery per shoot day rule. Upper Butte

Basin Wildlife Area will require each hunter to be present to sign up for the lottery. The federal areas will allow one person to put in for a hunting group. But that doesn't mean that others from the group will be allowed to put in for the same people at another area or refuge. For Gray Lodge Wildlife Area hunters without a reservation will have to choose if they want a low sweat line number or they want to hunt one of the other north valley areas through the lottery. The lotteries and the Gray Lodge sweat line will all begin at 7pm with the drawing to occur at 8pm. Gray Lodge will continue to hand out numbers throughout the night as normal. The big change for Gray Lodge comes from not beginning the process until 7pm when the other areas and refuges begin registering for their lotteries.

- Masks and social distancing will be required when dealing with staff at the check stations for check-in and check-out, lottery, and sweat line. We will be counting on hunters to help keep each other and the staff at the check station healthy during this COVID-19 event.
  - We recommend that all hunters carry their own bird strap to keep their harvests separate from others in their group. This will reduce staff/public contact and speed up the check-out process. What we don't want to see is 21 birds come in on one strap for three hunters, then have to figure out who shot which birds.
  - All non-portable restrooms will be closed, and portable restrooms will be used in their place with hand sanitizer available. We are also encouraging all hunters to bring their own supplies for proper hygiene.
- *Question/Comment #7:* I'd like to comment on the hunt programs at Sacramento Valley wildlife areas and specifically Gray Lodge wildlife area. I've hunted Gray Lodge since 1982. Like the rest of California, Gray Lodge has experienced a severe decline in the pheasant population. On a statewide level, I understand that the main reason is loss of habitat. Gray Lodge has ample habitat, and yet the pheasant population has plummeted. During the 80's and 90's I could hunt there without a dog and bag a limit of roosters. I now have two talented dogs and am lucky if I jump a lone hen pheasant. If I recall, the pheasant harvest on opening weekends in the past numbered over a thousand. On recent opening days, I'll check the harvest numbers upon my departure and they reflect only a few birds. I've heard that the specific reasons at Gray Lodge are increased mosquito abatement and that the wildlife area is now being managed primarily for waterfowl. Can you please explain what you believe to be the reasons behind the severe decline of the pheasant population at Gray Lodge Wildlife Area?
    - *NCR response:* We understand your frustration with the lack of pheasants on Gray Lodge. Over the last 10 years with help from our partners CDFW has restored approximately 740 acres of upland habitat on the wildlife area with more scheduled to be completed in the near future.
    - Pheasants took a 3-way hit beginning in the mid 1990's. First, they lost the rice ground that used to be burned seasonally to flooded rice. Those burned fields were a great source of food for the local pheasants. Second, laser-leveling and clean farming became widely used in the valley, which resulted in larger, more homogenous fields with fewer moist edges, brushy rice checks, and less cover available for nesting and refuge outside the wildlife area. Third, as you said mosquito abatement activities could have also played a role in the decline. West Nile virus hit in 2003 and the practice of aerial spraying over the next several years must have had an impact on the wild pheasants in the surrounding farmland. Now the pheasant numbers are so low the population is having a difficult time recovering. There may also be a mortality factor associated with hens and hunting at the low population levels we see currently. In a pheasant study conducted by USGS, over half of radio marked hens died once the hunting season began, with cause of death mostly undetermined. There is a lot of pressure placed on these birds on the wildlife area. Hunting dogs do not distinguish

between hens or roosters and will flush whatever they find. Each time a hen is flushed she is expending energy during months when it is critical she rebuilds her energy after the nesting season, exposing herself to predators, and increasing the stress on her system. There may be some correlation between this pressure exerted on the hens during our long season, and the population staying depressed.

- *Question/Comment #8:* Rick Schussel from our group posed a question to DFG that I don't think has been answered yet. So can you guys please include at the meeting coming up? Can one hunter apply for a group at the evening lotteries? The way the Sac Complex has traditionally done. Also once your name is in for a lotto that's it you're done? Example below: Tom goes to LDC and applies and writes down Rick and Mark on his ticket. Rick goes to Sac and applies and writes down Tom and Mark's name. That scenario is not acceptable, correct? Thank you both for working with hunters to get us out in the field this year. It is very much appreciated.
  - *NCR response:* Hunters may only appear on one lottery list per hunt day, and lottery sign up will be limited to one hour per evening, from 7:00pm – 8:00pm, except Llano Seco which will continue the morning lottery. We will continue to require all party members be present to sign up for the lottery at the UBBWA check stations. Additional opportunities may be available for walk-ons on shoot days. A summary of wildlife area operational changes can be viewed at <https://wildlife.ca.gov/lands/COVID-19>.
  - We appreciate your understanding that these changes are needed to ensure safety for the check station employees and the hunting public to keep the hunt program viable during the time of COVID-19. If only one of our employees contracts the disease the whole team will have to go into isolation which will likely lead to the temporary closing of that check station while sanitation occurs and, if possible, back-up staff are identified to continue operations.
  
- *Question/Comment #9:* I want to share a few questions and concerns with you: First, let me say that I hunt GL and/or UBB pretty much every week. I believe management has done well with habitat in both systems, especially in the Howard blinds, LDC free roam, and newer renovations at GL. I'm not complaining, just offering suggestions. Regarding the parking of trailers at Gray Lodge during hunting season, please don't deny us this privilege. 2020 has already been one hell of a year. We all park our trailers at least 6 feet apart, and almost all social interactions occur outdoors. With masks and social distancing, we should be safe.
  - *NCR response:* Currently, we are not planning on limiting trailer parking on Gray Lodge or any other area that permits trailers to be left for the season or the day prior to a shoot day. This doesn't mean that in the future we might not be directed to have the trailers removed from the areas. We will be following the state and county health department guidelines during this COVID-19 event, and we will be relying on the people using the facilities to also follow these recommendation and guidelines to keep everyone safe. Please contact the area or refuge you plan to visit, prior to heading out, to see if there has been any changes or updates to the rules or onsite conditions.
  
- *Question/Comment #10:* Regarding the check-in/check out processes at all refuges: this is the perfect year to implement use of barcode scanners to check people in and out. Not only would it be faster and safer, but it would offer the ability to catch those trying to participate in multiple lotteries. You guys can keep better, more accurate data on refuge use, hunter time in the field, harvest stats, and so on. Anyone with an iPhone and access to a database can scan a barcode in.
  - *NCR response:* We agree that this is the perfect year to try something new and bring us into the computer age. We currently are investigating the possibility of using scanners

for the check-in and check-out process. We think we have developed a system that will work, but only time will tell if it is successful. We ask all of the hunters to bear with us as we work any bugs out of the new system and hopefully we can begin a program that will make the check-in and check-out a smoother process for all of us.

- *Question/Comment #11:* Gray Lodge flooding: you used to flood Pond 56 high enough to have water standing in the trees on the south side of the pond; this provided excellent wood duck habitat. It seems like the past two years you've kept it too low. Is there any reason you can't flood those trees again? Seems like there are hundreds of wood duck nesting boxes on the refuge but limited flooded timber. Also, Pond 65 has been low for the past three years. I've noticed a significant decrease in mallard use since it has been lowered. I know you've got to prioritize, but damn that was a good pond. Disking ponds at LDC and Howard (and GL to some extent): I totally understand the need to manage tules, but is there any way you can take a different approach than disking entire ponds? Maybe disk one side this year and the other side next year? There would be a lot more huntable (in a practical sense) areas if we could actually walk in those ponds, even if it meant just half of the pond.
  - *NCR response:* With the redesign of pond 56 about 4 years ago it was designed to have a relatively consistent depth throughout so water should make it back to the trees. Also, just because the boards have been pulled on a field doesn't mean it was due to staff action. One of the constant challenges we have each year is hunters making the ponds the depth they want to hunt rather than how we have them set. Also, last year and this year due to the construction on our main intake ditch we have not and will not have surface water delivery on that portion of the wildlife area after October 15<sup>th</sup>. Depending on how the construction proceeds this winter this may be the final year of the project with severely reduced water deliveries. If the contractor is unable to complete the renovations, then we may have another reduced delivery of water during the winter on our main intake ditch. No rain will improve the pace of construction, but it may cause us to reduce quotas if the wells cannot keep up with evaporation and absorption.
  - Regarding discing of habitat units on the wildlife areas; discing a portion of the pond to control cattails, while trying to improve food sources on the remaining acreage through managed irrigations, will be counterproductive. It is somewhat of an either/or proposal. We can either irrigate an entire field to promote moist soil plants, or disc and leave dry the entire field for that season to set back cattail growth for future years. Also, discing will aid in improving moist soil production in subsequent years. Discing and irrigating in the same season will only worsen the tule and cattail growth that we are trying to manage. Leaving half un-disced and not irrigated will lower overall quality of that wetland unit over several subsequent years.
- *Question/Comment #12:* Suggestions for Gray Lodge - Please open additional parking lots off Pennington Rd around Evans Riemer Rd or off W Liberty Rd to allow easier access to largely untapped hunting area in the northern part of the refuge. Potentially even something south off Almond Orchard Rd to allow additional access to ponds 48/50/51 if improved? Anything to spread out hunters in order to allow additional hunt opportunities. Please prohibit bikes. They are being used by parties to jump early reservation holders and also for shell runs negating the benefits of the 25 shell limit. Please provide additional enforcement against common violations such as dropping people off on roads, reserving multiple spots for latecomers, crowding into ponds right before shoot time. Hunters know where these bad behaviors are taking place, listen to them and crack down. Continue to improve habitat away from popular ponds that are overcrowded. Find a way to pay for on-site security for the trailer parking area or frequent drive-by patrols. Either offering caretaker hookups in exchange for monitoring, voluntary donations, a bake sale, or charge a minimal fee for trailer parking or offer off-season storage at a cost.

- *NCR response:* Opening up additional parking lots off of public roads is not feasible. With the limited access points currently on Gray Lodge we have been able to control visitors entering and exiting the wildlife area. By adding additional lots off of the public road we would lose that ability to control access and have hunters and other visitors accessing the property in unauthorized locations. Gray Lodge depends on knowing how many hunters are on the east and west sides of the area for the daily quotas and the safety of the hunters in the field. If there are additional access points we can't monitor we lose the ability to track the number of hunters entering and leaving. Hunters could leave the property without stopping at the check station and staff would never know.
- Regarding bikes, we have had the question asked both ways in the past. We have had people happy they still have the ability to ride their bikes to their hunting spot, and like yourself we have had people unhappy about bikes on the area. It is a difficult question and at this time we have no plans to change the status quo. We recognize that these types of actions by hunters detract from the hunting experience. Generally, enforcement personnel are on the areas most shoot days. They are limited in number and try to cover as best they can, but they can only do so much. If you report to the check station that something is occurring on a regular basis then we can notify the wardens and they can focus on those areas. If you do see a violation in progress, then we recommend calling CalTIP: 1-888-334-2258. There is also an app available for smart phones which can be downloaded to make reporting easier. This is an anonymous tip line that will dispatch the nearest available warden to the complaint.
- Hiring on-site security is just not possible. Break-ins are the major reason we do not permit cars and trucks to be parked in the trailer area. Vehicles are not supposed to be parked in the trailer parking location at any time because it makes it too easy to break-in and remove items and secure them in a car or truck with no one seeing what is happening. It is important not to leave valuables unattended or unlocked in trailers, and we are counting on the public to report anything suspicious to the check station or the police.
- *Question/Comment #13:* No change to Howard or Little Dry Creek except 6 ft spacing in morning check in and evening sign up. Refills should stay at vehicle until called
  - *NCR response:* Thank you for your comments and suggestions for the hunt program at Howard slough and little dry creek. To ensure social distancing and crowd size reductions at all check stations in the Sacramento Valley, hunters will only be allowed to sign up for one lottery or sweat line per hunt day. Additionally, the sign-up period will be reduced to 7:00 pm to 8:00 pm at all check stations with lotteries except Ilano seco, where lottery sign-up will continue to be held between 4:00 – 4:30 am on the hunt day. Gray Lodge will begin sweat line entry at 7:00 pm as well. Entry times may be changed on hunt days to allow for additional processing times for reservations, as well as set times for the beginning of lottery entry.
  - We will encourage all hunters to remain in their vehicles until their number is called. Masks and social distancing will be required when dealing with staff at the check stations for check-in and check-out, lottery and sweat line. We will be counting on hunters to help keep the staff at the check station healthy during this COVID-19 event.

### **Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge Complex**

- *Question/Comment #1:* I saw CDFG post on Facebook regarding questions for the state refuges and NWR's. My question is, "could the NWR's plant winter wheat or rye grass in a hunt unit and have that unit be hunted as a dry field"? I'm not aware of any dry field hunt sites at either Sac, Delevan, Colusa or Sutter. Is this an option?

- *USFWS response:* The only dry field hunting opportunities are in upland units in the free roaming areas or assigned ponds. Later in the season, after some precipitation these areas can provide excellent dry field hunting opportunities. The Sacramento NWR complex does not have the ability to plant winter wheat or rye grass in existing hunt units.
- *Question/Comment #2:* Lottery process: times to submit, can I sign up for my group, can I submit to more than 1 refuge, etc.
  - *USFWS response:* We will be accepting lottery applications from 7 pm to 8 pm. You can sign up for your group. You are only permitted to sign up for one lottery on a Type A area. This means that your name may only appear on one lottery list regardless of whether you are the one putting in or not. If hunters are caught entering multiple lotteries on the Sac complex hunting areas, they may be fined and/or banned from those federal areas for the remainder of the waterfowl season.
- *Question/Comment #3:* Check in / out process: any change to check in times in case COVID check in is slower, contactless procedures if any, etc.
  - *USFWS response:* Check in procedures will be slower as we will be calling reservation and lottery numbers in groups of 5 and only allowing 5 groups within the fenced in areas around the check stations. Check in times will remain the same as they were last year: Sacramento 2 ½ , Delevan 2 ½ , Colusa 2, and Sutter 2 hours before shoot time. During check out we will be asking hunters to place their harvest on the bird checking tables so that staff can check their harvest and submit permits. During check out hunters will be asked to remain at least 6 ft away from check station staff and to wear a face covering.
- *Question/Comment #4:* Quotas: will quotas be impacted specifically due to COVID or just based on standard water availability
  - *USFWS response:* Quotas will be based on water availability and will not be reduced due to COVID-19.
- *Question/Comment #5:* Restrictions: any restrictions hunters need to understand such as crowding at check station, stay in vehicle until number is called, calling 'x' numbers at a time to step up, mask requirements, etc.
  - *USFWS response:* Check station staff will stop processing hunters if there are too many people in the fenced-in areas around the check stations. Masks or face coverings will be required during hunter processing. We will be calling reservations and lottery numbers in groups of 5 parties to reduce the number of people around the immediate check station area. Everyone else with higher numbers will be asked to remain in or by their vehicles or in the enlarged waiting area outside the fenced in area of the check station. Loudspeakers will be utilized to communicate with hunting parties in the parking lots.
- *Question/Comment #6:* Parking lot: any change to when lot is open, or other restrictions on sleeping overnight in lot?
  - *USFWS response:* Check station parking lots will open at 6 pm and the check stations will open at 7 pm to begin accepting lottery applications. Overnight stay will be allowed on Tuesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays and hunters will be asked to socially distance from each other while participating in overnight stay.
- *Question/Comment #7:* Is the plan to have hunters stay in cars while you call reservations? Why not have numbers 1 thru 10 outside the check station stand on painted spots 1.....2.....3... and so on. No doubt getting hunters out to the field will slow down and pissed off hunters getting to their blinds before shooting time. Hope you can find a solution.

- *USFWS response:* The plan will be to call reservation and lottery hunters in groups of 5 to process those hunters. We will be expanding the waiting areas around the check stations to provide room for social distancing. Hunters will be asked to remain in or by their vehicles or in the extended waiting area until their number is called.
- *Question/Comment #8:* Hi Garrett, one issue that emerges is the lottery hunters that travel to several refuges to get a number. I know you gave up on that a few years back but opening weekend there is a mass of humanity at the refuges. They speed down the roads getting numbers for friends at several places while their friends are doing the same. Lots of exposure and long lines. I see no need for masks while hunting in the fresh air. Most folks are distancing unless hunting with a friend. Might need masks around the building and sanitizer for the writing instruments. Maybe washstands near port-a-potties.
  - *USFWS response:* Hunters will only be allowed to enter one Type A area lottery for the 2020-21 season which includes Sacramento, Delevan, Colusa, and Sutter NWR's. Masks will be required during hunter processing at the check stations and hand sanitizer will be added to the porta potties.