

Rabbits seek fast refuge on former farm property

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When Elmer Fudd fumed over "that wascally wabbit," he was talking about his cartoon nemesis, Bugs Bunny.

But the frustrated Fudd's familiar lament also fits the riparian brush rabbit, a shy and secretive little critter considered one of California's most endangered mammals.

At midafternoon Wednesday, 16 riparian brush rabbits bolted, one by one, from cloth sacks and into their new home at the San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge west of Modesto.

The area, once part of the Buffington farm, is choked with what these rabbits need most — an almost impenetrable thicket of wild roses, blackberry brambles and scrub willow, among other things.

Since red-tail hawks, coyotes and any number of other predators are more than willing to dine on riparian brush rabbits, the critters tend to spend most of their precarious existence hiding in thickets.

"This is truly a memorable event," said Kim Forrest, wildlife refuge manager for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "We've been drooling over this property for many years."

Fish and Wildlife, in partnership with a host of public and private organizations including California State University, Stanislaus; the CAL-FED Bay-Delta Program; U.S. Bureau of Reclamation; and the California Department of Fish and Game, has been working since 2001 to restore the brush rabbit population.

Forrest brought a bottle of champagne to the Wednesday afternoon affair, toasting Helen Buffington as well as representatives of the many public and private agencies that are working on the project.

Project cost starts at \$4 million

Land acquisition alone cost about \$4 million, Forrest said. Once the land is obtained, restoring it to its

natural state costs \$5,000 an acre, she added.

Money for such projects, said John Shelton, staff environmental scientist for the Bay-Delta Authority, comes from federal, state and private sources, including several statewide bond issues.

As she filled a dozen or more plastic champagne glasses, Forrest noted that no bond or government money was spent on the bottle of "bubbly."

Helen Buffington was the first to raise her glass.

"My father and grandfather," she said, "thought this piece of ground should be kept for the wildlife. To the rabbits."

Patrick Kelly, an associate professor of biological sciences and coordinator of the Endangered Species Recovery Program at Stanislaus State, said more brush rabbits would be released in the same general area this afternoon and in coming weeks.

In all, Kelly said, about 40 brush rabbits would be released at the 350-acre site.

Kelly and his team also have helped place riparian brush rabbits at the adjoining Faith Ranch, owned by the Gallo family, and at Caswell State Park outside Ripon.

Since 2001, the rabbits have been bred at a facility near Lodi.

Kelly, Forrest and others said the recently acquired Buffington parcel, along with the easement on the Faith Ranch, would play a significant role in helping to "recover" the endangered rabbits along the San Joaquin River.

"We're looking for one more location," Kelly said. "About half of the rabbits have radio collars, so we will be able to track their movements."

The goal, said Kelly, is to see the riparian brush rabbits become a self-sustaining population.

Restoring a damaged area

"These rabbits are very different from cotton-tails," he said. "You won't see them sitting out in the open. These rabbits avoid open spaces. They're very shy, very secretive. They stay within the brush almost all of the time."

Do we really need to spend millions to restore a rabbit population whose main role seems to be as a food source for other predators?

Absolutely, said Forrest and Shelton.

"We're restoring an area that's been damaged in the past," said Shelton. "We're not trying to stop or get in the way of farming. We all benefit from this; it (improves) our quality of life."

Forrest noted that restoring habitat for the riparian brush rabbit has a ripple effect, benefiting other species as well.

The brambles and thickets so necessary for the survival of the brush rabbit, she said, also are vital to neotropical songbirds that migrate through the area.

Besides, Forrest added, "There's an intrinsic value to the species itself. They deserve to live, too."

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