

Upper Butte Basin Wildlife Area - A worthy excursion

Nestled in the heart of the Sacramento Valley a few miles north of the Sutter Buttes is one of California's newest wildlife areas—Upper Butte Basin Wildlife Area. It is comprised of three units: Little Dry Creek, Howard Slough, and Llano Seco, which together total more than

By Steve Cordes

DFG's acquisition in the late 1980s and early 1990s, these properties were managed for commercial rice production. While the DFG recognizes the value of laser leveled rice fields for migratory waterfowl, DFG also recognizes that restored to a diverse blend of seasonal wetland, upland, and riparian habitats, these areas will benefit many more species. With proper management and restoration efforts, these areas have the potential to support some of California's rarest species.

When the DFG became a signatory to the NAWMP, it agreed to aid in the restoration of North America's waterfowl population. DFG's primary role in the NAWMP has been participation in the Central Valley Habitat Joint Venture (CVHJV). The CVHJV is composed of a variety of both public and private organizations including Ducks Unlimited, California Waterfowl Association, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Audubon Society, and DFG.

The Central Valley of California has long been recognized as an important waterfowl wintering area because of its ample food supply and mild temperatures. As a result, more than 60 percent of the waterfowl in the Pacific Flyway winter somewhere in California. The goal of the CVHJV called for the creation of 120,000 acres of new wetlands and restoration or enhancement of an additional 750,000 acres of seasonal wetlands within the Central Valley. As a result, the DFG created the Upper Butte Basin Wildlife Area. Upper Butte Basin Wildlife Area provides important wintering habitat for the many species of waterfowl that call California home. The first northern migrants begin arriving on the wintering grounds in mid-August. At first only a handful can be found; however, their numbers build





DFG photo by Robert Waldron

Above, duck box at Upper Butte Basin Wildlife area.

Right, duck boxes becomes homes for many types of wildlife like ringtailed cats.

Bottom, wetland area at Upper Butte Basin provides habitat for migration waterfowl.

DFG photo courtesy Upper Butte Basin WLA



on Howard slough. Thirty-eight acres of permanent wetland habitat was developed to provide habitat for giant garter snakes. The Western Canal Water District developed 10 acres of riparian habitat adjacent to Butte Creek to replace habitat destroyed when Western Canal Water District installed a siphon under Butte Creek. The siphon was installed to provide farmers with water from Lake Oroville, thus reducing impacts to salmon within Butte Creek. Howard Slough was selected because the restoration effort expands already existing riparian habitat and could, with additional restoration efforts, connect isolated pockets of riparian habitat along Butte Creek.

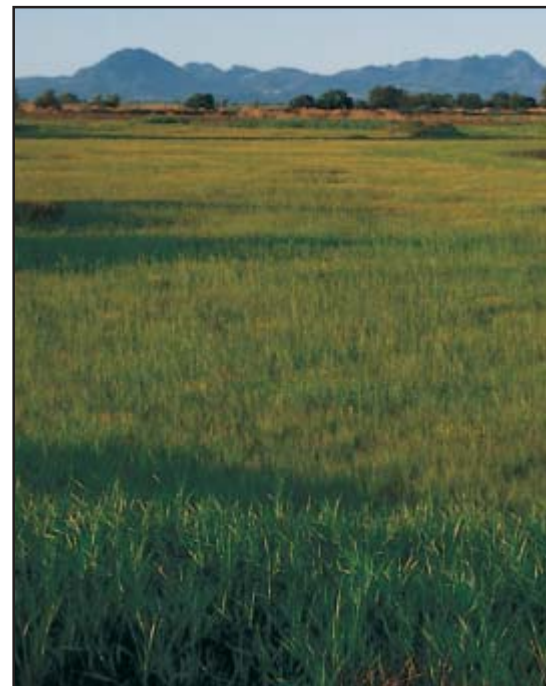
Hunting programs are run on all three units of Upper Butte Basin Wildlife Area. The primary species hunted on Upper Butte Basin Wildlife Area are waterfowl,

rapidly. By mid-September these areas host more than 250,000 waterfowl. Peak counts often exceed 500,000 birds in December.

As stated earlier, the areas were formerly laser leveled rice fields needing restoration efforts to return the areas to a more natural state. The DFG has turned to partnerships with private organizations to generate the money required to complete this task. The DFG works closely with a variety of public and private organizations including the California Waterfowl Association, Ducks Unlimited, Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) and local water districts to achieve this end. Since 1999 these partnerships have secured over \$500,000 of funding from the North America Wetland Conservation Act (NAWCA) to restore nearly 1,000 acres to diverse wetland, upland, and riparian habitats on both Howard Slough and Llano Seco. The latest project will start

during the summer of 2001 at Llano Seco, where 250 acres of rice fields will be converted to 220 acres of seasonal wetland and 30 acres of riparian habitat.

In addition to NAWCA funds other significant sources of funding have come from the WCB, the sale of California State Duck Stamps and from projects conducted for mitigation purposes. Currently, the WCB is working with the DFG to fund two projects, which will restore 60 acres of riparian habitat along Butte Creek and refurbish and upgrade three water pumps at Little Dry Creek. The refurbished pumps will provide a stable water supply and reduce electrical demand on the area. Duck Stamp funds are being used to develop a permanent pond adjacent to Highway 162 and to restore approximately 150 acres of seasonal wetland and upland habitat south and west of the proposed pond. There are two mitigation projects



pheasant, and dove; however, there is also a junior deer hunt held on Little Dry Creek. The deer hunt is shotgun only with success running as high as 80 percent. Some of the finest public waterfowl hunting can be found on the Little Dry Creek Unit. Seasonal averages run close to three birds per hunter, with mallards as the top bird in the bag. Avid pheasant hunters also find Upper Butte Basin Wildlife Area to their liking. Hunters typically bag 1,200 to 1,500 wild pheasants annually.

In addition to hunting, the areas also offer spectacular wildlife and habitat viewing opportunities. In July and August, some of the most spectacular concentrations of California hibiscus can be found along the sloughs and creeks on both Howard Slough and Little Dry Creek. From late September through March, large



DFG photos by Robert Waldron

Above, a rice field at Upper Butte Basin.



Left, pheasant. There are many species at Upper Butte Basin, making it an excellent stop for wildlife watching or hunting.



numbers of sandhill cranes can be found throughout the areas and adjacent farmland. When waterfowl numbers begin building in September, peregrine falcons, which prey on waterfowl, soon follow. Waterfowl numbers and diversity peak in December but can be found throughout the year. Later in the winter bald eagles also arrive. Eagle's also prey on the many waterfowl using the area. The area boasts populations of ring-tailed cats, giant garter snakes, and the western yellow-billed cuckoos. Howard Slough has had at least two pairs of cuckoos nesting on the area.

From February through September the areas are open seven days a week from dawn to dusk. Peak times to view wildlife are generally from sunrise until 10 a.m. from September through March on non-hunt days. Access is limited to walking and bike riding from designated parking lots only. For hunting, during the season, the

areas are open Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday from October through January.

While restoration is currently the major focus now, other programs will be developed and refined in the future. DFG plans to develop an interpretive and public outreach program with guided and self-guided tours to make Upper Butte Basin Wildlife Area a priority wildlife excursion for everyone. For additional information, call (530) 982-2169.

Steve Cordes has worked with the Department as a Wildlife Biologist since 1994, and has been assigned to Upper Butte Basin Wildlife Area since 1997.