

Waterfowling on public areas in California

By Tom Blankinship

Californians can find some great waterfowling opportunities on state and federal lands. Consider that there are over two dozen wildlife areas and national wildlife refuges in California that contain significant managed wetland components and offer a substantial amount of waterfowl hunting. In fact, approximately one-third of the managed wetlands in California are found on these areas. Some of these areas may contain two or more separate units. These wetlands draw waterfowl by the thousands. There also are dozens of state wildlife areas operated by the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) that do not have large managed wetland components, but where wildlife watching or hunting opportunities abound.

Regarding unting on national wildlife refuges, although it may seem to contradict the idea of what a refuge is, refuges are not synonymous with sanctuaries. The refuge system began in the 1920s in response to national and international concern over dramatic drops in waterfowl population numbers. At the same time, as the human population began to expand and agriculture began consuming more of the wetland areas for

rice and other crops, waterfowl habitat shrank and the birds began to cause crop damage. Refuges seemed to be an approach that would address not only waterfowl needs but the concerns of farmers as well. Hunters had already shown the willingness to fund the purchase of habitat for waterfowl by purchasing duck stamps and through the excise tax on hunting equipment that began in 1937. That willingness to fund habitat projects, combined with the farmers' needs, paved the way for the development of a patchwork of wetlands that provided feeding and resting areas for waterfowl. As refuges expanded and grew in California, so did the waterfowl populations, and in the 1950s, national refuges and state wildlife areas opened to waterfowl and pheasant hunting in response to the growing demand of the public for affordable public hunting areas.

California residents have a strong interest in waterfowling with 79,000 state duck stamps sold in California in 1999. Most were purchased by duck hunters, though some of the stamps are purchased by duck stamp collectors. Approximately 12,000 of those who purchased duck stamps applied for at least one reservation



DFG photos by Robert Waldron

Top, decoys at dawn. Bottom right, prepared decoy with line and weight.

for hunting on the public areas, so roughly 15 percent of California's waterfowlers hunt on public areas at least some of the time. In the 1999 season, 107,101 waterfowl hunter-days were recorded on the state and federal areas where the DFG operates formal waterfowl hunting programs. Last year, hunters on these areas took an average of two waterfowl per day.

A critical piece of information needed by someone unfamiliar with public areas is "How far do I have to drive to get to a hunting area?" There are public waterfowl areas literally from one end of the state to the other, although those living in Southern California will find only three areas managed for waterfowl hunting that have reservations available through the DFG's standard process (described later). These are the Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge, and the Imperial and San Jacinto wildlife areas. Public hunting is also

available at Lake Perris State Recreation Area, which is managed by the Department of Parks and Recreation. Most California waterfowl hunting areas are located in the San Joaquin and Sacramento Valleys, because the Central Valley traditionally has held the majority of wintering waterfowl in California (several million birds). Certainly, good hunting can be experienced in other areas. Most of DFG's public areas and many of the federal areas, their locations, and regulations pertaining to hunting on them, are described in the publication *Hunting and Other Public Uses on State and Federal Areas* which is published by DFG. *Hunting and Other Public Uses on State and Federal Areas* is available at license agents, DFG offices and on the DFG web page at www.dfg.ca.gov/hunting.

Going to a refuge for the first time can be quite an experience. Consider California Type "A" Wildlife Areas (WLA) and Type "A" National Wildlife Refuges (NWR). On every Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday during waterfowl season (usually October through January), these areas are open to hunting. One of the most prudent actions to take before planning to hunt is to call the refuge or wildlife area and ask the specifics of their system. Use the *Hunting and Other Public Uses on State and Federal Areas* as a guide. In this booklet, DFG describes how the reservation system works, which areas offer reservations, and other ways of gaining entry to the hunt areas. Options to become eligible to hunt are: submit a reservation application at least 17 days before the desired hunt day, go to the refuge the night before depending on the individual refuge and sign up for the lottery for the next day, or show up the morning of your hunt day and receive a "sweat line" (or "first-come-first-serve") number. The entry methods work this way:

- ★ *Reservation system* – DFG must receive an application for reservations at least 17 days in advance of the day desired to hunt. If drawn, the hunter and a partner are guaranteed entry. Junior hunters with valid licenses also can apply for reservations.
- ★ *Lottery system* – A few areas operate a lottery system. Hunters can sign up for a lottery drawing, typically on the evening before the hunt day. Spots not filled by reservation hunters are filled through a list resulting from the lottery drawing.
- ★ *First-come-first-served system* – Hunters sign up for a number to enter the area after the reservation list is exhausted. Since many DFG areas do not fill, particularly during the middle portion of the waterfowl season, many hunters use this method successfully. A sweat line number will allow only the one individual to get on the area when called.

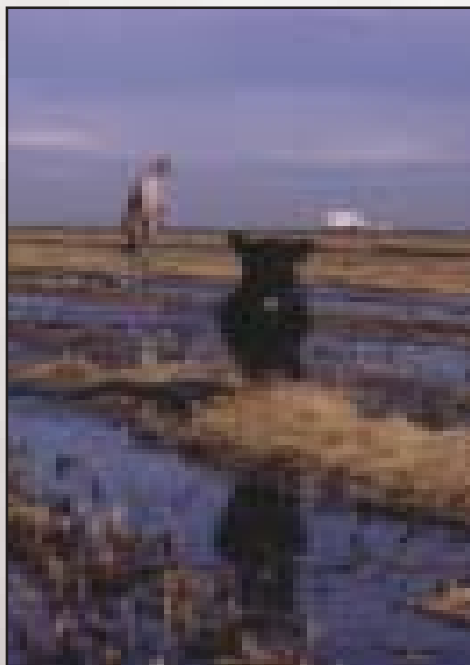
★ *Each area has its own system of calling numbers in the morning. For example, an area may first call for reservations numbers (1-25) and then the next (26-50), and so on until all the hunters with reservations have been let on the refuge. Then they will wait 20 minutes or so before calling in the lottery number holders. Finally they let in the hunters from the sweat line in numerical order.*

This process can seem rather complicated to someone unfamiliar with these procedures. Reading DFG's *Hunting and Other Public Uses on State and Federal Areas* will help, and if questions come up,



DFG photos by Robert Waldron

Dog on platform in duck blind.



Hunter transporting decoys in rice field with hunting dog.

call one of the numbers listed in the booklet. Though many areas do not fill their hunter quotas during most of the waterfowl season, a reservation or a lucky lottery number is necessary to get into the area for the early morning hunt for the most popular areas. However, since the quota for these areas are refilled with waiting hunters as others check out, hunting in the afternoons is frequently an alternative.

To assist the younger hunters, many of DFG's wildlife areas now offer special opportunities for junior hunters (under 16 years old). They include special hunt days or special areas reserved just for junior hunters and their hunting companions. For those hunters with disabilities, several wildlife areas provide blinds that are accessible by wheel chairs. DFG's *Hunting and Other Public Uses on State and Federal Areas* provides the list of areas with these features.

For hunters new to an area or new to DFG's public area system, unless they have a reservation that will secure a designated hunting site, a first hunt at an area should begin in midday. Many of the other hunters are leaving by this time, and this provides the opportunity to find an uncrowded spot. Obviously, the most popular sites may still be occupied, and the early morning usually is the best time of day to hunt ducks. However, afternoon hunting can be enjoyable, and there will be much less competition. Wandering around before daylight in an unfamiliar place, trying to select a hunting site in a short amount of time, can be a pretty frustrating experience. It also disturbs other hunters who have reached their destination.

To ensure an enjoyable day, it is extremely important to know the hunting regulations and all wildlife area regulations. Review the regulation booklets that contain regulations for waterfowl hunting and use of wildlife areas. DFG check station staff can answer any questions that might arise. Make sure to plan and prepare adequately with the proper equipment, clothing and supplies. When new to an area, do not judge the success of the first couple of hunts harshly – consider them investments for more successful hunts in the future. And lastly, it's not the success of the hunt but the experience of the day that's most important; it's the skill, effort, camaraderie, and pleasure of being outdoors that counts.

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