



[Home](#) → [Lands](#) → [Outdoor California Articles](#) → **The Evolution of Waterfowl Refuges and the Early Years of the Gray Lodge Wildlife Area**

This article was originally printed in *Outdoor California* magazine, January - February 2001.

[Subscribe to Outdoor California](#)

The Evolution of Waterfowl Refuges and the Early Years of the Gray Lodge Wildlife Area

By L.H. (Larry) Cloyd

There have been many articles written about some of the refuges in California, particularly Gray Lodge and Los Banos. Most people know of them as wildlife areas, but not everyone is aware of their origins. So how did waterfowl refuges come about? What was the need?

Reports from the 1920s indicate that waterfowl numbers in California had declined noticeably from levels of the late 1800s. Hunters in the 1920s were slow to accept the concept that waterfowl might not always be abundant. So long as there was food, hunters believed that there would be millions of ducks and geese.

During this period, forces other than hunting evolved that had a profound effect on the population of ducks and geese in California and elsewhere in the Pacific Flyway. At this time, California's human population began to multiply rapidly and the need for space and land for agriculture began to reduce the amount of space available to wildlife



The Gray Lodge Gun club first organized in 1921. The clubhouse was painted gray and that's how the area got its name, Gray Lodge. Photo courtesy of Frank McBride

The Bureau of Biological Survey, U.S. Department of Agriculture, reported continuous drought conditions in the Canadian nesting areas. This drought resulted in drastic cuts in the season lengths and bag limits of waterfowl. Canada and the U.S. grew concerned over the disastrous conditions that threatened the wildfowl of the continent. The two governments endeavored to avert severe waterfowl shortages by devising methods for saving an adequate breeding population for the following years.

As a result, the United States and Great Britain held a convention to discuss the protection of waterfowl and other migratory bird species. The United States and Canada signed a treaty for the protection of migratory birds on August 16, 1916. This proclamation defined what would be done for the protection of migratory game birds and identified what would be classified as migratory game birds, migratory insectivorous birds, and other migratory non-game birds.

Following this convention, another convention was held between the U.S. and United Mexican States to discuss the protection of migratory game birds and game mammals. Mirroring the U.S. and Canada treaty, Mexican officials signed the document in February 1936, and Franklin Roosevelt signed on March 15, 1937.

Responding to public pressure, the California Legislature passed legislation requiring one-third of the money collected annually from the sale of hunting licenses be set aside for a period of five years for a program of purchase and maintenance of refuge lands throughout the state. The program started January 1, 1925 under a Guidance Committee.

At the time, Fish and Game was a division of the Department of Natural Resources which had established a system of deer refuges and game farms. To manage these areas, the Bureau of Refuges was established in 1928, and took under its jurisdiction the deer refuges, game farms, predatory animal control, migratory game and non-game birds and mammals.



What looks like a swarm of insects is actually a concentration of waterfowl at Gray Lodge in 1935. DFG photo by Gordon True

The purchase of state waterfowl refuges started in 1929, under the leadership of the Bureau of Education and Research. Rice crop depredation by waterfowl had developed into a contentious issue, and the refuge was seen as one method for not only attracting waterfowl and thereby protecting the crops, but also providing waterfowl with needed resting and foraging opportunities. The first refuge was the Los Banos Waterfowl Refuge, purchased in 1929. It was a portion of a duck club in the grasslands of Merced County, within the wetlands of the San Joaquin Valley. Development of this area started with the construction of levees, ditches and water control structures to create resting ponds for migrating birds. Field work on this property was accomplished by two employees: Roy Wattenburger was hired on July 1, 1930, and I was hired September 15. To build levees and construct ditches, we had one Caterpillar 20 tractor, the smallest made; one pull grader (used) obtained from the Division of Highways; one six-foot pull revolving scraper; and, of course, picks and shovels. That was the extent of our equipment. To get our water control culverts, Asa McClellan, game refuge supervisor, would visit the junk yards in San Mateo, where he lived, and pick up discarded water heaters to bring to the refuge. Wattenburger and I would then knock out the ends which were riveted. We then fastened two together to make a pipe 12 inches in diameter and 12 feet long to serve as a water control structure. Other water control structures were built of purchased redwood.

The purchase of the second waterfowl refuge, Gray Lodge, was completed in 1931. Located 10 miles west of Gridley, in the Butte Sink, it is a major wetland in California. The Gray Lodge property had been a very successful duck club with records showing an average annual take of more than 12,000 birds.

During 1932 and later years of the 30s, additional waterfowl refuges were added to the refuge system. Duck clubs located on Joyce Islands were acquired in the Suisun Marsh, Solano County. The Finney-Ramer duck clubs were acquired in the Imperial Valley near the town of Calipatria and became the Imperial Refuge. A portion of Honey Lake in Lassen County was purchased and became the Honey Lake Waterfowl Area.

These early areas purchased by the state became the first waterfowl refuges in the refuge system. Initially managed as sanctuaries, these refuges provided year-round natural marsh for nesting birds as well as safe resting and feeding areas for winter migrating birds.

I reported to Gray Lodge on July 1, 1933 as the first resident supervisor of the newly acquired refuges with my wife of 18 months, Era. Here I was, a 23-year-old with a wife who had never lived anywhere but Fresno, ready to take over the management of Gray Lodge.

Living quarters at Gray Lodge consisted of one four-room house, formerly lived in by the caretaker, and five one-room cabins. My wife and I slept in one of the cabins and cooked and ate in another while remodeling and painting the caretaker's home which was eventually to be our home. We lived in the heart of this 2,500 -acre refuge until 1939. While living there, we saw sights few people witness. Snow geese flying on a clear moonlit night, so clear and bright, reading was almost possible. We saw flights of ducks and geese flying out of the refuge at dusk and returning the next morning. Some flights lasted more than an hour. At first, you could only hear them, just specks in the sky and then they would start circling and folding their wings, dropping like falling leaves on the water.

Development of the refuge slowed due to lack of earth-moving equipment and money to purchase equipment. Eventually, we did get a D-4 Caterpillar Tractor and a small John Deere wheel tractor; the purchase of these two pieces of equipment helped considerably in doing work necessary in creating ponds and distributing water.

With limited funding, the next big boost to the development of the refuge system came with the amendment by Congress to set aside an amount equal to the revenue accrued during the fiscal year ending July 30, 1939, and each year thereafter, from a tax imposed on sport hunting firearms, shells and cartridges, and set apart in the treasury as a special fund known as Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Fund. With the passage of this legislation, a program of additional development at Gray Lodge was completed in 1941 to 1942. Levee roads were raised and additional water control structures were installed. The California Wildlife Conservation Act and the establishment of the Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) in 1947 provided an appropriation from the General Fund of \$9 million.

With the funding from the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Program and WCB, acquisition and development of state refuges took a big jump forward. Areas already in existence were expanded and new areas were purchased. Mendota and Grizzly Island were added to the refuge system. All of the waterfowl refuges became known as "Waterfowl Management Areas" and were managed to the benefit of all waterfowl and wetland dependant species in addition to providing recreation uses. The waterfowl management areas are now called "wildlife areas" to emphasize their value to a wide variety of species.

When veterans returning from World War II looked for a place to hunt waterfowl and found only private duck clubs, costing beyond their ability to pay, they appealed to the state for something to be done. Public shooting was permitted on waterfowl management areas, and cooperative pheasant hunting areas were established through the cooperation of local farmers.

So the California Department of Fish and Game from the late 20s to the 50s established a system of waterfowl refuge and management areas, which along with work done by Ducks Unlimited in the breeding areas of Canada and Alaska, and the establishment of federal wildlife refuges in the state, and the enforcement of more restrictive regulations, turned the tide and ensured that waterfowl and associated species would be part of California's heritage for people to enjoy, whether for hunting, scientific study, or passive recreation like photography and bird watching.

Today, there are 106 wildlife areas and 109 ecological reserves in California. Efforts continue to enhance and protect habitat for wildlife to ensure that species have the habitat for foraging and the space to raise young for generations to come.

L.H. (Larry) Cloyd worked with the California Refuge Program until his retirement in 1971. He has been a laborer, game refuge supervisor, area game manager, wildlife supervisor, regional manager and DFG deputy director. He passed away November 23, 1998.

[Conditions of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)