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Wildlife Areas - California's Little Known Treasure

By Greg Slusser

Do you enjoy the splendor of wildlife, breathtaking scenery, and natural surroundings? If so, a visit to any one of the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) wildlife areas is a must. Few Californians are aware of these natural resource treasures that provide homes for more than 1,275 species of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish, including many that are listed as threatened and endangered. These DFG gems are virtual islands of habitat that serve as magnets to both wildlife and human visitors with excellent wildlife viewing, fishing and hunting opportunities.

Currently, the DFG oversees 106 wildlife areas located throughout the state, totaling over 627,500 acres - plenty of room for unique outdoor experiences for just about any wildlife interest. DFG-operated wildlife areas range in size from only a few acres to the 46,482-acre Tehama Wildlife Area in Tehama County.

DFG acquires wildlife areas to protect and enhance habitat for wildlife and to provide for public uses that are compatible with the long-term well-being of wildlife and habitat. Management of these areas range from custodial care where the goal is to protect the area from destructive activities, to annual intensive habitat manipulation to maximize wildlife populations.

Habitat management on the 14 major wetland wildlife areas located primarily in the Central Valley and northeastern portion of the state emphasizes the production of preferred waterfowl food plants. Since California supports nearly 60 percent of the waterfowl in the Pacific Flyway during the winter migration, DFG strives to assure the availability of adequate quantities of natural waterfowl food throughout the fall and winter months. By employing several different forms of habitat management, the DFG provides highly diverse habitat such as seasonal wetlands, permanent ponds, semi-permanent and standing grain, flooded riparian woodlands and green pastures (favored for grazing by many species of geese). It is no accident that these differing forms of management also provide superior habitat for a multitude of other wetland dependent species of birds, mammals and reptiles.

Over time, DFG has observed, adapted and modified historic marsh management practices which have resulted in major benefits to other species. A good example is the simple slowing of seasonal pond drainage from the traditional three-day drainage period to a 10-day period. This procedure provides substantially more time for shorebirds to harvest insects and worms from moist pond bottoms.

In an effort to take habitat management to a higher level, the DFG established the Wildlife Area Habitat Committee (WAHC) in 1991. This group of land management experts from around the state visits the 14 major staffed wildlife areas annually to review procedures being used for management of wetland and upland habitat. These areas are proving grounds for practices that may have statewide application. The WAHC prepares an annual report outlining its survey findings and recommending management approaches that will maximize habitat value for wildlife. This report is distributed to DFG land managers throughout the state.

The top priority of the WAHC is to develop guidelines to assure that habitat diversity and optimum productivity for many species of wildlife are achieved and maintained on all major wildlife areas that had significant wetlands. These guidelines, however, have been applied around the state for permanent wetlands, semi-permanent wetlands (summer wetlands), diverse moist soil vegetation (native marsh plants), special ecological communities (threatened and endangered and sensitive species habitat), riparian streamside habitat, managed nesting habitat, upland game foraging areas and cereal grain plantings.

While the WAHC has primarily focused on ways to improve conditions for waterfowl and upland game species, the activities benefit many more species. A university study at the Los Banos and North Grasslands wildlife areas (Merced and Stanislaus counties) is likely to open new management doors. Although the study is not scheduled for completion until later this year, initial results indicate that a highly diverse upland habitat consisting of open plowed fields, periodically irrigated grassy upland habitat, grain plots and nearby permanent sources of standing water - originally implemented to benefit upland game birds - provides substantial benefits to a variety of songbirds. If the final results of the study substantiate the apparent multi-species benefits of this form of intensive upland habitat management, it will be recommended for use on many other wildlife areas.

At Shasta Valley Wildlife Area in Siskiyou County, managed grazing systems have created a diverse mix of shortgrass pasture habitats for both geese and cranes. At Upper Butte Basin Wildlife Area (Butte and Glenn counties), restoring riparian habitat is benefitting a host of neotropical migrant song birds and a variety of other wildlife species. Planting of native willows and cottonwoods at Gray Lodge Wildlife Area (Butte and Sutter counties) enhanced habitat for all wildlife and helps provide greater opportunities for wildlife viewing.

In the 1980s, the white-faced ibis was an occasional visitor to Mendota Wildlife Area in Fresno County. The breeding colony recently reached more than 5,900 birds. Raptors are also on the increase at this wildlife area from 18 birds surveyed in 1992 to 356 birds counted in 1998. Also, the odds of survival of the endangered giant garter snake at this area have been substantially improved through new management techniques.

These are but a few examples of the positive things going on at wildlife areas today. Thirty years ago, these areas primarily focused on hunting activities. While these areas still support hunting and angling, as provided for in law, they offer many more opportunities to the public who visit them. The variety of management approaches employed now has yielded a diversity of wildlife species and subsequently broadened the experiences available. Hunters and anglers have helped bring about this change and join others in enjoying its rewards. To keep up with this, the DFG has developed informative brochures to guide visitors in activities such as bird watching, hunting, fishing and nature walks. Efforts are also underway to increase the number of informational kiosks, tour routes (viewing wildlife from your car), observation platforms, fishing access sites and disabled access.

So gather that gear together, check out the area regulations, and begin a new quest for a treasure of memories that await at one of these DFG wildlife gems.

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