

Winter at Our Wildlife Area

by Dave Feliz, Manager, Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area

Things are definitely changing. White-crowned sparrows stare at me from the feeder out my window, their songs piercing through the window pane. Large numbers of young Red-tailed Hawks sit on every other perch in the Bypass. The school kids have knit caps and coats as they

days, and then disappear. All refuges experience this phenomenon to some extent and all talk about it. Mallards come from many parts of California into the water grass fields in September. They are soon joined by more Pintail, teal and the class clown Northern Shoveler.



Photo credit: Dave Feliz

explore the Wildlife Area. White-tailed Kites congregate in great numbers in secret places. We look at weather reports from the far north and news of ice in Alberta, Canada means the time is near.

Surveys of the Sacramento Refuge complex come in twice a month. We see the waterfowl numbers increase, then decrease with the latest warm spell. Soon, eastern Oregon will freeze up, and then the birds will arrive. They have no where else to go. They are coming home.

The Central Valley of California is one of the premier wintering areas in the world for waterfowl. We annually host about 5.5 million ducks and geese in the Valley. This is about 60% of the total waterfowl in the Pacific Flyway. Some of the first to arrive are the Pintail. They show up in August for a few

Our blue skies turn to overcast white and a chill sneaks into the night air. If there is fog in the Valley, it is sure to be present in the Yolo Basin and every other lowland area where wetlands lie. The view from the Causeway is short ranged, misty shadows of hawks in trees and geese flaring in the low clouds. Get away from the roar of the freeway and another travel corridor comes into focus. The high pitched laughing of White-fronted Geese moving from field to field and overhead the falsetto shrill of Snow Geese. But the dominant sound is always the whistling of thousands of Pintail.

This is what the Central Valley sounds like in wintertime, Pintail. This is the sound that has echoed in these marshes for millions of years. This is what we all hope to leave for future generations. The opportunity to listen to the ancient sounds of the Central Valley. 🦆

What is a Duck Club?

by Dave Feliz

Over the years, you may have heard mention of local duck clubs. A place where local fowl gather for meetings? Actually, duck clubs are privately managed wetlands maintained to provide duck hunting opportunities for their members. This management is funded by the duck club owners, sometimes with the assistance of government funding via conservation easements or through development of land management plans. It can be quite expensive to manage a wetland. If a boat is a “hole in the water that you throw money into,” imagine what a duck club is described as.

A surprising statistic is that two thirds of the existing wetlands in California are privately managed as duck clubs. They obviously figure prominently in the overall wetland protection strategy in California and are encouraged by the Department of Fish & Game.

The Wildlife Area shares an irrigation system with several duck clubs and cooperates to insure the availability of flooded wetlands timed to coincide with the arrival of migratory wetland birds

The first local duck clubs were created by Christ Fulster Sr. from land purchased from the Glide family in the 1940's. One of these clubs became known as the Senator Outing Duck Club, presumably because their membership once included a senator, although

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Don't Forget Duck Days!
February 20-21
(see insert for details)

The Mighty Marsh Wren

by Melanie Pope, Program Director

Shhhhh! Put on your ‘sneaky feet’ and your ‘nature ears,’” I tell the students as I model light footsteps and cup my hands around my ears. “Do you hear it? Do you hear that bird scolding us with its ‘chip, chip, chip’ as we get closer?”

This instruction can be heard just about anytime I’m in the Wildlife Area with students, as we are on a mission to find one of the common residents, the Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus palustris*). As we walk, we usually hear the chatter of the Marsh Wren before we even set eye on the bird. I tell the kids to look for the “little brown bird with big attitude.” They know exactly what I mean when a Marsh Wren quickly pops up from the middle of a tule stand, looks right at us, cocks its tail in an upright position, and intently scolds us as we get closer.

For all its showy attitude, the “mighty” Marsh Wren is actually a small (4-6 inch) brown bird with a prominent white stripe above the eye. Males and females appear similar, but the male is slightly larger. The Marsh Wren is usually found perched with its tail positioned and pointed slightly upward or darting around and hiding in the cattails and tules of the wetland marshes. The Marsh Wren is a common year round resident in the Central Valley, with only some migratory populations, including some western populations which migrate to Texas and Mexico. Two populations have been documented in North America, a western and eastern population, which are mainly distinguished by differences in vocalizations.

As we approach, the Marsh Wren quickly moves on, discounting us as true predators. We watch as it flits about, both gleaning off the vegetation and darting around for its food, which includes bees, ants, wasps, beetles, moths and even spiders. The Marsh Wren may even dine on various aquatic invertebrates in the ponds.

I always tell the students to look for the rounded, domed-oval nests of the Marsh Wren. Each nest has an opening on the side and is commonly found intertwined among the cattail and tule plants. Looking closely, you can find both newly constructed nests as



Photo credit: Dave Feliz

well as last season’s vacant nests. The males will build numerous nests (anywhere from 14-22 nests) to act as decoys and ward off or “trick” predators. Only 1-3 of these nests will be used and males will have more than one female mate at a time (polygyny).

A female will then choose a single mate and a nest, and she may even “fix it up” by adding soft lining or even doing a major “remodel.” A female may assess the number of nests a male constructs as an indicator that he is “good builder” and will make a good mate. The males defend their territory fiercely during the breeding season, against both predators and other male Marsh Wrens. Marsh Wrens will even destroy eggs and nests of other Marsh Wrens or other birds that pose a threat in their habitat. Marsh Wren males have been documented as having very complex song vocalizations with a repertoire of many different songs (especially in western populations as compared to eastern populations). Single birds have been recorded singing up to 150 different songs!

So, the next time you visit the Wildlife Area, walk closely next to the ponds and peer into the tule and cattail stands. You will likely get a glimpse of a mighty Marsh Wren singing away, dipping and diving among the reeds. 🐦

Sources:

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Super Sara Mitchell!

by Sarah Ross, Volunteer Coordinator

Mention *Bucks for Ducks* to any YBF/YBWA volunteer or staff member, and you will get a response (not always polite) that has something to do with the amount of work involved in putting it on. What actually needs to be noted, however, is not how much work *Bucks for Ducks* involves, but rather how much volunteer time is contributed before, during and after the event. In fact, over 60 volunteers and over 400 volunteer hours contributed to making *Bucks for Ducks* the great success that it was this November. But this article is not about *Bucks for Ducks*. This article is about a wonderful volunteer who helps make *Bucks for Ducks* and other YBF events happen year after year – Sara Mitchell.

Sara's first experience of the wetlands was similar to that of many parents in the area. She says "I first became aware of the Wildlife Area when President Clinton came to dedicate it in 1997. While I thought it looked like an interesting place, I didn't actually visit until I was a parent volunteer with my third grade son's field trip to the area in early 2000". How grateful we are that Sara made 'the leap' to become a volunteer in 2001 after seeing an article in *The Davis Enterprise*. Sara continues "YBF was looking for volunteers for their *Discover the Flyway* program, and I thought it would be a great way to gain more knowledge of the wetlands, and pass that on to my children and to many other children. I volunteered a few days a month with the Foundation, and it was great to see the excitement of the children as they visited the various stations at the Demonstration Area. I enjoyed learning right along side of them! I worked with the Flyway program through the 2005-2006 school year."

When Sara began working for the City of Davis, volunteering with *Discover the Flyway* no longer fit into her schedule. Instead she now uses what she describes as her "art background" to help with special events such as *Bucks for Ducks*. What an understatement that is! This year alone, Sara put in around 20 hours of her evening time to make all of the wonderfully creative displays for the live auction and many of the Gaggle of Gathering displays at *Bucks for Ducks*. Sara takes a few

key words and an image or two and builds on this to create eye-catching, cleverly artistic displays which the rest of us just look on at in admiration. As if this isn't enough, Sara also works the entire evening of *Bucks for Ducks*.



Sara volunteers at the Naturalist Holiday party annually and somehow has been sucked into being an early morning greeter at Duck Days. This means, from around 7am on a cold, sometimes wet, February morning, she stands outside for several hours smiling and greeting visitors to the festival. Last year, she even did this while juggling it around her own son's sporting activities. Now that is commitment.

When asked what keeps her volunteering here, Sara replied "Most importantly I think YBF provides an awesome opportunity for children and the parent drivers to learn about wetlands and the many ways they are important. Volunteering, even if it's only a few hours here and there, helps the foundation continue to provide its wonderful educational

program. During the time I helped with the Flyway program I heard numerous parents comment on plans to return to the Wildlife Area with their children, family, and friends. Another reason I continue to volunteer is the opportunity it gives me to keep in touch with the awesome staff and other volunteers. It is fun to catch up with them a few times a year, and this connection actually paid off for my son this year in an unexpected way. While chatting with fellow volunteer, Mary Dobosz, at the volunteer thank you party, the conversation turned to "what are the kids up to?" I mentioned that my son, Tyler, was interested in a photography career. Mary recommended we check out the Hallmark Institute of Photography located in Turners Falls, MA (the hometown of her husband and a place they visit each year). We did some research on the school, Tyler flew out for an interview, and is now happily attending school there — thank you Mary."

And thank YOU Sara. Thank you for somehow fitting us into your busy work and family life. Thank you for taking on tasks that many of us go into paroxysms of creativity-challenged fear over. On your dog's behalf we hope you still find time to walk her and that your garden and scrapbooking activities are not suffering from neglect.

Sara Mitchell, display artist extraordinaire and all round fantastic volunteer. 🐾

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The Yolo Basin Foundation is a non-profit public benefit corporation dedicated to the appreciation and stewardship of wetlands and wildlife through education and innovative partnerships.

WILDLIFE ART SHOW

in Celebration of California Duck Days

Reception: 5:30 pm to 7:30 pm on Friday February 20th, 2009



February 2nd - 25th, 2009

Davis Art Center
1919 F Street
Davis, CA

Featuring works by Yolo County High School Students.



Artwork and Flyer design by Ryan Kocsis from Davis High School.

Funded in Part by the city of Davis Civic Arts Commission and sponsored by the Yolo Basin Foundation.

Duck Club *continued from p. 1*

no one can remember who this was. He later created the Glide-In Ranch one mile to the east. Both of these clubs are immediately south of the Wildlife Area in the Bypass. His son, Chris Fulster Jr. continues to hunt this area as a member of this club. He also is the proprietor of Broadway Bait, a local supplier and hangout for local hunters and fishermen. Between these two clubs is the Bull Sprig Outing, marked by a magnificent elevated club house.

Other neighboring clubs include the Skyraiders Club, H-Pond, Channel Ranch and Mike Glide's Place. South of this area are additional clubs including Mound Farms, Yolo Flyway

Farms and Dawson's. Many members of these clubs participate in the Yolo Bypass Working Group, which facilitates stakeholder meetings regarding land use activities in the Yolo Bypass.

Before the Yolo Basin Foundation and Department of Fish and Game established the Wildlife Area, the only managed wetlands in the Yolo Bypass were the private duck clubs. While Central Valley wetlands continued to disappear elsewhere, these clubs preserved our local piece of the Pacific Flyway for the birds who just kept coming and going on their rhythmic migrations up and down the continent. 