

Yolo fly by

A traffic slowdown clogs the Yolo Causeway on Interstate 80, just west of Sacramento, but no accidents, construction or stranded motorists are in sight. South of the interstate lies the cause: air traffic in the bird world has gone awry as tens of

By Dave Feliz

thousands of geese and pintail swarm around the flooded rice fields of the Yolo Wildlife Area (WLA). Such is the winter spectacle of this 16,000-acre wildlife area in the shadow of California's Capitol.

At the 1997 dedication of the Yolo WLA, President Bill Clinton said, "We can do anything if we roll-up our sleeves and get down to work and honestly listen to people who have different experiences, different perspectives and different genuine interests. That's what you've done here."

Six years later, this approach and this validation of other people's opinions

have resulted in some tremendous accomplishments.

Most significantly, the Yolo WLA has grown five times larger. In 2001, the California Wildlife Conservation Board approved the purchase of nearly 13,000 acres to be added to the Yolo WLA. The bulk of this was acquired from the Glide Family, who reclaimed much of the Yolo Basin and held the land for over 130 years. Much of the southern Tule Ranch was little more than grazed, never leveled, never plowed.

This property is truly a jewel in the Central Valley. During 2002, vernal pool specialist Carol Witham discovered many rare species of plants, including Ferris' milk vetch (*Astragalus tener ferrisiae*) as well as a population of the endangered Conservancy Fairy Shrimp (*Branchinecta conservation*).

At this same time, 450 acres along Putah Creek were acquired from Los Rios Farms. This property has some beautiful large cottonwood, black walnut and willow trees. This riparian forest hosts



Far left, the Yolo Bypass is a 43-mile flood control facility that has five times the capacity of the Sacramento River.

Left, Dave Feliz observes waterfowl at the wildlife area.

DFG photo by A. Retallack



White-faced ibis in the early morning glow of the Yolo Basin.

DFG photos by Dave Feliz



Pintails in Yolo Basin with Sacramento in background.



Thousands of waterfowl feed in the flooded rice fields adjacent to Interstate 80.

species not found on the Yolo WLA before, including western bluebird, gray squirrels and screech owls.

The expansion of the Yolo WLA has not occurred without controversy. During discussions with nearby land owners, stakeholders and local elected officials, a list of concerns emerged regarding the state purchasing such a large block of land. Concerns included the loss of agricultural land, the impacts to flood control, a desire to keep water associated with the property in the area

and the potential for creating a mosquito production hazard. The Department of Fish and Game (DFG) committed to not changing land use until it had created a WLA management plan. DFG pledged the creation of this plan to be a process open to the public. In the end, the acquisition was supported by local farmers, the Yolo County Board of Supervisors and the Delta Protection Commission.

Not changing land use means that the agricultural activity present on the

property at the time of acquisition remains until the management plan is completed. With funding from the Wildlife Conservation Board, a management plan is currently being written and should be completed by early 2006.

Since acquisition, the land has become more productive due to land infrastructure improvements funded by the leases themselves. DFG negotiated an agreement with the Dixon Resource Conservation District, as it controls the



White pelicans take advantage of the water and food available in the Yolo Basin.

DFG photos by Dave Feliz



An approaching fall storm provides a dramatic backdrop for Yolo Wildlife Area visitors.



On a clear day, the Sacramento skyline contrasts with the thousands of birds at Yolo.



Hawk over flooded bypass.

DFG photos by Dave Feliz



Dave Feliz works with Yolo Basin Wildlife Area visitor, discussing days of access, hunting opportunities and wildlife found at the area.

DFG photo by A. Retallack

DFG leases and deposits payments with Solano County for DFG use on the Yolo WLA. Most of these funds are reinvested into the land, improving roads, pumps, and irrigations systems. This infrastructure can then be used for continued farming activity or future wildlife habitat management. For example, the seasonal irrigation system used by the farmers was removed every winter in anticipation of the flood season. These pumps were replaced by low lift pumps on tall towers. Now we have the means to flood the rice fields after harvest, setting the table for thousands of waterfowl.

The agricultural income has become an important income source for the everyday operation of the Yolo WLA. As DFG suffered, endured, and adapted through repeated state budget crises, this income was a lifesaver, paying for electricity for the Yolo WLA office and fuel for DFG tractors, among many other operating expenses.

Recognizing the importance of this income and the obvious wildlife habitat values associated with agriculture, DFG will use the next couple of years to investigate ways in which agriculture will fit into the long term management of the Yolo WLA. Flooding harvested rice is just the beginning. DFG developed a rotation of organic rice and shorebird management and began implementation in 2003. Fields are prepared for rice in early summer and flooded July 1, coinciding with the initiation of the southward migration of shorebirds from the arctic. These fields are kept flooded for two months and drained Sept. 1. As the fields drain and begin to dry, thousands of acres of seasonal wetlands are flooded to ensure continuous availability of mudflats. By that point, the shorebird ponds have sprouted watergrass, cattails and many other plants which are weeds to the rice farmer. The fields complete drying, and farmers disc them in preparation for the winter. These fields are then planted in rice the following spring, with much of the dirt work and weed control already accomplished.

On the native grasslands of the Tule Ranch, spectacular wildflower blooms are followed by massive growth of annual rye grass. This non-native invasive grass must be removed in order to allow the germination of the specialized native plants that inhabit this area. This is where cattle come into the picture. Cattle feed on the annual rye grass, exposing the soil which enhances the bloom in the spring. In



Spectacular vernal pools highlight the unique value of the recently acquired Glide Tule Ranch property.



Flooding and crop rotation attracts shorebirds like stilts. *DFG photos by Dave Feliz*



DFG and the Yolo Basin Foundation run an education program at the Yolo WLA.

researching and studying vernal pools, DFG has found that careful cattle grazing at specific times of year can actually enhance vernal pool success by removing non-native plant competition. The fields at the Yolo WLA have been grazed for over a hundred years and look great. Controlled, timed grazing will be an integral part of the vernal pool management at the Yolo WLA. DFG will also use cattle in the wetlands to control sweet clover and jointgrass, two plants that, given half a chance, will dominate the vegetation of seasonal wetlands.

Fields of milo, corn, and safflower are some of the crops scheduled for planting in the future. Not only will these crops serve as an important food source for wildlife, they provide exciting and productive hunting opportunities for waterfowl, dove and pheasant hunters.

The success of the Yolo WLA is not DFG's alone. The Yolo Basin Foundation served as a strong and effective advocate for the creation and existence of Yolo. With executive director Robin Kulakow at the helm, they developed a well-regarded school program, brought together stakeholders of the bypass into a unified group, and worked hard to help Yolo WLA meet its full potential. Since 1997, over 16,000 school children have visited Yolo WLA and learned about the importance of wetlands and the grandeur of the Pacific Flyway.

For several years, DFG and the foundation worked to establish an education center that will highlight the value of wetlands and the value of the joint efforts. The Pacific Flyway Center will be located just outside the west levee at Putah Creek. It will include 63 acres of wildlife habitat to be used as an outdoor classroom by the students who visit the Yolo WLA as part of the "Discover the Flyway" program. With magnificent views of Putah Creek, Mount Diablo, the Coast Range and the skyline of Sacramento, the Flyway Center will serve as the centerpiece of the Yolo WLA when it opens in 2007.

For the birds of the Pacific Flyway, the Yolo WLA is well on its way to being a larger, more important link in the habitat chain used by millions of birds to navigate the west coast of the Americas. For the people of northern California, we are creating tremendous opportunities for wildlife viewing, fishing, hunting, and a sense of wonder as travelers glimpse scenes of the dynamic Pacific Flyway spectacle that causes motorists to slow on Interstate 80. 🐻

Dave Feliz is the Yolo Basin Wildlife Area manager.

September - October 2004

The Yolo Bypass

The Yolo Bypass was carved out of the Yolo Basin, one of several basins that parallel the journey of the Sacramento River through the valley and receive its floodwaters during winter months. Putah Creek meanders through the basins marked by towering cottonwoods and willows which give way to an endless expanse of tules in the heart of the basin. Tule elk abounded here, along with grizzly bear and mule deer.

The California Grizzly was eliminated from California by 1922, but tule elk are prospering downstream from the Delta at Grizzly Island. Mule Deer have been seen in recent years, along with gray fox and large numbers of beaver and otters. As in ancient times, when the area fills with water, it seems that every duck in California wants to be in the basin. Massive flocks of scaup and canvasbacks move inland from the Suisun Marsh and San Francisco Bay, joining thousands of pintail, wigeon, teal and gadwall taking advantage of the newly flooded bypass.

The Yolo Bypass provides important flood protection for northern California. This land has been set aside and engineered to receive the floodwaters of the Sacramento River and convey them to the Delta. Flood protection is the primary function of the Yolo Bypass and any activity the Department of Fish and Game undertakes in the Bypass must remain compatible with this function. Habitat restoration can only proceed with adequate hydraulic modeling that demonstrates that DFG land use changes have no effect on the conveyance of flood waters through the Bypass.

The wetlands of the Central Valley were once enormous nurseries for vector borne diseases such as malaria. California saw it fit to drain these wetlands in the latter half of the 1800s. DFG's planned activities will include working closely with Sacramento Yolo Mosquito and Vector Control District to manage



A cold morning brings snow to Mt. Diablo and Tundra swans to Yolo Basin.

the wetlands in a way that minimizes the production of mosquitoes. A set of "best management practices" has been developed which allows wetland managers to provide

important habitat while avoiding conflicts with the public safety of our neighbors. 🐻