

# Collaboration benefits Pacific Flyway habitat for migratory birds

BY DAVID GUY AND MARK BIDDLECOMB

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White-faced geese take off from a rice field near Marysville in November. **Randy Pench** [rpench@sacbee.com](mailto:rpench@sacbee.com)

This time of year, millions of birds arrive in the Sacramento Valley as part of their annual migration cycle along the Pacific Flyway. The drought that has already caused significant losses to farmers also represents a major threat to these birds, which include migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors and other species.

Like every other water use in the region, the fourth year of the drought has challenged the ability to divert water for the Pacific Flyway. Yet, as a result of hard work, innovation and collaboration this year, the results have been incredible in the face of challenging conditions. Our partners in the Sacramento Valley, working with many state and federal agencies, have managed to provide water for more than 200,000 acres of habitat in rice fields and managed wetlands to help migrating wildlife.

With 95 percent of California's original wetlands lost, these birds and hundreds of wildlife species depend on rice fields and managed wetlands for food and a resting place. In fact, nearly 60 percent of the winter diet for the millions of ducks and geese migrating through the Central Valley comes from area rice fields.

For the past several years, water resources managers, conservation organizations, landowners and state and federal agencies have been working together to develop various habitat strategies for these lands in the face of bleak conditions. For example, water resources managers have creatively used and rescheduled water conserved during the summer irrigation season to stretch winter rice decomposition and refuge water for habitat purposes.

Conservation organizations have also worked closely with the California Rice Commission and landowners to proactively prepare post-harvest ricelands to take advantage of natural rainfall and any other available water. Refuge managers have prepared public lands with limited resources to squeeze the best habitat out of wildlife areas.

This is particularly positive considering that during the dry summer we were all very concerned that there would be very little water available for bird habitat this fall and winter. Wildlife experts say prolonged periods where precious little habitat is available can lead to undernourished birds incapable of returning on spring migratory routes, and it increases the potential for outbreaks of contagious diseases such as avian cholera, which can decimate bird populations in a relatively short time. Importantly, the 200,000 acres of habitat are strategically spread from Glenn and Butte counties in the north, all the way down to the Yolo Bypass, just west of Sacramento and south to the Grasslands Ecological Area.

We are not out of the woods. The habitat acreage is still less than half of what would be considered optimal conditions. November rains were less than we had hoped. Winter storms now emerging may add additional water, but we are only halfway through the migration season, and additional water will be essential to sustain this habitat.

In an era where it seems many organizations would rather churn out more studies or seek court injunctions, it is refreshing to see on-the-ground, tangible successes here in the Sacramento Valley. We have made a difference so far and will continue to make a difference. Mother Nature may or may not cooperate, but the partners are all working to improve bird habitat under all these conditions.

Now is your opportunity to experience firsthand the incredible result of these efforts. We encourage you to visit the Sacramento Valley this winter to view the millions of birds spread out throughout our special region.

*David Guy is president of the Northern California Water Association. Mark Biddlecomb is western regional director of Ducks Unlimited.*