



TULARE BASIN WILDLIFE PARTNERS
Creating Opportunities for Nature and People

Tulare Basin Conservation Report Summary: Sand Ridge-Tulare Lake

Introduction

Creighton Ranch. Pixley National Wildlife Refuge. Allensworth State Historic Park. Sand Ridge. Deer Creek. Located in the Tulare Lake Basin, the Sand-Ridge - Tulare Lake Planning Area features some of the best gems in the southern San Joaquin Valley.

With documented human use stretching back 15,000 years, this area now includes low population density, important farmland and natural areas for a wide variety of plants and animals. Highlights include: alfalfa, pasture and other farms that provide critical foraging land for 5,000+ sandhill cranes (*Grus canadensis*) and nesting areas for wintering, breeding and migratory birds; 61 unique species, many of which are only found in this region; and excellent representations of a diversity of natural areas, including grassland, shrubland, trees, wetlands, rivers and creeks.

With 24 separate plant community classifications, this area encompasses greater natural diversity than either nearby Carrizo Plain National Monument or Merced County's Grassland Ecological Area. Seventy five percent of these communities are listed as rare and are tracked by the California Natural Diversity Data Base.

The Sand Ridge - Tulare Lake Conservation Report proposes the following recommendations:

- Protect 83,000 acres of existing uplands, such as shrubland and grassland;
- Protect 20,000 acres of existing wetlands, such as marshes, floodplains, creeks and ponds;
- Restore 30,000 acres of uplands;
- Restore 30,000 acres of wetlands;
- Complete Allensworth Ecological Reserve; and
- Complete Pixley National Wildlife Refuge, managed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS).

Tulare Basin Wildlife Partners aims to implement this report by working with willing landowners to create a balance between wildlife-friendly agriculture and targeted conservation projects. Worthy of immediate action, protecting the Sand Ridge - Tulare Lake area will allow us to pass on some of our most cherished places to our children and grandchildren.

Sand Ridge - Tulare Lake Facts

Location: Southwestern Tulare County, southeastern Kings County & northern Kern County

Size: 261,570 acres

Ownership: 91% private; 9% public

Natural Lands: 24 types: 39% grasses & forbs, 30% shrubs, 26% trees, 5% vernal pools

Land Use: 43% native upland, wetland or fallow; 31% leveled, irrigated & farmed; 15.5% farmed sporadically with mostly dry-land crops; 7% flood control basins; 2% evaporation ponds; 1% ag developments; 0.5% ditches & canals

Goals

The Sand Ridge - Tulare Lake Conservation Report goals include:

1. Conserve existing uplands, such as grassland and shrub-land, and travel corridors between these areas for unique wildlife species.
2. Create and restore wildlife corridors that have been lost between existing patches of grassland and shrubland.
3. Protect and restore floodplains, marshes and open water for wintering and migratory waterfowl.
4. Provide breeding season wetlands for waterfowl, shorebirds, colonial water birds and other wildlife, including Buena Vista Lake shrew (*Sorex ornatus relictus*), southwestern pond turtle (*Emmys marmorata pallida*), fulvous whistling-duck (*Dendrocygna bicolor*), least bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*), California red-legged frog (*Rana aurora draytonii*) and giant garter snake (*Thamnophis gigas*).
5. Restore saltbush scrub, alkali sink, valley grassland, wetland and areas along creeks and streams.
6. Provide flood control benefits for cities, farms and natural areas by protecting or creating wetlands to store flood water.
7. Recreate integrated historical southern San Joaquin Valley landscapes.
8. Recreate a portion of Ton Tache Lake between Alpaugh and Allensworth.

Objectives

Objectives for the Sand Ridge - Tulare Lake Conservation Report include:

1. Develop a conservation strategy for Ton Tache Lake Basin, located between Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Atwell Island Project and Allensworth State Historic Park, which features important natural and archeological resources.
2. Restore wildlife corridors between Allensworth Ecological Reserve and USFWS's Pixley National Wildlife Refuge.
3. Protect native wetland, grassland, shrubland and forest along creeks in the area between Interstate 5, Allensworth Ecological Reserve and Creighton Ranch.
4. Purchase unproductive farmland and restore to native land; resell grazing land with conservation agreements in place and increase the size of reserves, parks and other wildlife areas.

5. Protect remaining private wetlands, some through USFWS's Kern National Wildlife Refuge expansion; establish additional private wetlands; complete cooperative agreements with water districts and agencies to manage in perpetuity.
6. Establish voluntary conservation agreements with willing landowners to protect wildlife-friendly farms and foraging areas for waterfowl, sandhill cranes, Swainson's hawks (*Buteo swainsoni*), tricolored blackbirds (*Agelaius tricolor*) and other wildlife.
7. Maintain and restore landscape features, including Sand Ridge and surrounding historic wetlands.
8. Develop cooperative agreement with J. G. Boswell Company for Creighton Ranch and with other private landowners for management of the Tule River.
9. Acquire Liberty Ranch and develop as a flood basin and wetland area.

Site-Specific Recommendations

For ease of planning and discussion the Sand Ridge - Tulare Lake planning area was divided into 15 sub-management areas, each with different status, goals and management recommendations. The majority of native and farmed land in the planning area will remain in private ownership for grazing and wildlife-friendly farming under voluntary conservation agreements. Some lands will be purchased by agencies and conservation organizations, while others will be used for duck clubs, recreation, hunting, photography or education.

South Wilbur Flood Area

Status: 10,240 acres, 0% protected; 0% farmed, 100% flood control basin and native land with high waterbird diversity.

Goals: Protect by adding to USFWS Refuge or manage through cooperative agreement with private landowners.

Management Recommendations: Construct interior levees to create wetlands of varied depth; restore hummocky topography, recreate sloughs; create islands for nesting terns, shorebirds and other waterbirds; obtain additional water in dry years; use fire and grazing to control non-native species.

Hacienda Flood Area

Status: 9,650 acres, 0% protected; 0% farmed, 100% flood control basin and native land with important natural areas for waterbird nesting and unique wildlife.

Goals: Protect by adding to a USFWS Refuge or manage through cooperative agreement with private landowners.

Management Recommendations: Construct interior levees to create wetlands of varied depth; restore hummocky topography, recreate sloughs; create islands for nesting terns, shorebirds and other waterbirds; obtain additional water in dry years; use fire and grazing to control non-native species.

Liberty Ranch

Status: 23,000 acres, 0% protected; 100% farmed, 0% native land.

Goals: Protect Liberty Ranch in a USFWS Refuge or manage through cooperative agreement with private landowners; minimize negative impacts on agriculture while maximizing wildlife benefits; establish permanent wetlands.

Management Recommendations: Manage for flood water storage, wetland habitat and irrigation water supply.

Sand Ridge

Status: 4,160 acres, 0% protected; 0% farmed, 100% native land, including high-quality grassland and shrubland and the best reproducing populations of unique wildlife in the area.

Goals: Protect as a new ecological reserve through the Metro-Bakersfield and Valley Floor Habitat Conservation Plan processes or by managing it with additional land management agencies as a wildlife corridor connecting natural areas.

Management Recommendations: Remove saltcedar (*Tamarix* spp.) and replace with perennials and native dune annuals.

Dudley Ridge Interstate 5 Corridor

Status: 36,480 acres, 0% protected; 54% farmed, 46% native or fallow land.

Goals: Conserve unique wildlife by protecting grazing land and high-quality native shrubland; create a new ecological reserve or expand established protected lands managed by other agencies; restore some farmland to native grass and shrubland.

Southwestern Corridor

Status: 14,080 acres, 0% protected; 23% farmed, 68% native or fallow land, 9% evaporation ponds. A portion of the area is intended for sewer sludge disposal.

Goals: Conserve unique wildlife species by protecting grazing land and high-quality native shrubland; create a new ecological reserve or expand established protected lands managed by other agencies.

Atwell Island

Status: 22,400 acres, 28% protected; 23% farmed, 77% native or fallow land with burrowing owls (*Athene cunicularia*), coast horned lizards (*Phrynosoma coronatum frontale*) and Tipton kangaroo rats (*Dipodomys nitratoides nitratoides*).

Goals: Complete purchase and restoration of BLM's Atwell Island Project.

Ton Tache Basin

Status: 14,080 acres, 13% protected; 0% farmed, 100% native or fallow land, which was historically a shallow lake basin with a high density of tules.

Goals: Recreate a portion of the historic Ton Tache Lake. Purchase land in basin between Allensworth State Historic Park and BLM's Atwell Island and use as a flood control storage basin and wetland area. Feature recreational opportunities with canoe trails and wildlife viewing areas.

Management Recommendations: Provide flood control and natural areas; design wetlands, flood slough channels and construct islands for nesting terns, shorebirds and other waterbirds.

Allensworth

Status: 27,000 acres, 12% protected; 41% farmed, 59% native land, including areas for unique wildlife species.

Goals: Protect native land by adding to Allensworth Ecological Reserve through the Metro-Bakersfield and Valley Floor Habitat Conservation Plan processes. Re-establish corridors to USFWS's Pixley National Wildlife Refuge.

Alpaugh Town

Status: 9,860 acres, 10% protected; 55% farmed, 20% native or fallow land, 15% town site, 10% reservoir.

Goals: Maintain area as a small farming community with adjacent farm lands and where appropriate, encourage ecotourism-based commerce and entrepreneurship. Maintain Alpaugh Irrigation District reservoirs and district-owned open space.

Management Recommendations: Continue current management. Maintain existing patches of tules and cattails; create islands for nesting terns, shorebirds and other waterbirds; remove saltcedar and replace with native shrubs and trees; use fire and grazing to control non-native species.

Alpaugh Wetland Reserve Area & Homeland Ranch

Status: 17,280 acres, 46% protected; 49% farmed, 25% native or fallow land, 25% managed wetlands.

Goals: Manage conservation agreements with hunting clubs; purchase additional wetland agreements through Natural Resources Conservation Service; develop affordable water supply.

Management Recommendations: Ensure water supply and provide for flood control, water quality, wildlife viewing and native biodiversity.

Pixley South Agricultural Buffer

Status: 6,080 acres, 0% protected; 90% farmed, 10% native land.

Goals: Protect remaining native land; use voluntary conservation agreements with private landowners to ensure wildlife-friendly farming practices and foraging areas for sandhill cranes and Swainson's hawks.

Management Recommendations: Manage land under voluntary conservation agreements to maintain agricultural production of alfalfa and compatible row crops.

Creighton Ranch

Status: 8,960 acres, 0% protected; 46% farmed, 54% native land. Remarkable mosaic of oaks, freshwater marsh, alkali scrub, grassland and vernal pools owned by the J.G. Boswell Company.

Goals: Conserve through fee title purchase, voluntary conservation agreement, by adding it to already protected land or through a cooperative agreement with the J.G. Boswell Company and Lower Tule River Irrigation District.

Management Recommendations: Secure reliable water supply; provide wetlands and ponds for waterbirds by flooding areas with hydric soils; provide facilities for wildlife viewing and education opportunities; develop and restore flood plain along Tule River; protect and restore an upland buffer.

Pixley National Wildlife Refuge

Status: 6,720 acres, 89% protected; 10% farmed, 85% native land, 5% managed wetlands. Features a wintering population of 5,000 sandhill cranes.

Goals: Purchase remaining native grassland and shrubland near USFWS Refuge; continue current management to benefit unique wildlife species.

Management Recommendations: Continue management of wetlands to benefit waterfowl; secure reliable water supply to sustain Deer Creek wildlife corridor.

Pixley North Agricultural Buffer & Corridor

Status: 40,960 acres, 5% protected; 75% farmed, 25% native or fallow land, including high-quality valley grassland and alkali sink with wintering and breeding populations of many unique wildlife species.

Goals: Protect native land and restore additional areas through voluntary conservation agreements or fee title purchase, including wildlife corridors from USFWS's Pixley National Wildlife Refuge to Creighton Ranch. Use voluntary conservation agreements with private landowners to ensure wildlife-friendly farming practices and foraging areas for sandhill cranes and Swainson's hawks.

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