

Tracking the Refuge

a publication of Friends of Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge

2019 Annual Report



2019 Recap

2019 was a very busy and successful year for the Friends of Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge (Friends). As part of our Community Outreach Program we attended a number of community events to inform the public about the Refuge and its programs and the mission of the Friends to support and protect the Refuge. We established an annual Friends Scholarship as part of the Elk Grove Regional Scholarship Foundation. We also initiated discussions with the Cosumnes River Community Services District to enter into an “open space and recreation” partnership to get more of the local community outside and involved in Nature and the Environment.



In November, we hosted our annual “Brunch with the Birds” event to introduce the community to the Refuge and its



staff. The weather was great and there were over 90 attendees.

Watch our website (www.friendsofstonelakes.org) to get information about our Fall 2020 event when details become available.



You will probably never see me, but I live on the Refuge.
I am so grateful for your support of my home!

Do you know who I am?

Virginia Opossum—Didelphis virginiana



Conservation

Major Threats to Stone Lakes and its Wildlife:

As of publication, the Friends Conservation Committee has been pursuing several issues threatening the ability of the refuge to fulfill its mission. A proposed hospital and the Tunnels Project are two of the more significant threats we are acting on.

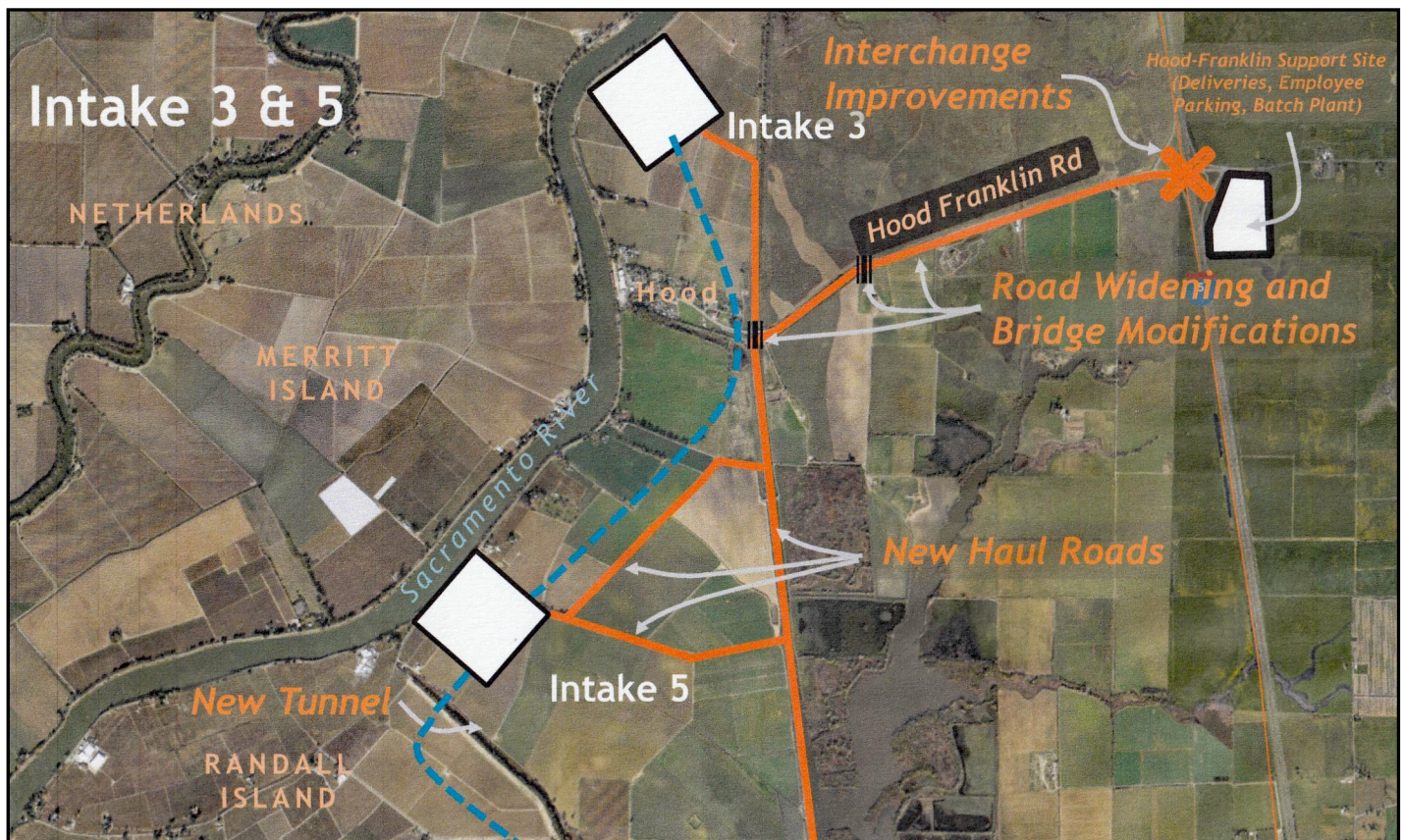
Proposed Hospital: The proposed 13 story California Northstate University Medical Center at Elk Grove Blvd and Interstate 5 is currently undergoing environmental review. This would be the tallest building in the region outside the City of Sacramento. February design changes eliminate the towers' reflective glass curtain wall to mitigate for bird strikes, but the building's height and helipad remain a major concern. Last year over 35,000 white-fronted and snow geese foraged in the fields near the site. In addition, recently submitted maps show a 200-year-flood depth of up to 10 feet for much of the site and 3-5 feet for Elk Grove Blvd, raising legitimate questions as to the hospital's utility in a major flood.

Tunnels Project: The Refuge is ground zero for the Tunnels Project. Originally, two huge tunnels, each 40 feet in diameter, were proposed to move water around the periphery of the Bay Delta. Three massive water intake plants, the tunnel entrance and forebay and the transmission lines serving them were all proposed to be within or adjacent to the Refuge. Clearly, the wildlife on and around the refuge are at risk.

Since 2009 the Friends of Stone Lakes NWR been working to prevent or mitigate the negative impacts of the Tunnels project. In the past year, the project has been revised to one tunnel rather than two. Nonetheless, most of the threats, slightly modified, remain.

The Delta Conveyance Authority, successor entity to build the tunnel to bring water to the South State, is evaluating an alternative design that would utilize Hood Franklin Road as a main construction haul route and create new haul roads close to North and South Stone Lakes. The Friends are working with our allies on the recently-created Stakeholder Committee to respond. Meanwhile, with important design details in flux, the Notice of Preparation has been issued to begin environmental review. The Friends are preparing comments, which will be posted on our website.

The Friends will continue monitoring and acting on these issues. Contact us or check the Friends website for more information.



2019 Bird Report

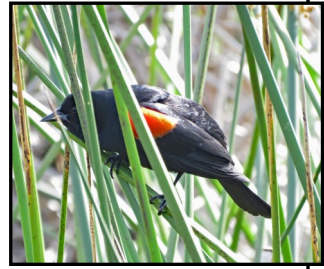
Stone Lake Wildlife Populations Increasing

Refuge waterfowl and shorebird numbers have trended steadily upward over the past decade. Refuge staff survey approximately 700 acres of managed wetlands bi-monthly, recording both shorebird and waterfowl numbers for each individual wetland.

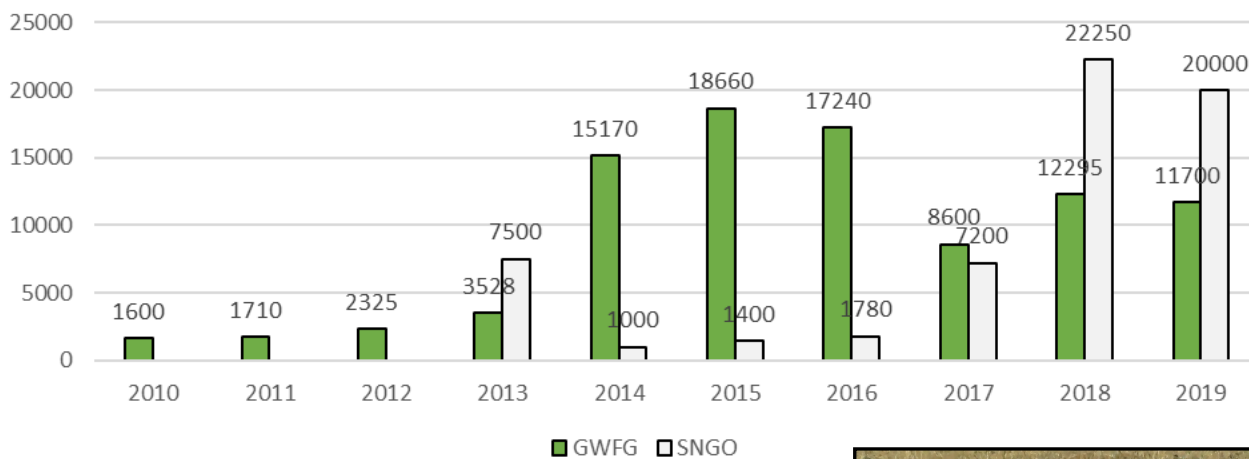
The above normal precipitation received in 2019 enhanced habitat, resulting in a peak of 6300 ducks observed on February 21st! In addition, 8300 shorebirds were observed on May 2nd, which is the highest number we have ever recorded. Due to late May precipitation, the Refuge still had over 50% of its managed wetland acres flooded as of June 17th. The late rains provided excellent brood habitat for ducklings, and we noticed an increase in number of broods including Gadwall, Cinnamon Teal, and Mallards. All three of these duck species nest in Refuge grasslands, and move their chicks into nearby wetlands shortly after they hatch, navigating through dense vegetation, while attempting to avoid predators.

Sandhill Cranes are a favorite, of both visitors and Refuge staff. The cranes start to arrive in mid-late September, and we conduct monthly crane roosting surveys in conjunction with several of our neighboring wildlife areas including Cosumnes Preserve, Staten Island, and Woodbridge Wildlife Area. We usually observe our peak number of roosting cranes in October, and in 2019 we counted 746 Sandhill Cranes roosting on the Refuge. This was similar to previous years, as our crane numbers have remained fairly steady.

The Refuge conducts informal goose surveys every spring in an attempt to capture the peak numbers of both Greater White-Fronted Geese and Snow Geese on the Refuge. This is a challenge for Refuge staff, as the geese can be found nearly anywhere, potentially utilizing any of the 700 acres of managed wetlands, 4100 acres of grassland habitats, and 80 acres of agricultural lands found on the Refuge. Once a flock of geese is located, we are now faced with the task of counting them. Imagine an area the size of a football field, covered entirely with white Snow Geese! Our goose numbers have increased greatly over the last 10 years, with an especially large increase of Snow Goose numbers in the last few years.



Stone Lakes NWR Peak Spring Goose Numbers



Great Blue Heron

GWFG (Greater White-Fronted Geese) and SNGO (Snow Geese)



White-faced Ibis



Sandhill Cranes

Environmental Education

Environmental Education for elementary school students is an integral part of the activities at Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. The Friends of the Refuge (Friends) supports the efforts of the staff through several programs. In 2019 the Friends collaborated with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife to host the 7th annual Nature Bowl Semi-Final at the Refuge; funded transportation for student field experiences to the Refuge in partnership with the Elk Grove Unified School District and California Waterfowl Association; and provided an Environmental Education scholarship through the Elk Grove Regional Scholarship Foundation.

Nature Bowl is an engaging outdoor science experience for 3rd through 6th grade students in the region organized by the CA Department of Fish and Wildlife. The Friends and staff of the Stone Lakes NWR provide volunteer judges, coordinate the coaches and set up for the event at Blue Heron Trails on the Refuge. The 2019 event was the 7th year the Friends has hosted the event, and involved nearly 100 students from six schools and 14 volunteer judges and coordinators. The in-kind contributions from Friends, volunteers and Refuge staff totaled over \$4,000. This included volunteer hours involved, transportation funding for students from Title 1 schools, mileage, awards, and supplies.



Ride to the Refuge is a unique Friends program that provides transportation funding to schools to bring students to the Refuge. In 2019 the Friends provided over \$1500 in grants to three schools to fund transportation to over 250 students. The staff at the Refuge provides the environmental education curriculum for students.

The Friends also allocated a budget of \$2500 to fund transportation for students to participate in **Marsh Madness** at the Refuge, an environmental education experience offered by the California Waterfowl Association for students throughout the Sacramento region.

Scholarship Established This year the Friends supported a high school senior by offering a \$1000 scholarship through the Elk Grove Regional Scholarship based on student interest and experience in Environmental Sciences. The scholarship was to be given to a student interested in a career in Wildlife Management, Natural Resource Management or Environmental and Natural Sciences. The purpose of the scholarship was also to promote awareness of the Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.

This year's recipient, selected by the Foundation, was Francis Bodine, a senior at Pleasant Grove High School, who participates in Future Farmers of America and has an interest in animals. She volunteers with caring for animals and has hopes of pursuing a career in Environmental Science. She has been commended for perseverance, leadership and supporting others.

Through these efforts, both monetary and in-kind, the Friends Environmental Education programs help to promote, protect and preserve Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge for present and future generations.

2020 has been a challenging year due to COVID-19. We have had to cancel most of our outreach events so far. But we are committed to continuing our support of the Refuge by working on our existing programs and moving forward with new ones. We are working on creating a book of flowering plants which grow at Stone Lakes. It will have beautiful prints of paintings by our long time supporter and artist, Linnea Fronce. Please check the website below for updates as they become available.



Friends of Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge

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Refuge Grapples with COVID-19

A special message from the Refuge Manager



The refuge staff has been working from home since mid-March when the county and state stay at home orders were implemented. During that period, a few staff have been working on the refuge to conduct some essential activities that involve protecting infrastructure and ensuring public health and safety. Some of the activities involved in this work entail mowing levees, roads and creating fire breaks to reduce the threat of wildfire later in the summer; moving water and keeping conveyance systems functioning and free from debris; and controlling some invasive species that may promote the spread of wildlife diseases.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has encouraged refuge managers across the nation to keep public use areas open during the Pandemic to provide opportunities for the public to experience wildlife as long as large groups do not form and illegal activities do not become prevalent. A few refuges in California and Nevada have had to close their public use areas due to a number of issues involving dumping trash, target shooting, trespass, and vandalism. Fortunately, the level of visitors to Blue Heron Trails has been modest and they have been respectful of the site and others as they meander around the trails. There has been a steady stream of family groups and individuals throughout each day.

The local government's ban of large gatherings required us to cancel several public use programs such as Docent Guided Walks, Wildlife Observation Paddle Program, and school field trips. Prior to the cancellations from COVID-19, the refuge's schedule for public use activities was full. Before that time, refuge staff was able to successfully host a number of the Docent Guided Walks and 20 of the scheduled school groups, totaling over 1000 participants.

As Blue Heron Trails remains open to visitors for essential outdoor exercise and experiences, refuge staff has tried to keep up with the maintenance around the trails that is required during the spring with mowing and weeding, as well as cleaning the restrooms and emptying the trash and recycling. During this challenging time, we are doing our best to protect refuge facilities and resources, while providing opportunities for the public to experience wildlife along the trails. We look forward to resuming normal operations when it is safe to do so.

Beginning in June as Sacramento County moved into the State's Phase 2 reopening, the Refuge was granted approval to have staff resume field work activities. Staff will be focusing on habitat management, monitoring and facility maintenance tasks that can be achieved alone, outdoors or by practicing CDC measures for protecting against COVID-19. We will be monitoring the counties COVID-19 website and coordinating with our FWS leadership to evaluate and consider other public use activities, events and administrative functions at the Headquarters office throughout the rest of the year.

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