

# MODOC NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE



Newsletter 2012



## Our History.....

Located on the convergence of the north and south forks of the Pit River, Modoc National Wildlife refuge has a long history of providing habitat to wildlife and a home for people. Native Americans hunted and gathered wildlife and plants in the wetlands and meadows along the river where multitudes of animals and plants species were found. In more recent times the abundance of resources in the vast valley attracted European settlers searching for grazing lands, timber and other natural resources to utilize. In 1870, Presley A. Dorris, Henry Fitzhugh, and several other Dorris family members drove cattle and horses into the area and established a live-stock ranch, which they operated for ninety years. In 1959 Modoc Refuge was authorized and land was purchased from the Dorris family to established the refuge. Early Refuge employees immediately mobilized to begin restoring and managing habitat for migratory birds. The refuge turned 50 in 2010 and is still on this same path of protecting migratory birds just like the day it was established.



## A Brief Moment with Project Leader Steve Clay

Hello and welcome to the first edition of the Modoc National Wildlife Refuge Newsletter. I hope you all find something interesting within these pages and I encourage you to provide us feedback about the newsletter along with any questions you might have or ideas for future content. I'd like to give a big "Thank You" to all of the Modoc NWR staff who provided material for this newsletter as well as a special "Thanks" to our biological intern, Cameron King, who took on the task of assembling much of the information contained herein as well as being the "herder of cats" that made sure the newsletter was completed.

As I write this, the cooler feel to the air along with the flights of waterfowl and raucous chorus of the greater Sandhill Cranes as they mass for their fall departure all remind me that another cycle in the life of Modoc NWR is starting. I've been privileged to guide the efforts of the refuge staff and the growth of "Your" refuge for the past 11 years and look forward to the start of my 12<sup>th</sup> year here come October 21.

During my tenure the refuge has grown to better meet the needs of you, its citizen owners. Whether through the expansion of our environmental education and outreach programs to meet the new emphasis on "connecting people to nature" and getting our youth outdoors, the growth of recreational opportunities for people of all abilities and ages, the development of a more substantial "private lands" program to help promote habitat restoration throughout the watershed, or in the numerous habitat and maintenance projects that have been accomplished, the refuge continues to evolve.

Again, I hope you enjoy this newsletter as much as we have enjoyed telling our story. If you haven't taken the opportunity to do so or you're one of our regular visitors please take the time to stop in and visit.

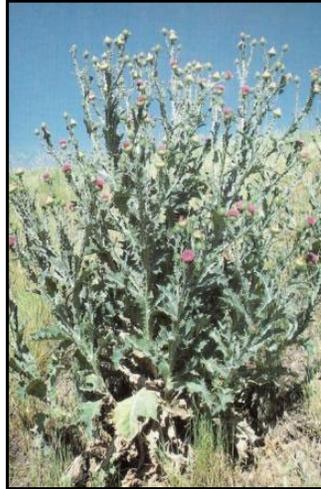
Enjoy  
Steve Clay

# Refuge Projects 2012



## Eighty Acres Added to Pit River Floodplain

In coordination with California Waterfowl Association and local contractors, the Refuge has completed a large project converting the “North Grain Field” into floodplain along the Pit River. The new floodplain area adds to the previous 120 acres to create 200 contiguous acres of floodplain wetlands, which provide valuable resources to a variety of nesting and migrating birds. The project created a new channel for the river, which now meanders through the previous “North Grain Field”, emulating historic conditions of the Pit river. Tule’s were transplanted from the existing floodplain and moist soil plants were seeded into the new floodplain to promote a quick transition to a diverse wetland complex. The Refuge and it’s partners in the project are excited to see the results after all the hard work. We encourage hunters to have a look at the project, but we caution them about deep mud that is expected throughout the project area. Anyone hunting within the floodplain should be very careful.



Above: Ten species of weeds were mapped at Modoc NWR this spring and summer. Using computer software a weed database was created which will aide the Refuge in its future weed control efforts.

Below: New nest boxes were erected on the refuge in 2012, while older ones were cleaned and repaired. Five wood duck boxes were deployed in an effort to create a local population of wood ducks.



Right: With the help of the local Youth Conservation Corps (YCC), a new viewing blind was constructed overlooking the House pond and field.



## Modoc Island Enhancement

For a number of years the Refuge has been working hard to improve islands for both birds and hunters. In the past, islands were built tall above the water, creating ideal conditions for weeds like poison hemlock, perennial pepperweed, and Canada thistle. Within many wetland units the Refuge has scraped down these islands to remove the weed-promoting conditions and promote growth of desirable plants. In some cases the islands are left with sparse vegetation, and become excellent loafing sites for migrating birds. In other cases, the refuge has transplanted willows, tules, and other vegetation in order to provide cover for hunters. The picture to the left shows the popularity of these islands as loafing sites.



## 2012-2013 Modoc NWR Waterfowl Hunting

Season Dates

**Ducks:** October 6 - January 18

**Geese:** October 6 - January 13

**Bag Limits:** Same as 2011-2012 season

Hunting Outlook

Refuge staff have high hopes for the 2012-2013 hunting season at Modoc National Wildlife Refuge. Spring surveys indicate the highest number of ducks in North America since natural resource agencies began estimating duck populations in 1955. Populations of green-winged teal, blue-winged teal, and northern shovelers are all at record highs. Mallards and gadwall, two prevalent species at Modoc NWR, are 50% and 100% above their long-term averages respectively, so we hope this translates into lots of ducks in the sky come fall! For locally breeding birds our counts this spring showed an average production for both ducks and Canada geese.

Dry conditions throughout the region likely played a role in this and will have some impact upon the season, but being one of the few areas with significant wetland acreage may be a plus for the refuge. As of mid-September, the refuge is slowly flooding wetland units and we are seeing significant numbers of birds taking advantage of this new habitat in the hunt area. Though we may not reach last year's record duck harvest we are hoping for a good season this year.

Recent habitat work has improved hunting conditions, mostly cover, in a number of our wetlands. The most notable examples are the South Grain Field and South Dam Pond. Both have had extensive work to increase tule density in addition to transplanting of willows and large snags to increase hunting cover. Two of our hunt units had extreme makeovers this summer, the Sharkey Field and the North Grain Field. While the North grain field will probably be slow this season, as the emergent marsh develops it should create superb hunting opportunities in the future. By creating more open water in the Sharkey field we expect to attract more ducks and geese into the unit, creating a higher quality hunting opportunity. We wish all our hunters the best of luck, and have a safe and fun season!

## Cooperative Conservation

The Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW) program was established by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1987, as a way to look past the boundaries of Federal lands and to work cooperatively with private landowners. The PFW program offers a method for landowners to receive cost sharing and technical assistance when restoring natural habitat without signing a long term commitment. The program operates on a voluntary basis and focuses on restoring habitat that targets species of interest to the landowner and federal trust species. Local projects may range from wetland restorations, to stream bank stabilization, fish passage improvements, forest improvements, juniper removal and upland or rangeland improvements. The success of this program depends largely on the one-on-one relationships developed between the landowner and the Partners Biologist. Here at Modoc National Wildlife Refuge we strive to offer our landowners the best possible habitat restorations and pride ourselves on cooperating with our landowners to ensure that their needs are met along with the needs of the habitat.



## Micke Ranch Restoration

The Micke Ranch restoration began in 2011 as a cooperative project between the Landowner, Partners for Fish and Wildlife, and the Lake County Umbrella Watershed Council.

Approximately 60% of the ranch is upland habitat with varying amounts of juniper encroachment. The landowner's objectives are to treat encroaching juniper stands throughout the property, to retain and improve forage value for wintering mule deer, to provide restoration of sage grouse habitat, and to improve aspen stands. The initial phase of the project, back in 2011, revealed springs and associated wet meadows. Many of these meadows should be holding 6-12 inches of water during the wet season and would remain wet year round. The juniper removal has already shown great improvements in hydrology in these wetlands and increased flow from many of the springs. The end result of the restoration efforts on the Micke Ranch should be an additional 200 acres of habitat for mule deer, ducks and geese, improved water management on the entire ranch and an additional 2000 acres of valuable grazing.

# WILDLIFE



# FUN FOR THE KIDS!



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Search the letter scramble above for the following words. Words can be spelled forwards, backwards, up, down, or diagonal:

Goose  
Decoy  
Teal

Widgeon  
Crane  
Modoc

Mallard  
Gadwall  
Pintail

**D** ♦ Canvasback ducks often travel at speeds of 50 mph, and have been clocked up to speeds of 72 mph!

**U**  
**C**  
**k** ♦ Many ducks feed by diving under the water to find bugs, fish, and mussels. The Long-tailed duck has been caught in fishing nets at 240ft deep!

**F**  
**a**  
**c** ♦ Blue-winged teal migrate up to 4,000 miles one way. A 13 year old blue-winged teal can accumulate 100,000 miles of air time just in migration!

**t**  
**s** ♦ Green-winged teal are the smallest North American duck. Adult females can weigh as little as 6 ounces, the equivalent of 7 AA batteries!

# MODOC'S WINGED WILDLIFE

## 2012 Status



**Sandhill Cranes:** 2012 was an average year for Crane production at the Refuge. Nesting success was great, with 75% of crane nests successfully hatching a colt, compared to a 66% long term average. Total breeding effort was also high this year, with 48 pairs of cranes creating breeding territories on the refuge, compared to a long term average of 38 pairs. Despite these above average numbers, poor habitat conditions due to hot and dry weather combined with a seemingly expanded population of coyotes at the refuge took a toll on the young birds, and only 12 crane colts survived to fledge. This is 1 bird shy of the long term average for crane production.



**Ducks:** Mallards, gadwall, and cinnamon teal are all regular breeders in Modoc County. Compared to the previous 20 years, all species realized average production for 2012, except for cinnamon teal which declined 30% from their long-term average and 40% from 2011. Sparse vegetation due to low spring precipitation created tough nesting conditions. An increase in widgeon production was realized this year, a trend we would love to see continue. Recent surveys indicate a mid-September population of 12,000 ducks.

### Bringing Back California's Sandhill Cranes: A Story of Success



Modoc National Wildlife Refuge is home to a healthy population of breeding and migrating Greater Sandhill Cranes, but this hasn't always been true. In the 1970's statewide numbers of Greater Sandhill cranes were dismal. Conversion of natural habitat throughout the state, combined with other factors, threatened the long-term existence of California's Sandhill Cranes. Numbers of Sandhill Cranes dropped 75% on many popular breeding grounds.

In 1983 the state of California listed the Greater Sandhill Crane as threatened, and the Refuge System committed resources to ensure Crane conservation. New actions were taken to increase the crane population, including preserving important habitat on their wintering areas and taking management actions on their breeding grounds. In 1979 there were only 16 breeding pairs of Cranes at Modoc National Wildlife Refuge. These numbers have consistently risen, and now the Refuge hosts 45-50 breeding pairs of Cranes each year.

**Canada Geese:** Canada Goose monitoring has been limited in the previous decade. In 2012 we managed to complete our historic goose surveys. Breeding pairs (635) were average compared to 1990's data. Nesting success (46%) was slightly below the historic average, but brood size (5.0) was on average larger. Total production was average compared to the 1990's, but high compared to the early 2000's. Recent surveys indicate a mid-September population of 3000 geese.



## WATERFOWL OF MODOC: WHERE DO THEY COME FROM...WHERE DO THEY GO?



Modoc National Wildlife Refuge has been banding ducks and geese for nearly 50 years. Banding birds can help biologists determine survival rates and harvest rates, but it is also a great tool for determining migration patterns. Have a look at the map above to see where different species of Modoc waterfowl commonly travel.

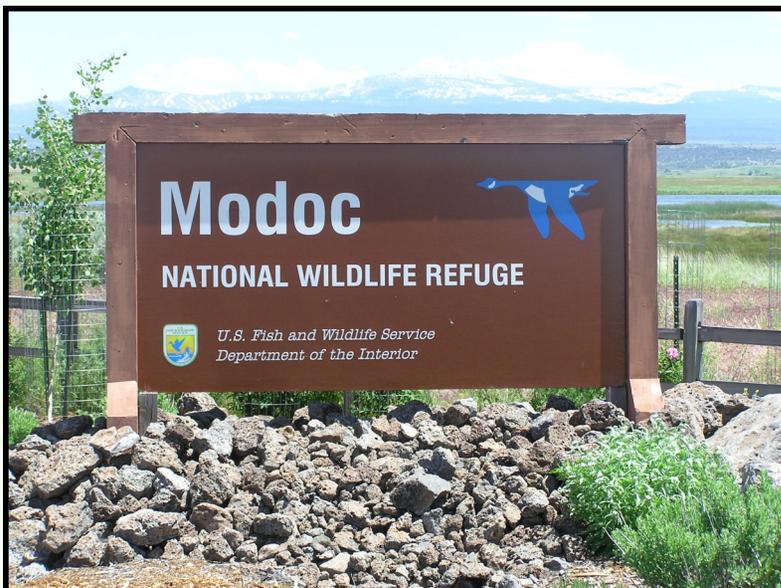
\*Crane migration is not illustrated on this map, but most Modoc cranes migrate south into the Central Valley and the bay/delta area of California. They feed on high energy rice and corn throughout the winter to survive the colder temperatures before returning to Modoc NWR in late winter.

# Modoc Events

## Come Join Us to Enjoy the Following Attractions

- ◆ Wildlife abound on the 3 mile wildlife drive as it winds through wetlands, sagebrush, and grasslands.
- ◆ Take time to experience the sights and sounds of the new Kaye Johnson Trail around the Wid-geon Ponds, which includes a viewing blind and wonderful interpretive signs along the way.
- ◆ Stop in and say hi while looking at the displays, or let your kids explore in the children's discovery area at our Refuge Headquarters visitor center.
- ◆ Capture that unique image you have always wanted in our photo blind located on the Lower Duck Pond. Call refuge headquarters to reserve it from sunrise to sunset.
- ◆ Relax and enjoy some time fishing, boating, and wildlife watching on Dorris Reservoir.
- ◆ Come experience the early morning anticipation of waterfowl setting their wings as they glide into your decoys during hunting season.

January	February	March	April
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Great horned owls begin nesting</li> <li>• Hunting Season Closes</li> <li>• Excellent Photography opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dorris Reservoir opens to walk-in guests</li> <li>• Peak Snow Geese</li> <li>• Cranes begin to return around the 14th</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Canada Geese begin nesting</li> <li>• Cranes dancing and initiating nests</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dorris Reservoir opens to boating</li> <li>• Ducks begin nesting, shorebirds migrating</li> <li>• YCC applications due</li> </ul>
May	June	July	August
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Songbirds migrating through to the North</li> <li>• Environmental Education field trips</li> <li>• Crane nests hatching</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quail nests begin to hatch</li> <li>• Refuge habitat and maintenance projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peak duck nests hatching</li> <li>• Refuge habitat and maintenance projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applications due for waterfowl opener and youth hunt</li> <li>• Songbirds migrating south</li> </ul>
September	October	November	December
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Junior waterfowl hunt</li> <li>• Shorebirds migrating south</li> <li>• Dorris Res. Closed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Waterfowl hunting season begins</li> <li>• National Wildlife Refuge week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Junior pheasant hunt at Refuge</li> <li>• Last of the Cranes depart Refuge for Central California</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Swans wintering at Refuge</li> <li>• Christmas bird count</li> </ul>



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