

What's On Your Mind?

In each issue of *Valley Ventures*, we respond to your questions and comments about conservation issues in our Central Valley. Are you wondering about the best timing to implement a special land management practice? Do you have questions about how some pending legislation will affect wetlands in your area? Do you want to learn more about a particular species of wildlife and how to attract it to your property? Would you like to share a conservation success story with others? Are you wondering how certain conservation decisions are made and by whom?

These questions and more are fair game for What's On Your Mind? Contact us via one of the methods in the shaded box and we'll respond as quickly as possible. We may print your question or comment, along with our response, in the next issue of *Valley Ventures*!

From A Reader Near Modesto

Question:

"I farm about 160 acres just outside of Modesto, CA. I grow a few different

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crops and some of the land is grazed. There's a low portion on the property (about 20-25 acres) that typically floods or is too wet to work with by the end of the winter. Since this chunk of low ground isn't very productive or profitable, I was thinking about creating a pond or marshy area for wildlife. I heard there are some programs that provide money and expertise to landowners who want to do things like this. How do I find out about these programs? If there's money available for it, how do I get some?"

Answer:

That's a great question and a wonderful idea for your land! You're exactly right, there are lots of programs that

assist landowners with habitat enhancement and restoration projects on their property. In fact, we could probably devote an entire issue of this newsletter to the subject and just barely scratch the surface of what's available!

Many of these programs are offered through the various non-profit, Federal, and State partners of the Central Valley Joint Venture (CVJV). Some of the programs provide funding, while others may provide biological or engineering assistance. One way to start investigating what programs are available and which ones may work for your situation is to visit the CVJV website at www.cvjv.org and click on "Conservation Programs" and/or "Funding Opportunities." This provides an overview of different programs and includes links and contact information for the organizations that offer them. We also welcome you to call Bob Shaffer or Ruth Ostroff at the CVJV office at (916) 414-6464. Good luck with your habitat project and thanks for wanting to help Central Valley wildlife!



White-fronted Geese Respond Well To Joint Venture's Habitat Improvements

By Josh Ackerman, John Takekawa, and Joe Fleskes, U. S. Geological Survey; and Dennis Orthmeyer, California Waterfowl Association

During the past decade, changing agricultural practices and conservation programs have altered the landscape in the Central Valley of California. These habitat changes included wetland restoration and enhancement of agricultural habitats related to the implementation of the Central Valley Joint Venture Plan beginning in 1990, increased land area used in rice

production due to improved prices and subsidies, and more frequent flooding of rice fields after harvest to speed straw decomposition since air-quality legislation enacted in 1991 restricted rice burning (California Rice Straw Burning Reduction Act; AB-1378). As a result, wintering habitat for waterfowl has increased in the Central Valley. This increase has been most apparent in the northern Central Valley where availability of ricelands increased by 94,000 acres (23% increase), flooded rice fields by 62,000 acres (47%), and wetlands by

72,000 acres (67%) between 1989 and 1999. Although these habitat changes presumably have improved conditions for wintering waterfowl, no one had examined their actual response to these landscape changes.

To fulfill this information need, as part of a larger cooperative project with California Department of Fish and Game, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, California Waterfowl Association, Ducks Unlimited, and others, U.S. Geological Survey biologists from the

see *Geese*: page 12

Geese from page 10:

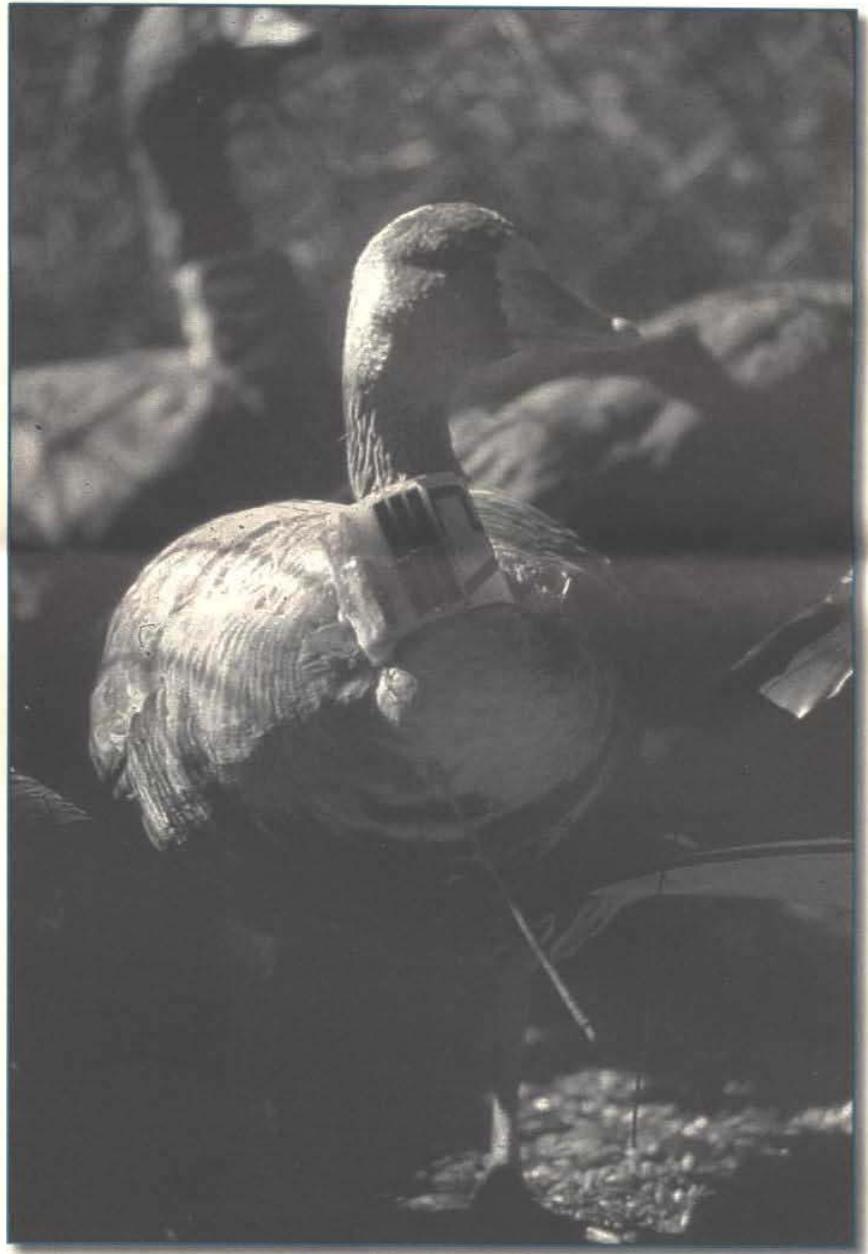
Western Ecological Research Center radio marked and tracked more than 200 white-fronted geese during the winters of 1987–1990, before these major habitat changes occurred, and again during 1998–2000, after a decade of habitat change in the Central Valley. Geese were followed from their breeding grounds on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta in Alaska to their wintering area in the Central Valley of California, where more than 4,500 goose locations were recorded.

This extensive tracking shows that white-fronted geese have greatly altered their spatial use of the Central Valley. Geese have shifted into areas that have had the greatest increase in rice production, such as District 10 in the American Basin, and out of other areas in the Central Valley, such as the Delta (see map). In addition, increased feeding and roosting habitat apparently has allowed the white-fronted goose population to concentrate its range in its preferred areas, having shrunk from 5,145 km² to just 3,367 km². This is especially informative considering that, during the same time period, the Pacific population of white-fronted geese has more than doubled in size from about 175,000 to 391,000 birds. The distance traveled from roosting areas (sanctuaries) to feeding sites (rice fields) also has declined by about 5 miles over the past decade, and now geese travel only about 15 miles on average to find food. Geese now spend more time feeding and roosting within rice fields, especially flooded fields, than they did in the late 1980s.

These data indicate that winter distribution and movement patterns of white-fronted geese has changed in response to landscape changes that resulted, in part, from the Central Valley Joint Venture. This has translated into a more favorable environment for wintering geese, and other waterbirds,

and likely improves their survival and body condition entering into spring migration and breeding. To ensure that these habitat gains are sustained into the future, the challenge for the Central

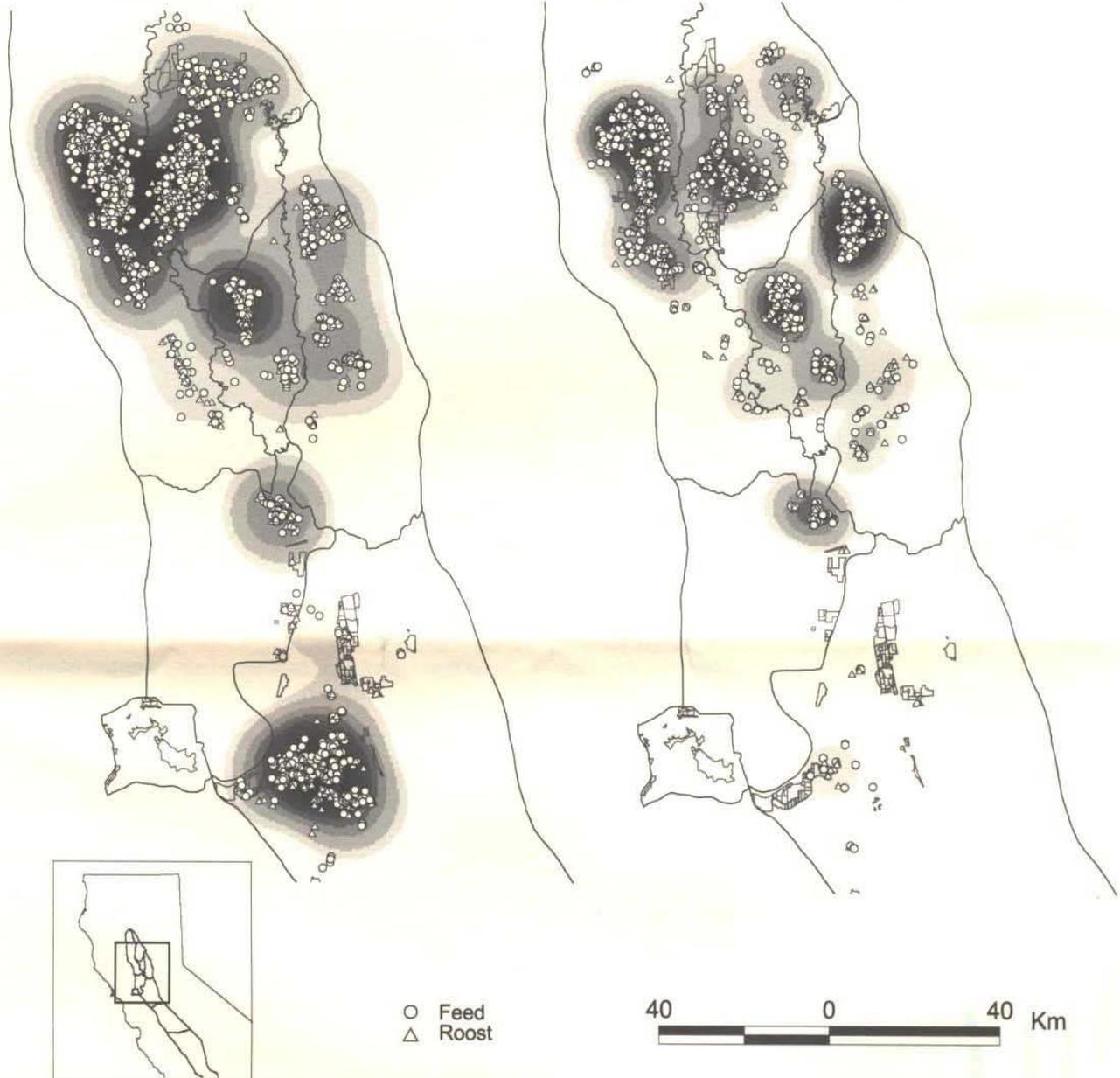
Valley Joint Venture and other habitat program managers will be to meet the long-term habitat needs of waterfowl while maintaining the distribution of geese throughout the valley.



White-fronted goose female with a radio transmitter attached to the neck collar. Photo by authors.

1987-1990

1998-2000



Distribution of radio marked (female) white-fronted geese during the winters of 1987–1990 and 1998–2000 in the northern Central Valley of California. Goose feeding (circles) and roosting (triangles) locations are shown and darker contours indicate more concentrated use by geese. Thick lines are basin boundaries and thin lines delineate wetland habitats and state and federal waterfowl refuges.