

Klamath Basin Called "Critical" for Pintail that Depart Grasslands

By Mike Miller and Joe Fleskes,
USGS, Dixon Field Station

Any duck hunter worth his salt can tell you that there are jillions of pintails in the Klamath Basin during the fall and early winter. But fewer are aware of that region's importance to pintails during the spring migration. In fact, a recent study designed to use satellite telemetry to identify spring migration routes, staging areas, and destinations of pintails after they depart the Grasslands and other Central Valley areas has shown just how critical the Klamath Basin and surrounding region are to this special species. This research was supported by funding provided by the Tuscan Research Institute of Las Vegas via grants to Ducks Unlimited and California Waterfowl Association.

By deploying back-mounted satellite-received transmitters on adult female pintails in late winter, a USGS research team from the Dixon and San Francisco Bay Estuary Field Stations of the Western Ecological Research Center found that 77 to 87 percent of all pintails that migrated north from the Central Valley stopped first during spring in southern Oregon, northeastern California, or extreme northwestern Nevada (convenient acronym is "SONEC"). Habitats used by pintails during spring in the SONEC region were located in the Klamath, Malheur and Harney Basins, Warner Valley, Upper Klamath Lake, Klamath Forest, and Chewaucan and Sycan Marshes in Oregon; Butte Valley, Lower Klamath, Tule Lake, Honey Lake, Modoc Plateau, Surprise Valley, Big Valley, and Fall River Valley in California; and the Massacre Lake area of Nevada.

Pintails remained in SONEC for variable lengths of time, gathering nutrients crucial for migration and reproduction, before moving on. About 25 percent of the pintails stayed in SONEC an average of two months before flying directly to Alaska over the ocean or along the coast, usually around the last week of April or so; another 25 percent stayed about a month and then flew directly to Canada, usually southern Alberta; about 40 percent stayed a few days to a few weeks before flying to southern Idaho and/or western Montana and then on to southern Alberta; the last remaining 10 percent or so headed east-

erly through Nevada and Utah and ended up in the Dakotas or remained in SONEC.

Tracking revealed that about 40 percent of pintail locations in the SONEC region overall were on privately-owned lands with 86 percent on private lands in the Warner Valley and Summer Lake subregions. Pintail habitat use was similar during day and night and for all pintail age/sex classes.

Critical SONEC habitats and food resources for spring-staging pintails and the future of pintails in the Pacific Flyway cannot be overstated. Thus, conservation of waterfowl habitats in the SONEC region is crucial not only for pintails, but also for the numerous other waterfowl species that migrate through there from their wintering grounds in the Grasslands, in Merced County and other parts of the Central Valley.

Vol. 15, No. 3

www.grasslandwetlands.com

May/June 2005

GRASSLAND TODAY
The Grassland Wetlands Newsletter