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Two new US Ramsar Sites in the state of California

01/02/2005



The United States designates two Wetlands of International Importance in California

To commemorate World Wetlands Day 2005, two sites designated by the United States of America have been added to the List of Wetlands of International Importance, the **Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve (TRNERR)** and **Grassland Ecological Area**, both in the state of California. TRNERR is one of the few unfragmented estuaries in southern part of the state and is located at the very southwestern corner of the country on the border with Mexico. Grassland is the largest remaining freshwater wetland complex in the state and is renowned for its very large congregations of wintering waterfowl and shorebirds. Brief site descriptions have been prepared by Ramsar's **Iván Darío Valencia** based on the information supplied in the Ramsar Information Sheets accompanying the designations.

Grassland Ecological Area (65,000 ha; 37°10'N 120°50'W) is a National Wildlife Refuge and Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve located in the Central Valley in the San Joaquin River Basin. The largest remaining contiguous block of freshwater wetlands in California, it consists of semipermanent and permanent marshes, riparian corridors, vernal pool complexes, wet meadows, native uplands and grasslands, featuring Alkali Sacaton grassland *Sporobolus airoides* and the endemic Delta button celery, *Eryngium racemosum*. The site is renowned for its wintering waterbirds which reach several hundred thousands every winter. These include Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*), 19 duck species (Northern pintail *Anas acuta*; Green-winged teal *Anas crecca*; Northern shoveler *Anas clypeata*; Canvasbacks *Aythya valisineria* and others), 6 species of geese, tens of thousands of shorebirds (most abundantly Western Sandpiper *Calidris mauri*, Dunlin *Calidris alpina* and Long-billed dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus*). The site is home to four endangered shrimps as well the threatened Giant garter snake *Thamnophis gigas*. Due to flood-control and irrigation projects the entire hydrology of the valley had been dramatically altered, but water quality and allocation issues have been successfully addressed with the Central Valley Project Improvement Act in 1992. Most of the wetlands are managed by the controlled application of water using a series of canals and control structures, mimicking historical flood patterns with pulses of high water flow during winter and spring. The largest potential threat to the site is urban development. Ramsar site no. 1451.

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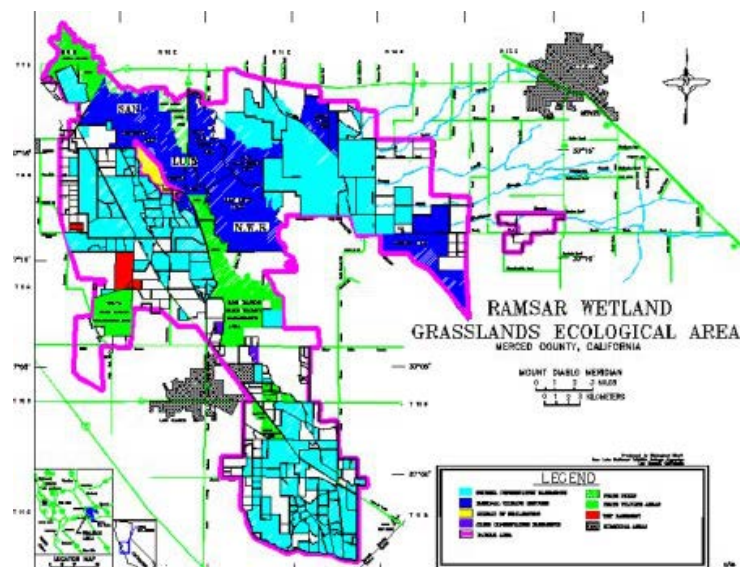
 Number of » [Contracting Parties](#):
168

 Sites designated for the
 » [List of Wetlands of International Importance](#):
2,186

 Total surface area of designated sites (hectares):
208,674,247

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The **Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve (TRNERR)** (1,021 ha, 32°33'N 117°07'W), a National Wildlife Refuge, lies on the border with Mexico facing the city of Tijuana -- it is one of the few unfragmented estuaries and coastal lagoons in Southern California. It is a seasonally marine-dominated estuary experiencing freshwater input only during the wet winter period, though its mouth remains open throughout the year. It has several sensitive habitats such as sand dunes and beaches, vernal pools, tidal channels, mudflats and coastal sage scrub. The site is critical habitat for nationally endangered species and subspecies such as the San Diego Fairy Shrimp *Branchinecta sandiegonensis*, the Light-footed Clapper Rail *Rallus longirostris levipes* and the Salt Marsh Bird's Beak *Cordylanthus maritimus maritimus*; as well as nursery grounds for commercially important fish like the Diamond turbot (*Hypsopsetta guttulata*) and the California halibut (*Paralichthys californicus*). Dirt roads and border patrol off-road vehicles are a primary cause of concern because of the impacts of lighting, noise and sedimentation, already serious due to strong erosion and runoff from the shared basin with Mexico. The site is unfortunately isolated from surrounding habitat by urban areas and there are problems with introduced species. A multi-phased restoration program designed to restore tidal exchange and wetland habitats is in place, as well as a management plan. The site is administered jointly by California State Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Ramsar site no. 1452.

The United States now has 21 Wetlands of International Importance, with a surface area totaling 1,258,751 hectares.

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Merced

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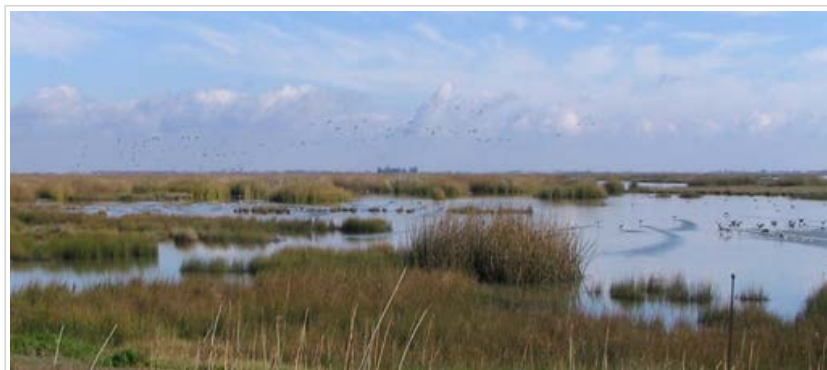


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Grasslands Wildlife Management Area



Grasslands Wildlife Management Area

The Grasslands Wildlife Management Area (WMA) was established by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1979 and is located in western Merced County, California within the San Joaquin River basin. Unlike typical National Wildlife Refuges, the Grasslands WMA is comprised entirely of privately-owned lands on which perpetual conservation easements have been purchased. These easements preserve wetland and grassland habitats, as well as some wildlife-friendly agricultural lands. The preservation of these areas prevents conversion of the land to uses not compatible with migratory bird and other wildlife values, while allowing daily management to remain under the landowners' control.

The Grasslands WMA can be divided into eastern and western divisions separated by the San Joaquin River. In the heart of the western division is the Grassland Resource Conservation District, an area of 70,000 acres of private wetlands and associated grasslands, and over 30,000 acres of federal National Wildlife Refuges and state Wildlife Management Areas. These wetlands constitute 30% of the remaining wetlands in California's Central Valley and are extremely important to Pacific Flyway waterfowl populations. Over 60 million duck use-day and 3 million goose use-days occur annually in the Grasslands WMA.

The Grasslands WMA supports diverse habitats including seasonally flooded marshlands, semi-permanent marshes, riparian habitats, wet meadows, vernal pools, native uplands, pastures, and native grasslands. In addition to waterfowl, these habitats support shorebirds, wading birds, songbirds, raptors, and other wildlife species. Several federal- and state-listed endangered and threatened plants and animals are present in the area and benefit by the habitat protection provided by the easement program. From 1979 to the present, nearly 80,000 acres have been incorporated into the Grasslands WMA.

Technical Assistance for Landowners

Technical assistance is available to all Grasslands WMA area landowners who request it, whether they participate in the easement program or not. Many landowners are attempting to manage their wetland water supplies more efficiently; others are searching for ways to grow larger, more diverse stands of moist-soil food plants to attract waterfowl; and some are looking for ways to diversify their habitats to attract different suites of wildlife.

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Lesser Sandhill Cranes

The Merced NWR hosts the largest wintering concentration of Lesser Sandhill Cranes in the Pacific Flyway with as many as 20,000 cranes using the Refuge.

Partners for Fish & Wildlife Program

In 1987, the Fish and Wildlife Service initiated the Partners for Fish & Wildlife cost-share program which pays landowners up to 50% of the funding necessary to accomplish wetland restoration and enhancement projects on their property. This program provides landowners with the opportunity to perform wildlife habitat improvements they might not be able to afford without some type of financial assistance. Typical projects that have been cost-shared in the past include the installation of new water control structures; the construction of swale drains that increase efficiency of habitat management practices, and the construction of levees and waterfowl loafing islands. Typical maintenance practices like disking and mowing cannot be cost-shared under this program.

Page Photo Credits — Seasonal Wetland / USFWS

Last Updated: Apr 09, 2013

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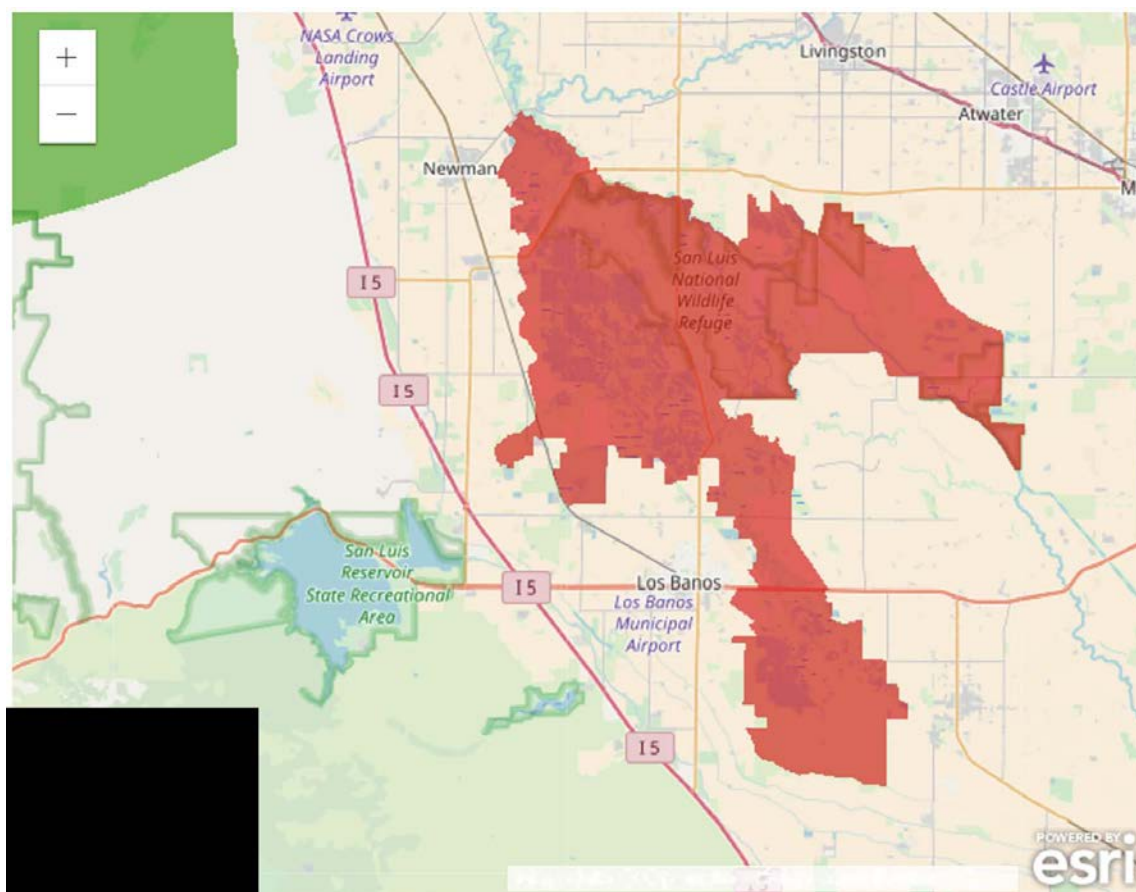
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Important Bird Areas

Grasslands Ecological Area

California



The Grasslands Ecological Area is a 160,000-acre mosaic of Central Valley floor habitats located primarily within Merced County between I-5 and I-99 in the northern San Joaquin Valley, west of a line between Modesto and Fresno. It lies in the historic floodplain of the San Joaquin River, in an area historically prone to floods and poor farming soils. This vast

network of freshwater marshes (permanent and seasonal), alkali grassland and riparian thickets is the result of decades of collaborative conservation agreements between private duck clubs, CA State Parks (Great Valley Grasslands), CA Department of Fish and Game (Volta, Los Banos, and North Grasslands wildlife areas), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (San Luis and Merced National Wildlife Refuges, Grasslands Wildlife Management Area). It is among the largest remaining areas of unplowed land on the floor of the Central Valley, and The Nature Conservancy (1998) has identified its Valley Sacaton Grassland (see Holland 1986) as the finest example of such habitat in the state.

{link:For IBA map, click

here. | http://www.audubon.org/bird/iba/maps/CA/CA173m_Grasslands_Ecological_Are...}

Updated February 2010

Ornithological Summary

This IBA is most notable for its abundance of native valley grassland and for its staggering concentrations of wintering waterfowl. It hosts a half-million individual ducks, geese, and swans each year between November and February, with Northern Pintail, Green-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler and Gadwall all having registered 100,000+ counts. It is also a major post-breeding dispersal area for American White Pelican (1000 counted on 20 August 1995; J. Fulton, in litt.). This IBA consistently hosts large numbers of breeding Tricolored Blackbirds, which average 5-10,000 breeding birds (RA), with over 60,000 typically wintering. Large numbers of wintering Sandhill Crane (high of 12,000+, including c. 25 Greater Sandhill Crane an average of over 10,000 Lesser Sandhill Crane) and Long-billed Curlew (up to 2000+) forage in its open pastures and fields, which host breeding colonies of Grasshopper Sparrow in the spring (RA). Winter roosts of White-faced Ibis were estimated at over 10,000 birds, making it the second-largest concentration of the species in winter in California, after the Imperial Valley (Shuford et al. 1996). It is a

major stopover site for shorebirds moving through the Central Valley, with an average of 10,000 each fall, winter and spring, and over 200,000 counted during peaks (see Shuford et al. 1998), earning it a distinction as a Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Site in addition to its recognition as a RAMSAR site. Several heron rookeries have developed here, with an average of 300 nests of Double-crested Cormorant, Great Blue Heron and Great Egret. Dozens of pairs of Swainson's Hawk breed, a significant percentage of the entire San Joaquin Valley population. The riparian bird community is best-developed along the San Joaquin River in the northwest section of the IBA, which supports breeding Yellow-breasted Chat, large numbers of Blue Grosbeak as well as the southernmost large population of the California-endemic Yellow-billed Magpie on the floor of the Central Valley (RA). Waterbird monitoring has been ongoing here for decades, and riparian songbird monitoring was initiated in the late 1990s, run in partnership with PRBO Conservation Science.

Help us learn more about the birds at this IBA! Enter your birding data online at California eBird!

(<http://ebird.org/california/>)

Conservation Issues

Under the terms of the Central Valley Project Improvement Act (1992), a minimum flow of water must be maintained to the refuge and to private lands with easements for wildlife habitat. The GEA oversees 76 stream miles of existing or potential riparian habitat, and recent management plans have included the fencing of streambeds from cattle, the re-watering of ancient oxbows, and, remarkably, the de-authorization of portions of San Joaquin River flood control levees to restore the natural riparian ecology. Despite a vast network of easements and reserves within the GEA, the progression of land conversion, including urban sprawl along the Hwy. 152 corridor (e.g. Los Banos) and agricultural and industrial development region-wide, threatens the wildlife of this IBA. Non-native plants (incl. Yellow Star Thistle *Centaurea solstitialis*) remain a constant

obstacle to conservation, but are being managed for by refuge staff. Giant Reed (*Arundo donax*) and perennial pepperweed have established stands within the GEA. The conversion of native scrub habitats to grain crops (to attract game birds) has been an issue in the past, but current management seems sympathetic to the concerns of native wildlife. Interestingly, lack of grazing in portions of the IBA may become a possible threat to certain open-country species that thrive on the sparse, scrubby grassland maintained by cattle (TNC 1998). As an historical note, this IBA contains the infamous former Kesterson Reservoir, where thousands of water birds experienced acute selenium poisoning (including horrific birth defects and deformities) in the early 1980s due to improper storage of agricultural runoff. The site has since been cleaned up, filled in with soil, and absorbed into the GEA, and refuge managers are now keenly aware of the need to carefully manage runoff in and around the IBA.

Ownership

Collaborative conservation agreements are between private duck clubs, California State Parks, DFG (Volta and Los Banos wildlife areas), and the National Wildlife Refuge System (San Luis, Merced NWRs). The Nature Conservancy (1998) has identified its Valley Sacaton Grassland (see Holland 1986) as the finest example of such habitat in the state.

Habitat

The Grasslands Ecological Area is a 160,000-acre mosaic of Central Valley floor habitats. There is a vast network of freshwater marshes (permanent and seasonal), alkali grassland and riparian thickets. The GEA oversees 76 stream miles of existing or potential riparian habitat, and recent management plans have included the re-watering of ancient oxbows, and the de-authorization of portions of San Joaquin River flood control levees to restore the natural riparian ecology.



The Grasslands

The Grasslands is one of the most important shorebird habitats in the western United States. California's Central Valley hosts one of the largest wintering shorebird populations of any inland site in western North America. It is the Grasslands Ecological Area of the San Joaquin Basin that comprises The Grasslands WHSRN Site of International Importance. The San Joaquin Basin is 80 miles long and covers 2,900 square miles. It extends from the Stanislaus River in the north, to the San Joaquin River in the south, and is bordered on the west by the California Aqueduct and on the east by the foothills of the Sierra Nevada.

Wetlands in California's Central Valley have declined from roughly 4,000,000 acres in the 1800s to just over 205,000 managed wetland acres as of 2006; about one-third of them are in the Grasslands. The site is dominated by intensively managed, seasonal and semi-permanent palustrine-emergent marsh, but also includes riparian wetlands, permanent marsh, alkali scrub, native grassland, and pastoral lands. All are managed under a mosaic of federal, state, and private ownerships.

Nearly 50% of all the shorebirds in California's Central Valley are found in the Grasslands during mid-April, the peak of spring migration. According to Pacific Flyway Project censuses conducted by the Point Reyes Bird Observatory, the site seasonally hosts up to 200,000 shorebirds during the spring, predominantly Western Sandpipers, Long-billed Dowitchers, Dunlins, and Least Sandpipers; some 14,000 shorebirds during the fall, mostly Long-billed Dowitchers, Least Sandpipers, Black-necked Stilts, and Least and Western Sandpipers; and at least 60,000 shorebirds in winter, mainly Long-billed Dowitchers, Dunlins, Least Sandpipers, and Black-necked Stilts.

Country, State
United States, California

Category
International

Basis for Designation
More than 100,000 shorebirds annually

Size
78,476 ha (193,918 acres)

Joined
December 1992

Site Owner
U.S. Fish and Wildlife, California Department of Game and Fish, and Private Landowners

Site Partners
California Waterfowl Associate, Ducks Unlimited, Inc., Sierra Club, National Audubon Society, Natural Resources Defense Council, Campaign to Save California Wetlands

Contact
Outreach and Outdoor Recreation Planner
San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex
Los Banos, CA

General Manager
Grasslands Resource Conservation District
Los Banos, CA