



TULARE BASIN WILDLIFE PARTNERS
Creating Opportunities for Nature and People

Tulare Basin Conservation Report Summary: Buena Vista Lake - Kern Lake

Introduction

Dozens of tule elk (*Cervus elaphus nannodes*) stand bugling among the cattails, while fulvous whistling-ducks (*Dendrocygna bicolor*) and northern pintail (*Anas acuta*) glide overhead. American avocets (*Recurvirostra americana*) and black-necked stilts (*Himantopus mexicanus*) nest on islands surrounded by shallow lakes fed from Sierra Nevada snow melt. This is the Buena Vista Lake - Kern Lake region of the southern San Joaquin Valley.

The freshwater and saline wetland complex associated with Buena Vista and Kern lakes provides extremely important wintering, breeding and migratory areas for tens of thousands of waterfowl and other water-dependent animals. With nearly 100,000 acres of rivers, sloughs, marshes and ponds, this area was historically a major hub in the Central Valley wetland system, critical for the survival of many plant and animal species.

Important strategies for maintaining and restoring this region include re-establishing and sustaining wetlands, restoring upland areas and aiding in the recovery of unique wildlife species. Services provided include: flood water storage, water purification and filtration in marshes and natural air pollution control by planting native annuals and perennials.

The Buena Vista Lake - Kern Lake Conservation Report recommends the following:

- Protect 25,000 acres of existing uplands, such as shrubland and grassland;
- Restore 26,000 acres of uplands;
- Restore 24,000 acres of wetlands; such as marshes, floodplains, creeks and ponds;
- Complete Buttonwillow Ecological Reserve;
- Complete Coles Levee Ecosystem Preserve, managed by Aera Energy LLC;
- Complete Kern Water Bank, managed by Kern Water Bank Authority;
- Complete Tule Elk State Reserve, managed by California State Parks;
- Complete Lokern Preserve, managed by Center for Natural Lands Management; and
- Establish a new state, federal or private Wildlife Area.

By collaborating with private landowners, business and agency partners to conserve this amazing region, the Tulare Basin Wildlife Partners aims to leave a legacy for our children and grandchildren to enjoy.

Buena Vista Lake - Kern Lake Facts

Location: Westcentral Kern County, southwest of Shafter, west of Bakersfield, northeast of Taft

Size: 187,990 acres

Ownership: 79% private; 21% public

Natural Lands: 23 types: 39% grasses & forbs, 35% shrubs, 22% trees, 4% vernal pools

Land Use: 58.5% intensively farmed; 26.3% native land; 8.7% water banking & wetlands; 5.1% sporadically farmed; 1.3% developed; 0.5% ditches & canals

Goals

The Buena Vista Lake - Kern Lake Conservation Report goals include:

1. Conserve existing uplands, such as grassland and shrub-land, and travel corridors between these areas for unique wildlife species.
2. Create and restore wildlife corridors that have been lost between existing patches of grassland and shrubland.
3. Protect and restore floodplains, marshes and open water for wintering and migratory waterfowl.
4. Provide breeding season wetlands for waterfowl, shorebirds, colonial water birds and other wildlife species, including Buena Vista Lake shrew (*Sorex ornatus relictus*), southwestern pond turtle (*Emmys marmorata pallida*), fulvous whistling-duck, least bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*), California red-legged frog (*Rana aurora draytonii*) and giant garter snake (*Thamnophis gigas*).
5. Restore saltbush scrub, alkali sink, valley grassland, wetlands and areas along creeks and streams.
6. Provide flood control benefits for cities, farms and natural areas by protecting or creating wetlands to store flood water.
7. Recreate integrated historical southern San Joaquin Valley landscapes.

Objectives

Objectives for the Buena Vista Lake - Kern Lake Conservation Report include:

1. Establish a protected Wildlife Area on the south shore of Buena Vista Lake managed cooperatively by federal and state agencies and private landowners.
2. Protect native grassland, shrubland, trees and wetlands in the following conservation plan sub-management areas: Westside Corridor, Interstate 5 Corridor, Coles Levee Area and Buena Vista Lake Wildlife Area.
3. Purchase unproductive farmland and restore to native land; resell grazing land with conservation agreements in place and increase the size of ecological reserves.
4. Establish private wetlands in the Las Palomas sub-management area; complete cooperative agreements with water agencies to manage in perpetuity.

5. Protect Kern Lake/Gator Pond by entering into a cooperative agreement with private landowners or through fee title purchase; re-establish historic water regimes and plan for restoration needs.
6. Maintain and restore landscape features, including sloughs between Kern Lake and Buena Vista Lake and the Kern Fan, which created Buena Vista Lake and Kern Lake Basin.
7. Develop a corridor linking Kern Lake/Gator Pond on the south shore of historic Kern Lake to the proposed Buena Vista Lake Wildlife Area.
8. Expand Coles Levee Ecosystem Preserve, managed by Aera Energy LLC, to include natural land south of Kern Water Bank and east and west of Interstate 5.
9. Partner with Kern County to increase native trees and shrubs at Buena Vista Lake Aquatic Recreation Area.
10. Develop a cooperative agreement between wildlife management agencies, NGOs, Kern Water Bank Authority and others to manage water supply and natural areas to benefit wildlife.
11. Expand Tule Elk State Reserve, managed by California State Parks, to provide additional natural lands for the tule elk herd; create public viewing and educational opportunities.

Site-Specific Recommendations

For ease of planning and discussion, the Buena Vista Lake - Kern Lake planning area was divided into nine sub-management areas, each with different status, goals and management recommendations. The majority of native and farmed land in the planning area will remain in private ownership for grazing and wildlife-friendly farming under voluntary conservation agreements. Some lands will be purchased by agencies and conservation organizations, while others will be used for duck clubs, recreation, hunting, photography or education.

Westside Corridor

Status: 8,400 acres, 19% protected; 7% farmed, 93% native land. Area provides a link to Lokern Ecological Reserve and Center for Natural Land Management's Lokern Preserve to the west and features Buena Vista Slough, which historically linked Buena Vista Lake and Tulare Lake.

Goals: Conserve grazing land and high-quality shrubland by adding to Lokern Ecological Reserve and Lokern Preserve through the Metro-Bakersfield and Valley Floor Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) processes. Protect Buena Vista Slough through fee title purchase or cooperative agreement; use channel for flood control and restore native plants.

Management Recommendations: Restore moderate flows in Buena Vista Slough and 10-year high-magnitude flood events to maintain trees and shrubs along channel.

Interstate 5 Corridor

Status: 9,600 acres, 2.3% protected; 64% farmed, 33% native land, 3% developed.

Goals: Conserve native land to provide wildlife corridors Buttonwillow Ecological Reserve to the Kern Water Bank, managed by Kern Water Bank Authority, and Aera Energy LLC's Coles Levee Ecosystem Preserve. Purchase land through Metro-Bakersfield and Valley Floor HCP or U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Section 6 processes.

Tule Elk State Reserve

Status: 3,120 acres, 38% protected; 62% farmed, 38% native, including grassland, wetland and creeks.

Goals: Expand Reserve to better manage tule elk herd by purchasing adjacent land from willing sellers. Link Reserve to Kern Water Bank and provide public viewing and educational opportunities.

Management Recommendations: Continue current management of Reserve.

Kern Water Bank Area

Status: 23,000 acres, 89% protected; 5% farmed, 28% native land, 67% wetland groundwater recharge basin.

Goals: Conserve remaining unprotected land and manage for unique wildlife species. Cooperate with Tule Elk State Reserve to provide additional foraging areas for tule elk west of Interstate 5.

Management Recommendations: For wetland areas, create islands for nesting waterbirds and obtain additional water in dry years.

Coles Levee Area

Status: 22,400 acres, 26% protected; 14% farmed, 86% native land.

Goals: Enlarge Aera Energy LLC's Coles Levee Ecosystem Preserve mitigation bank by purchasing and protecting native land; purchase and restore unproductive farmland.

Buena Vista Lake Aquatic Recreation Area

Status: 1,200 acres, 100% protected; 0% farmed, 15% non- native uplands, 81% wetland – aquatic recreation area, 4% developed. Owned by Kern County and managed for camping, picnicking and boating.

Goals: Increase quantity and diversity of native trees and shrubs along south and west shoreline of the lake.

Management Recommendations: Restore shoreline with native trees and shrubs.

Buena Vista Lake Wildlife Area

Status: 14,700 acres, 10% protected; 55% farmed, 44% native land, including Buena Vista Lake bottom, grassland and shrubland, 1% developed.

Goals: Establish a state, federal or private Wildlife Area with Wildlife Conservation Board funding and restore native plants on low-quality, unproductive farmland.

Management Recommendations: Flood hydric soils in southern portion of Buena Vista Lake bottom and manage summer water to benefit wildlife; provide wildlife viewing opportunities; re-introduce wetland-dependent species; develop a comprehensive management plan.

Las Palomas Wetlands Reserve Program

Status: 5,760 acres 0.7% protected; 97% cotton farms on marginal land, 2% native land, 1% wetland.

Goals: Establish voluntary conservation agreements with willing landowners through the Natural Resource Conservation Service's Wetlands Reserve Program.

Management Recommendations: Recreate braided channels connecting Kern Lake and Buena Vista Lake; flood hydric soils in Los Palomas Slough system and manage summer water to benefit wildlife; provide excellent wildlife viewing opportunities; re-introduce wetland-dependent species; develop a comprehensive management plan.

Kern Lake & Bureau of Land Management Corridor

Status: 6,680 acres, 7% protected; 54% cotton farms on marginal land, 45% native land, 1% wetland.

Goals: Protect natural lands in the Kern Lake/Gator Pond area, which provides important wetlands for Buena Vista Lake Shrew and is possibly the only remaining location for the plant, Bakersfield small-scale (*Atriplex tularensis*). Purchase and restore unproductive farmland. Provide wildlife corridors by connecting Gator Pond, the proposed Buena Vista Lake Wildlife Area and Bureau of Land Management lands through fee title purchase or cooperative agreement with private landowners.

Management Recommendations: Determine water needs for Gator Pond and build infrastructure to maintain it; determine potential for increasing wetlands.

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