



The California Central Valley *and* Foothills

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AMANDA BOHL, PROGRAM DIRECTOR
CALIFORNIA CENTRAL VALLEY & FOOTHILLS

FEW PEOPLE TRAVEL TO CALIFORNIA JUST TO visit the Central Valley and Foothills region. And yet, from its historic Gold Rush towns and white water boating spots to fruit-laden orchards and vibrant wetlands teeming with waterfowl, this region contains a wealth of resources that form a vital part of our American heritage.

Dominating the region is the 430-mile long Great Central Valley—once a giant inland sea—that is flanked by the foothills of the Sierra Nevada and Coastal Ranges. The Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers, fed by their tributaries, flow from the mountains through the oak-studded foothills and then meander through the valley floor where they ultimately meet to form the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, the largest estuary on the Pacific Coast.

The Central Valley is one of the most productive agricultural zones in the world and the heart of the state's \$27 billion agricultural economy. The 15 million-acre garden supplies one-quarter of the food America eats.

In the last century, the region underwent a tremendous transformation as natural habitat was converted to agricultural fields. Where the region once contained four million acres of fertile wetlands, less than 300,000 acres remain today. Riparian forests and woodlands once covered the banks of almost every river in the area. Now, 90 percent of this habitat type has been lost. With this near total loss of natural communities, species dependent upon them have also begun to vanish.

And yet, the region is still rich with wildlife and holds vast potential for habitat restoration. The Central Valley supports 60 percent of the migratory waterfowl along the Pacific Flyway. Chinook salmon, Delta smelt, Steelhead trout, San Joaquin kit fox, riparian brush rabbit, California condor, the Least Bells vireo and blunt-nosed leopard lizard are just a few of the endangered or threatened species maintaining a foothold in the region. More threatened and endangered species are found in the San Joaquin Valley than any other region of the continental United States—588 species.

These species face new threats daily as urbanization replaces agriculture as the leading cause of land conversion. By 2040, the Central Valley's population is expected to nearly double to 12 million, placing the region's air, land, water, species and other natural resources at great risk. The profound increase in people, homes and businesses will strain public open space and recreation resources, while increasing the conversion of prime agricultural lands and critical habitat.

ALC's vision is to enhance the quality of life in the Central Valley & Foothills through the conservation of fish and wildlife habitat, preservation of working farms and ranches, and the acquisition of land for public recreation.

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FOCUS ON WILDLIFE



SAN JOAQUIN KIT FOX

Vulpes macrotis mutica

The San Joaquin kit fox is the smallest species of fox in North America. It thrives in the grass lands and shrub lands of the Central Valley, consuming mainly mice, kangaroo rats, squirrels and rabbits. Until the 1930s the range of the San Joaquin kit fox extended from Kern County in the south all the way north to Contra Costa County. With the rise of intensive farming practices, use of pesticides and urban development, the population of the San Joaquin kit fox has dwindled.

Photo: US Fish and Wildlife Service
Source: Sacramento Fish and Wildlife Service



DELTA SMELT

Hypomesus transpacificus

The delta smelt is a small, slender fish that is endemic to the Suisun Bay and the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. The delta smelt are environmentally sensitive to seasonal freshwater outflows since they thrive in partially saline environments. The population of delta smelt has declined 90 percent in the last 20 years, mainly due to decreasing delta water outflow and diversions of the Sacramento River and San Joaquin River for agriculture and urban use.

Photo: US Fish and Wildlife Service
Source: US Fish and Wildlife Service

ALC has already conserved 20,000 acres in the region. Yet so much more needs to be done. We continue to work in the Sacramento River Bend Area and around Bear Valley in Northern California. In the past 18 months, our efforts have expanded to include the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, Tulare Basin, and the oak woodlands of the Sierra Nevada and Coastal Range.

SACRAMENTO-SAN JOAQUIN RIVER DELTA

The Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta provides water for two-thirds of the state's population and three million acres of agriculture. Its thousand miles of waterways support over 700 native plant and animal species, from egrets and hawk to river otters and salmon, while providing a popular recreation destination for bird watchers, anglers, hunters, boaters and other water sports enthusiasts.

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Altered by major land use changes, the health of the Delta ecosystem has been declining for decades. While state and federal agencies, non-profit organizations and elected officials are working to create a long-term solution to this complex problem, ALC is doing its part through the conservation and restoration of fish and wildlife habitat.

In 2005, ALC helped the Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge acquire 537 acres in Sacramento County for wetlands restoration. This addition supports the Pacific Flyway and provides habitat for sand hill cranes, burrowing owls and the giant garter snake.

ALC is now working as part of a coalition of land trusts and environmental organizations to explore the use of conservation easements to improve the Delta's fragile ecology.

TULARE LAKE BASIN

Historically, the Tulare Lake basin was the largest freshwater lake west of the Mississippi River and the most extensive wetland in the Central Valley, providing over 500,000 acres of habitat for migratory waterfowl and shorebirds. During the late 1800s and early 1900s water was drained as the land was converted into agriculture.

Now, ALC is helping the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) acquire land to restore an area of the basin called Atwell Island, which consists of 7,000 acres situated near the Pixley and Kern National Wildlife Refuges. This project will recreate native valley grassland and alkali sink habitats on an area that for the past century was covered by fields of cotton, oats and alfalfa.

The retirement of farmlands on Atwell Island will improve the water table of adjacent wetlands, thereby enhancing the Pacific Flyway. BLM also hopes that this could be a model restoration project that could help resolve water table depletion issues in other areas.

Atwell Island is currently home to over 60 special status or sensitive species that will benefit from habitat restoration including; mountain plover, Tipton's kangaroo rat, San Joaquin kit fox, tri-colored blackbird, burrowing owls, horned lizards and the blunt-nosed leopard lizard.

OAK WOODLANDS AND WORKING LANDSCAPES

A majestic oak tree set against golden foothills is perhaps the most iconic image of the California landscape. Unfortunately, this image may be relegated to the history books in some of the state's fastest growing counties.

Covering more than 12.5 percent of the state's geographic area, California's oak woodlands are critically linked to the health of the state's ranching economy. Thanks to the shade, shelter, and accompanying grassland habitat they provide, over 80 percent of these woodlands are used as rangeland. Yet, livestock producers that own most of the state's oak are under increasing pressure to subdivide and sell their land, the trees and the resources they support. A partnership between ranchers and conservationists is key to preventing the loss of these vital working landscapes.

ALC is working with the California Rangeland Trust to conserve historic oak woodlands habitat in Shasta and Mariposa Counties through the acquisition of conservation easements on working ranches. By helping make ranching more economically viable, easements can prevent the fragmentation of large tracts of land while helping to sustain California's ranching heritage.

INTRODUCING: AMANDA BOHL



AMANDA BOHL
California Central Valley & Foothills Program Director

Amanda Bohl has a true love of the land. Her fascination with the way in which landscapes and land uses help connect people to their communities drew her to the

newly created position of ALC's Central Valley and Foothills Program Director.

The opportunity to help protect a region that she cares deeply about is a wonderful challenge for Amanda. "Conservation can assist landowners and communities in finding their place in local, regional, even statewide economies. For example, if a conservation easement helps a farmer stay in business, a community's open space values are protected, as well as a local food source," she says.

Growing up in Amador County on the edge of the foothills and the Central Valley, Amanda spent most of her time hiking in the Sierra Nevada, raising pigs and chickens for 4-H while enjoying the wonderful open spaces and rural life of a small town. The open spaces of her childhood were instrumental in fostering her love of the land.

"It's hard to imagine barriers or dead ends in life when you can look at a landscape and feel like you're seeing forever," Amanda says.

Prior to joining ALC, Amanda worked for Resources Law Group in Sacramento, helping to administer the "Preserving Wild California" philanthropic program. As an organizational consultant, Amanda established a countywide recreation agency and two community centers in Amador County, California. She also has experience as a legislative consultant in the California and Oregon legislatures. Additionally, Amanda serves on the board of directors of her hometown land trust.

At ALC, Amanda's daily focus is her relationships with other conservation partners and using those connections to evaluate and secure key conservation projects. She is currently working with other land trusts, local state and federal agency representatives, and landowners to further develop ALC's Central Valley and Foothills Program.

Amanda lives in Sacramento with her partner and their 2 year-old son where she still enjoys hiking, cycling, traveling, cooking and gardening. Amanda holds a Masters Degree in Community Development from the University of California, Davis.

FOCUS ON WILDLIFE



TULE ELK

Cervus elaphus nannodes

The Tule elk, endemic to California, once roamed throughout the Central Valley between the Sacramento and San Joaquin River valleys. By the late 1800s their population, thought to have been as large as half a million, was decimated by hunting and conversion of native habitat to agriculture. Thanks to the restoration efforts of landowners along with hunting and conservation organizations there are now estimated to be about 3,600 of these creatures reclaiming their original range.

Photo: Alan Tobey, www.istockphoto.com
Source: CA Dept of Fish & Game



SWAINSON'S HAWK

Buteo swainsoni

While the range of the Swainson's hawk extends to Mexico and Central America, its main breeding ground is Central California. The hawk's diet mainly consists of the California vole, ground squirrels, mice and other rodents. Once found throughout lowland California, their populations are now restricted to Sacramento, San Joaquin and Yolo counties. Much of their habitat has been lost due to commercial and residential development of agricultural land.

Photo: John Pitcher, www.istockphoto.com
Source: CA Dept of Fish & Game