

The Use of Eastern Sacramento Valley Vernal Pool Habitats by Geese and Swans

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ABSTRACT. We studied the fall-winter use of Sacramento Valley high-terrace vernal pools and associated grassland habitats by geese and swans from November 1999 through March 2003. During each of nine diurnal and six nocturnal (1999-2000 field season only) surveys, we recorded the presence or absence of each species and subspecies, as well as flock sizes, habitats used, and activity patterns. Although all goose and swan species and most subspecies that winter in the Central Valley were observed using study area habitats, lesser Canada/Taverner's cackling geese, *Branta canadensis parvipes/Branta hutchinsii taverneri*, Ridgway's cackling geese, *B. h. minima*, and western Canada geese, *B. c. moffitti*, were observed most regularly and in the greatest numbers. In general, Canada and cackling geese (hereafter white-cheeked geese) used study area habitats from November through March, with regular use by large flocks of small and mid-sized subspecies in December and January. Smaller numbers of western Canada geese used study area habitats from December through the end of March, with the largest flocks occurring from late December through February. Monthly occurrence and maximum flock size values for lesser Canada/Taverner's cackling geese differed significantly throughout this 4-year study, although changes in these variables in successive months did not. Monthly changes in these variables for all other white-cheeked geese were not significant. Following their arrival in November and early December, white-cheeked geese used artificial stock ponds as nocturnal roost sites and then departed for disjunct foraging habitats during the day. Small and mid-sized subspecies roosted primarily on vernal pools in late December or January, following the onset of ponding; most roosting western Canada geese continued to use stock ponds through the end of March. With the growth of herbaceous vegetation beginning in late December or January, small and mid-sized white-cheeked geese shifted to a general pattern of day-long grazing activities on study area pastures. This regular and predictable shift suggests a pattern of long-term traditional use of vernal pool landscapes. We believe, therefore, that the protection of these remnant high-terrace vernal pool landscapes may be critical to the maintenance of California's small and mid-sized white-cheeked goose populations throughout the winter, during spring migration, and also to their success during the subsequent nesting season.

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INTRODUCTION

The loss of North American wetland habitats since the 1800s due to agricultural expansion and urbanization resulted in long-term conti-

mental population declines in waterfowl (Anatidae) (Baldassare and Bolen, 1994). A series of droughts throughout the prairies of the United States and Canada beginning in the 1970s, along with changing agricultural prac-

Research and Recovery in Vernal Pool Landscapes

tices led to further declines in many duck populations (e.g., northern pintails) (Miller and Duncan, 1999; Fleskes and Gilmer, 2004). However, since the development and implementation of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan in 1986, most waterfowl populations have recovered dramatically.

Up to 60% of the waterfowl migrating down the Pacific Flyway during the fall use Central Valley wetlands (Heitmeyer et al., 1989), with the majority of these migrants wintering in the Sacramento Valley. Only 5% of California's historic wetlands still exist (Heitmeyer et al., 1989; Holland, 1998), and of these wetlands, high-terrace and alkali vernal pools are among the rarest and least studied (Bogiatto and Karnegis, 2006; Silveira, 2000). The use of Sacramento Valley vernal pools by waterfowl and other waterbirds has been well documented (Grinnell et al., 1930; Baker et al., 1992; The Nature Conservancy, 1994; Silveira, 1998, 2000), although only a single study focuses on the use of high-terrace pools by ducks (Bogiatto and Karnegis, 2006), and none documents the use of these habitats by geese and swans.

The objectives of our study were to 1) describe the goose and swan community using eastern Sacramento Valley high-terrace vernal pools and associated uplands during the fall and winter, 2) determine seasonal patterns of occurrence and flock sizes for each taxon, 3) describe the daily activity patterns of each taxon, and 4) describe the specific habitat types used by each taxon.

STUDY AREA

Our study area included the vernal pools and grasslands on the original 619-ha parcel of The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) Vina Plains Preserve (VPP), located east of State Highway 99, and south of Lassen Road, 21 km north of Chico in southern Tehama County, California

(122° 03' 10" W; 39° 55' 59" N) (Figure 1). This vernal pool complex lies on a terrace between the foothills of the Cascade Range and the floodplain of the Sacramento River. A subterranean duripan, formed from the consolidation of eroded sediments from the Tuscan Formation, prevents water percolation and causes rapid accumulation of water in the heavy clay loam-lined or silt-lined pool basins (The Nature Conservancy, 1994). This parcel of the preserve consists of four fenced pastures, each containing numerous pools surrounded by an upland community dominated by native and exotic grasses and forbs. All pastures are grazed by cattle on a rotational basis, beginning in late fall, and historically, TNC has set prescribed burns to control exotic grasses such as medusa head, *Taeniatherum caput-medusae*.

Our study area also included the two southernmost pastures (472 ha) of the Earl Foor Ranch Conservation Area (EFRCA), located directly north of Lassen Road which forms the northern border of the VPP (Figure 1). These pastures also contain numerous vernal pools as well as several artificial stock ponds for cattle. EFRCA stock ponds generally contain water by October, well in advance of vernal pool ponding (Table 1). Like the VPP, EFRCA pastures, also dominated by exotic and native grasses and forbs, are rotationally grazed by cattle.

METHODS

We studied the use of vernal pool and associated uplands by geese and swans during the fall and winter months, from November 1999 through March 2003. During the 1999-2000 field season, we conducted twelve to fifteen 3-hr field surveys each month. Survey time periods were as follows: 1-hr post-sunset to 4-hr post-sunset; 4-hr pre-sunrise to 1-hr pre-sunrise; 1-hr pre-sunrise to 2-hr post-sunrise; 3-hr post-sunrise to 6-hr post-sunrise; and 2-hr

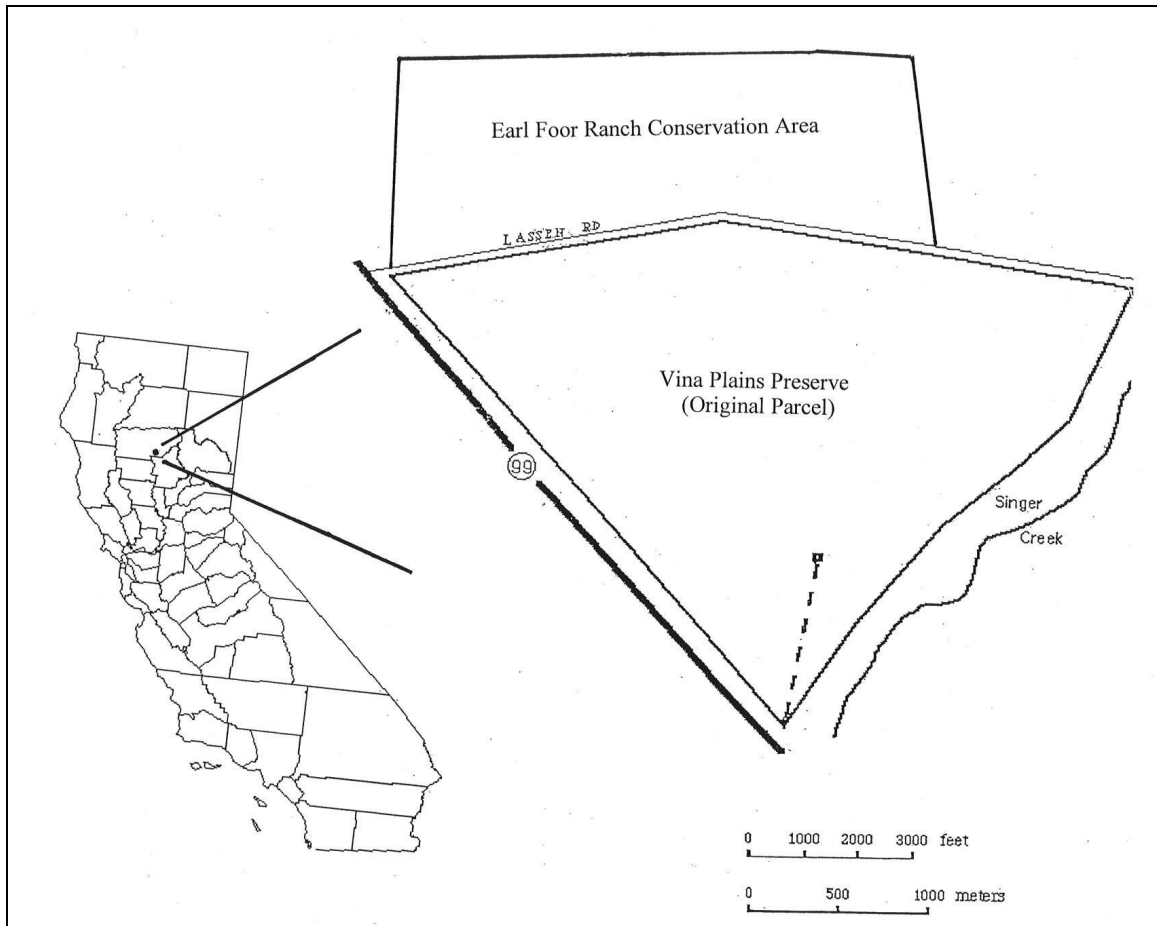


FIGURE 1. Location of the Vina Plains Study Area in Tehama County, California.

pre-sunset to 1-hr post-sunset. We attempted to cover all survey periods equally with three surveys each per month, and with a maximum of one survey per day.

Diurnal and nocturnal (auditory) surveys were conducted along Highway 99 and Lassen Road by vehicle, whereas remote portions of the study area were surveyed on foot. During field surveys, we used binoculars, two 20-60X Kowa spotting scopes, head lamps, and topographic maps of the study area.

Data collected by pasture included species and subspecies identification, flock location, number of individuals per flock, flock arrival and departure times, the most common flock behavior within each habitat, and presence or

absence of cattle by pasture.

We present maximum flock sizes and percent occurrence values by month, with percent occurrence defined as the percentage of survey-days per month in which each taxon was present, and with maximum flock size defined as the maximum number of individuals from each taxon observed during a 3-hr survey. We determined flock sizes through complete counts or collaborative estimates by members of the survey crew. Numbers of geese in flocks detected during nocturnal surveys were quantified during return visits to the study area at sunrise.

We tested for significant patterns of change in monthly occurrence and maximum flock size

Research and Recovery in Vernal Pool Landscapes

TABLE 1. Ponding chronology for the vernal pools on the Vina Plains, Tehama County, California, Fall 1999 – Winter 2003.

Field season	Initial ponding ¹	Desiccation ²
1999-2000	19-21 Jan 2000	8-10 Apr 2000
2000-2001	10-12 Jan 2001	19 Mar-4 Apr 2001
2001-2002	13-15 Nov 2001	Still-ponded—15 Apr 2001
2002-2003	13-14 Dec 2002	Still-ponded—16 Apr 2003

¹Most large vernal pools (surface area $\geq 15,000$ m²) ponded.

²Most large vernal pools desiccated.

for each white-cheeked goose subspecies using the Friedman Two-Way Analysis of Variance by Ranks test, the null hypothesis being that monthly values throughout this 4-yr study were the same. When monthly patterns of change were significant, we used the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test to compare values in successive months (e.g., November vs. December, December vs. January, etc.), the null hypothesis being that percent occurrence and maximum flock size values in successive months were the same. We eliminated nocturnal surveys from our protocol beginning in Fall 2000, because our data from 1999-2000 suggested that nocturnal use of the Vina Plains was limited to roosting activity on vernal pools and stock ponds. As a result, to control for survey time periods among years, we used only data collected during the three diurnal sampling periods for analyses.

RESULTS

Goose and Swan Taxa Observed

Except for the Aleutian cackling goose, *Branta hutchinsii leucopareia*, and the tule white-fronted goose, *Anser albifrons elgasi*, all goose and swan taxa that regularly winter in the Sacramento Valley were observed using habitats on the Vina Plains (Table 2). However, two Canada goose subspecies, *Branta*

canadensis parvipes, the lesser Canada goose, and *B. c. moffitti*, the western Canada goose, as well as Ridgway's race (Mlodinow et al., 2008) of the cackling goose, *B. h. minima*, were the most frequently observed and abundant goose taxa throughout this study (Tables 2 and 3, Figure 2). Also, flocks of lesser Canada geese often included individuals which were morphologically consistent with Taverner's cackling geese, *B. h. taverneri*, which tend to be somewhat smaller and darker than lesser Canadas (Yocom, 1972; Johnson et al., 1979; Bellrose, 1980). Nevertheless, although genetically distinct (Shields and Wilson, 1987a,b; Van Wagner and Baker, 1990; and others), the lack of distinct morphological features makes the separation of these two geese all but impossible in the field (pers. comm., J. S. Seding, University of Alaska, Fairbanks; pers. comm., P. F. Springer, retired, Cooperative Research Unit, Humboldt State University, Arcata, California). Therefore, because of this taxonomic ambiguity, we combined data for lesser Canada and Taverner's cackling geese, and will refer to them collectively. Our definitive identification of the lesser Canada goose was made possible through the tracing of a neck-banded bird observed in January 2001 (blue collar with the alphanumeric code MF6). This particular goose, a 3.5-year-old female, was banded near Anchorage, Alaska in 1998 (pers. comm., T. Rothe, Waterfowl

Bogiatto et al: Use of Vernal Pool Habitats by Geese and Swans

TABLE 2. Percent occurrence (frequency) values for geese and swans on the Vina Plains, Tehama County, California, November 1999 to March 2003.

Taxon	% Occurrence (Frequency)				
	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.
Tundra swan (<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>)	0(0)	3.2(1)	9.7(3)	10.7(3)	6.5(2)
Greater white-fronted goose (Pacific subspecies) (<i>Anser albifrons frontalis</i>)	0(0)	12.9(4)	9.7(3)	7.1(2)	9.7(3)
Snow goose (<i>Chen caerulescens</i>)	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	6.5(2)
Ross' goose (<i>Chen rossii</i>)	13.6(3)	3.2(1)	3.2(1)	0(0)	0(0)
Western Canada goose (<i>Branta canadensis moffitti</i>)	4.5(1)	19.4(6)	51.6(16)	75.0(21)	74.2(23)
Lesser Canada goose (<i>B. c. parvi-</i> <i>pes</i>) / Taverner's cackling goose (<i>Branta hutchinsii taverneri</i>) ¹	50.0(11)	71.0(22)	71.0(22)	10.7(3)	0(0)
Ridgway's cackling goose (<i>B. h. minima</i>)	18.2(4)	35.5(11)	25.8(8)	10.7(3)	3.2(1)
Cackling goose (<i>B. h. taverneri</i> ?) X greater white-fronted goose	0(0)	9.7(3)	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)

¹The 4-yr pattern of November through March change in % occurrence were significant ($\chi^2_r = 10.105$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.041$); results of month-to-month comparisons were not significant (all p -values > 0.05).

Coordinator, Alaska Dept. of Fish and Game, Anchorage). Greater white-fronted geese (Pacific subspecies) *Anser albifrons frontalis*, snow geese, *Chen caerulescens*, Ross's geese, *C. rossii*, and Tundra swans, *Cygnus columbianus*, occurred infrequently throughout this study (Tables 2 and 3). Individuals or small numbers of these goose taxa were generally observed within flocks of grazing or roosting white-cheeked geese, and except for one swan observed loafing on an EFRCA stock pond, all swan observations were of single or small numbers foraging or loafing on VPP pools. We also observed two hybrid geese which appeared to be crosses between greater white-fronted and cackling geese (Tables 2 and 3). The hybrids, which shared morphological fea-

tures with both species, were observed during three surveys in December 2002, and always in close association with two other geese, one adult white-fronted goose and another bird that was morphologically consistent with Taverner's cackling goose.

Our focus throughout the remainder of this paper will be on white-cheeked geese (Canada and cackling geese), as they were the most regularly occurring taxa on the Vina Plains.

Chronology, Percent Occurrence and Flock Size in White-cheeked Geese

Lesser Canada/Taverner's cackling geese are the most abundant and among the most reg-

Research and Recovery in Vernal Pool Landscapes

TABLE 3. Maximum flock size for geese and swans on the Vina Plains, Tehama County, California, November 1999 to March 2003.

Taxon	Maximum Flock Size				
	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.
Tundra swan (<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>)	0	12	42	26	7
Greater white-fronted goose (Pacific subspecies) (<i>Anser albifrons frontalis</i>)	0	1	11	6	9
Snow goose (<i>Chen caerulescens</i>)	0	0	0	0	10
Ross' goose (<i>Chen rossii</i>)	20	1	0	0	0
Western Canada goose (<i>Branta canadensis moffitti</i>)	1	102	69	51	14
Lesser Canada goose (<i>B. c. parvi-</i> <i>pes</i>)/ Taverner's cackling goose (<i>Branta hutchinsii taverneri</i>) ¹	330	1200	1300	25	0
Ridgway's cackling goose (<i>B. h. minima</i>)	230	475	475	12	2
Cackling goose (<i>B. h. taverneri</i> ?) X greater white-fronted goose	0	2	0	0	0

¹The 4-yr pattern of monthly change in maximum flock size were significant ($X^2_r = 12.05$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.019$); results of month-to-month comparisons were not significant (all p -values > 0.05).

ularly occurring taxa, using study area habitats during the fall and winter (Tables 2 and 3, Figure 2). These mid-sized white-cheeked geese were observed from November through February, although they occurred most regularly in late December and January. The 4-yr pattern of change in monthly occurrence for these geese was significant ($p = 0.041$). Differences in values from successive months were not (p -values > 0.05). Monthly maximum flock sizes, ranging from 0 to 1,300 geese, also showed a significant pattern of change ($p = 0.019$), although month-to-month comparisons did not (p -values > 0.05).

Western Canada geese were observed on the

Vina Plains from November through March, and they occurred most regularly from January through the end of our field season in late March (Table 2, Figure 2). The 4-yr pattern of monthly changes in occurrence and maximum flock size were not significant. Maximum flock sizes ranged from 0 to 102 geese, although flocks of 100 or more birds were observed only in December 2001 (Table 3).

Ridgway's cackling geese, the smallest of the white-cheeked geese, used Vina Plains habitats from November through March, although we observed them most regularly in late December and January (Table 2, Figure 2). Maximum flock sizes ranged from 0 to 475 birds

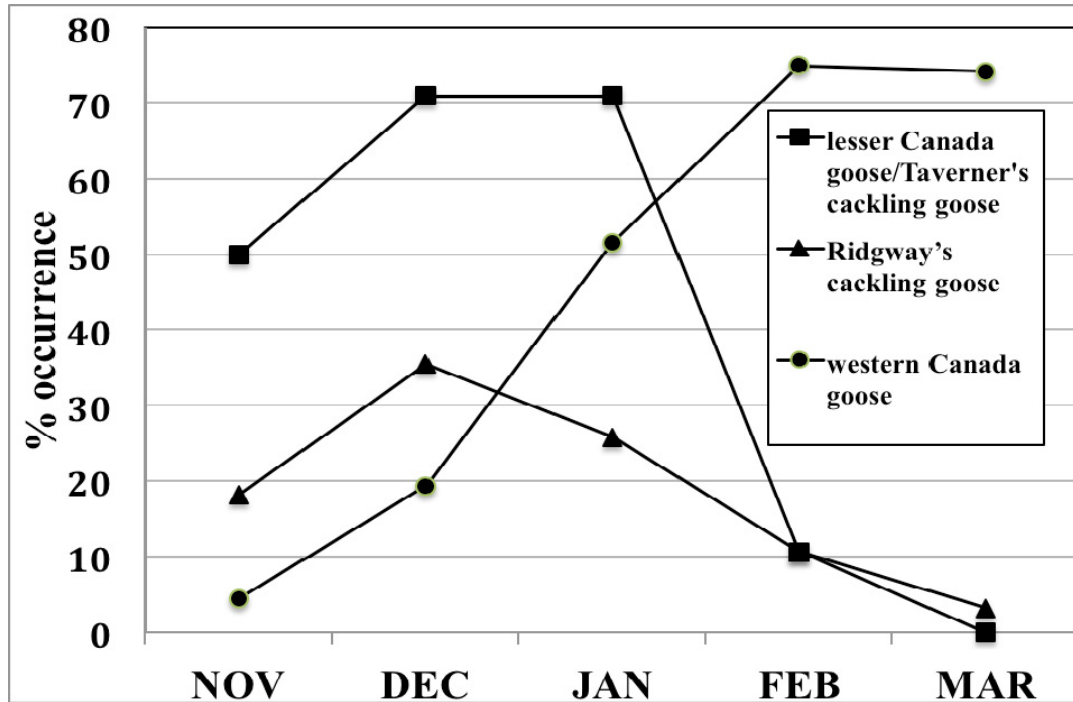


FIGURE 2. Seasonal occurrence of Canada and cackling geese on the Vina Plains, Tehama County, California, Fall 1999 – Spring 2003.

(Table 3), although flocks of over 100 birds were observed only in November and December 2002, and January 2003. The 4-yr pattern of monthly changes in percent occurrence and maximum flock size were not significant.

Habitat Use and Daily Activity Patterns in White-cheeked Geese

In general, the daily activity pattern of white-cheeked geese included night-time roosting activities on artificial stock ponds and vernal pools (Figures 3 and 4), as well as periods of morning and afternoon grazing on pastures. We also documented some use of study area ponds and pools as midday roost sites.

More specifically, geese arrived at night roost ponds from 14 to 48 min post-sunset, with the earliest arrival times recorded in January and February and on cloudy evenings. Morning departure times from night roosts ranged from 14 min pre-sunrise to 52 min post-sunrise,

with the earliest departures recorded in November and early December. These early morning departures and late evening arrivals in the fall are consistent with diurnal movements to disjunct foraging habitats (Raveling, 1969; Raveling et al., 1972; Owen, 1980). The latest morning departures were recorded from late December through January as well as on overcast mornings. Arrival and departure times were more or less consistent for all white-cheeked geese.

Following morning departures from roost ponds, white-cheeked geese grazed for brief periods of 15 to 45 min on study area pastures throughout November and early December, with lengthy, sometimes day-long departures to foraging habitats disjunct from the Vina Plains. We believe that geese were likely moving to agricultural areas in order to take advantage of waste grains such as rice and corn. A shift to more extended periods of grazing on Vina Plains pastures occurred in

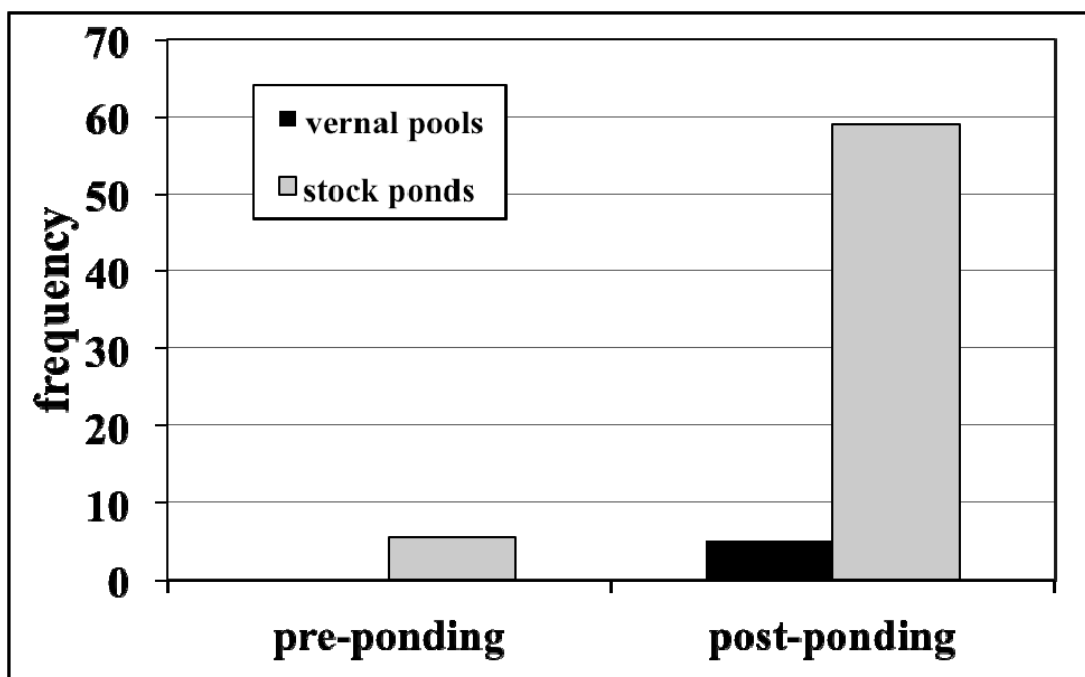


FIGURE 3. Use of Vina Plains vernal pools and artificial stock ponds as roost sites by western Canada geese, Fall 1999 to Spring 2003.

late December or early January following the start of the growing season. In general, white-cheeked geese grazed Vina Plains pastures for 2 to 3 hours in the morning after leaving the night roost, and for 2 to 3 hours in the afternoon before returning to stock pond or vernal pool roosts. It should be noted that 46 (97.9%) of 47 observations of foraging geese occurred on pastures previously or concurrently grazed by cattle.

The use of stock ponds or vernal pools as midday roost sites by small mid-sized white-cheeked geese was minimal, with more consistent use by western Canada geese, which we often observed grazing near their roost ponds or in pastures located 1-2 km from roost ponds. They generally returned to their night roost pond or another nearby pond during the midday hours. These geese arrived at midday roosts from 3 to 3.5-hr post-sunrise, and then moved off to afternoon foraging sites from 2 to 2.5-hr pre-sunset. From late February

through March, most of the western Canada geese spent the entire day on or adjacent to EFRCA stock ponds (Figure 3).

Small and mid-sized white-cheeked geese did not return to their night roosts during the midday in November and early December. Beginning in late December, use of midday roost ponds by these smaller taxa was more variable, with flocks often remaining on Vina Plains pastures throughout the day. This pattern of prolonged, often day-long grazing (hyperphagia) is thought to facilitate the accumulation of endogenous body reserves necessary for migration and reproduction (McLandress and Raveling, 1981).

DISCUSSION

The low numbers and irregular occurrence of tundra swans, greater white-fronted geese, snow geese, and Ross's geese on these high-terrace landscapes (Table 2) is not surprising.

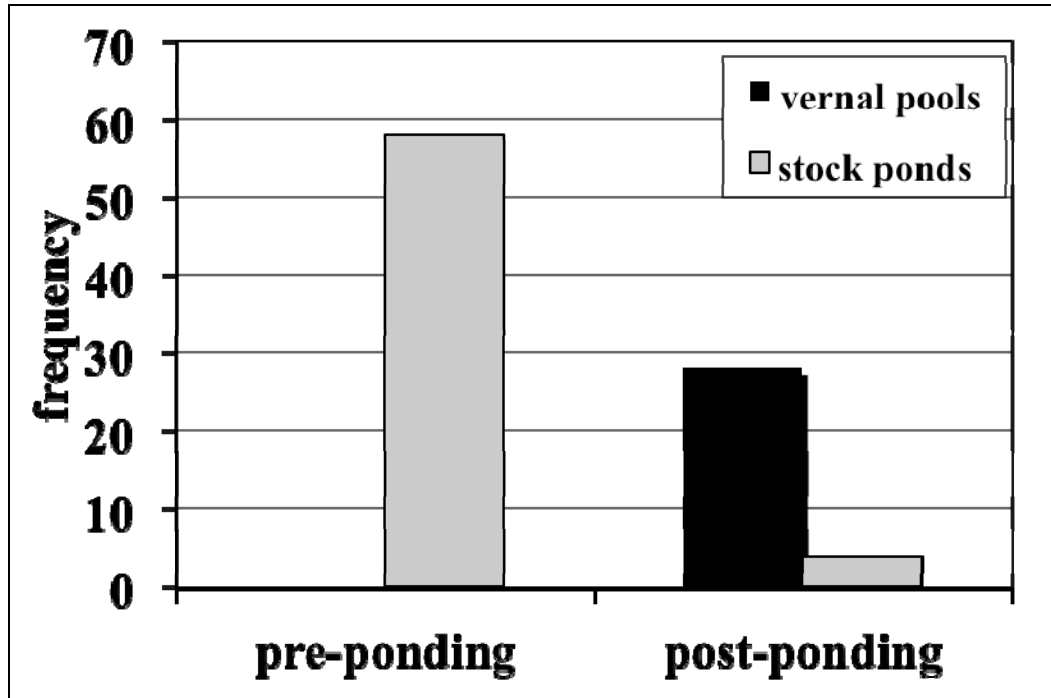


FIGURE 4. Use of Vina Plains vernal pools and artificial stock ponds as roost sites by Ridgeway's cackling geese and lesser Canada/Taverner's cackling geese, Fall 1999 to Spring 2003.

Large populations of these species (Scott, 1972; Owen, 1980) roost primarily within large Sacramento Valley wetland complexes, and feed mostly on rice and other waste grains in nearby agricultural fields throughout the fall and winter (McLandress, 1979; Bellrose, 1980; Owen, 1980).

Prior to the onset of vernal pool ponding (Table 1), use of study area habitats by white-cheeked geese was limited to roosting activities on EFRCA stock ponds. Small to mid-sized subspecies began using vernal pools as roost sites immediately following the beginning of ponding (Figure 4), with a subsequent shift to diurnal grazing on Vina Plains pastures. This shift in foraging behavior is likely due to the availability of high protein and more easily digestible grasses and forbs at the onset of the growing season (Raveling, 1979a,b; Raveling and Zezulak, 1991).

Western Canada geese used Vina Plains habi-

tats from December through March, although their numbers were relatively low (Table 3). The largest flocks occurred from late December through February, with low numbers of what were likely local, non-migratory individuals remaining on the study area through late March. As these large geese are more aquatic than smaller white-cheeked geese (Owen, 1980), the bulk of their population tends to winter in agricultural areas of the Sacramento Valley, roosting within large managed marshlands, on lakes and reservoirs, and along rivers. Although they were occasionally observed on or near vernal pools, western Canada geese continued to use EFRCA stock ponds as roost sites following vernal pool ponding (Table 1, Figure 3), with most grazing activity occurring in pastures adjacent to these culturally-maintained ponds.

Numbers of up to several hundred Ridgeway's cackling geese used Vina Plains vernal pools and pastures, with the most regular use and the

Research and Recovery in Vernal Pool Landscapes

largest flocks occurring in late December and January (Tables 2 and 3, Figure 2). In 1984, when their population was at an all-time low, it was estimated that up to 85% of these birds wintered in the Central Valley (Mlodinow et al., 2008). The current figure is at 5% of an estimated 193,300 geese, with the remaining 95% wintering in the lower Columbia River Valley of Washington and Oregon, and the Willamette Valley of western Oregon (Mlodinow et al., 2008; USFWS, 2008). According to Raveling (1978), these sorts of shifts often suggest changes in winter resource availability. Although reasons for this migratory “short stopping” remain unclear, it is thought that this particular shift may have been stimulated by drought conditions in California during the period from 1986-1992, as well as by an increase in winter forage availability (e.g., ryegrass agriculture) in areas of Washington and Oregon (USFWS, 1999). Based on this well-documented shift in winter distribution, coupled with the historic loss of California’s vernal pool landscapes (Holland, 1978, 1998), we suspect that the use of these habitats by Ridgway’s cackling geese was much greater in the past.

Large flocks of up to 1,300 lesser Canada/Taverner’s cackling geese were present on the Vina Plains from December through January (Table 3, Figure 2). Most observed roosting activities of these geese as well as Ridgway’s cackling geese shifted from stock ponds to vernal pools following the onset of ponding (Figure 4). Based on current estimates, approximately 10,000 lesser Canada/Taverner’s cackling geese winter in central California (Mlodinow et al., 2008). As these birds likely move into California from late October through mid November, and as their northern migratory movements have been documented in the Columbia River Basin as early as mid February, our occurrence and flock size data suggest that Sacramento Valley vernal pool habitats provide resources to a significant portion of

wintering populations.

Traditional use of migration routes as well as wintering, staging, and breeding habitats has been well documented for geese and other waterfowl (Hochbaum, 1955; Raveling, 1979c; Owen, 1980). We believe that the regular and predictable shift by small and mid-sized white-cheeked geese from artificial stock ponds to vernal pools following the onset of ponding, and from disjunct foraging sites to study area pastures is consistent with a pattern of long-term traditional use. Also, it is likely that usage of these habitats would have been greatest from initial pool ponding in late December or January until spring migration. Additionally, based upon their continued use of relatively deep stock ponds throughout the winter and spring, we think it likely that historic and prehistoric use of shallow vernal pools by western Canada geese would have been minimal.

Traditional roost sites are thought to serve as important reunification and communication centers for goose family units and subflocks (Raveling, 1969, 1970). Considering that the selection of a roost site is likely based on that pond’s ability to provide adequate protection from predators and harsh environmental conditions, it can be argued that maintaining the quality of traditional roosting and foraging habitats, such as those on the Vina Plains, may be critical to the maintenance of California’s small and mid-sized white-cheeked goose populations during the winter, spring migration, and also to their success during the subsequent nesting season. Accordingly, we suggest that large, intact vernal pool landscapes on elevated terraces along the east side of the Sacramento Valley should be protected as part of a long-term management strategy for both small and mid-sized white-cheeked geese. Although we did not test for the effects of cattle grazing on the selective use of upland habitats by these geese, our data suggest that tradition-

Bogiatto et al: Use of Vernal Pool Habitats by Geese and Swans

al levels of rotational grazing on Vina Plains pastures should be maintained

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Research and Recovery in Vernal Pool Landscapes

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