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Livestock, wildlife sharing same land

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YOU/bahyou@modbee.com) - Cattle grazing on the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge, Thursday morning. January 20, 2011

Who would have thought that beef cattle would be so important to the diet of the sandhill crane?

It's not that this bird likes to grill up a steak or swoop into Burger King for a meal.

Cattle help the cranes, wildlife experts said last week, by keeping grasses short enough for the fowl to find insects and other food on the ground.

"We have a lot of photographs of sandhill cranes and cattle grazing together," said Kim Forrest, manager of three West Side wildlife refuges where the bovines help groom the land.

She took part in a two-day event devoted to the idea that cattle and wildlife can coexist. It included a conference that drew more than 350 people to Modesto Centre Plaza and visits by smaller groups to grazing operations in Merced County.

The event was sponsored by the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition, made up of people in ranching, government, environmental groups and academia.

About 83,800 head of cattle were on ranches in the Northern San Joaquin Valley last year, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Tuolumne County had 6,600.

It's big business, but coalition members said it does not come at the expense of wildlife.

"The grazing on private and public lands has proven to be a benefit for the long-term health of the ground and the native species," said John Herlihy of Modesto, who runs cattle on three north valley ranches.

The coalition has tried to change the minds of people who think that cattle overgraze the land and foul the water with manure.

Members said responsible grazing leaves plenty of habitat for wildlife, including the many birds that migrate in winter from Canada and other northern climes.

Some ranchers have taken simple steps, such as installing wooden boxes where owls can roost.

Keeping land from developers

Others have placed their land under conservation easements, where they agree to continue ranching forever in exchange for payments from public agencies or private groups.

Mape's Ranch, west of Modesto, put part of its acreage under an easement. This land near the confluence of the Tuolumne and San Joaquin rivers has been crucial to the recovery of Aleutian cackling geese.

Bill Lyons Jr., whose family owns the ranch, said it has been a worthwhile effort. But he urged fellow ranchers to get legal advice to assure that the easements do not complicate life for their descendants.

"Perpetuity is a long time," said Lyons, a former food and agriculture secretary for the state.

Grassland must be protected because prairie falcons, golden eagles and certain other raptors cannot thrive in orchards, vineyards or row crops, said Ed Pandolfino of the Sierra Foothills Audubon Society.

He took part in a three-year survey that found especially strong raptor numbers in eastern San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced counties.

Pandolfino said grazing helps control star thistle and other invasive plants that crowd out grasses that raptors need.

The grasses themselves are non-native, having arrived with Europeans centuries ago and replaced most of the native cover. Pandolfino said returning to the primeval state would be impractical, but wildlife still can get plenty of benefit from today's grazing land.

Vestiges of those native plants live in and near vernal pools, small bodies of water that form in winter.

Help for vernal pools

Cattle grazing helps control non-native grasses that otherwise would suck water from the pools, said Jaymee Marty, lead scientist for the Nature Conservancy in the Central Valley.

"It's pretty clear that you get fewer native species in your ungrazed plots than your grazed plots," said Marty, who has researched this issue for a decade.

Meadowlarks whistled in the thick morning fog as a tour group visited the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex. It covers about 135,000 acres of grass and wetlands in Merced and Stanislaus counties.

Forrest, the manager, said ranchers run cattle and sheep on some of the acreage to enhance habitat and reduce wildfire fuel.

"The long-billed curlews are not going to land on grasses that are longer than their legs," she said.

The short grass also provides nesting and denning spots for kit foxes, ground squirrels, badgers, kangaroo rats and other creatures, she said.

The main purpose is wildlife enhancement rather than livestock production, but Forrest said the managers try to understand the ranchers' needs.

"We have an arrangement here that has worked out beautifully," she said.