

Steve Chainey: 2023 Central Valley Bird Club Conservation Award



The Central Valley Bird Club recognizes Steve Chainey with its 2023 Conservationist of the Year Award. Steve is highly deserving of this award for his long and distinguished career in restoring and protecting ecosystems in California's Central Valley. He applied his skills for nearly 35 years for a variety of environmental and engineering consulting firms in Northern and Central California.

Steve is truly unique for his depth and breadth of knowledge of natural systems, his commitment to improving the natural world, and his ability to bring people together to build consensus and enthusiasm for big ideas. Along with several others, Steve is widely recognized as a foundational figure in the practice of land and habitat restoration in Northern California. His knowledge of landscapes, physical processes, and ecosystems, and his vision and influence, propelled many important restoration projects since the 1990s.

Steve was a leader or major collaborator on the following major habitat restoration and protection projects in the Central Valley. All these project sites are designated as birding hotspots in eBird (ebird.org) and widely valued and visited for their wildlife values.

Putah Creek Restoration

Putah Creek drains from Lake Berryessa through the west side of Yolo County and through the University of California Davis campus before emptying into the Yolo Bypass. The creek was dewatered most years during spring through fall by irrigation diversions. After observing the ecosystem response to an unusually wet year, in 1988 Steve co-founded the citizen-based Putah Creek Council with Susan Sanders and others, which undertook a 10-year successful legal challenge to the diversions under the Public Trust Doctrine. This success guaranteed year-round flows to lower Putah Creek, resulting in large-scale restoration of a riparian and aquatic ecosystem including annual runs of salmon and steelhead. In subsequent years, Putah Creek Council inspired many volunteers and creekside landowners to plant native riparian and grassland vegetation and remove exotic invasive plants between Winters and Davis.

Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area

Through work on Putah Creek, Steve recognized the tremendous potential to improve wildlife habitat in the Yolo Bypass, a wide 40-mile-long flood bypass facility between Sacramento River and the Delta that skirts past Woodland, Sacramento, Davis, and many large duck clubs in the lower Yolo Basin. Most lands were privately owned with flood easements on them. Steve spearheaded an effort to create a state wildlife area. He, and long-time bird club member Ted Beedy, led preparation of an initial acquisition, restoration, and management plan. Despite initial widespread opposition from flood control agencies, agricultural landowners, and local politicians, Steve and his small group of visionaries persisted. After receiving key support from Vic Fazio, the local Congressman, the idea for the wildlife area was widely embraced, and it was dedicated onsite by President Bill Clinton in 1997. Since its establishment, the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area has grown to 16,000 acres and hosts thousands of birders, wildlife sightseers, and school children annually, as well as a managed hunting program (Brice 2017). Today, it is co-managed as wetland, grassland, and agricultural habitats to support a wide range of breeding, migratory, and wintering wildlife species, and as rearing habitat for out-migrating juvenile salmon and steelhead.

Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS') Stone Lakes NWR was proposed in the 1980s to help implement the Central Valley Joint Venture plan and provide wildlife habitat close to the Sacramento urban area. The refuge was fashioned from a variety of local and state public lands and acquired private lands. The refuge proposal was highly controversial, particularly over potential federal land condemnation. Steve led the preparation of the USFWS' EIS on refuge establishment. He met with landowners and guided USFWS managers in modifying the refuge proposal to acquire lands only from willing sellers, which reduced landowner antagonism. The refuge was established in 1994 and now provides over 17,000 acres of managed habitats, including agricultural lands, as wildlife and migratory shorebird and waterfowl habitat, and a robust public education program for area schools.

Sacramento County Sanitation District Bufferlands

The Sanitation District owns 2,650 ac of land around its regional wastewater treatment facility, as a buffer from adjacent developed residential areas (Conard 2007). The bufferlands were used for agriculture, but portions were subject to flooding. The district initially considered converting the area to a eucalyptus plantation to produce pulp for paper. Steve was brought into the project and proposed an alternative land use - the restoration of high quality permanent and seasonal wetlands and riparian habitat and wildlife-

friendly farming. Steve led project planning and design and supervised the construction process, resulting in creation of a de-facto wildlife refuge occupied by a variety of sensitive species including Burrowing Owls, Swainson's Hawks, Loggerhead Shrikes, and colonial waterbirds.

Davis Stormwater Detention Habitats

Steve pioneered the design of multi-use stormwater facilities in the City of Davis that provided floodwater detention, wildlife habitat, and nature-based recreation and education. By careful hydrologic analysis and grading design, the West Davis and Northstar ponds provide wetland, riparian, and grassland habitat that receives high wildlife use and are treasured by the local community. Steve's designs have served as prototypes for similar wildlife-friendly stormwater detention conversion designs elsewhere.

Natomas Levee Improvement Project Habitat Design

Steve led a planning and restoration design team for over 10 years for the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency (SAFCA). Over 20 miles of levees surrounding the Natomas Basin were extensively widened, raised, and strengthened to protect the City of Sacramento, Interstate 5, and Sacramento International Airport from catastrophic flooding. The unprecedented project scale required unavoidable land disturbance including removal of several hundred mature valley oak trees, relocation of historic irrigation canals that sustained wetlands and pond habitats, and loss of croplands. Project impacts were compensated by 10 major habitat restoration projects that have successfully established over 700 acres of managed wetlands for the giant garter snake, planted and transplanted over four linear miles of valley oak and riparian woodlands along the Sacramento River levees, established conservation easements on annual croplands for Swainson's Hawks and other raptors, and created native perennial grassland throughout the Natomas Basin. For bunchgrass restoration, Steve co-designed a novel conversion of a large rice-planting roller to make a 'Ridger-Roller-Seeder' with a bank of native grass seeding equipment pulled behind a D8 dozer to stabilize miles of levee slopes and setback corridors. Most of these restored or created habitats can be viewed from public roads on the levee system or throughout the westside of Natomas Basin.

Cache Creek Conservancy and Gravel Mine Reclamation

Cache Creek is a major westside tributary of the Sacramento River and Yolo Basin. The Cache Creek Conservancy was established by Yolo County and the Cache Creek Aggregate Producers Association to implement a new regional mining ordinance that ended the legacy of in-channel mining of the alluvial stream and restored creek habitats in exchange for permitting off-channel mining. Steve was a founding member of the Conservancy's board

after he developed mine reclamation plans that restored in-channel riparian habitats, off-channel wetlands and ponds, and post-mining reclaimed agricultural fields.

For these many contributions to restoration and productive management of so many natural areas in the Central Valley, the Central Valley Bird Club is happy to recognize Steve Chainey with its 2023 Conservation Award.

LITERATURE CITED

Brice, A. 2015. The Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area: History, management, and significance for birds. *Central Valley Bird Club Bulletin* 18:2–13.

Conard, C. 2007. Habitat restoration and bird responses at the Sacramento Regional County Sanitation District Bufferlands. *Central Valley Bird Club Bulletin* 10:4–89.



Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area, Yolo County, California. 10 September 2010.

Photo by Susie Nishio.