

Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge GCJV Mottled Duck Conservation Project

By Neal McLain

In the years following the American Civil war, and well into the 20th century, rice was an important subsistence crop across the southern United States from Texas and Florida. The flat coastal plains of Texas and Louisiana, with their extensive networks of rivers and bayous, were well suited to irrigated rice production. With the arrival of Southern Pacific Railroad in Texas in 1885, rice became an important export crop along as well.^[1] Today, over 180,000 acres are under rice cultivation in Texas.^[2]



During the growing season, rice fields must be flooded. In many areas, including Texas, farmers must purchase bulk water in order to maintain field water levels. At today's prices, bulk water costs about \$95 per acre per growing season.



Efforts are now under way, led by Bill Stransky, Executive Director of the Texas Rice Industry Coalition for the Environment (Texas R.I.C.E.), to maintain rice fields as permanent wetland feeding and roosting grounds for migratory birds, notably ducks, geese, and Sandhill Cranes. Through these efforts, over 35,000 acres of permanent wetlands have been established.^[3]

As part of this effort, many abandoned rice fields have been reestablished for the dual purposes of rice agriculture and permanent wetland. These efforts have included the restoration of levies, reconstruction of irrigation structures, eradication of invasive species, and the purchase of off-season bulk water.



Bill Stransky is Executive Director of Texas R.I.C.E.

Many of these fields are located within the boundaries of Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge. Friends of Brazoria Wildlife Refuges, working cooperatively with Texas R.I.C.E. and the Texas Mid-Coast National Wildlife Refuge Complex, supports these efforts by providing administrative assistance and volunteer field workers.

Funding for the project has come from two sources. Texas R.I.C.E. received \$55,000 from Houston Endowment in 2007 and began work in 2008. These funds were used as match to secure a \$50,000 grant from the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA), a federally-funded program managed by the US Fish & Wildlife Service.^[4]

Gulf Coast Joint Venture (GCJV) was an active partner in support of Texas R.I.C.E. in its efforts to obtain the NAWCA grant. GCJV is a partnership among Federal and State Agencies, non-profit organizations, and private landowners dedicated to the conservation of priority bird habitat along the U.S. Gulf of Mexico coast. GCJV is based at the U.S. Geological Survey National Wetlands Research Center in Lafayette, Louisiana.^[5]

GCJV Mottled Duck Conservation Project

Ron Bisbee, a member of the Board of Directors of Friends of Brazoria Wildlife Refuges, represented Friends and provided administrative support.

Phase 3 of the project is now substantially complete. Stransky notes that Phase 3 funding has supported the restoration of almost 500 acres of permanent wetlands by building levees and installing water control structures. He noted that "This work is having a dramatic positive effect on the refuge, especially when combined with the substantial amount of spraying of invasive Chinese tallow and the restoration of a large scale rice farming program."^[6]

Stransky also noted that "During the summer [of 2010] an estimated 800 to 1,000 Mottled Duck were observed in the wetland/moist soil projects along with thousands of wading birds."

FIELD TRIP

Stransky recently hosted a field trip for Friends of Brazoria Wildlife Refuges members to one of the older, well-established dual-purpose fields. His claim of having seen 1,000 Mottled Duck was not an exaggeration: we saw numerous ducks and geese.



Ducks in flight, Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge, November 2010. Photo: David Plunkett.



White-fronted Geese (black, in foreground beyond water) and Sandhill Cranes (white, in background). Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge, November 2010. Photo: David Plunkett.

GCJV Mottled Duck Conservation Project



Chinese Tallow after eradication spraying. Photo: Marty Cornell.



The group. Ron Bisbee (second from left) leads the discussion. Photo: Neal McLain.

GCJV Mottled Duck Conservation Project



Ron Bisbee
Photo: David Plunkett



Ron Bisbee leads a discussion.
Photo: David Plunkett

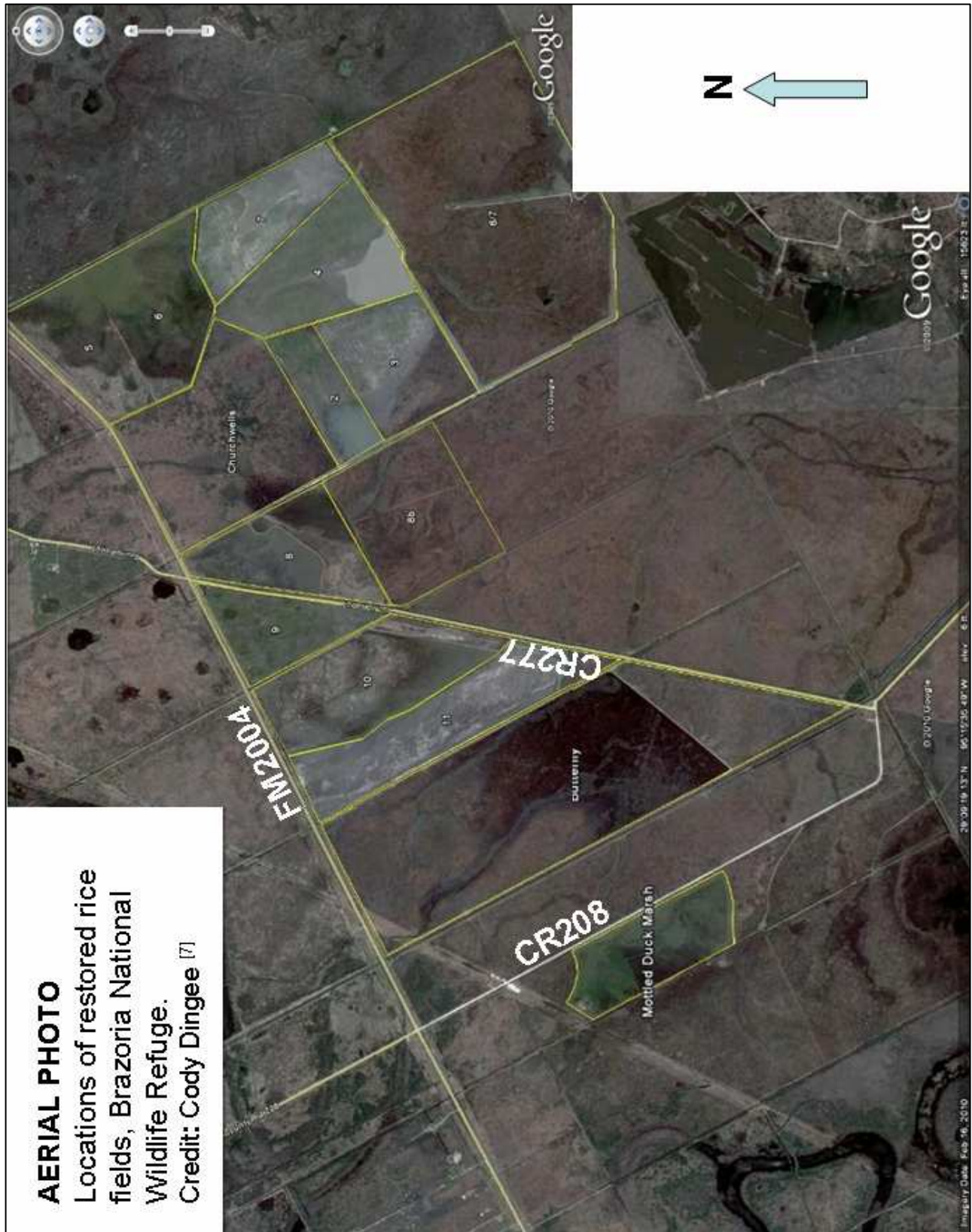


Torry Tvedt, David Plunkett
Photo: Marty Cornell



Warren Pruess
Photo: David Plunkett

GCJV Mottled Duck Conservation Project



Additional photos and high-resolution maps can be viewed or downloaded at:
<http://refugefriends.org/archive/MottledDuckPonds/index.html>

GCJV Mottled Duck Conservation Project

References.

- [1] Henry C. Dethloff. "Rice Culture." Handbook of Texas Online. Accessed November 26, 2010.
<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/afr01>
- [2] Bill Stransky. "Re: Mottled Duck Pond Restoration." Email message to author, October 29, 2010.
- [3] Ducks Unlimited. "Conserving Texas Prairie Wetlands" Page 2. Accessed November 26, 2010.
<http://tinyurl.com/2ckhhon>
- [4] United States Fish & Wildlife Service, Division of Bird Habitat Conservation. "North American Wetlands Conservation Act: Purpose and Scope." October 13, 2010. Accessed November 26, 2010.
<http://www.fws.gov/birdhabitat/Grants/NAWCA/index.shtm>
- [5] Gulf Coast Joint Venture. "About Us: What is the Gulf Coast Joint Venture?" 2005. Accessed November 26, 2010.
<http://www.gcjv.org/>
- [6] Bill Stransky. "GCJV Mottled Duck Conservation Plan - Phase 3 Final Report." Email message to Ron Bisbee, October 09, 2010.
- [7] Cody Dingee. Digital aerial photograph of Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge (detail) with white overprint. Base map: Google, Inc., based on data provided by Houston-Galveston Area Council, Texas General Land Office, Texas Orthoimagery Program, United States Geological Survey, and USDA Farm Service Agency. Additional photos and high-resolution maps can be viewed or downloaded at:
<http://refugefriends.org/archive/MottledDuckPonds/index.html>