



Land of the West Wind

January 2025

Volume 25 Issue I



History of Joice Island, the First State Wildlife Area

In 1850, one of the oldest map detailing Suisun Marsh and other regions of San Francisco was created by Cadwalader Ringgold, a Commander with the U. S. Navy. Cadwalader illustrated the Suisun Marsh landscape before it was dredged, transformed, and leveed, displaying the historic names of the Suisun Marsh islands with Joice Island near its center of the map. Joice Island was one of the most important waterbird sanctuaries in the region, and in 1931, it became the first state-owned wildlife refuge. Today, Joice Island remains a major waterbird sanctuary that contributes to maintaining high numbers of waterfowl within the surrounding managed wetlands of Suisun Marsh. Half of the island (850 acres: Ponds C&D) is maintained as a closed zone, while the other portion (690 acres: Pond A&B) is only hunted on Sundays starting with the first Sunday in December.



Chart of Suisun and Vallejo Bays with the Confluence of the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers of California as drawn by Cadwalader Ringgold, U. S. Navy Commander, 1850

Beginning in 1850, islands in Suisun Marsh were acquired by private individuals after the U. S. Congress granted all swamp and overflowed lands to the states under the Swamp and Overflowed Lands Act of 1850. The Act allowed states to sell the land and use the proceeds to fund drainage projects to make the land suitable for cultivation.

Among the first private individuals to acquire the Joice Island property was Mr. John Bensley. He claimed the area until 1889 when he fled to the east coast after running into trouble with a federal judge at the neighboring Ibis Duck Club. During his absence, his wife was accused of attempting to defraud Mr. Bensley for the deed to his Suisun Marsh real estate. Her scheme to give Joice Island to her son was revealed in a box of letters detailing her plans to do so. [*Joice Island*, Cont. on Pg. 4]

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Quarterly Newsletter
Suisun Resource Conservation District
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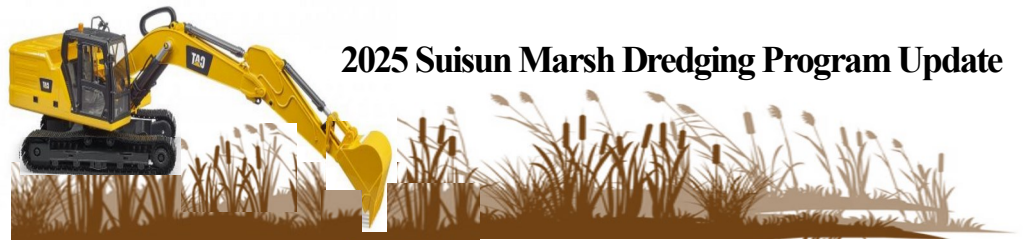
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SRCD's board meetings are the second Wednesday of each month at 2PM at the Solano County Supervisors Chambers: 675 Texas Street Fairfield, CA 94533

SRCD represents private landowners of the Suisun Marsh at the Federal, State, and local levels. It's historic goal has been to achieve a water supply of adequate quality so that preferred wetland habitat values will be retained through appropriate management practices. With cooperation from landowners and various agencies, SRCD develops new programs aimed at protecting and improving the Suisun Marsh for future generations.



2025 Suisun Marsh Dredging Program Update

In 2014, the Suisun Resource Conservation District (SRCD) was issued the first of three 10-year Letter of Permission dredging permits in conjunction with the 30-year Suisun Marsh Habitat Management, Preservation, and Restoration Plan. This permit allows the landowners to use dredged sediments from adjacent sloughs to maintain exterior levees. Since April 2023, SRCD has been working on a renewal to ensure that the permit would not lapse. SRCD staff expects to have the 10-year permit renewal in hand in February-March 2025. We strongly encourage any landowners that have had levee erosion or damage to consider the dredging program as a more cost-effective way to obtain material for repairs and general maintenance of their properties.

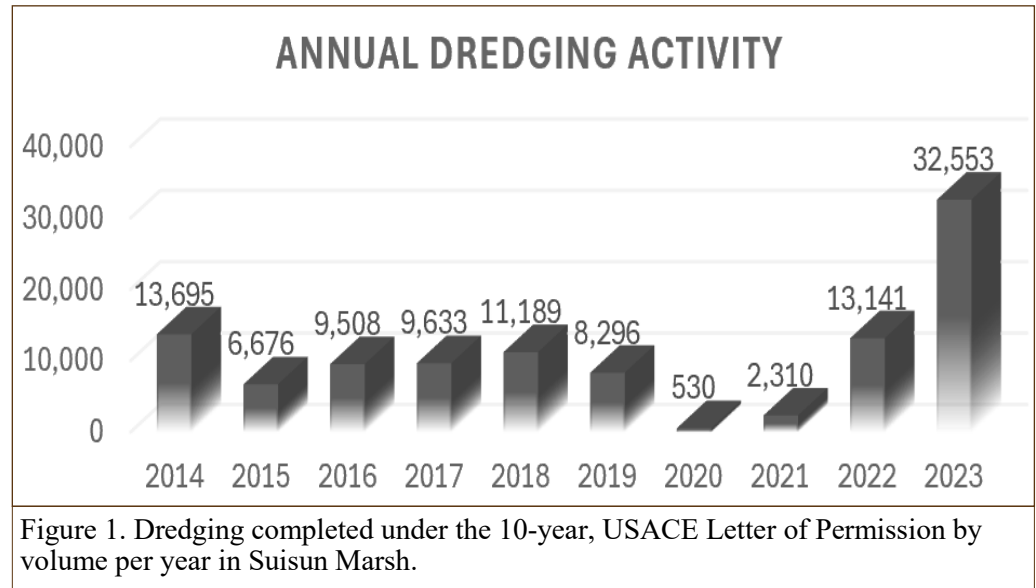


Figure 1. Dredging completed under the 10-year, USACE Letter of Permission by volume per year in Suisun Marsh.

Dredging of up to 100,000 cubic yards of material annually was approved by the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers for landowners of Suisun Marsh under the Letter of Permission. SRCD holds the permit for the landowners to assist in maintaining the exterior levees of Suisun Marsh. During the previous 10 years of dredging, Suisun Marsh landowners have dredged only 10.7% of the allowable volume of material to maintain the exterior levee systems (Figure 1).

Through the renewal process, SRCD is noticing a trend from the regulatory agencies where fee structures and permit costs have gone up significantly since the last permit was issued. While the cost to implement the dredging program may increase in the coming years, it is still the most cost-effective way to obtain material for exterior levees without importing dirt. SRCD supports use of this program to preserve the integrity of the Marsh levee system.

If you would like to get more information on dredging around your properties, please contact your Water Manager to see what areas are suitable for dredging and what volumes of material you may access.

BirdReturns



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PRIVATE LANDOWNERS

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Suisun, Delta, Central Valley



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Contact Ashley Seufzer:

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ashley.seufzer@audubon.org



Receive compensation for providing flooded wetland habitat in the off-season!

Over the past year, BirdReturns supported nearly **60,000 acres** of flooded habitat across the Central Valley. In 2024, **Suisun Marsh** joined the program, adding over **5,000 acres** of wetland habitat thanks to the participation of **18 wetland managers!** Participants from Suisun Marsh provided **critical nesting space for waterfowl and shorebirds**, creating safe, food-rich environments during the breeding season. Last year, the program achieved the **highest shorebird counts for breeding habitat** among all program regions, supporting unique species like Semipalmated Plovers and American Avocet. By participating in BirdReturns, private wetland owners play a crucial role in replicating seasonal wetland cycles to benefit bird populations across the region.

Seasonal wetland management, including **flooding** (adding water to create shallow wetlands) and **drawdowns** (lowering water levels to expose nutrient-rich mudflats), mimics the natural cycles that birds depend on. **Flooding** (adding a minimum of 18 inches of water) provides habitat for waterfowl, shorebirds, and other wildlife to nest, feed, and shelter. **Drawdowns** (draining water during crucial migration periods) create ideal conditions for migrating shorebirds, breeding birds, and molting waterfowl that rely on the protein-rich invertebrates that concentrate in the exposed mudflats and shallow water. **Spring drawdown**—a period when water levels are gradually lowered to expose mudflats—in particular supported an impressive average of **44 shorebirds per survey point**, showcasing the incredible impact of providing essential habitat for migratory birds exactly when and where they need it most.

Learn more the BirdReturns' conservation successes in 2024 and how your wetland property can apply for the 2025 BirdReturns Wetland Incentive Program at birdreturns.org/program/wetlands or scan the code above.

[BirdsReturn, Cont. on Pg. 6]

According to an article dated June 6, 1890 in the San Francisco Examiner, both Mr. and Ms. Bensley lost ownership of Joice Island to Solano County Sheriff Benjamin F. Rush from 1895 to 1898. Rush was not only the sheriff in town but a well-known stockman and president of the State Agricultural Association in the area. Rush must have retained Joice Island after Mrs. Bensley's sudden death and purchased the property some years after Mr. Bensley



Sheriff Benjamin F. Rush, Solano County Sheriff from 1895-1989.

failed to return to claim the island, leaving no information on next of kin. Once purchased, Rush began building an exterior levee around the island for cultivation practices and in doing so, captured Volanti Slough within its borders, one of the widest sloughs in the Marsh. Capturing Volanti Slough prove to be difficult but could be the reason why in 1985, the San Francisco Examiner reported Joice Island as one of the largest stock ranches in Central California with "millions" of geese surrounding the island and quite a few flocks of brant. A local newspaper then reported that Sheriff Rush hired Edward Dinkelspiel to sell Joice Island and being advertised as a "2,700-acre tract of rich dairy and stock land." It was purchased in June 1903 when a famous attorney, Louis Titus, closed the deal. The Sacramento Bee and the Napa Journal claimed the sale of Joice Island as the "most important real estate transaction that has taken place" of that the time as it sold for \$10 per acre. Dinkelspiel even helped to promote the sale by voting as a member of the Solano County Board of Trade to approve construction of a new road connecting Suisun City to Grizzly Island, decreasing the distance from 11 to 5 miles. This route is the same road traveled today.

After Louis Titus acquired the area, Joice Island's waterfowl hunting records were frequently published in the local newspapers. The San Francisco Call's article dated October 16, 1903 reported that Titus originally obtained Joice Island to create private wildlife preserved for himself and friends. The article continued to say that Titus and six of his closest friends harvested 265 ducks during the first hunt on his newly purchased property. Titus had plans to own one of the best preserves in California while still developing the Joice Island Asparagus Company with a capital of \$100,000 to reclaim land and devote it to the cultivation of asparagus and alfalfa.



Newspaper clippings from 1895 and 1908 reported on outcomes from local hunters including Mr. Louis Titus and his friends. These reports were frequently published in both the San Francisco Call and The Examiner newspapers.

A project to isolate the island from tidal waters began in 1906 although the levee built by the previous owner Rush had been completed only recently. A large amount of funds were invested to bring in a dredger and insure the agricultural area was protected against unexpected flooding. A project of this scale would be nearly unimaginable under today's permit restrictions, but the levee work was completed in 1908. Following construction of the levee, there are fewer details of events from 1908 until 1931 when the State of California bought Joice Island. Most of what is known about this time is that small duck clubs in Suisun Marsh were interspersed among farms. During this time, many landowners who had poor success farming beans, grains, beets, and asparagus became discouraged and began moving away from Suisun Marsh.

By 1927, Joice Island was a cattle ranch owned by Andrew Mahoney, a former San Francisco police commissioner. Mahoney's ranch and 6 other properties were reviewed by the Game and Refuge Advisory Committee to consider its acquisition. In an

article published by the Napa Journal in December 1932, Mahoney cut his price in half to \$72,000 after hearing that the committee favored buying the Williamson and Howell tract on the northern end of Grizzly Island. Ultimately, Mr. Mahoney convinced two members of the Committee to purchase the 1721-acre ranch, making it the first wildlife refuge to be owned by the state of California. Critics at the time claimed Mahoney's property was financially "on the rocks," and the state had paid too high a price for Joice Island. However, Joice Island served as a key sanctuary during the drought that came only a few years later in 1934. Once the wetland habitats were improved, Joice Island became one of the top spots for hunting in the San Francisco region.



A Rainy Adventure: My 1st Christmas Bird Count

by Kristin Brandon, SRCD staff

On Monday, December 16th, water manager Jeff Taylor and I braved the cold rain and wind to take part in the 77th annual Benicia Christmas Bird Count (BCBC) at Lower Joice Island. It was my first time participating in this incredible event, and despite the challenges navigating the storm-damaged trails and less-than-ideal weather conditions, it was a truly rewarding experience. Among the 41 species we observed were the American bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*) and sora rail (*Porzana Carolina*; Fig. 1), two elusive wading birds that were particularly exciting to see in the field.



Figure 1. The American bittern (a) and Sora rail (b) were just a few of the highlights from this year's CBC.

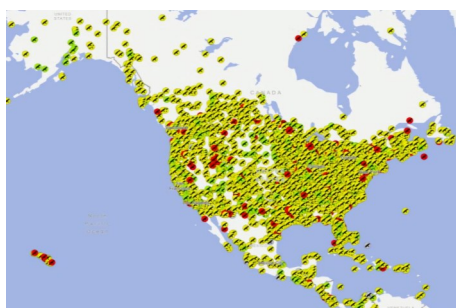


Figure 2. North American Christmas Bird Count circles.

The Christmas Bird Count (CBC) is a beloved tradition for bird enthusiasts across North America. Sponsored by the National Audubon Society, this annual event runs from mid-December to early January and is the longest-running citizen science survey in the world. The survey began in 1900 when ornithologist Frank M. Chapman proposed counting birds as an alternative to participating in traditional Christmas hunts. During this 125th year of the CBC, teams of volunteers gather at designated locations to survey 15-mile diameter circles (Fig. 2) and document the diversity and abundance of bird species, providing invaluable insights on long-term population trends.

The BCBC has been an annual event for local birders since its founding in 1930 by Emerson Stoner. It is sponsored by the Napa-Solano Audubon Society and covers a 15-mile diameter circle that includes Benicia, East Vallejo, Cordelia, West Suisun City, and parts of Grizzly Island and Grizzly Bay (Fig. 3). Since its inception, BCBC volunteers have recorded an impressive 238 species, including notably the Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis*) and the Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*). This year brought an exciting new addition with a thick-billed kingbird (*Tyrannus crassirostris*) that was spotted in Lynch Canyon—the northernmost sighting of this species in California.

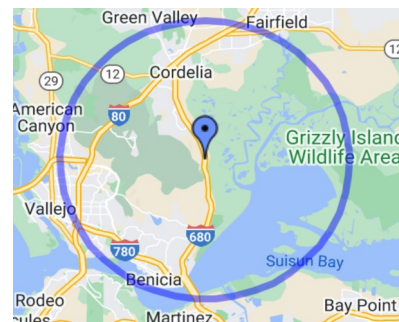


Figure 3. Benicia Christmas Bird Count circle.



Figure 4. Robin Leong

Remarkably, Benicia consistently ranks in the top 3% of counts nationwide for species diversity, underscoring its importance as a haven for both native and migrating birds. This year's event also marked a bittersweet milestone. Robin Leong (Fig. 4), the BCBC's coordinator since 1986, is stepping down after 38 years! Robin has been a cornerstone of this event, organizing thousands of volunteers over the years and inspiring countless birders with his expertise and passion. His contributions have left a lasting impact on both the birding community and the field of avian conservation. Thank you, Robin, for your commitment to avian conservation! We look forward to working with Tom Slyker, vice president of the Napa-Solano Audubon Society with coordination of future BCBC events.

As I reflect on the day, the BCBC was more than just a simple survey—it was a chance to connect with the natural world, contribute to conservation, and learn from my peers. I can't wait to participate again next year, and I hope to see some of you out there, binoculars in hand, making your own memories while supporting this vital tradition.





Grizzly Island Wildlife Updates

- Opening Day, Grizzly Island Wildlife Area (GIWA) shot a 3.3 bird average and the most common bird was the Northern Shoveler followed by the American Green Wing Teal.
- Pheasants Opening Day, the wildlife area welcomed 22 hunters and the harvest number was twice as high this year compared to 2023.
- Long Point, a property acquired by GIWA in 2018, is fully operational for the first time and will remain a sanctuary for the time being. All water control structures have been updated and the pond remain fully flooded until summer 2025.
- Pond 15, near Check Station Road, has been flooded and hutable for the public for first time in over 20 years. Inadequate infrastructure prolonged the proper management process.
- DFW is collecting tongue DNA samples for all Greater White-Fronted Geese harvested on the wildlife area. Efforts are made for the waterfowl program to genetically determine the harvest of the Tule Goose subspecies. Hunters who have harvested Specks in Suisun Marsh can donate a meat sample to Check Station if they would like to share data.

BirdReturns

Spring
Support Migrating
Shorebirds

Summer
Boost Resident
Waterfowl Populations

Participation benefits can include **enhancing your wetland value** by receiving compensation for providing critical habitat during the off-season, ensuring your property works year-round for wildlife. Benefits can include **supporting conservation** and playing a key role in protecting migratory birds, shorebirds, and waterfowl when they need it most. **Other benefits to the program are opportunities to collaborate with conservation experts** and professionals to apply science-driven approaches that support your goals while helping you contribute to a larger environmental impact.

What Are Private Landowners Saying in Suisun Marsh?

“BirdReturns helps us deliver year-round benefits to shorebirds, waterfowl, and other wildlife on our wetland conservation property in the Suisun Marsh. It’s a win for wildlife!”

— Andrew Bogan, The Teal Club, Suisun Marsh

“The BirdReturns Program is a terrific example of effective collaboration between landowners and conservation organizations and is administered with respect and professionalism.”

— Brian Boero, Morrow Island L.C., Suisun Marsh

Black Brant — *Branta bernicla*

* Brant are compact, small geese with stubby bill and short necks, often with a white bib across their upper neck. Their size is comparable to a Mallard duck.

* Brant are typically monogamous, spending most of the year in flocks. Family groups migrate long distances between the Arctic, Pacific and Atlantic Coast.

* Flocks give a pleasing calls reminiscent of Sandhill Cranes and the sounds from a group can carry for long distances. The guttural call given is *crrrronk*.

* Due to their saltwater environments, Brant have well-developed salt glands that enable the consumption of saltwater and saltwater plants. Their primary food resource is a type marine seagrass called Eelgrass.

* In the 1930s, a disease devastated eelgrass which may have been the cause for a sharp decline in Brant populations at that time. The species adapted to the lack of eelgrass by beginning to foraging along agricultural fields and on turf grass. Today, eelgrass has recovered today and the brant population has risen.



WANTED
DEAD OR ALIVE

NUTRIA UPDATE IN THE MARSH



Nutria (*Myocastor coypus*) are an invasive rodent species introduced to California from South America. They burrow into levee, consume large amounts of aquatic vegetation causing damages to wetland habitats. In 2019, the Department of Fish and Wildlife received funding from the state legislature to create the Nutria Eradication Program. With access to full-scale operations, resources and a fully-dedicated staff, the program has been combatting nutria populations across California. The program has obtained entry permits from 4,700 landowners, accessed 10,500 parcels, and collected assessment data on 1.9 million acres. The program has expanded from the Grasslands to the Delta and in 2022, a family group of nutria was detected on Sherman Island. Following that detect, in May 2023, nutria were confirmed and collected off the Grizzly Island Wildlife Area. As of October 23, 2024, the field division of the program working across the 16 counties including Solano County has reported the following eradication efforts:

- ⊕ 5,014 necropsies show a 1.16 sex ratio (M:F), and the average litter size for adult females is 6.6 pups
- ⊕ 11,789 cameras have been installed, and over 95,000 camera checks have been completed. 1,451 thousand cameras are currently active.
- ⊕ >165,000 trap nights have been completed with 14,000 trap set deployments, and 740 traps are currently active
- ⊕ 5,208 nutria have been taken since March 2017 (see Figure 1)

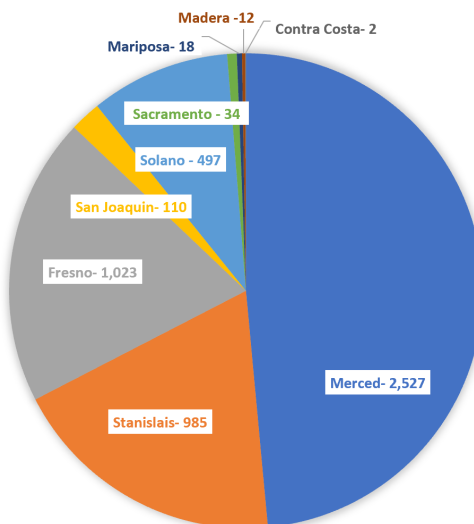


Figure 1 illustrates the number of nutria taken from each county. Suisun Marsh is part of Solano County.

Suisun Marsh has been part of the program since April 2024, and efforts have recorded 1,036 cells (a cell is 40-acres or 1/4 square mile) with positive detections of nutria. Over 740 cameras have been set, 697 traps deployed, and 239 nutria removed. Access to private land has been limited. SRCD encourages landowners to allow access to eradicate nutria. See <https://wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Invasives/Species/Nutria>.



The 2025 Events Ahead

- Bird Returns Application—
January 22
- Chinook Salmon Gate Restriction—
Now through Jan 31
Feb 21 through March 31
- Ridgeway’s Rail Restrictions—
Feb 1 through Aug 1
- Spring Burning Period—
March 1 through April 15
- Lepidium Control Order Deadline—
March 25
- PAI Round 1 Application —
March 31
- Delta Smelt Gate Restriction—
April 1 through May 31
- Spring Landowner Workshop—
Wednesday, April 23
- Dredging Application Deadline—
Wednesday April 30
- Phragmites Control Order Deadline—
Monday June 2
- California Waterfowl’s Marsh Day—
Saturday, June 7
- PAI Round 2 Application—
End of June
- Suisun Conservation Fun Shoot—
Friday, July 25
- Fall Landowner Workshop—
Wednesday, Sept 17



**SUISUN
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Land Of The West Wind
SRCD Newsletter

2544 Grizzly Island Road
Suisun CA 94585

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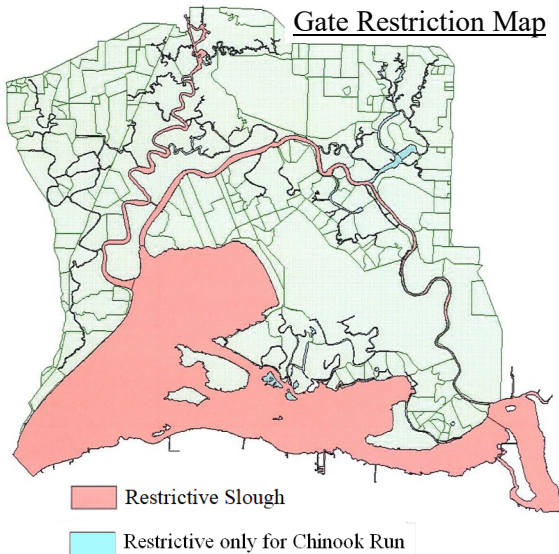


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2025 Intake Gate Restrictions

A friendly reminder to all landowners of the 2025 gate restrictions for the Winter/Spring Run of the Chinook Salmon and the Delta Smelt reproduction period. Any landowner diverting water from designated sloughs (see map) shall obey unscreened water diversion restrictions described in the Army Corps of Engineers Regional General Permit No. 2012-00258N and the USFWS Biological Opinion pursuant to intake capacity restriction to 25% closure until January 31, 2025 to full closure between February 21 through March 31 and to intake capacity of only 20% of water control structures between April 1 through May 31.



Suisun Resources Conservation District and California Department of Fish and Wildlife will be checking all intake gates in the restriction zones by boat during the monitoring period. If there are any questions regarding these restrictions contact the SRCD office at (707) 425-9302 and speak with Steven Chappell.

Areas of Critical Salmon Habitat

- *Montezuma Slough
- *Lower Nurse Slough
- *Goodyear Slough
- *Cutoff Slough including Spring and Mallard Branch
- *Suisun Slough from downstream of Boynton Slough
- *Chippis Island
- *Denver Slough
- *Honker, Grizzly, Suisun Bay