

THE "NO MANAGEMENT" CONCEPT AND HOW IT HAS CAUSED GRIEF, HEARTACHE,
AND THE DESTRUCTION OF ONE OF OUR MOST VALUABLE WILDLIFE AREAS IN THE
WESTERN UNITED STATES

The Harney Basin is unique. Located in the middle of one of the West's greatest deserts. It is a closed basin fed by waters from the Oregon's timber country to the North and the famed Steens Mountains to the South.

Settled in the early 1870's by such men as Pete French, who was known to have run 45,000 head of cattle, the Harney Basin was declared by many to be the most important migratory wildlife area in the West.

Each Spring, ducks, geese, swans, cranes, shorebirds and marsh birds by the tens and hundreds of thousands poured into the basin on their annual trek North.

In 1908 President Theodore Roosevelt moved to protect the area. The ranching families who had settled around Harney, Mud and Malheur Lakes were bought out and a migratory bird sanctuary was created.

Then in 1935 nearly all the ranches in the adjacent Blitzen Valley were purchased including the famous "P Ranch". Today the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge covers over 181,000 acres, stretching over an area 40 miles long from North to South and 37 miles wide, East to West.

During the early years, after the Refuge was created, management encouraged livestock use. Thousand of cattle were run on the Refuge. The 100,000 acres of meadow lands developed by the people that settled the Valley continued to be irrigated by the local permittees.

When setting grazing fees, consideration was given to the ranchers input, such as the maintenance of fences and the vast irrigation system that had been developed by the pioneers.

Then in the early 1970's management philosophy began to change. Ranchers were told grazing was detrimental to Wildlife and must be reduced.

In the years that followed livestock use was reduced by 70%. Of the original Fifty-three (53) permittees, thirty-two (32) were forced to leave. Many of the families had been almost totally dependent on the Refuge.

The grief and heartache caused these families as they were forced out of business or forced to begin to build a new operations will never be fully known.

The economic impact was significant, not only to the local communities but also to Harney County as a whole.

It was obvious to the local people that what was happening was detrimental to Wildlife, as well as, the local communities. There was no scientific data nor studies to support such action. It was obvious that the Agencies objectives were purely political.

But the conflict did not end there, grazing fees were raised for those that were allowed to remain as permittees. Refuge personnel took over management of the irrigation system allowing most of the water to bypass the vast meadow lands and run directly

into Malheur Lake.

It was then that things really began to deteriorate. Much of the "state of art irrigation system" fell into ruin, meadows became patches for weeds as sagebrush began to re-establish itself. On marsh and riparian areas, plant communities changed to dead and decadent vegetation.

Yet neither local outcry, nor common sense would jar the Agency from its course. In fact, they only wanted more control. A conflict soon started over water allocation on the adjacent (privately owned) Silvies Flood Plain.

Obvious to, was the fact that the Wildlife Service wanted to acquire the ranch lands on the Silvies Flood Plain to add to their already vast holdings. The scenario led to a study conducted in 1975 by the Fish and Wildlife Service themselves.

The study was probably the best thing that ever happened to bring out the truth of the rape and destruction that was occurring. The study showed that during the Summer of 1975 the Silvies, which I remind you, is all privately owned, produced four times as many ducks and geese as did the Malheur Refuge. The Silvies also experienced thirteen times as much use by curlews, willets, stilts, phalaropes, avocets and other birds.

By this time another conflict was building. Malheur Lake was raising rapidly, and if the trend was to continued, would within a few short years flood the private lands on the Silvies Flood Plain.

If the Refuge had only continued to irrigate their vast meadows as they had in the past, water levels may have remained below record levels, but again the Agency had its way. By the early 1980's the rancher's worst fears came true, three record water years in a row doubled the surface area of the Lakes.

Thirty-one ranches were either partially or wholly flooded. Homes, corrals and barns were washed away and destroyed. It was not until this last year, 1989, that the water began to recede.

Today many of the ranching families that once fought to keep the Wildlife Service from acquiring the lands they loved, now broke, their land rendered nearly valueless are now forced to argue for Government acquisition, all in the name of protecting Wildlife.



FISH AND WILDLIFE ECOLOGY SURVEY
By Dave Paullin Presented to Kiwanis Club
Burns, Ore. Aug. 12, 1976

Introduction

The Malheur-Harney Lakes Basin study is, to our knowledge, the first project of its type in the Western United States. The study area has been classified as a water problem area in the Columbia-North Pacific Comprehensive Study and the Western States Water Plan Study. Both of these studies concluded with the recommendation that planning for water and land development should not be done until a comprehensive data collection study has been completed. This study would include five elements -- biological, hydrological, land and water resource availability, current resource use and management and socio-economic.

The detailed study was recommended because of conflicting demands and opinions regarding the best use of lands and waters in the basin. These conflicts were primarily the result of the Fish & Wildlife Service's opposition to a number of water development proposals which would have altered water supplies and schedules at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and adjacent floodplains.

In 1971 the Oregon Water Resources Board requested that the Fish & Wildlife Service seek funding for the entire study. Broad support, including that of the Oregon Congressional Delegation, was received but funding requests were unsuccessful. In FY 1975 the Fish & Wildlife Service allocated a portion of its national budget to initiate the biological phase of the study and with this funding the Division of Ecological Sciences established an office in Burns last year. A portion of these funds were applied to a contract with the F. S. Geological Survey to gather hydrological data.

The purpose of our ongoing study is to determine the relationship between water and wildlife in the basin. In conducting the study, we will identify major habitat and wildlife use areas and relate these to water cycles ranging from drought to flood levels. Data collected will provide a base for evaluating the impacts of water and land development proposals on wildlife and also provide the knowledge needed to include proper recognition and consideration of these resources in all future planning and developments in the basin.

Malheur-Harney Lakes Basin is located in southeastern Oregon. It is a closed basin 117 miles long and 74 miles wide. Our entire study encompasses 3.3 million acres.

The northern third of the basin is a forested region including portions of the Malheur National Forest and the Strawberry Mountain Wilderness Area.

In the southern reaches of the basin is the well known Steens Mountain.

In the middle of the basin are native meadow lands of Harney Valley and the marshes of Malheur Refuge.

The remainder of the basin is the typical vegetation of the arid eastern Oregon desert -- sagebrush, rabbitbrush, and greasewood.

For those of us in this room who live in Harney County in the spring, you may have witnessed one of the most spectacular wildlife phenomena in the Western United States.

Each Spring ducks, geese, swans, cranes, shorebirds, and marshbirds by the tens and hundreds of thousands pour out of the central valley of California and stop in Harney Basin on their annual trek northward to their tundra nesting grounds.

For a few weeks each spring we are the spectators and they are the actors in a premiere showing; overwhelming in magnitude and unparalleled in beauty.

The key to the attractiveness of the area for migratory birds is water -- and lots of it. The closed basin is a virtual oasis surrounded by the dry desert of eastern Oregon. There are three main drainages in the basin (,) all of which flow into Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

The refuge is comprised of three major areas.

At the heart of the Refuge is Malheur Lake which is really a marsh. In wet years the lake has staged at over 60,000 acres making it the largest freshwater marsh in the western United States.

Malheur Lake is a sump, receiving the majority of its water from the Silvies River from the north and the Blitzen River from the south.

To the south of the lake lies that portion of the refuge known as Double O. Numerous springs and Silver Creek from the north are its primary water source.

A large alkali flat known as Harney Lake is the sump for the Silver Creek drainage. In wet years Malheur Lake spills over into this area.

Combined, these three areas; Malheur Lake, Blitzen Valley, and Double O comprise the 181,000 acre Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. We have been collecting information in all three of these drainages but we are concentrating our efforts in the Silvies drainage for four reasons: (1) it is the largest drainage in the basin, (2) it is a major water source for Malheur Refuge, (3) its

floodplain is the largest single wetland in the basin outside the refuge and, (4) the Corps of Engineers has a large storage reservoir project proposed on the Silvies that could have a drastic impact on the waterfowl in the basin.

Our primary objective, in the simplest terms, is to determine the relationship between water and wildlife in the basin.

While resident wildlife species do occur in the basin, our efforts in the study area have centered around these species most closely associated with water, namely migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, and marshbirds.

The Silvies River enters Harney Valley 5 miles north of Burns and it is here that the Silvies tops its banks each spring and floods, in good water years, over 50,000 acres of privately owned meadows north of the refuge.

Similar but smaller flooded areas also occur on the Silver Creek and Blitzen River floodplains.

To this vast wetland flock thousands of migratory birds on their annual spring migration. Entering last year we were faced with several unanswered questions. First, just how important is the Silvies River Floodplain to these birds? What are the relationships between the floodplain and the refuge? Are there alternate off-refuge areas in the basin for migratory birds to use should present water and land management practices be significantly altered in the future? What was the chronology of use and were there preferred areas?

To accomplish this task over such a large area, we laid out over 500 miles of ground transect using trucks, airboats, and walking to conduct surveys of raptors, shorebirds, marshbirds, waterfowl pair counts, brood counts, and the service sponsored Breeding Bird Surveys.

In addition weekly census flights were made during periods of peak use to survey migratory birds. We logged about 100 hours in the air.

Thirty-three photo plots were established on Malheur Lake to monitor changes in lake levels and vegetation. Photos were taken bi-weekly and cataloged.

To further our understanding of Malheur Lake, we collected water samples at 50 sites on the lake and monitored bi-weekly changes in salinity and conductivity. This work was done by cooperation with the U. S. Geological Survey. Similar water collections were made for the Corps of Engineers who are doing water analysis work with Washington University. Our findings revealed new insights into Harney Basin.

The Silvies River floodplain, which I remind you again, is all privately owned WAS, without a doubt, the most important migratory bird area in the basin during spring migration in 1975 -- a high water year.

The floodplain supported 6.7 million waterfowl use days last spring.

Spring peaks for the entire basin were 210,000 ducks and 62,000 geese. We feel that at least 1 million ducks and 100,000 geese moved through the basin last spring.

The Silvies floodplain supported almost twice the waterfowl use as Malheur Lake and when other privately owned wetland are taken into consideration, the private lands exceeded the entire refuge total by 1.6 million use days.

With the waterfowl come the bald eagles, ever watchful for the sick and crippled that easily succumb to the rigors of migration. Bald eagles peaked at 40 birds during spring migration and they accrued 5,700 use days, most of them on the Silvies floodplain. 15 Bald eagles wintered near Burns on the floodplain. The basin is an important area for these birds and because of their food habits, we consider them to be a water-oriented species.

Nearly three hundred pairs of greater sandhill cranes nest in the flooded meadows of the basin. Forty-five pairs nest on the Silvies Floodplain with most of the other cranes nesting on Malheur Refuge.

In addition, most of the entire central valley population of lesser sandhill cranes stops during spring migration on the Silvies floodplain just east of Burns. The cranes, numbering 20,000, spent 152,000 use days on the floodplain feeding in the meadows, building up their pre-migratory fat. From Burns these cranes will fly non-stop to their breeding grounds in Alaska and Canada. The floodplain is obviously an important link in their migration route. Also attracted to these flooded meadows were a wide variety of shorebirds.

Curlews, willets, stilts, phalaropes, avocets, and many others spent 397,000 use days on the Silvies during migration; over 13 times the use received on Malheur Lake.

In addition to shorebirds, -- herons, egrets, gulls, terns, pelicans, ibis, and grebes spent 434,000 use days on the Silvies, even exceeding Malheur Lake, which is noted for its extensive heron and egret rookeries. Not all of these birds leave the basin, however.

Receding (sic) flood waters leave numerous ponds and sloughs that attract thousands of nesting birds.

(The Silvies floodplain raised 12,800 ducks and 150 geese, over four times the production of Malheur Lake.) ←

Also at the time of our breeding pair counts for waterfowl, there were 12,000 curlews, avocets, stilts, terns and phalaropes nesting on the floodplain.

Two rookeries are also located on the floodplain; a California Gull colony of 300 nesting pairs and a Great Blue Heron colony of 30 pairs.

The importance of the Silvies River floodplain to wildlife should be obvious by now. For many species such as the lesser sandhill cranes, snow geese and white-fronted geese, Harney Basin is their last resting and feeding area in the United States before flying non-stop to Canada. The fact that it overshadows Malheur Refuge rapidly diminishes however, as flood water recede. Numerous situations that looked like this in April looked like this in June.

By August, when brood water is critical to the survival of young birds, the floodplain had been reduced from a situation like this in April * to this in August. As the waters of the Silvies continued to decline in late summer and fall, the more permanent waters of Malheur Refuge became increasingly important, especially during the fall migration. By the time fall migration peaked, there was so little water left in the floodplain and it was of minor importance to migratory birds.

Ducks peaked at 16,000 and geese at 3,300. Total waterfowl use days for the Silvies during fall migration was 2.1 million as compared to 6.7 million for Malheur Lake and 11.9 for entire refuge.

Use days for shorebirds and marshbirds show a similar pattern. Fall marshbird use on Malheur Lake alone was twice that of the floodplain.

A similar situation is evident with shorebirds. In short, the Silvies River floodplain was the most important resting and feeding area for migratory birds during spring migration and the single most important nesting area for waterfowl and shorebirds but of limited importance during the fall due to lack of water.

Throughout this presentation, I have used Malheur Lake for a comparison to the privately owned Silvies Floodplain. In most cases the floodplain supported more migratory bird use and raised more waterfowl than Malheur Lake. I must confess, however, that I haven't been perfectly candid with you regarding Malheur Lake.

I have had the privilege of working on 5 refuges in this region and have visited ~~many~~ more and I am sorry to say that I have yet to see a marsh in worse shape than Malheur Lake in 1975. The story is a familiar one.

Well meaning individuals heralded (sic) the carp as the game fish of tomorrow, only to find it is the nightmare of today.

Carp have rooted, grubbed and muddied their way through the heart of Malheur Lake, reducing it to a state nearly devoid of the aquatic vegetation and invertebrates necessary to sustain high productivity that Malheur Lake is noted for.

This is what Malheur Lake should and can look like -- the water clear -- full of food plants which in turn support large populations of invertebrates.

Yet, today, most of Malheur Lake looks like this -- turbid, barren, stripped clean of any food plants. Malheur Lake needs help.

This year the lake produced 2,300 ducks -- the lowest nesting density of any area in the basin. It used to produce upwards of 15,000 ducks and 1,000 geese.

Waterfowl on Malheur Lake used to peak during migration at 400,000. This year they peaked at 50,000. In 1973 the lake supported 10 million waterfowl use days. In 1957, just two years after carp were poisoned for the first time, the Lake supported 67 million waterfowl use days.

Heron and egret production on the lake has been declining in recent years and most of these birds no longer even feed on the lake. Rather, they feed almost exclusively on the Silvies floodplain north of the lake.

In addition, Malheur Lake is noted for the northernmost nesting colony of Franklin's Gulls in the United States, as well as large colonies of eared grebes and some horned grebes. This year none of these birds nested on the lake. Because of carp, the importance of Malheur Lake to migratory birds has been diminishing every year.

More importantly, because Malheur Refuge is liked by migration routes to over 20 refuges in the west, carp and the associated loss of food supply are directly affecting a large portion of the entire Pacific Flyway. Migratory birds arriving at the lake in the fall soon leave because of the lack of food and concentrate at other points in the flyway where food is available, placing a greater demand on that food supply.

Carp represent a major disrupting element in the balance between water and wildlife in the basin. It is a major conflict which we hope will someday be resolved to the benefit of the wildlife resources in the basin.

Up to this point, I have talked primarily about biological data collection and related observation. Several other activities are, or soon will be, underway to compliment (sic) the basic data collected.

Members of our Portland Field Office will be working with Oregon State University on typing all the major habitats(,) include croplands in the basin using ERTS and LANDSAT satellites. The satellites will also be used to monitor changes in land use practices, flooding on the Silvies and fluctuations in Malheur Lake.

We have been using color infrared photos taken at high altitudes from U-2 spy planes and from SKY LAB astronauts to aid us in this work. As the result of recent coordination meetings, the Soil Conservation Service has expressed an interest in conducting wet-land soil analysis work in the study area during the summers of 1976 and 1977. This data will enable us to relate wildlife production and use and vegetation types to soil types which will be a useful tool in the determination of land use potential to the basin.

The U.S. Geological Survey is under contract with us to monitor stream flows into the basin and to develop a water budget for Malheur Lake. USGS has completed its 4th year on this work and it is our intent to continue the funding of this important element of the study.

We are negotiating with the Malheur Environmental Field Station, located at the old Malheur Job Corps Center, to conduct Field Studies on Malheur Lake to collect some much needed biological data.

The complex interrelation of water, vegetation, carp and wildlife of Malheur Lake will require intensive investigations before we can begin to understand its requirements.

We will continue our work on the floodplain and Malheur Lake, looking for problem areas, and striving for solutions and hopefully providing some much needed information so that we, as resource managers, can plan wisely for the future of the Malheur-Harney Lakes Basin.

The information I have given you represents a year's data collection -- a year of high runoff and flooding, which occurred about 3 weeks later than normal. The big question now is - WHERE

DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Briefly, our Central Office in Washington D.C., is again in the process of requesting total funding for the study to fully investigate land, water and wildlife values and potentials in the basin.

In the interim, we will continue with the biological and hydrological work described today. Our study schedule is for a 10-year period or at least until data collection covers a full range of water conditions, from high flood to drought. Without such coverage, planning for land and water management in the basin cannot fully consider wildlife values.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that this study is unique in that it is not being conducted to determine the impacts a specific water development project will have on fish and wildlife. We have never had the luxury of such an undertaking for that purpose. Instead, we hope to identify the true value of a disappearing resource -- highly productive wetland habitat -- and relate it to other land and water uses. We believe that present and potential wildlife values in the Malheur-Harney Lakes Basin far exceeds anyone's comprehension at this time. Further, it is our opinion that the data collection program now underway can, and well may, revolutionize the land and water management planning concept that we are accustomed to -- at least in this study area.

As a result of this study, we believe an environmental quality plan can be prepared which will identify the means to fully develop the national and international wildlife resources of the basin and that this plan could yield higher economic and social values to local residents and the general public than the typical land and water development projects we are familiar with today.