

Founder and ramrod behind Desert Wildlife Unlimited

Leon Lesicka passes at 87

By JIM MATTHEWS

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Dove hunters have more places to hunt in Southern California, and there are growing desert mule deer and desert bighorn sheep populations largely thanks to one man – Leon Lesicka.

Lesicka, the 87-year-old founder of Desert Wildlife Unlimited and its face and spokesperson for 40 years, died Dec. 21 at his home in Brawley. There was a celebration of life held Saturday, Jan. 18 at the Brawley Lions Center with over 300 people in attendance.

Under Lesicka, DWU became well known for its wildlife conservation activities and providing public hunting access on private lands in the Imperial Valley, according to Rob Yates, who had been the project lead at DWU for the past several years as Lesicka aged.

A short list of accomplishments for Lesicka and DWU includes:

■ **Wildlife Water:** DWU has constructed and maintained over 100 deer and sheep drinkers in the desert around Imperial Valley and east along the Colorado River. These new water sources made up for the loss of drying desert springs and loss of livestock water sources, and allowed desert deer and sheep to expand their range and populations in this region. These water sources also provided water for over a hundred different species of desert wildlife.

■ **Public Dove and Pheasant Hunting:** Lesicka started working with local land owners to plant fields just for dove and pheasants and then provide public access to these private lands for hunting. The program today involves about 3,000 acres of land, and many Southern California dove hunters spend dove opener on the Lesicka-DWU fields each year.

■ **Wetland Creation:** DWU has been instrumental in creating three wetlands on the New and

Alamo rivers, with a fourth in the works, all open to public hunting access.

■ **Ducks in the Classroom:** Most recently, DWU started a Ducks in the Classroom program with Imperial Valley schools where children raise mallard duck eggs in incubators and then to flight stage before releasing the birds on local wetlands. The program was in 26 different classrooms in 2019.

“It takes a passion in your heart to want to do this kind of work,” said Yates. “Leon had that passion.”

Lesicka graduated from Brawley High in 1950, where he met his wife La Velle. They eloped that same year to Yuma, Ariz. During the Korean War, the new family was stationed at Fort Ord. Upon his return to the Valley, he formed Lesicka Brothers with his brother Marvin, with La Velle as their secretary. The company built custom homes and commercial buildings all over the Imperial Valley in the ensuing years.

Lesicka became an outspoken advocate of wildlife in the late 1970s, when the Coachella Canal was lined with concrete. The canal became a death trap for mule deer and bighorn sheep that would slip into the water while trying to get a drink and drown. That began Leon’s interest in building off-canal drinking sites for deer and sheep, and he designed the water catchment or big game guzzler system that has since been used by Game agencies in Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, Mexico, and Mongolia.

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DWU was started officially in 1980, and Leon assembled a volunteer crew to build an ever-growing number of water catchments, all with money raised from sportsmen.

While not always on their “nice list,” Lesicka had the ability to make the Department of Fish and Wildlife bureaucracy come around to be his assistant in the water projects and provided the seed for the 3,000-acres of dove fields. While the state was studying the pollution in the New and Alamo rivers, Lesicka set in motion the creation of the wetlands to cleanse the water and create habitat for wildlife.

Leon is survived by his children, Kathy Dennis, Mark Malou, and Marty Lesicka; six grandchildren, and four great grandchildren, and a great many sportsmen across the region knew Lesicka both personally and by his works. Many claimed Lesicka was more like family than a friend, including Yates.

“I feel really similar to when I lost my Dad,” said Yates. “There’s a big, gaping hole in my heart. No other person in my life – other than my father – has had a greater influence on me.”

Yates promised that the important work Le-



sicka started under DWU would continue into the future with the dedicated work crews and the continued financial support of sportsmen throughout the region. Sportsmen who would like to commemorate Lesicka’s passing are encouraged to make a donation to DWU, which can be done through the organization’s website at desertwildlifeunlimited.com.

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