

Ridgecrest Quail Forever chapter has been providing water for wildlife over 30 years

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Larry Boyer, the senior member of the Ridgecrest Chapter of Quail Forever at 80 years old, remembers vividly a story he was told as a young man. One of his older friends remembers the desert valleys from Inyokern to Trona a bit differently than they are today.

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In those years, there were quail everywhere, and even Boyer and his junior sidekick Danny Zurn who is a young 77, remember the years when valley quail could be found across the desert flats and foothills. Today, outside of the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, there are only small pockets of valley and Gambel's quail left in the desert, most disappearing in the 1960s.

The Department of Fish and Wildlife's hunter survey data shows the dramatic decline in quail numbers across the state over the last 70s years. In the 1960s and into the 1970s, there were over 2 million valley, Gambel's and mountain quail harvested by hunters statewide. Since then, the number has been steadily declining, dropping from the 600,000 in the 2000s to just 320,000 in 2016-17 season (the most recent data available).

Boyer, Zurn, and a handful of other hunters in the Ridgecrest region were concerned about the decline and wanted to help. During the 1950s and 60s, the Department of Fish and Game had built 102 gamebird guzzlers, a man-made water catchment that holds rain water year-around for birds and other small wildlife in the region. Most had fallen into disrepair and were not functioning as designed. Most of the local hunters had found these guzzlers and knew they were the key to

“He remembered when the grass around here was up to the bellies of the cattle, but that was probably in the 19-teens,” said Boyer. “In those days the desert had a lot more water and there was more rain.”



Ridgecrest Quail Forever volunteers now use a poly material originally designed for mining operations that is “tough as hell.” It delivers more rainwater into the tank than other materials.

keeping gamebird populations viable in an area. This led to the formation of the Ridgecrest Quail Unlimited Chapter, which almost seamlessly transitioned to another non-profit, Quail Forever, in 2005, when QU when out of business.

According to Boyer and Zurn, the group has probably repaired and continues to fill “about half of the guzzlers in our district,” and restoring four more in poor shape each year, hoping to eventually get to them all.

“It if wasn’t for us keeping water out there, all the wild-life would be gone in a lot of areas,” said Zurn.

With the disappearance of quail in the desert, most of the restored guzzlers now water a multitude of song-birds and small mammals, but one important gamebird continues to use the restored drinkers, the chukar partridge. For hunters from across Southern and Central California, what most hunters call “the Red Mountain region” is considered chukar hunting central for this region – if not the whole state. The core of this area is the Rand and El Paso mountain ranges.

The chukar partridge, first introduced into California in 1932, did well in the arid desert ranges in the Mojave Desert and the slopes of the Sierra Nevada, White, and Inyo mountains. The state held the first hunting season on chukar in 1954 when 2,100 birds were harvested statewide. The birds expanded their range into all suitable habitat by the 1960s, and hunter harvest rates seemed to stabilize at between lows of around 20,000 to highs of 60,000.

The chukar clearly did better than the quail in the succession of long-term droughts that California has been experiencing for 50 years, thriving on the non-native cheatgrass that had invaded the desert mountains. But the big birds (about the size of Cornish game hen) still had to have permanent water where they could drink during the hot summers. The guzzlers have maintained chukar populations across broad swaths of Kern, Inyo, and San Bernardino counties, especially in areas without much natural water. While total chukar numbers fluctuate, depending on winter and early spring rains that cause desert greenup, the permanent water provides a source that keeps birds in a region.

Boyer and Zurn are happy to talk about the work done each year by the two of them and their small band (10 to 20 regulars who help on work projects) of Quail Forever members, and they all know how important their work is to the thousands of chukar hunters who hunt the region each year from mid-October through the end of January.

“We have a big fundraising banquet every two years,” said Zurn. “It’s the biggest Quail Forever banquet in the state, bigger than any of the others. We have just under 300 guys attend each year, hunters from all over, and people write us checks for \$2,000, even \$5,000.”

The money all goes toward supplies to repair and maintain guzzlers. The non-profit group tries to get four old guzzlers repaired each year, and go back and make sure the others (already upgraded) don’t need repairs or filling. Last year, the members hauled over 20,000 gallons of water to drinkers because there were a lot of young birds this past season and they drank a lot of

water in some areas.

The group has also pioneered the use of a new material to use with the guzzlers. These devices consist of the large apron with catches the rainwater. The water then runs down the apron and is directed into a large, underground tank. There is an opening into the tank and a ramp so the birds and other wildlife can walk down into the tank and get a drink, regardless of the water level. Historically, asphalt or concrete has been used for the apron, but it was very porous and a lot of the water that falls on the apron doesn’t make it to the tank.

The Ridgecrest QF volunteers have been using poly-cloth material that “is tough as hell,” according to Zurn. The 60-mil poly fabric is rolled out on the apron, smoothed and a nifty seam tape used to join pieces to shape the poly to the surface of the old aprons. Rocks are then piled along the edges of the poly apron, and then the rocks are cemented in place.

“Dump a gallon of rain water on this material and at least 95 percent of it ends up in the tank,” said Zurn. He also said it was durable, with some of it being on a couple of guzzlers for over 10 years and still no worse for wear. If the material does get a rip, it is easy to repair with the same tape used to create seams.

Zurn said the material was originally designed to be used as lining on ponds in gold mines, so it has proven very tough and impervious to elements.

“It’s just so much better than asphalt or concrete,” said Boyer.

While Boyer and Zern don’t do much hunting any more, they still figure they have a couple of more years of working on the guzzlers in them. However, they admit it would be nice to get some new, young hunters in the group to keep the tradition going. Most of the other members are getting on it year’s, too. There is an open invitation.

[Hunters or other wildlife enthusiasts interesting in helping on Quail Forever projects are always welcome.

[More information is available at the club’s Facebook page www.facebook.com/RidgecrestQuailForever/. The next club meeting will be 6:30 p.m., Wednesday, March 18 at Lugo’s Restaurant, Ridgecrest, and the next work project will be scheduled at that meeting. The Bi-Annual Fun Shoot will be March 28 at the Inyokern Trap Club.]
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California Deer Association Fundraiser set for April 18

The Southern California Chapter of the California Deer Association will have its annual fundraiser banquet April 18th at the Red Hill Country Club in Rancho Cucamonga.

The CDA has been a major supporter of funding wildlife water and habitat projects in Southern California, including those done by Desert Drinkers 4 Wildlife which works in the East Mojave and Southern Sierra and Desert Wildlife Unlimited that has been working on desert deer and sheep water projects in eastern Riverside and Imperial County for over 30 years. These annual banquets are one way for this organization to raise funds so that they can continue this support of wildlife conservation throughout the state of California.

For more information about the banquet or purchase dinner tickets, contact Mike Bouman 909-841-7006 or Cliff McDonald at 760-449-4820.

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Desert Drinkers 4 Wildlife schedules major wildlife water project May 12-18 in Sierra

Desert Drinkers 4 Wildlife, the volunteer organization that has repaired or completely rebuilt 194 man-made desert wildlife drinkers or guzzlers over the past 15 years, has just one big project scheduled for 2020, and the group is looking for volunteers to help with the work.

The project will be May 12-18 in the Independence to Bishop region of the Eastern Sierra to restore as many guzzlers as they have volunteer help to accomplish – up to a dozen drinkers and possibly more.

Cliff McDonald, the founder and still project coordination for the group, said the group will assay the guzzlers on Wednesday, May 13, determining the locations, work needed at the sites, and best access. Work parties will begin on Thursday, May 14, and continue through Saturday with full work days those three days. Any final work will be completed on Sunday.

All volunteers will be provided breakfast Thursday through Sunday mornings at the meeting/camp site. There will be a pot luck Thursday night, and a full dinner and dessert provided Friday and Saturday nights. All Volunteers will need to provide their own lunch and drinks during the work days.

Final details about camping location and the Saturday night fundraiser raffle are still being ironed out, but McDonald would like to be able to ink in a volunteer list for planning purposes. New volunteers are welcome and can contact McDonald at 760-449-4820 or e-mail at bigmc@citlink.net.

In 2019, there were a total of 80 volunteers for all the projects, and they restored 14 drinkers with 1,250 man hours of labor. Material and equipment costs were \$6,500, with major donations from the California Deer Association and the Orange County Chapter of Safari

Club.

McDonald said of the 194 drinkers restored over the past 15 years, 80 or so were completely non-functioning. “These drinkers were not furnishing any water to the wildlife and were in dire need of maintenance,” said McDonald. “All the others, by performing the maintenance work, the volunteers have increased the drinkers efficiency anywhere from 50 to 100 percent and restoring the drinkers to year-around water sources.

“Just by pumping out the tanks and removing 60-70 years of muck increased their holding capacity of most tanks by 50 percent,” said McDonald.

Sadly, McDonald reported in his annual letter to volunteers that volunteer efforts in the East Mojave Desert, both on and off the Mojave Preserve, have been put on hold because of bureaucratic decisions by the National Park Service and the Bureau of Land Management.

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Wildlife Conservation Board approves grant to purchase 3,800 acres on South Fork of Kern

The state Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) approved a \$2.32 million grant to acquire just over 3,800 acres of land near Weldon in Kern County, adjacent to the South Fork of the Kern River. It was part of the \$33.2 million in grants the board approved at its Feb. 26 meeting in Sacramento to help restore and protect fish and wildlife habitat throughout California.

The \$2.32 million grant was given to the Trust for Public Land for a cooperative project with the California Natural Resources Agency’s Environmental Enhancement and Mitigation Program, National Audubon Society, Sierra Nevada Conservancy, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and Kern River Valley Heritage Foundation to acquire land in the South Fork of the Kern River drainage for the protection of threatened and endangered species, wildlife corridors, habitat linkages and watersheds, and to provide wildlife-oriented, public-use opportunities. Public hunting and fishing are likely to *not* be part of the mix.

Funding for these projects comes from a combination of sources including the Habitat Conservation Fund and bond measures approved by voters to help preserve and protect California’s natural resources. Currently, the WCB has a “budget” of \$421 million, with nearly \$200 million of that not allocated to projects.

More information about the WCB and details on projects funded, go to www.wcb.ca.gov.

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