

## ELLIS STEPHENS

## LEAVING A MARK ON THE DELTA MAP

Story, photo and map by HOLLY A. HEYSER, EDITOR

Ellis Stephens grew up dirt poor, one of seven siblings, born in 1920, the fourth son of an impoverished Mississippi sharecropper. He started working in the cotton fields when he was 6. The only meat the family ate was what they could hunt in the woods – squirrel, opossum, whatever they could find.

Those woods were the boy's only respite from an otherwise hard life, and there he bonded deeply with nature. Extreme poverty never tainted his zeal for the hunt, or his passion for wild game. These days he might pass up on a resplendent cock pheasant, more content to admire him than to shoot him. ("Awwwww, I'm getting soft in the head," he growls with a self-deprecating grin.) But Stephens'

taste for game remains strong ... and opinionated. Skin your ducks? Are you nuts?

The woods Stephens grew up in would eventually change, stripped by lumber operations, replanted not with native trees, but with replacements that would grow profitably fast. Stephens' life changed too: After a stint in the military – including military intelligence – he became a very successful stock broker.

And the wealth he acquired gave him an opportunity he couldn't pass up, even though it meant passing over more lucrative investments: In 1989, he bought a 789-acre island in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, began healing the scars of agriculture, and

started restoring his own little piece of paradise – where, by the way, the duck hunting can be quite good.

Quimby Island is a peculiarly shaped landmass, like a little flourish of filigree in the Delta landscape. Its soil is dark as French roast, so irresistibly fertile that Stephens and his friend and hunting buddy Larry Watty maintain a garden there, a last remnant of the island's modern agricultural past.

And while the shapes of Quimby's former farm fields are still visible from the air, the ground is a lovely tangle of wildness, with stands of willow and dense thickets of watergrass and smartweed. Stephens put in a permanent lake and stocked it with bluegill, crappie and channel cat. And he surrounded it with wood duck nest boxes, which have done their part to attract a few of those charismatic ducks, in addition to the standard Delta menagerie.

The only serious problem Stephens had with his piece of the Delta was its future: Once he hit his 90s, he had to accept the fact that his remaining time on this earth would be limited. But none of his heirs are interested in owning Quimby Island, which comes with maintenance costs and potentially a substantial tax burden for anyone who inherits it. Who would take care of this land?



Ellis Stephens



The answer: California Waterfowl. As a longtime life member of CWA, Stephens knew about the organization's habitat work, and he knew that the organization had recently taken ownership of three duck clubs, two in the Suisun Marsh and one in the historic Tulare Basin. So he turned over the deed, set up a \$2.2 million endowment and secured the future of the island.

So now CWA owns a piece of the Delta, an opportunity to continue restoring the wildness, a deep stake in a region rife with environmental and political controversy. The controversial Twin Tunnels – which would change how drinking water is diverted south – would, if approved, go through the adjacent Mandeville Island. Restoration

of the Delta is a high priority of environmentalists, but a monumental task in a landscape so deeply altered that the “islands” all sit lower than the sloughs that surround them. Levee maintenance is a perpetual and enormous responsibility, with 20 feet of tidally influenced water eating away the island's earthen boundary. Saltwater intrusion brought on by upstream water diversions is an ever-present threat. And there is a constant struggle against drug cartels that litter the Delta with illegal and environmentally damaging marijuana grow operations.

But CWA is up for it. And in addition to continuing Stephens' restoration work, California Waterfowl also plans to bring Quimby Island into its Hunt Program, where members of the public can win hunts on private lands through a lottery system, following the practice on CWA's first three duck clubs: Grizzly Ranch, Denverton and Goose Lake.

Running hunts there will be challenging. Infrastructure on the island is limited. And unlike the other properties, Quimby Island is accessible only by boat. Ferrying passengers by boat incurs legal risks.

But Stephens has faith in CWA's stewardship, and he still has a vision for the Island. “What about tule elk?” he asked in a recent meeting with CWA. “What about wild turkeys?” 🦃

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