

**Arkansas Ducks Unlimited
Conservation Programs Annual Report
Fiscal Year 2008 (July 2007 – June 2008)**

Ducks Unlimited continued its waterfowl and wetland programs on public and private lands in Arkansas in FY08. Conservation priorities of Ducks Unlimited are to restore and enhance waterfowl habitats on both public and private lands and protect existing quality wetland habitats on private lands. The work of DU and its partners resulted in approximately 14,200 acres restored, enhanced, and protected in FY08 and is summarized below. Collectively, DU and its partners have helped restore, enhance, and protect 309,837 acres private lands and over 50,000 acres of public lands in Arkansas from 1991-2008.

Public Lands Projects

Public land projects that expand public access and hunting opportunities, or greatly contribute to quality habitat enhancements on state-owned wildlife management areas (WMA) and federally-owned national wildlife refuges (NWR), are frequently evaluated for funding by DU and its partners. Arkansas is incredibly important to migrating and wintering waterfowl and providing abundant and quality habitat is critical throughout the state. Also, waterfowl hunting is highly popular in Arkansas and providing hunting opportunities, or quality habitats on sanctuaries near areas of heavy hunting pressure, are sensible both in terms of meeting biological needs of waterfowl and creating localized use by birds in these areas.

The thrust of public lands work in FY08 involved major efforts by DU and AGFC to develop two North American Wetland Conservation Act (NAWCA) grants, submitted in late July 2007 and March 2008. Primary objectives of the grants were to restore Halowell Reservoir and the Wrape Plantation, the two waterfowl sanctuaries at Bayou Meto Wildlife Management Area (BMWMA). The 586-acre Halowell Reservoir was constructed in the early 1950s and originally managed as a green-tree reservoir for public hunting. Today, Halowell contains an outer ring levee and two interior levees but independent flooding and drainage are difficult. Ducks Unlimited prepared a grant with AGFC to raise and create interior levees, develop an interior canal system, and install several culverts, water control structures, and 2 relift pumps to create several new moist-soil impoundments. The proposal received funding and construction will commence at Halowell in late summer-fall 2008, contingent on weather.

The second proposal affecting the Wrape Plantation was submitted in March 2008 and accepted for funding in summer 2008; work will begin in 2009. This 712-acre rest area was purchased by the AGFC in 1949 and has been a waterfowl rest area ever since. The many levees, water control structures, and water delivery system at Wrape are deteriorated and archaic. Work to be conducted will subdivide Wrape into 14 units to facilitate state-of-the-art water and habitat management through new levees and sub-impoundments, refurbishment of existing levees, installation of a water main trunk line, installation of covered water distribution lines, installation of pre-cast water control structures with reinforced concrete pipes, and aggregate surfacing. Also, AGFC will install 5 solar-powered mini-satellite water gauge stations throughout BMWMA to facilitate more efficient water management on the 32,000 acre WMA. An added feature of this project will be the installation of an underground water line that will provide water to the adjacent Buckingham Flats green timber hunt area.

Both projects at Halowell and Wrape will provide state-of-the-art wetland construction and management capabilities. Improvements in habitat management, specifically AGFC's ability to increase production of food for waterfowl, will significantly improve the management capacity of these areas to better meet biological needs of migrating and wintering birds. The sanctuaries also provide sources of ducks for hunters at BMWMA and adjacent private lands. Both sites will be model demonstration areas of wetland management.

Arkansas Partners Program

The Arkansas Partners Program (APP) is one of the longest-tenured programs of Arkansas DU. This program is collaborative among DU, AGFC, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The APP provides water control structures to private wetland stewards committed to managing quality wetland habitat for wintering waterfowl. The APP provided 152 WCS on 33 lands to improve wetland habitats on 4,608 acres during this reporting period. In addition, APP biologists provided technical assistance to 33 landowners on 14,371 acres. The APP requires landowners to sign 15-year agreements to impound winter rainfall for waterfowl. The APP focuses its efforts to enhance habitats on seasonally flooded wetlands, or moist-soil impoundments, and forested wetlands. The APP serves a valuable niche because it provides landowners opportunity to create wetland habitats that usually are of greater quality than flooded agriculture, but does not require significant personal expense that a landowner might incur through turnkey restoration.

Languille River Program

A complementary program to APP is the Languille River Program. Funding for this program was provided by the Environmental Protection Agency through the Arkansas Soil and Water Conservation Commission. The Languille River program is somewhat similar to APP in that private landowners are provided water control structures as an incentive to curb nonpoint source pollution from agricultural lands along the highly degraded Languille River in eastern Arkansas. Water control structures are installed in levees and stop-log boards placed in WCS after fall harvest to impound winter rainfall and provide seasonally-flooded agricultural habitats for waterfowl and other wildlife. Landowners in the Languille program are also required to abide by 15-year agreements. The objective of the Languille program is to impound winter rainfall to curtail soil erosion into the Languille and adjacent aquatic systems. We enhanced 2,319 acres with 83 WCS on 10 private lands during this reporting period. In addition to those lands receiving WCS, biologists provided technical assistance to 5 landowners on 2,074 acres in the Languille program. Although funding for water control structures has expired, APP partner biologists continue to assist Languille River landowners with technical assistance to help improve winter waterfowl habitats within the basin.

Wetlands Reserve Program

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) is a joint effort between DU and the NRCS. The WRP has been one of the most popular habitat restoration programs not only in Arkansas but the South in general. Both hydrological restoration and reforestation are important aspects of WRP. In FY 2008, WRP resulted in 1,134 acres of restored lands in Arkansas. These efforts reforested 941 acres and restored 193 acres of wetlands. To date, Arkansas DU has restored 29,333 acres of wetland (hydrology) habitat and provided 559 WCS; reforestation of 74,490 acres has also been accomplished through WRP. The NRCS provides 100% of funding for all restoration activities conducted through the WRP. Changes in administration of WRP by the federal government have resulted in less delivery of the program by DU and partners. Future efforts by DU to restore wetlands and conduct reforestation on private lands in Arkansas will likely have to be accomplished outside of WRP.

Turnkey Restoration – Private Lands

Ducks Unlimited has had the unique opportunity to assist private landowners with retiring agricultural lands and restoring them to wetlands. One tract, Six Shooter's near Humnoke, AR in southeastern Lonoke County, converted rice and soybeans to quality wetland habitats in 2006 and 2007. The landowners restored 152 acres of the 167-acre site to seasonally-flooded wetlands. Work entailed de-leveling fields and restoring micro-topography, building levees, and installing water control structures. A second tract, Buffalo Bayou, is located east of Geridge, Arkansas in Lonoke County. This 70-acre tract was previously farmed in rice and soybeans and restored to seasonally-flooded wetlands in summer 2006. In both instances, these lands were surveyed and designed by DU staff, and construction oversight was also provided. The landowners used their own funds to cover project costs. Although these tracts were physically constructed in 2006 and 2007, they were used as match in the NAWCA grant submitted in March 2008 (FY08) to acquire funds to restore the Wrape Plantation at AGFC's Bayou Meto WMA (see *Public Lands Projects* above and *Future Partnerships* section below).

Conservation Easement Program – Private Lands

Conservation easements entail identification of important waterfowl and wetland habitats and working with private landowners to protect them in perpetuity. This relationship is beneficial because 1) important waterfowl/wetland habitats can be protected in perpetuity, 2) landowners design their easements specifically to address their conservation interests, 3) landowners often receive valuable tax incentives, and 4) the conservation value of easement lands are eligible for match in NAWCA grants to restore or enhance wetland habitats on public and private lands. In FY08, 11 properties representing 5,521 acres with a conservation value of over \$7 million were enrolled in conservation easements between July–December 2007. The majority of these easement properties are located in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley (MAV) of eastern Arkansas. DU staff also spent considerable time monitoring compliance of existing easements and provided technical assistance to easement tract holders. Over 19,000 acres of easement lands were monitored in fall 2007 and technical assistance was provided to more than 4,300 of those acres. Currently, DU holds conservation easements on 24,587 acres in Arkansas.

Future Partnerships

Ducks Unlimited continues to serve a critical wetlands conservation role in Arkansas. Because of the complexities associated by agriculture and water interests, protection and development of hunting properties, and diverse state, federal, and NGO habitat priorities, DU and its partners must work synchronously to meet multi-faceted challenges of waterfowl and wetlands. More specifically, working to restore wetlands on private lands, especially protecting them with conservation easements, allows DU to use the conservation easement value of those lands to leverage funds to restore habitat on public and private lands, like at Halowell and Wrape. These funds can also be used to restore habitats on the same lands as the conservation easement donor. This networking is positive because landowners can reap tax incentives by voluntarily giving up certain property rights (e.g., development) while retaining coveted rights (e.g. hunting, fishing) on their lands. This in turn allows them to maintain important traditions and helps DU and partners accomplish further habitat restoration and enhancement. Thus, partnerships are vital to accomplishing waterfowl and wetland habitat objectives.

DU Contacts

Please contact DU for further information about conservation programs in Arkansas. Mr. Craig Hilburn (501-837-1524), Brian Davis (501-837-1526), Phil Covington (501-837-1520), or Bill Noble (501-837-1525) can assist you with information about DU's waterfowl and wetlands programs listed above.

Wetland acres protected, enhanced or restored in FY08:

Public Lands Projects:	Two NAWCA grants submitted and approved for Bayou Meto WMA
Arkansas Partners Program:	4,608 acres
Languille River Program:	2,319 acres
Wetlands Reserve Program:	1,134 acres
Private Land Restoration:	618 acres
Conservation Easements:	5,521 acres
Total acres:	14,200 acres