Opportunities expand for South Dakota waterfowl hunters

By John Pollmann
Originally published in the Outdoor Forum

The release of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service’s “Trends in Breeding Duck Populations” report each summer kick-starts the crescendo of excitement leading up to the opening day of the waterfowl season, and all signs are pointing toward another tremendous fall in the Dakotas.

An estimated 49.1 million ducks settled across the U.S. and Canada to breed this spring, according to the report, marking an eight-percent increase over continental numbers from 2013 and the highest ever recorded since the air and ground survey began in 1955. The eastern Dakotas, however, saw a decrease in both the number of breeding ducks (-18 percent) and ponds (-19 percent) from last year, but South Dakota’s leading waterfowl biologist says that hunters should not be too concerned.

“That the eastern half of South Dakota was the driest portion of the Prairie Pothole Region when the survey was conducted in May goes to show just how wet the remaining portions of the pothole region were this spring, because conditions here were not all that bad.” Murano says. “And wetlands conditions have improved here with all of the moisture in June, so I’d expect that we’ll still have solid production from this region.”

Wetland conditions in portions of prairie Canada are “off the charts,” Murano says, and favorable conditions in the western Dakotas and Montana are also helping produce the phenomenal duck numbers in the survey.

“The area west of the Missouri River is not always considered to be...
South Dakota NAWCA Grants Approved

By Steve Donovan

The North American Wetlands Conservation Council has approved two grants to be awarded to Ducks Unlimited, allowing the organization to continue its efforts to preserve and enhance areas of vital wetland and grassland habitat and accomplish a number of high priority conservation objectives.

The James River Lowlands/Missouri Coteau Project, Phase VI, and the Central South Dakota Wetlands and Prairies proposals provide Ducks Unlimited with $2.5 million in federal grant funds awarded through the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, with matching funds of just over $2.5 million provided by Ducks Unlimited and its conservation partners. When combined, the funds will provide needed protection of crucial wetland and grassland habitat through the acquisition of perpetual conservation easements.

Though long a close partner with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the acquisition of these important conservation easements, their value has increased tremendously in recent years.

Since 2006 the Prairie Pothole Region – otherwise known as the “duck factory” – has experienced accelerated loss rates of grassland and wetland habitats, primarily through conversion for agricultural purposes. Ducks

Ducks Unlimited, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other conservation partners are attempting to address this significant problem by dramatically increasing efforts to work with willing landowners and protect vital waterfowl habitat with conservation easements.

The future health of waterfowl populations is dependent on the protection of sufficient breeding habitat in the Prairie Pothole Region, which represents the most important waterfowl breeding habitat in North America. Those grasslands and wetlands protected by conservation easements are also critically important to many other wildlife species, including ring-necked pheasants, grouse, deer, other migratory birds and many additional species of fish and wildlife

‘duck country,’ but when you have the wet conditions like we do this year, it is an area that can produce a strong flight of birds on the stock dams and natural wetlands,” Murano says. “Ducks can find a lot of nesting options out there with such a large base of grassland acres, and the area lacks the predators that hurt nesting success in the eastern Dakotas. It will probably kick out a lot of ducks this year.”

Species that nest in Dakotas such as mallards, gadwall, wigeon, pintails, redheads, canvasbacks are all trending well above the long-term average. Blue-winged teal continue to settle in the region in remarkable numbers as well (over 2.5 million), leading Murano to push for a special opportunity for hunters in South Dakota this fall.

Upon request from Murano and other waterfowl leaders in the northern reaches of the Central Flyway, officials from the USFS&WS approved a special three-year season that would allow hunters to shoot two additional blue-winged teal for the first sixteen days of the regular duck season.

“The bonus teal is a way for the northern states to take advantage of some of that harvest opportunity we have with blue-winged teal without going through the issues that may come up with a traditional early season,” Murano says. “If production states tried to actually institute a teal season I think there’d be a whole lot of issues regarding duck identification that would put our hunters in a tough position.

“In the early season we have so many kinds of ducks, all pretty much in that drab brown plumage for the month of September, so that was kind of why we pushed for adding the two teal during those first weeks of the regular season.”

In addition to the bonus blue-winged teal for the first sixteen days, this season’s daily limit on ducks is six, which may consist of no more than 3 mallards (no more than 2 hens), 3 wood ducks, 3 scaup, 2 redheads, 2 pintails and 1 canvasback.

Hunting opportunities for Canada geese expanded this fall as well, as the number of birds nesting in the state remains well above the number the GF&P believes meets biological and social constraints. An estimated 175,000 nesting Canada geese settled on the state’s semi-permanent and permanent wetlands this spring, roughly double the management goal of 80,000-90,000, and the GF&P again instituted expanded seasons and limits for the big birds.

From August 16-31 resident hunters were allowed to shoot 15 geese per day in select counties in eastern South Dakota, and the expanded limit remained in place across much of the state through September. Beginning October 1, the limit decreases to 8 birds per day for the remainder of the season for most of the state, while hunters along the Missouri River and in the southwest corner of the state will be allowed to shoot 4 geese per day.

“Based on local production and what will funnel through here from North Dakota and prairie Canada, this is shaping up to be another good year for waterfowl hunters,” Murano says. “Ducks or geese, there should be lots of opportunities.”

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Continued from page 1
South Dakota Volunteer Elected to DU Board of Directors

By Steve Donovan

Longtime South Dakota Ducks Unlimited volunteer and former state chairman Jeff Heidelbauer was elected to DU national board of directors during the organization’s annual convention in St. Louis.

Heidelbauer will likely serve a two-year term on the board while also serving as the Regional Vice-President of the Great Plains Region, which includes the states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming and Montana. Chief among Heidelbauer’s duties will be working to train other volunteers – particularly senior volunteers – to propel and implement initiatives at the state level.

“Fundraising equals conservation, plain and simple,” Heidelbauer says. “My role is help facilitate growth, including among our major donors, which DU can use to see habitat preserved and enhanced on the ground. The role of our state volunteers in this capacity is vital; the ability of initiatives developed at the national level to succeed at the local level really depends on those grassroots efforts within states and individual chapters.”

Heidelbauer points to the Protect Our Prairies initiative – an aggressive campaign to protect critically important areas of duck breeding habitat - as a perfect example of how an idea developed in committee can have a lasting impact on a landscape. With a seat on the DU’s development committee and the national board, Heidelbauer believes he will be in a great position to share thoughts on what is needed to further protect South Dakota’s grasslands and wetlands.

“I’ve seen already that it will be easier to get a seat at the table when it comes to conversations about conservation – something about which I am very passionate,” Heidelbauer says. “I’m still learning what my new role will all include, but I’m very excited to play a part in furthering the mission of Ducks Unlimited.”

Heidelbauer, the co-owner and operator of a ranch in Custer and a farm in Minnesota, has been an active DU volunteer for 38 years – a commitment he says was instilled by his father, Frank.

“My father taught me to give back for the enjoyment you get from outdoor activities like waterfowl hunting. I learned early on there was no better organization than Ducks Unlimited for me to focus my ‘give back’ activities,” he said. “To serve on the DU board of directors is the ultimate honor and a great way to help conservation in the Prairie Pothole Region that I have had the life-long privilege to enjoy.”
Volunteers Brave the Elements to Help Band Ducks

On a cool, misty, gray, and windy Saturday morning in late August, twenty enthusiastic volunteers visited the Goebel Ranch in McPherson County to assist with Ducks Unlimited’s duck banding operation and hear updates about the organization’s conservation efforts in South Dakota. This is the 6th consecutive year volunteers and their families have had the opportunity to get their hands on some live ducks, participate in a banding operation, and learn more about the biology and migration patterns of the waterfowl species that spend the spring and summer months here on the prairie.

Among the attendees were seven eager youngsters, who would not see their excitement dampened by the cool and wet weather conditions. At the first banding station each youngster stood next to the catch pen full of ducks, which were predominately blue-winged teal, and patiently waited with their hands stretched out until a small ball of feathers and wiggling webbed feet was placed in their palms. If the duck they were holding was wearing a band that was placed on the bird earlier this banding season, the child would launch the bird into the air and watch it fly out across the prairie or land on one of the nearby small wetlands.

“Many of the ducks that we capture at this point in the banding season have been through this process before and have already been banded,” said Bruce Toay, a regional biologist with DU. “Once individual birds discover a place they can get a free meal of corn or oats, they keep coming back for more, even if that means sitting in a trap for part of the day!”

Ducks pulled from the catch pen that did not already have a band on one of their legs were given a shiny new bracelet with their own personal identification number on it and then released. The volunteers helped place about 100 new bands on ducks that were captured in the 10 swim-in type traps located at various wetlands scattered across the Goebel Ranch. An additional 300 birds that were captured but already banded in previous weeks were also released.

“We’ve been trapping ducks on most of these same ten wetlands for the past twelve seasons,” said Randy Meidinger, Regional Biologist for DU in SD. “During this stretch of time we have banded nearly 35,000 ducks that have visited our traps.”

After the banding work was completed in the field the group enjoyed a well-earned warm grilled lunch in the sheltered precincts of the Goebel machine shed.

Continental Influence of the Goebel Ranch

Approximately 2200 of the ducks banded at the Goebel Ranch over past decade have been recovered by hunters in all four flyways; from as far west as southern California, to as far east as the Caribbean islands, and from as far north as Red Deer, Alberta and New Brunswick Canada, to as far south as Ecuador.
thirty miles north of the equator. This recovery data is a perfect indicator of just how important the wetlands and grasslands of the Goebel Ranch – and all of the Prairie Pothole Region – are for sustaining fall flights of ducks across the continent.

All of the data gathered from the ducks banded by DU is submitted to the US Geological Survey Bird Banding Lab located in Laurel, Maryland. The banding data from DU is pooled with banding info collected from various other state and federal agencies across the country where the associated recovery information reported by hunters is used to help determine migration routes, survival rates, harvest distribution and other information concerning certain species of ducks. This information, in part, is then used to help determine duck population estimates that assist managers in determining local and regional duck hunting season lengths, bag limits and associated regulations.

So while the job was a wet and cold one, the volunteers that gathered on the Goebel Ranch were playing an important role in waterfowl management all the while underscoring why it is so important that we continue to protect the wetlands and grasslands of South Dakota, which represent some of the most important nesting and breeding habitat remaining in North America.

“We’ve been trapping ducks on most of these same ten wetlands for the past twelve seasons”

Randy Meidinger, Regional Biologist for DU in SD
The prospect of seeing a large number of bald eagles was enough to get me out of the house and hit the gravel back-roads of southeastern South Dakota on a brisk afternoon this past spring. Word had it that more than twenty of the majestic birds were roosting in a large stand of cottonwood trees not too far from where I live in Dell Rapids. It is not all that rare to see eagles in this part of the state, but to have so many congregated in one area certainly piqued my interest.

My three-year old son came along for the ride, and after pulling up to a rural intersection we were both treated to the spectacle that is the spring migration. The eagles were there - roughly a dozen or so standing sentinel in the trees with others on the ground or soaring in the air - but the stars of the show were the ducks.

The cornfield directly adjacent to the cottonwoods was buzzing with several thousand ducks - mallards, pintails, green-winged teal and wigeon. It quickly became apparent what brought all of the birds to this area: food. A nearby ice-free creek was providing roosting waters for the waterfowl, while the harvested field obviously held an ample supply of waste grain to help restore fat reserves after the migration. For the eagles, it meant a steady diet of waterfowl in preparation for their own northward movement.

My son and I sat outside at corner intersection of two gravel roads and watched the beehive of activity for quite some time, and I was pleased to see that he was taking it all in.

“Those geese, daddy,” my son stated.


“Oh. I like ducks.”

“So do I.”

Anyone who knows me well is aware of my fascination with waterfowl, and my wife deserves special credit for putting up with my frequent ramblings on all things ducks and geese. I do believe that she has come to accept that no conversation in the car is safe from interruption when mallards, pintails or Canada geese are spotted out the windows.

These are good times to be a waterfowl fanatic, too. Tremendous water conditions throughout the Prairie Pothole Region in the Dakotas, Montana, Minnesota and Canada have helped supply skies full of both ducks and geese. I do believe that has come to accept that no conversation in the car is safe from interruption when mallards, pintails or Canada geese are spotted out the windows. As populations of many species of waterfowl have recently reached record or near-record levels. Though delaying the arrival of spring, our recent string of snowstorms are doing much to see excellent conditions again on the prairie, at least where quality habitat remains.

Water in the form of spring rains or snowmelt is a key factor in creating favorable nesting conditions, but that moisture does little for upland nesting ducks like mallards, pintails and blue-winged teal where grassland and wetland habitats have been lost or degraded. A person need only look to southern Minnesota or northwestern Iowa to see the reality of that caveat. Grasslands and wetlands are what make South Dakota unique from her neighbors to the east; they are what make South Dakota a duck producing state; and they are disappearing at a rate not seen in nearly 100 years.

Much has been said of how the Dakotas are losing acres of wetlands - as much as 13,000 acres a year - but I will contend that the loss of grassland acres is of more concern. When an acre of grass is turned over, any wetland found within immediately shifts from an asset to a liability. Even the smallest wetlands are valued in a grass-based operation, but those same ephemeral basins prove to be more of a headache for a producer growing corn or soybeans. Grassland conservation is truly our best form of wetland conservation.

Though long on the radar of conservation organizations like Ducks Unlimited, the risks threatening the PPR region of South Dakota are gaining more attention from politicians and others who drive federal policy, which has played a significant role in habitat losses. To that end, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service recently announced the Prairie Conservation Campaign - a partnership of conservation organizations dedicated to developing and maintaining relationships with private landowners and preserving those working landscapes where the needs of wildlife and agricultural production go hand-in-hand.

A successful fall flight of ducks like the one we’ll likely see this year doesn’t happen by accident; it takes habitat. And I am hopeful that we are ready to turn the corner toward a renewed sense of conservation of the wetland and grassland habitats in South Dakota.
Ducks Unlimited Submits the “Missouri River Wetlands” NAWCA Proposal

In an effort to continue a mission of conservation in South Dakota, Ducks Unlimited recently submitted another proposal to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for funding consideration under the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA). The “Missouri River Wetlands” proposal seeks $1 million in federal grant funds to complete several important wetland conservation projects in south-central South Dakota, and matching funds totaling more than $1.6 million were contributed by DU and its conservation partners.

The remaining funds in the grant proposal are slated for a series of wetland restoration and protection projects within a six-county project area. If approved, the NAWCA funds will become available to Ducks Unlimited to initiate these important conservation projects in March of 2015.

Included among the proposed projects are:

- A large wetland enhancement effort being planned for the Lake Andes National Wildlife Refuge in Charles Mix County
- Planned habitat conservation activities on the newly-acquired Van Zee property northeast of Platte
- The Hastings acquisition and restoration project, which is located on the Nebraska side of the Missouri River near Niobrara, Nebraska
- A wetland enhancement project on lands managed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers between Lake Andes and Pickstown
Ducks Unlimited to Acquire Important Habitat in Roberts County

As a part of the Revolving Lands Program, Ducks Unlimited has entered into a purchase agreement to acquire a 431-acre property in Roberts County in northeastern South Dakota.

The Vig property is located adjacent to the 160-acre Kemnitz property, which was acquired last December using money raised from the sale of portions of the Goebel Ranch. Similar to the Kemnitz property, this new acquisition contains numerous shallow wetlands, including a large number of restorable wetlands. The abundant, small, shallow wetlands on this property provide outstanding breeding habitat to waterfowl.

The Vig property purchase will be complete by late October of this year, after which DU biologists and engineers will begin to develop a comprehensive wetland and grassland restoration plan for both properties. When fully restored, these properties will attract well over 100 pairs of breeding waterfowl per square mile, which puts this complex among “the best of the best” in the entire Prairie Pothole Region.

Both the Vig and Kemnitz properties have been acquired as part of DU’s Revolving Lands Program. As part of this program, DU will place perpetual conservation easements on these tracts once they are restored - permanently protecting nearly 600 acres of vital waterfowl breeding habitat. After restoration and protection efforts are completed, the properties will be sold to conservation buyers, and the proceeds from the sales reinvested in future conservation efforts.

Like all DU-owned lands, the properties will be open to a variety of public activities while under DU ownership, including hunting, birdwatching, hiking and other activities.

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A work group formed by Gov. Dennis Daugaard announced its recommendations for enhancing pheasant habitat in South Dakota last month at the Outdoor Campus in Sioux Falls. Though aimed at preserving a sustainable population of the state’s most popular upland bird, the recommendations given to the governor could also have a positive impact on habitat for nesting ducks as well.

Gov. Daugaard formed the work group following the Pheasant Habitat Summit last December. Group members met eight times from February through August, reviewing hundreds of comments, suggestions, letters, survey results and scientific data. The work group then developed a report with eight recommendations for action.

Among other suggestions, the work group calls for the formation of the South Dakota Conservation Fund “dedicated to providing financial resources directly to conservation efforts, including pheasant habitat.” Gov. Daugaard has pledged to establish the fund, and Tim Kessler, an Aberdeen businessman and member of the work group, has committed an initial gift of $100,000 to launch it.

Other recommendations include:

- Develop and implement the South Dakota Conservation Certification Program, which will reward landowners for maintaining a baseline level of conservation
- Revisit the current policy for mowing ditches and other right-of-ways
- Petition the U.S. Department of Agriculture to include all South Dakota counties as eligible for crop insurance coverage on winter wheat
- Support Congressional efforts to raise the Federal Duck Stamp from $15 to $25

Eric Lindstrom, government affairs representative for Ducks Unlimited in the Bismarck office, applauds the actions of the governor and the work group for their effort to take an important first step in addressing habitat losses in South Dakota.

“Hunters in South Dakota know that the enhancement and protection of habitat for pheasants is going to have a positive impact on other game and non-game species, including ducks and other grassland dependent birds,” Lindstrom said. “We are excited to watch how the important work of the governor and the members of the work group translates into habitat on the ground.”

Of particular interest, Lindstrom says, is the support for winter wheat and the effort to raise the price of the Federal Duck Stamp. “Winter wheat is not preferred to native grass, but it has the potential to serve as productive nesting habitat for ducks, especially in areas of high wetland densities,” Lindstrom says. “We have found it to be a win-win crop; it is good for both a producer’s bottom line and the ducks.

“The impact of a price increase on the duck stamp, too, would be tremendous. We’re looking at an additional bump of around $14 million, which would allow Ducks Unlimited, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and our other partners to further protect wetland and grassland habitat in South Dakota and across the Prairie Pothole Region.”
The 2015 South Dakota Ducks Unlimited State Convention will take place Friday, February 13 - Sunday, February 15, 2015, at the Highland Conference Center in Mitchell SD. All Ducks Unlimited members are invited to attend. You can learn more about the Highland Conference Center by visiting highlandconferencecenter.com.

Be sure to make your hotel reservations early and ask the for DU Convention rate.

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See the SDDU State Convention registration form elsewhere in this issue of Fowl Talk, and watch for the formal invitations in the mail later this fall!
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Ducks: 6 and comprised of no more than:
5 Mallards, which may include no more than 2 hens
3 Scaup
3 Wood Ducks
2 Redheads
2 Pintail
1 Canvasback
2 BONUS blue-winged teal (first 16 days of season only)
(Low Plains North & Middle Zones: Sept. 27-Oct. 12
High Plains and Low Plains South Zones: Oct. 11-26)
Mergansers: 5 (including no more than 2 hooded merganser)

Coots: 15

HIGH PLAINS ZONE

LOW PLAINS - NORTH ZONE
Season Dates: Sept. 27 - Dec. 9

LOW PLAINS - MIDDLE ZONE
Season Dates: Sept. 27 - Dec. 9

LOW PLAINS - SOUTH ZONE
Season Dates: Oct. 11 - Dec. 23