Ducks Unlimited Sells Remaining Acres of Goebel Ranch

On April 1, 2014 Ducks Unlimited completed the Revolving Lands phase of the Goebel Ranch project by selling the remaining 2163 acres of this property by way of a DU online public auction. The property was advertised to be sold in three different parcels of 1167 acres, 917 acres and 79 acres, which included the existing ranch house and building site. Interest in the sale of this land was quite high, with over 50 individuals registering to bid on the land during the weeks prior to the online auction. At the conclusion of the sale the highest bids for all three parcels were submitted by area ranchers. The primary use of the land will not change with the transfer of ownership, as Ducks Unlimited has allowed grazing as a major component of the management of this property in the past. The ranch is permanently protected with US Fish and Wildlife Service wetland and grassland conservation easements, so the land will continue to provide quality habitat for waterfowl and other grassland

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DU Sells Remaining Acres of Goebel Ranch

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nesting birds for future generations to enjoy.

Ducks Unlimited's decision to sell the property at public auction was reached only after multiple attempts were made to sell the remaining acres of the Goebel Ranch to state and federal conservation entities. However, due to tight budgetary constraints at both the state and federal levels, a deal that would work out in the best interest of all parties involved could not be reached. Nonetheless, as part of the Revolving Lands Strategy (RLS) proceeds from the sale of the Goebel Ranch will be reinvested in the purchase of other parcels of land in South Dakota, which will provide additional public access and recreational opportunities to outdoor enthusiasts. Existing cairns located at four dedication sites on the Ranch will be moved to a vista on an adjacent Waterfowl Production Area that will provide visitors with a wonderful view of the Goebel Ranch located to the immediate south.

The recently competed auction of the remaining acres of the Goebel Ranch was the second sale that pertained to this property. In the fall of 2011 a 7292-acre portion of the Ranch was also sold to area ranchers. Although Ducks Unlimited no longer owns any of this property, options for the organization to conduct scientific studies and continue longer term monitoring and research projects exist as part of the purchase agreements made with all new landowners.

Ducks Unlimited purchased the Goebel Ranch in the fall of 2000 as one of the first properties included in the newly conceived RLS. Parcels of land involved with this process are typically only retained in Ducks Unlimited ownership for 1-5 years before being sold after habitat improvements and protection of conservation values are established. However, given the uniquely large size, quality of intact native prairie habitat, existing infrastructure for rotational grazing practices and multiple opportunities to conduct research projects, it was decided the Goebel Ranch would be held for a longer period of time than other typical RLS properties.

Over the course of the past 13+ years of ownership by Ducks Unlimited the Goebel Ranch was utilized to provide educational opportunities to various audiences about the suite of conservation projects the organization completes in the region. Additionally, multiple research and monitoring projects were conducted on the ranch, including: duck nesting, livestock grazing, song bird occupancy, wetland function, weed control, butterfly utilization, prescribed fire, duck banding and many others. All of these projects have added to the scientific base of knowledge that Ducks Unlimited and our conservation partners continue to use to make the best and most informed decisions to deliver effective conservation programs across the prairie landscape. The Goebel Ranch has served as a very successful Ducks Unlimited project at many levels, and it is fitting that it was recognized as the SD DU 75th anniversary project last year.

SDDU State Convention Future Site Selection

The South Dakota Ducks Unlimited State Convention Site Selection Committee met in early March to consider future venues to host our state convention.

The committee reviewed several proposals submitted by event centers in Aberdeen, Brandon, Brookings, Chamberlain/Oacoma, Huron, Mitchell, Rapid City, Sioux Falls (two separate proposals) and Watertown. Those factors taken into consideration by the committee for selection included site and date availability, location in relation to our state Ducks Unlimited member and volunteer base, number and price of motel rooms, banquet room capacity, price including meals, and alcohol price structure (The Blind!).

Most of the proposals submitted were reasonably competitive and each proposal was reviewed in depth. In addition to selecting future venues, the committee also decided to hold upcoming conventions two weeks later than what has been scheduled in recent years.

The sites and dates for the upcoming conventions are as follows:

2015 Highland Conference Center, Mitchell
Feb 13-15

2016 Highland Conference Center, Mitchell
Feb 12-14

2017 Huron Event Center, Huron
Feb 10-12

2018 Cedar Shore Resort/ Bridges Conference Center, Oacoma
Feb 9-11

2019 Best Western Ramkota Hotel & Conference Center, Pierre
Feb 8-10

or
Watertown Event Center, Watertown, SD
Feb 11-13

You can learn more about the Highland Conference Center in Mitchell by visiting www.highlandconferencecenter.com. The Highland Conference Center is connected to two hotel properties and reservations can be made at the following phone numbers (be sure to ask for the DU Convention rate):
Comfort Inn & Suites, 605-990-2400; Hampton Inn, 605-995-1575.

See you in Mitchell in 2015!
DU Supporters Honored at Convention

Among the many activities taking place at last January’s state convention were the presentations of two awards to some of the biggest friends of grasslands and wetlands in South Dakota.

The recipients of the 2014 Friend of the Ducks Award were Jim and Carol Faulstich, owners and operators of the Daybreak Ranch near Highmore, S.D.

Along with their daughter Jacquie, son-in-law Adam, and their two children Alexis and Caleb, the Faulstich’s use a holistic approach to manage their herd of Red Angus cattle and custom graze yearling heifers. In addition to cattle, the Faulstich’s also operate an upland bird and whitetail deer hunting enterprise.

Jim has long been a supporter of grass-based agriculture and currently serves as the chairman of the South Dakota Grassland Coalition. Conservation advocates in South Dakota will also see Jim attending the Natural Resource Conservation Service’s state technical committee meetings and giving presentations on adaptive ranch management and conservation to many groups, including the South Dakota Grazing School. In 2010, Jim led the movement to bring the Leopold Conservation Award Program to South Dakota, which recognizes landowners actively committed to a land ethic.

The list of state, regional and national awards received by Jim, Carol and the Faulstich family is extensive, including the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association Environmental Stewardship Award for Region VII, Society for Range Management’s Excellence in Grazing Award, South Dakota Wildlife Society’s Citizen Award, the National Natural Resource Conservation’s Excellence in Conservation Award, South Dakota State University Chapter of Gamma Sigma Delta distinguished Alumnus Award, and the 2013 Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies National Private Lands Fish and Wildlife Stewardship Award. Now they can add the South Dakota Ducks Unlimited Friend of the Ducks Award to their list.

The Answers the Call Award is given to a South Dakota Ducks Unlimited volunteer who has gone above and beyond to help support the mission of wetlands conservation, and this year’s recipient was Paul Dehaan of Custer.

Paul has been a Ducks Unlimited volunteer for ten years and has made a significant impact to the organization’s efforts in the Black Hills region. From 2008 to 2010, Paul served as the area chairman for the Custer Committee, which received state recognition awards for its performance. Since 2010, Paul has served as treasurer for the committee and has helped the Custer chapter add a poker tournament and a dove hunt as secondary fundraising events. In addition to his work in Custer, Paul has served as a zone chairman since 2010, playing an active role in starting two new Black Hills chapters in Spearfish and Belle Fourche. Additionally, Paul attends and assists with all of the Ducks Unlimited events in the Black Hills region.

Paul’s service extends to the state level as well, having served on the state convention committee since 2011, when he managed the Big Boat Dice Toss Raffle. Paul has agreed to handle the treasurer’s job at the 2015 state convention in Mitchell.

Paul is also a Life Sponsor and has assisted with each of the Lake Oahe Life Sponsor Rendezvous as a boat captain. Not only is Paul a great example of a volunteer who is always ready to help the Ducks Unlimited cause, he has fun doing it!

Answers the Call Award

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The South Dakota Ducks Unlimited Heritage Award was presented in honor of the late DU leader Don Knapp at the 2014 SDDU State Convention.

The Heritage Award recognizes volunteers who have served an extended and extinguished career as a volunteer in South Dakota. Don served over 25 years as volunteer and served in a multitude of roles, which benefited Ducks Unlimited conservation efforts. As a District chairman he was instrumental in starting chapters in the Sioux Empire area. He mentored young volunteers on the best methods to grow their events and the importance of committee growth. The Hartford committee which is consistently a top SDDU chapter will miss his steadfast leadership, as will all volunteers who became friends with Don at the many SDDU State Conventions he and his wife Joanne attended thru the years.

Joanne accepted the Heritage Award in memoriam of Don at the Hartford Banquet in March.
Conservation at the Heart of Revolving Lands Program

The Revolving Lands Program (RLP) is one of the most important tools Ducks Unlimited has to protect threatened areas of vital grassland and wetland habitat in the Missouri Coteau portion of the Prairie Pothole Region. The program targets properties that are rich with valuable nesting habitat – both real and potential - and at risk of conversion, and after purchasing at market value from a willing seller Ducks Unlimited is able to restore degraded land features and place a perpetual conservation easement on the property. This ensures that future generations will be able to enjoy skies full of mallards, pintails and teal hatched in the heart of North America’s “duck factory.”

Essential to the RLP is the subsequent sale of the property to a buyer who will continue a mission of conservation – typically a local rancher looking for additional pasture or a conservation-minded buyer who wishes to own a hunting property, as such a sale provides for the capital needed to continue the program of restoration and conservation.

The sale of the remaining acres of the Goebel Ranch in McPherson County this past April brought to a close the first major transaction for the RLP in South Dakota, but it also opened the door for further protection of some of the most productive nesting habitat remaining on the continent.

Gricus Property
This spring Ducks Unlimited acquired a 480-acre property on the south side of the Mills Waterfowl Production Area in northern Buffalo County, an extensive tract of grassland and wetland habitats managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Up until two years ago, the $1.2 million Gricus property remained in a native condition, dotted with numerous wetlands, and providing ideal habitat to breeding waterfowl and many other species of wildlife. Unfortunately, most of the prairie on this property was recently plowed and converted to row crop farming – representative of a trend of grassland loss in the Prairie Pothole Region that has accelerated in recent years and is causing great concern for the future of waterfowl populations.

Like other properties in the RLP, while this parcel is owned by Ducks Unlimited, it will be open to hunting and will host a variety of research activities. The primary focus, however, will be restoring native prairie species on the property through a planting of a diverse mix of native grasses and flowering plants. Conservation easements will then be placed on the property to permanently protect the restored grassland and ensure that wetlands on the property will never be drained. The diverse mix of wetlands on the property will provide ideal breeding habitat to mallards, northern pintails, gadwalls, blue-winged teal and many other species of waterfowl.

Paula Hall Trust Property
On March 20th, Ducks Unlimited was the successful bidder on 638 acres of pristine waterfowl habitat south of Miller. The extensive 2,977 acre Paula Hall Trust property that sold at auction was virtually all intact, native prairie dotted with hundreds of small, shallow wetlands. The ranch was auctioned as 12 distinct parcels. None of the wetlands or grasslands was protected by any kind of conservation easement at the time of the auction.

The auction was well attended by over 60 people, and the many rounds of bidding stretched out for over 4 hours. In the end, Ducks Unlimited was able to acquire three of the twelve parcels – each recognized as a highest priority for protection because of the extensive waterfowl habitat contained within. Another parcel of high priority was acquired by a neighboring rancher and Ducks Unlimited is hoping to work with that individual to protect the property’s important habitat through a conservation easement.

Working with ranchers to protect and improve grassland habitats tends to be mutually beneficial for Ducks Unlimited
and producers, as the recent loss of grassland habitat in South Dakota has made it more difficult to find adequate grass for livestock. Several ranchers at the Paula Hall Trust auction wished Ducks Unlimited luck in efforts to acquire portions of the Hall property, and Randy Meidinger, manager for Ducks Unlimited's properties in South Dakota, received several calls from local ranchers on the day of the auction, inquiring about the possibility of grazing on the new RLP property.

Unfortunately, the balance of the parcels sold that day could very likely be plowed up and converted to row crop agriculture. The loss of native grassland and CRP acres in the past few years has been occurring at a high rate. The conversion of grassland to cropland, and the loss of wetland habitats that continues to occur, particularly on those lands, is a real threat to habitat for waterfowl, pheasants and many other species.

Van Zee and Kemnitz Properties

Additionally, last fall and winter Ducks Unlimited added a pair of properties to the Revolving Land Program.

As mentioned in a recent issue of Ducks Unlimited magazine, the acquisition of the 65-acre Van Zee property was completed at auction last November. The property is located about one mile south of the Broken Arrow Waterfowl Production Area northeast of Platte in Douglas County.

While other portions of the property attracted multiple bidders and much interest, Ducks Unlimited was the only entity that bid the announced minimum price on this portion of the property. The parcel is a very nice mix of grassland and wetland habitats currently enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program.

During a site inspection of the tract, Steve Donovan, Manager of Conservation Programs for Ducks Unlimited, reported seeing large numbers of pheasants on the property, using both the tall grass habitat and the planted food plots.

Merlin Van Zee, the previous owner who sold the property to Ducks Unlimited, planted the grasslands and food plots that are providing habitat to not only pheasants but nesting ducks and many other species of wildlife. Ducks Unlimited will likely seek Mr. Van Zee’s help in the future to maintain those important food plots.

In addition to ducks, the property will also provide habitat to pheasants, deer, and many other species of wildlife, including ground nesting prairie songbirds.

The Van Zee property should provide for ample hunting opportunities while under Ducks Unlimited ownership, and all hunters are urged to observe the signs that will be placed on the property, delineating not only the property boundary but the “safety zone” next to a neighbor’s house.

In late December of 2013, Ducks Unlimited successfully acquired the Kemnitz property – 160 acres of terrific waterfowl habitat located just southeast of Veblen in Roberts County. The property is currently farmland but does contain over 30 individual wetlands, including many wetlands that are partially drained but can easily be restored.

The large number of small wetlands on the property makes it a parcel of particular importance to nesting waterfowl, explains Johann Walker, Ducks Unlimited’s Director of Conservation Programs for the Dakotas.

“Biologically, ten one-acre wetlands can produce three times as many ducks as one ten-acre wetland,” says Walker. “With its high density of small wetlands, the Kemnitz property has a high carrying capacity for breeding waterfowl pairs.”

Waterfowl pairs develop a “pair territory” during the spring breeding season, Walker says, and will seek isolation from ducks of the same species.

“Even the smallest wetlands are capable of supporting waterfowl pairs,” says Walker. “And the greater the number of small wetlands contained on a particular property, the more pairs that property can support.

Wetlands attract breeding pairs of ducks, regardless of whether those wetlands are located in grassland or cropland. On the Kemnitz property, a number of drainage ditches will be plugged, fully restoring these wetlands and further increasing the ability of this property to attract breeding pairs of ducks. The cropland will be restored to grassland habitat and the entire property protected with both grassland and wetland conservation easements.

The role these small, ephemeral wetlands and the surrounding grasslands play for nesting waterfowl has made their protection a focus in South Dakota. The Revolving Land Program has emerged as a very effective way to support Ducks Unlimited’s aggressive goal of protecting the “best-of-the-best” waterfowl habitat remaining in North America.

Ducks Unlimited is seeking other opportunities to restore and enhance wetland and grassland habitats in eastern South Dakota. Any landowners who might be interested in discussing a potential project should call Steve Donovan at 308-383-8075.
Giving Thanks for the Little Things

Cotton socks. Twenty years separate me from one of my favorite hunts, but I still remember those white cotton socks.

“Your feet are going to freeze,” my brother informed me after spying the offending knee-highs while I slipped off a boot and used a fencepost to help balance the awkward, one-legged dance of putting on waders in the dark. On the other side of the fence sat a large slough, and there in grasses along the waters’ edge, rested a canoe loaded with all of our hunting gear. It was a cold morning in late November, and the mallards were in town.

“That weather is cold,” he added. “Those socks are not going to be warm enough in those waders.”

Like most teenagers, I wasn’t thinking of the practical ramifications of wearing a single layer of cotton socks on a late-season hunt when I dressed that morning. I was excited for the hunt, for the opportunity to hunt with my brother. Duck calls, decoys and shotgun shells – those are the thoughts of a youthful waterfowl hunter; warm socks, not so much.

The morning progressed on this marsh near De Smet, and little emerged to temper my enthusiasm. Waves born on a strong northwest wind buffeted the bow of the canoe as my brother and I paddled toward the far corner, where tall stands of cattails created pockets of protection from the elements. As we tossed out the last of the decoys from the canoe into one of the small openings, snow began to fall from the low ceiling of gray clouds. Standing in the waist-deep water, tucked into a wall of cattails, the scene spread out in front of me was one straight from the pages of some classic duck hunting tale. And fortunately, for my story, the lead characters didn’t disappoint.

Flock after flock of mallards worked over the marsh that morning – birds riding the big wind after feeding in a nearby cornfield. More magical than their sudden appearance in the snowy sky were the birds’ reactions to my attempts on the duck call. It was the first time where I could see that my hail-calls and five-note greeting calls were having an actual influence on wing-beats and direction. As a duck hunter, I grew up a little that morning, and my feet – well, they grew uncomfortably cold.

I noticed the chill almost the second I slid over the edge of the canoe and into the water, but it was manageable for the first moments of the hunt. Wading through the waters to retrieve downed ducks helped to warm my toes, but any period of time spent in one spot quickly left my feet painfully cold. Thankfully there were enough excuses to keep moving, but by the time we had shot our limits of ducks and picked up our decoys, my feet felt as if they were frozen. Fittingly, when I lifted myself back into the canoe, the boots of my waders thudded on the floor like blocks of ice.

Back on the other side of the slough, my brother and I slid the canoe under the fence line and marched it up to our waiting truck. When I slipped one foot out of my waders, the cotton sock remained inside the frozen boot. My foot was a bright red.

“How are your toes,” my brother asked.

I didn’t feel the need to reply.

Most of us who spend time in the outdoors can unlock the detailed memories of an entire day hunting or fishing because of one moment or event that sticks with us forever. Sometimes it’s as significant as a son or daughter’s first duck, other times it’s as small as a single feather. Such was the case last year on a duck hunt near Lower Brule.

The shooting was slow but steady for me and the three others who were hiding in a blind sunk into an earthen berm. Flooded corn sat on either side of us, 10 acres or so of habitat managed by the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe. Roughly three hundred yards in front of the blind rested the waters of the Missouri River, and mallards were bouncing back and forth between their areas of rest and food.

We shot mostly single drake mallards all morning, and I was helping my yellow Lab search for a downed bird when something caught my eye down one of the rows of corn. Resting on top of the water was a single feather from the speculum on a mallard’s wing, and the light leaking into the rows of corn was hitting it at just the right angle so that the iridescent blue glowed.

I paused long enough to take a quick photo, though it was etched in my mind forever, and moved on in search of the drake mallard. Ducks continued to work in the cold skies above as yellow dog and I worked through the stalks.

We eventually found the greenhead, and walking back to the blind, for some reason, I thought of my toes. They were comfortably warm – a good pair of socks will do that. And for that, I was thankful.

Fourth Oahe Reservoir Life Sponsor Rendezvous

If you are a South Dakota Major Donor or are interested in becoming one, please plan to attend the Life Sponsor Rendezvous June 25 and 26 at Spring Creek Resort on Lake Oahe. Anyone who has attended will tell you the event is all about having fun and catching fish!

This year’s Rendezvous will begin on the evening of the 25th with a social hour and dinner, at which time fishermen and fisherwomen will be assigned to their boat captains for the next day’s fishing. The rules will be explained for the fishing raffles and there will be a couple of presentations by the Ducks Unlimited Conservation and Development staff. The next morning you will be treated to a continental breakfast before heading off for a day’s fishing. In the afternoon the boat captains will clean the fish, with some fillets delivered to the lodge kitchen. That evening a huge fish fry will be served with all the fixings, and the fishing raffle winners will be presented with their prizes.

A block of cabins will be held for our group at Spring Creek Resort (call Angela at 605-224-8336 and ask for the special Ducks Unlimited rate). All registrations for the Rendezvous will be coordinated by John Cooper, 108 Iris Court, Pierre, SD 57501 (605-224-1598). Do not delay as the cabins will fill up quickly!
New Farm Bill Provides Needed Tools, Protection for Habitat Conservation

Nearly three years of debate and frustration came to an end earlier this year when President Barack Obama signed into law the Agriculture Act of 2014. Better known as the farm bill, the legislation is widely recognized as the largest driver for private-lands conservation, and wildlife and habitat leaders across the region were relieved to see the president put ink to paper.

“In the time it took to pass the legislation, we know we lost thousands of acres of habitat in South Dakota, so it was very important to make conservation tools available again for farmers and landowners,” says Dave Nomsen, vice president of governmental affairs for Pheasants Forever. “Overall, we are pleased with the bill, but the real work begins now to take these tools and implement them on the landscape.”

Conservation programs included in the 2014 farm bill are projected to spend $57 billion nationwide over the next 10 years, including $20 billion in the popular Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). However, the bill does place an enrollment cap of 27.5 million acres of CRP for 2014 with a gradual decline to 24 million acres by 2017.

In South Dakota, the amount of ground enrolled in CRP is already on the decline, with the total number of acres in the state in 2013 dipping below 1 million for the first time in more than two decades.

Part of that decline can be linked to the growing disparity between what a producer can receive via a CRP rental rate versus a traditional cash rental rate for crop production, explains Mark Norton, farm bill coordinator with the South Dakota Game, Fish & Parks.

Norton says that last year the average Conservation Reserve Program rental rate in Brown County was $106 an acre; in Beadle County, $125 an acre; while McCook County contracts earned $163 an acre. By comparison, the average cash rental rate for non-irrigated cropland in McCook County in 2013 hovered near $215 an acre.

“The new farm bill does include language that requires a review of those conservation rental payments on a yearly basis,” Norton says. “We hope that the increase in cash rental rates moderates some, but we know that the CRP rate will never be the same. It has to stay somewhat competitive, though.”

In the next five years, roughly 500,000 additional acres of CRP in South Dakota are set to expire, and Pheasants Forever’s Nomsen says that part of the challenge will be to inform landowners of the other conservation tools available in the new farm bill.

“Programs like the Conservation Stewardship Program, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and others are proving to be very popular, and more importantly they are good for farmers, good for ranchers and good for pheasants and other wildlife,” Nomsen says. “These ‘working lands’ programs are what we need to keep habitat on the ground regardless of land prices and...”

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commodity prices.”

The accelerated loss of native prairie in South Dakota has become a paramount concern, and Nomsen credits South Dakota Senator John Thune and Representative Kristi Noem for seeing a “sodsaver” provision included the new farm bill that discourages producers from breaking new ground.

“It really would not have happened without the leadership from South Dakota,” Nomsen says. “And it is good policy; it saves taxpayer dollars and protects our country’s last remaining native prairies where they are most threatened.”

Wetland protection received a common-sense boost in the new farm bill as well, adds Eric Lindstrom, Ducks Unlimited government affairs representative in Bismarck, N.D., through the re-coupling of conservation compliance to crop insurance.

The idea of linking basic conservation provisions that reduce soil erosion and deter wetland drainage with those taxpayer-funded supports provided to agricultural producers is nothing new, Lindstrom explains.

“But really, we’re maintaining status quo protections for wetlands that have been in place for thirty years,” Lindstrom says. “It is a long-standing agreement that previously was linked to direct subsidy payments to producers, which were eliminated in the new farm bill. We strongly support crop insurance and believe that farmers need a strong safety net, and by linking conservation compliance to crop insurance, we feel like we are providing again that safety net for wetlands and other habitat loss.”

Lindstrom says that conservation compliance has helped protect nearly 1.4 million of the most productive wetlands for waterfowl production in North and South Dakota, and he credits a unified message of support sent from a broad coalition of agricultural, conservation and commodity organizations for seeing those protections stay in place.

“This new farm bill has been a long journey, but we’re pleased with it, that it includes proactive measures and commonsense programs that will incentivize conservation on working lands,” Lindstrom says.
Preserving the conservation tradition of the federal duck stamp

The federal duck stamp turned 80 years old earlier this year, but it may be safe to say that it was an event largely unheralded by a good percentage of the folks in South Dakota.

That the stamp flies under the radar of so many is surprising, as there are reminders of its legacy of conservation all across our great state.

If you’ve ever taken in the sights of the spring snow goose migration at Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge or watched trumpeter swans swimming the shallow marshes of the Lacreek National Wildlife Refuge or even boosted a rooster pheasant from the cattails of a Waterfowl Production Area, you’ve witnessed first-hand the conservation power of the federal duck stamp.

Since President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act into law on March 16, 1934, the federal duck stamp has proven to be a workhorse for conservation across the country. In its 80-year history, over 119 million duck stamps have been sold, raising $671 million for conservation, and helping protect over 6 million acres of wetland habitat.

The pair of mallard ducks that graced the face of the first federal duck stamp, sketched by Iowa artist Jay “Ding” Darling in 1934, were a natural reflection of what the stamp’s supporters were hoping would benefit most from the monies raised, but the impact of duck stamp dollars has stretched far beyond waterfowl. The list of wildlife that benefit from duck stamp sales is extensive - upland birds, neotropical migrants, deer, and raptors just to name a few – and an indication of just how important wetlands and the surrounding habitat are to the health of the landscape.

Little has changed to the mission of the duck stamp program over the past 80 years and it remains one of the great success stories in conservation. What has changed, however, is the stamp’s buying power.

The price of the federal duck stamp has been raised only seven times since 1934 when it cost $1, and it has been 23 years since the price was last increased to $15, where it remains today. But the value of those lands that the stamp pays to protect has skyrocketed in recent years, including here in South Dakota. In the late 1990’s, a section of grassland in McPherson County – an area valued for its high-density of wetlands and propensity for growing ducks – may have cost around $400 an acre. In 2013, quality native prairie in north-central South Dakota averaged over $1500 an acre.

Conservationists – hunters, bird watchers among them - are vocal leaders in seeing the price of a stamp raised, and legislation sponsored by Alaska Senator Mark Begich that would increase the fee to from $15 to $25 is currently moving forward in Washington, D.C. The bill is receiving bipartisan support in no small part because, as a user fee, the increase would have no net-impact on federal spending.

And there is interest on the other side of the duck stamp equation, too, as the waiting list of landowners interested in grassland and wetland easements numbers over 500 in South Dakota alone. The fee increase would help protect those remaining acres of high quality waterfowl habitat found throughout the Prairie Pothole portion of the state.

Belated or not, could there be a more appropriate birthday gift to give the 80-year old federal duck stamp than a chance to continue its legacy of habitat conservation?

Failing to do so will remove a tool that wildlife officials have long used to protect vulnerable wetlands and grasslands from conversion. And fewer acres of wetlands and their surrounding habitats would eventually have a negative impact on wildlife populations, water quality and the overall diversity of our landscape. That may be something that we all would notice.

By the Numbers

$1 – Price of the first federal duck stamp in 1934

7 – The number of times the price has been raised since $1 Current price of the federal duck stamp

2.6 million – Number of duck stamps purchased in South Dakota since 1934

4 – Number of National Wildlife Refuges in S.D. funded in part by duck stamp sales

119.3 million Number of duck stamps that have been purchased nationwide

$671.1 million Funds that have been raised for habitat conservation

98 cents – Portion of every duck stamp dollar raised that goes directly to habitat conservation

6 million+ – Acres of wetland habitat protected by the sale of federal duck stamps
South Dakota Man Honored by Ducks Unlimited

The winners of the 2014 Ducks Unlimited Conservation Achievement Awards were recently announced, and among the recipients was Kurt Forman of Brookings.

Forman was among six individuals recognized at an early morning award banquet on Thursday, March 13 in conjunction with the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference in Denver. Ducks Unlimited CEO Dale Hall and Chief Conservation Officer Paul Schmidt presented Forman with the award in the federal employee category in appreciation for his work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as the state coordinator of the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program in South Dakota.

Forman was born and raised in Windom, Minn., and developed a love of the outdoors at an early age, in no small part because of a father who loved to hunt.

“Some of my earliest memories are of ducks and geese; I was really infatuated with the birds,” Forman says. “My father, who hunted just about everything but ducks, noticed my interest and tried very hard to become a duck hunter and get me out hunting, too.”

Forman’s father, Jim, also forged a connection with a local hunting organization, the North Heron Lake Game Producers Association – a consortium of a dozen or so hunting clubs – and managed to land his son an open invitation to hunt with some of the members. Regaled with stories of the famed flights of canvasbacks that used to frequent the marshes in the area and instructed on decoy placement and other techniques, Forman says his ex-officio association membership proved to a first-class education in waterfowl and waterfowl hunting.

“Along with my father, a man by the name of Tony Thompson from the North Heron Lake Game Producers Association, in particular, really helped me along and took me under his wing,” Forman says. “Summer, spring, and fall, I was out in these marshes, poking around and discovering new things.”

Forman says that choosing to make a career in the wildlife field was a natural one, and narrowing down a college for studies after high school in Windom wasn’t all that hard, either.

“My father was in the livestock business, and I would travel with him to the sale barns in South Dakota in the fall,” Forman says. “I remember seeing ducks in the ditches during the hunting season, and you just didn’t see that in southern Minnesota. I was just flabbergasted. There were so many ducks around, so many wetlands, so many grasslands – it was an easy decision to head to South Dakota State University.”

An undergraduate degree took five years to complete – “the hunting was just that good,” Forman says – and the University of Montana, studies in duck nesting success, and a master’s degree in waterfowl biology came next.

While many of his graduate school classmates tried to find ways to stay in the mountains of Montana, Forman says he jumped at an opportunity to return to South Dakota.

Forman credits then-South Dakota USFWS private lands program coordinator Carl Madsen with helping launch his own career with the federal agency in the state that he had come to so deeply admire.

Since 1993, Forman has worked with the USFWS private lands program in South Dakota, the past 12 years as the state coordinator of the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. Wetland conservation has flourished under his leadership, with nearly 7700 acres having been restored or established, and 32 percent of those acres enrolled in perpetual conservation easements.

Grassland conservation, Forman contends, is the best form of wetland conservation, and to that end he has helped private landowners plant over 27,500 acres of native grass (46 percent protected by easements) and assisted grass-based producers with enrolling nearly 464,000 acres of grasslands into wildlife-friendly grazing systems, with over 25 percent of those acres protected by conservation easements.

Those are the achievements that earned Forman recognition from Ducks Unlimited, and a level of partnership for conservation in South Dakota in which the boy from Cottonwood County feels grateful for having played a role.

“I was kind of like a moth drawn to the light,” Forman explains. “I just had to try and make a career in the wildlife field, and I have met a lot of great people along the way, both inside my agency and within the field of natural resource conservation. I cannot imagine a more rewarding job.”
Rep. Noem Recognized with 2014 Wetland Conservation Achievement Award

Ducks Unlimited announced South Dakota Rep. Kristi Noem as the recipient of the Wetland Conservation Achievement Award at the 79th North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference last week. Rep. Noem was recognized for her work on the 2014 Farm Bill Conference Committee and as a champion of the Sodsaver program.

“I’m honored to receive the Wetland Conservation Achievement Award,” said Rep. Noem. “Dating back to President Theodore Roosevelt, hunters have been the pillar of conservation in America, doing more than anyone to conserve wildlife and its habitat. As a lifelong hunter, I’m proud to be able to pass that tradition down to my kids and I’m hopeful the Sodsaver program will help ensure future generations can enjoy native sod and grasslands as we do today.”

Rep. Noem authored the bipartisan Protect Our Prairies Act, a sodsaver protection that was included in the 2014 Farm Bill. The program encourages the conservation of waterfowl and other wildlife habitats that are on native sod and grasslands by reducing the crop insurance coverage for the first four years after its conversion to cropland in the Prairie Pothole Region.

Ducks Unlimited CEO Dale Hall said: “As a member of the farm bill conference committee, Rep. Noem was an essential player in securing the Sodsaver program’s place in the final 2014 Farm Bill, which will apply to six top duck-producing states.”

Paul Schmidt, Ducks Unlimited Chief Conservation Officer, added: “As a farmer, rancher and sportswoman herself, Representative Noem understands the connected nature of agriculture and hunting. Passage of the 2014 Farm Bill was a very significant achievement and she proved herself a true champion of conservation in the process.”

Ducks Unlimited’s Wetland Conservation Achievement Awards are presented annually in six categories to recognize individuals who have made outstanding contributions to the conservation and restoration of North America’s wetlands and waterfowl. The awards, one of Ducks Unlimited’s highest honors, were announced during the 79th North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference in Denver.

Ducks Unlimited Seeking Landowners to Participate in NAWCA Grant

In late February Ducks Unlimited and its conservation partners submitted a $1 million “Central South Dakota Wetlands and Prairies” grant proposal to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA).

The grant proposal addresses the conservation goals of 24 distinct projects in eastern South Dakota between the Missouri River and the James River, which includes some of the very best of the state’s waterfowl nesting habitat. Vital partners in the delivery of the grant-funded projects will include the South Dakota Game Fish & Parks, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the Northern South Dakota Chapter of Pheasants Forever and several Ducks Unlimited major donors.

The proposal utilizes a variety of conservation tools to protect and enhance habitat including the fee acquisition of two important additions to SDGF&P Game Production Areas in McPherson County. The proposal also includes the permanent protection of grassland and wetland habitats through perpetual easements to be held by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
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