



Measuring Waterfowl and Wetland Conservation: Counting Acres

The Bottom Line:

“Counting acres is a useful yardstick for measuring progress toward conservation goals. No matter how acres or progress are determined, Ducks Unlimited stands as the world’s leader among wetland and waterfowl conservation organizations.”

How does DU measure progress toward its waterfowl conservation goals?

- Ducks Unlimited has several measures of conservation performance, including acres conserved. We maintain a cumulative total of the acres conserved since DU started its work in 1937.
- **As of December 31, 2004, the total “acres conserved” in North America by DU was 11,259,529**, with the national breakdown being: Canada – 6,288,036; U.S. – 3,231,947; Mexico – 1,739,546.

What does “acres conserved” mean?

- DU defines conserved acres as habitat that DU has protected, restored, enhanced or managed for the benefit of waterfowl. DU considers habitat conserved if it is under an agreement that lasts at least 10 years or is owned by a public agency that assures its long-term dedication to wildlife.
- Protection can involve a range of activities, from complete protection through fee-title purchase to easements that protect waterfowl habitat values while allowing compatible or beneficial activities, such as managed and delayed grazing or hunting.
- When DU restores or enhances land, we improve the habitat by taking direct management actions such as improving water control, plugging ditches or establishing native vegetation. Although DU often protects and restores or enhances the same land, we only count the acres once to avoid double counting.
- Most DU work is done on land that is owned by someone else, although DU does own over 300,000 acres in North America, primarily in Canada. Accomplishments on land owned by public agencies or private landowners are counted for only the areas under specific agreement.

How is DU held accountable for what it says it does?

- DU has computerized records of all relevant aspects of every project on which we work, such as costs, partnerships, acreage, precise location, and type and duration of conservation activity.
- Each year, DU's records are audited by an independent accounting firm to verify our financial records and many of our measures of accomplishment, such as financial efficiency, which for many years has exceeded 85% in our waterfowl conservation programs.
- Almost all of DU's conservation work is done through partnerships that provide another layer of accountability. For example, North American Wetland Conservation Act projects have multiple levels of scrutiny. A proposal is first reviewed by a nine-member Council and staff of state, federal, and non-governmental representatives, and then reviewed by the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission. Once approved, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) administers contracts that bind DU to achieving all aspects of the proposals, including conserved acres. DU receives the project funding only after we demonstrate to the FWS that we accomplished what we said we would.

What does DU claim credit for in the acreage reported in annual reports and state fact sheets?

- We consider an acre conserved as one that has received protection, enhancement or restoration as a direct result of actions taken by DU.
- The number of conserved acres is updated annually to assure accuracy. For example, a large percentage of our work in Canada is done on lands owned by farmers to provide significant benefits to ducks. However, farmers often don't want to lock their lands into agreements that last forever. When agreements that are less than perpetual expire, though landowners very often maintain the conservation work, we reduce the total acreage accordingly.
- Our conservative accounting system does not include acres that we know our work has indirectly benefited. For example, DU has been a leader in policy work, such as our advocacy for the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) of the Farm Bill. Although the CRP has enhanced millions of acres for waterfowl, none of those significant accomplishments are counted. Similarly, each year we provide technical assistance to hundreds of landowners who manage hundreds of thousands of acres for waterfowl. Those "technical assistance" acres are tracked each year but, even though landowners often put our advice into practice and provide waterfowl benefits, we do not count those as conserved acres. In fact, DU members alone voluntarily manage hundreds of thousands of acres to benefit waterfowl that are not added to the record of DU accomplishments.
- DU Canada also has over 10 million acres of land that is protected in long-term conservation agreements with First Nations and with mining, petroleum and forestry interests that are not included as conserved acres.

Does counting acres measure progress toward waterfowl population conservation objectives?

- Using acreage as a yardstick for measuring conservation accomplishment is a convenient, accountable, and widely accepted tool. It is used by virtually every waterfowl conservation partnership working to achieve the habitat objectives established by the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and its Joint Ventures.
- Research conducted by DU and many other partners is conducted to help the waterfowl management community better understand the complex relationships between habitat conservation and waterfowl population response. This constantly improving understanding is used by DU to revise and update our habitat objectives and priorities to get the greatest return in waterfowl for our investment.
- No matter how the accomplishments are measured, DU stands out as the world's leader among waterfowl and wetland conservation organizations.