



DUCKS UNLIMITED Conservation for Generations:

Ducks Unlimited's Diamond Anniversary

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Ducks Unlimited got its start on the banks of New York's Battenkill River. Four men in a riverside fishing lodge hovered around a warm fire, lamenting a series of nearly duckless hunting seasons. Joseph Palmer Knapp, along with three other men, all as passionate about waterfowl as the next, took this fireside meeting as an opportunity to plan a new organization that would be a leading force in restoring duck numbers. These other men, John Huntington, Arthur Bartley, and Ray Benson, all played major roles on the More Game Birds staff, an early predecessor of Ducks Unlimited.

During a discussion of potential names for the organization, many ideas were tossed around the fire that evening. Everyone agreed that the group's first priority would be conservation of the Canadian prairies, where a majority of North American waterfowl breed. In order to work there, the new organization would need to be incorporated under Canadian law. So when Knapp suggested it be named, simply, "Ducks," Bartley reminded him that because of Canadian laws, it would have to be named "Ducks, Limited." The quick-tempered Knapp shot back, "Dammit, we don't want limited ducks!" This gave Bartley the idea. He responded, "Ducks Unlimited, then."

And it stuck.

But finding a name was easy compared to realizing success for the fledgling organization. The year was 1937, and the odds were against them. The plan: restore waterfowl by restoring water to prairie wetlands—despite the great Dust Bowl, the worst drought in our nation's history—and pay for it with donated dollars (in the midst of the Great Depression).

It worked. Seventy-five years later, Ducks Unlimited is the largest wetlands and waterfowl conservation group in the world, with more than 12.4 million acres conserved and 62 million more influenced through partnerships and policy. Still, North America's wetlands, waterfowl and hunting traditions are far from safe. In the last seven years, the rate of wetlands loss has increased 140 percent.

"We live in a far more complicated world than the one that gave birth to DU and our modern conservation values," said John Newman, president of Ducks Unlimited. "But the story of DU's founding bridges the gap between that time and ours. It inspires us with the belief that no challenge is so great that it cannot be overcome if we apply the best solutions that science has to offer, and give the best that we ourselves have to offer."

That desire to make a difference is the key to Ducks Unlimited's success. DU is fueled by the grassroots support of volunteers, members and major sponsors who share the same passion for waterfowl that inspired DU's original four founders.

Through the years, Ducks Unlimited's membership has grown from a few wealthy sportsmen to more than 600,000 hunters and other conservationists from all walks of life and every corner of the continent. To help raise money for DU's conservation work, volunteers hold more than 4,000 events each year, ranging from member and sponsor banquets to shooting and fishing tournaments, golf outings and more. These events raise more than \$50 million for Ducks Unlimited each year.

"Ultimately, DU's ability to conserve habitat depends on the generosity of people, and as stewards of their good will, it's our honor—our responsibility—to ensure that every gift entrusted with Ducks Unlimited is used for the best benefit of the most waterfowl for the longest time," said Dale Hall, CEO of Ducks Unlimited. "That's why our goal every year is to spend at least 80 percent of every dollar raised on our conservation mission."

BIGGEST BANG FOR THE DUCKS

Ducks Unlimited's conservation work can be summed up in two words: *strategic* and *science-based*. With limited funds and increasing threats, DU uses sound science to identify the most critical, threatened habitats on the continent for waterfowl and focuses on conserving these areas first.

DU's highest priority is conserving the two most-productive waterfowl breeding areas on the continent: the Prairie Pothole Region and the western boreal forest.

More ducks hatch in the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) of North America than any other place in the world; hence, the region's nickname "the duck factory." Spanning some 300,000 square miles across southern Canada and the northern United States, the PPR forms the core of the continent's Great Plains. During wet years, potholes left by receding glaciers more than 10,000 years ago fill with water and offer a steady stock of food for waterfowl, while surrounding grasslands lend shelter and security to nesting hens. In 1937, this is where DU's founders conserved their first acre—on Big Grass Marsh in Manitoba, Canada, which still thrives today, along with 4.7 million acres DU has since conserved in the region.

Unfortunately, the threats to North America's duck factory have also multiplied. Seventy percent of the region's native grasslands are gone. The remaining 22 million acres in the U.S. portion still produce a majority of the U.S. fall flight and serve as the backbone of a robust ranching industry. But what's left of the prairies is under imminent threat of destruction and DU is working hard to find common ground solutions for landowners and wildlife alike.

"New crop varieties are allowing grasslands that were once un-farmable to be plowed for the first time," Hall explained. "High commodity prices, driven by demand for ethanol and food, make plowing every inch almost irresistible, and federal farm policies remove the financial risk of farming even marginal croplands. These threats alone give landowners pretty powerful incentives to plow native grasslands."

Once plowed, native prairie can't be replaced, which is why DU and partners are working to protect what remains. Using geographic information system (GIS) technology and LANDSAT satellite imagery, DU locates areas of the PPR where healthy wetlands and spacious grasslands exist, analyzes the terrain and surrounding property to identify the most productive habitat at

the greatest risk of loss, and works with the landowner to find conservation options that meet everyone's needs.

The best way to do that is through conservation easements, where, for a one-time payment, willing landowners agree to never plow up the prairie or drain its wetlands. More than 800 landowners in the heart of the PPR have expressed an interest in conservation easements, but DU lacks funding to secure them all. DU's "Rescue the Duck Factory" campaign has secured funding to protect more than 245,000 acres in partnership with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

The Dakota Grassland Conservation Area, recently added to the National Wild-

With 12.4 million acres conserved and a record 45.6 million ducks surveyed on the breeding grounds this spring, Ducks Unlimited (DU) has reason to celebrate on its 75th anniversary. But the organization isn't resting on its laurels.

life Refuge System, could protect 2 million acres of native prairie and associated wetlands in the PPR, depending on the federal budget.

"Designating the conservation area was the first step. Next, we need to ensure the Land and Water Conservation Fund isn't underfunded in the 2012 budget, and that the price of the federal duck stamp increases to a more appropriate level," said Hall.

The cost of a duck stamp hasn't been adjusted in 25 years, which has drastically decreased its power to conserve habitat. To boost the stamp's purchasing power for conservation, DU and partners like the Boone and Crockett Club support an increase in the stamp's cost from \$15 to \$25 to ensure that the investment hunters have made to protect waterfowl habitat over the last 77 years is sustained into the future.

"Sportsmen have always been the first to step up and take action for conservation in this country—whether it's founding Ducks Unlimited or supporting the federal duck stamp. The best way to honor that legacy is to ensure its future with adequate funding for conservation," said Hall.

Like Ducks Unlimited, the federal duck stamp conserves habitat across the continent. From prairie potholes to Gulf Coast wetlands that continue to disappear

at an alarming rate, from the Rainwater Basin of Nebraska to the Central Valley of California—these are all critical habitats for North America's waterfowl. Ducks Unlimited is working to conserve them, but DU can't do it alone.

"Our efforts are stronger when combined with the strength of partners like the Fish and Wildlife Service and the PEW Charitable Trusts, who share DU's conservation mission and are committed to making a difference."

In partnership with the PEW Charitable Trusts, Ducks Unlimited is conserving the second-most productive breeding area for waterfowl—the western boreal forest of Canada and Alaska. Each spring, 13 to 15 million ducks migrate to the boreal, where forests, rivers, wetlands and lakes span 1.8 million square miles of wilderness. Until about 12 years ago, the forest remained largely untouched by development. Rising demand for natural resources, however, has led to a dramatic increase in logging, oil and gas exploration and production, mining, hydroelectric development and agriculture in the region.

The Pew Charitable Trusts created a partnership ultimately known as the International Boreal Conservation Campaign, of which Ducks Unlimited is a central partner. After years of negotiation between industry, government, First Nations and conservation organizations, 130 million acres of important wetlands and wildlife habitat have been conserved in the forest.

"This is a great start to what could be a lasting legacy for our generation," said Hall. "The western boreal forest is our opportunity to conserve habitat in its truly natural state, and opportunities like that are hard to come by," explained Hall.

"We've come a long way in 75 years, but we clearly have a lot of work left to do. Looking back on the people who got us this far and what they overcame to do it should be an inspiration, and also confirmation that when you have an important cause and passionate people to support it, no challenge is too great."

What started 75 years ago as a simple plan to restore wetlands on Canada's prairies has grown into an international conservation effort with projects in every province of Canada, all 50 states and throughout Mexico. Wherever waterfowl breed, migrate or winter, Ducks Unlimited is there. And for the sake of our wetlands, waterfowl and hunting traditions, let's hope it always will be. ■