

STATE CONSERVATION REPORT

Montana

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What a year!

By Bob Sanders, Manager of Conservation Programs

Ducks Unlimited, in concert with our many partners, impacted a record 100,037 acres and provided 85,508 acres of technical assistance in Fiscal Year 2019 (FY19). Strong partnerships and generous contributions from donors and volunteers are the backbone of the conservation accomplishments in Montana.

DU is celebrating its ninth year of cooperation with USDA's Natural Resources

Conservation Service (NRCS) in Montana. DU conservation staff play key roles in delivering USDA programs, including the Wetland Reserve Easement and the



Bob Sanders

Agricultural Land Easement programs. During 2019, the USDA and DU partnership secured 76,896 acres of permanent and term habitat protection agreements and provided more than 85,000 acres of technical assistance on private lands. Thanks to this incredible partnership, Montana ranks number one in USDA easement deliveries in the United States.

The partnership among DU, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and private landowners focuses on our highest priority landscapes along Montana's Hi-Line. With many landowners converting marginal croplands to permanent grass cover, demand for USFWS programs has reached all-time highs. Ranchers pursuing easements on their lands receive a cash payment and qualify for cost-sharing to improve infrastructure such as stock water for livestock and fencing. In 2018-19, USFWS and DU finalized easements with six landowners that will permanently protect 12,638 acres of Montana's Prairie Pothole habitat. These easements allow flexibility for ranchers to operate while keeping grasslands and wetlands intact.

Restoration of wetlands, grasslands and ranch infrastructure through the USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife program improved 10,490 acres of priority waterfowl breeding habitat. This voluntary program provides conservation and financial assistance to private landowners who conserve fish and wildlife habitat on their properties for federal trust resources.

The 2019 Montana legislative session was a resounding success thanks to numerous DU volunteers and other conservation supporters. This was the second session where DU partnered with like-minded conservation groups to form the Montana Sporting Coalition, a collaborative effort to lobby legislators for pro-conservation legislation. As a result, important bills that provide funding for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks were successfully passed and a bill that would complicate the establishment of state-held conservation easements was defeated.

DU celebrates *Rescue Our Wetlands*

Ducks Unlimited supporters celebrated Montana's *Rescue Our Wetlands* project at Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) near Great Falls. Supporters who made a formal commitment to DU during the campaign in Montana were recognized on a special bronze plaque. Ducks Unlimited's *Rescue Our Wetlands* campaign raised \$2.34 billion and conserved more than 2.2 million acres of wetlands and associated habitats across North America.

Benton Lake NWR is part of a 163,304-acre national wildlife refuge complex. It encompasses a diverse landscape of wetlands, mixed-grass prairie, forests, intermountain grasslands, rivers and lakes. Ducks Unlimited and partners restored 2,194 acres of wetland habitat on the refuge.

Ducks Unlimited's biology and engineering team designed a water conveyance system and water-control structures for several wetland units on the refuge. In the second phase of the project, DU installed another water-



control structure to help NWR staff more efficiently manage water levels. The two structures allow for independent water management capabilities, essential to the refuge's ongoing selenium remediation and water availability challenges. Better water control capabilities also allow managers to provide optimal foraging conditions for migratory waterfowl and other birds.

Staff at Benton Lake were concerned about the refuge's increased levels of selenium, a naturally occurring substance that can be toxic. In addition to water challenges, the Great Falls-area NWR wanted to improve the overall quality and quantity of its habitat.

The project partners included Ducks Unlimited, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and Pheasants Forever, and utilized funds from the North American Wetlands Conservation Act.

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A unique incentive to make Montana a million-dollar state



Ducks Unlimited Senior Regional Director Barry Allen and DU Director of Development Chris Hildebrandt say raising \$1 million for DU in Montana is a great reason to shave your head.

"We thought if we were willing to sacrifice our hair, our volunteers and supporters would be willing to give their time and donations," Allen said.

Hildebrandt and Allen will shave their heads at the Montana Volunteer Celebration on Feb. 8 to mark Montana's success. The challenge was set in 2016 and the volunteers kicked their fundraising into high gear during the following three years.

"We had a big gain during the first year, but last year we fell short by \$35,000," said Hildebrandt. "We

reached our goal in June. Never in the history of DU has a state with a population of a million or fewer people raised \$1 million."

Montana State Chair, Scott Johnson, saw making Montana a million-dollar state as an achievable challenge. He traveled across the state with his mom, Shirley Johnson, attending events and rallying volunteers.

"My mom and I attended 32 events in 18 months. It gave us an opportunity to spend time together and interact with volunteers who are as passionate about DU as we are," said Johnson.

When donors John and Alexandra "Alex" Spizziri finalized their benefactor gift at the 2019 DU National Convention in Hawaii, it put the state over the top. The DU volunteers and supporters in Montana will now have the distinction of accomplishing a unique goal and seeing Barry and Chris lose some hair.

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Workshop held to educate producers about cover crops

Ducks Unlimited partnered with NRCS, Blaine County Conservation District and Pheasants Forever to host a cover crop workshop. Producers from Blaine, Hill and Phillips counties learned about the benefits of five soil-health principles and how to incorporate them into their operations. Benefits include minimizing disturbance, increasing plant diversity, maintaining living roots in the soil, keeping the soil covered and incorporating livestock.

During the workshop NRCS Area Resource Conservationist Marni Thompson used a rainfall simulator to demonstrate how different land management practices impact water infiltration into the soil. The simulator compares rainfall on five different field samples simultaneously.

"The amount of water the soil can efficiently use to build soil health on a field with a cover crop compared to wheat fallow is immediately evident," said Adam McDaniel, DU conservation specialist in Montana. "The cover crop field absorbs the water and soil run off is minimal, whereas the wheat fallow sample has significant soil erosion and poor water infiltration."

The group visited cover crop fields planted with various seed mixes and discussed the importance of designing a seed mix that will satisfy a producer's objectives. Depending on the operation, a producer may want to increase soil organic matter, reduce soil compaction, improve water infiltration or enhance grazing and haying opportunities for livestock. One way to increase plant diversity and improve soil cover is to plant cover crops.

The workshop ended with a social hour and discussion about cost-share opportunities through programs offered by the partners conducting the workshop. Ducks Unlimited staff in Montana is getting guidance from DU biologists in North Dakota to develop a cost-share cover crop program for farmers interested in incorporating cover crops into their rotations.

By helping producers plant cover crops, DU's objective is to improve water quality by reducing chemical and fertilizer runoff and decreasing sedimentation in wetlands. This leads to healthier wetlands and improved waterfowl habitat. The cover crop program also seeks to alleviate grazing and haying pressure on native grasslands and pastures during peak nesting season by increasing forage opportunities for producers with mixed operations. These practices improve waterfowl nesting habitat in agricultural areas of the Prairie Pothole Region.

For more information about Montana's cover crop program contact Adam McDaniel at 406-564-0709 or amcdaniel@ducks.org.

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Montana couple supports DU's mission

John and Alex Spizziri are long-time DU members who started volunteering in the 1980s. John was introduced to DU when his best friend invited him to a dinner. He soon started volunteering for the local committee. John served as a state chair for two years when he lived in New Jersey and was an officer for the Hudson River DU Chapter before he and Alex moved to Montana to be closer to family. The Spizziris now live in Ryegate, Montana, a ranching community 60 miles northwest of Billings, and are involved with the Montana State Council.

"I've always been an outdoor person and I enjoy the environment," John said. "I support DU's habitat enhancement and protection efforts and I like the goals of DU's conservation programs."



John and Alex Spizziri, with their great grandchildren, receiving Benefactor Roll of Honor recognition

The couple has a history of giving to DU. They are on the Benefactor Roll of Honor and have been members of the President's Council for several years. Even their dogs have gotten in on the DU giving as part of DU's Retriever Club. At the DU convention in Hawaii, John and Alex completed their Benefactor level pledge of \$100,000, putting Montana over the top for its \$1 million fundraising goal. [Front Page >>](#)

Montana celebrates Bruce Posey

Ducks Unlimited volunteers and staff gathered on the prairies of Montana to dedicate a plaque and cairn to Bruce Posey, a long-time DU sponsor, leader and volunteer. The fundraising tribute, which began in 2018, raised more than \$6 million for DU's work in the Prairie Pothole Region and other priority areas.

Bruce developed a love for the outdoors at an early age while hunting with his father. His volunteer leadership positions included area chair, state chair, national board member and senior vice president.

The 30-acre dedication site is on a 1200-acre property of native shortgrass prairie with wetlands, riparian



habitat and a creek. The land was acquired through DU's revolving habitat program. The habitat on the property is permanently protected and the land will likely be sold to an area rancher. DU will work with the future landowner to maintain access to the dedication site. [Front Page >>](#)

Montana Projects

1984 through the end of Fiscal Year 2019

● Completed projects



Fiscal Year 2019

- Impacted acres - 100,037
- Technical assistance acres - 85,508
- Dollars invested - \$1,259,638

From 1984 to 2019

- Impacted acres - 326,314
- Technical assistance acres - 259,995
- Dollars invested - \$28,471,600

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Phillips County, a focus for DU's conservation work

Through word-of-mouth, attractive conservation programs, and hard work by ranchers over the last couple of years, Ducks Unlimited and partners created a complex south of Dodson that includes more than 11,000 acres of protected wetlands and grasslands. At the same time, the protected acres are still in agriculture and the majority are in private ownership.

"DU and our partners want to keep ranchers in business," said Bob Sanders, DU manager of conservation programs for Montana. "Helping Phillips County landowners find conservation programs that work with their operations has helped keep grass and water on the landscape. That's good for cattle and wildlife."

Ducks Unlimited and its partners have invested more than \$2 million in these efforts which include assistance with fencing, water and protecting and improving grassland. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks offer a variety of programs tailored to fit landowners' specific needs. [Front Page >>](#)

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