

DU CONSERVATION REPORT

Montana
2018



BLUE-WINGED TEAL (MALE)

Bob Sanders
Manager of Conservation Programs for Montana

During 2017, our diverse array of programs and partners helped DU conserve 16,622 acres of wetlands and associated uplands across the Montana landscape. This year DU is celebrating eight years of cooperation with U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). DU conservation staff play key roles in delivering the NRCS's Wetland Reserve Easement and Agricultural Land Easement programs. During 2017, the USDA and DU biologists secured 8,823 acres of permanent and term protection agreements and provided more than 20,723 acres of technical assistance on private lands.

The conservation easement partnership between DU, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and private landowners focuses on Montana's Hi-Line region. Drought conditions have underscored the value of grass-based agriculture with many landowners converting marginal crop fields back to grass. Ranchers receive a cash payment and qualify for cost-share on infrastructure improvements such as stock water and fencing. In 2017, FWS and DU finalized easements with three landowners protecting 4,334 acres. These easements allow ranchers to operate while keeping grasslands and wetlands intact.

DU continues its partnership with the FWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife program by identifying opportunities and providing administrative support for a range of restoration projects. During 2017, this partnership restored 3,386 acres of wetland habitat and improved upland nesting habitat.

During the past three years, DU has partnered with Pheasants Forever (PF) on three Farm Bill

Biologist positions and several on-the-ground conservation projects. In 2017, DU provided financial support to PF to protect an 80-acre parcel in Lake County. This will provide habitat for waterfowl and upland gamebirds and increase public hunting opportunities in the Mission Valley.

Numerous DU volunteers and other sportsmen and women made their voices heard during the 2017 Montana legislative session. DU partnered with several conservation groups to form the Montana Sporting Coalition, a collaborative effort to lobby legislators for pro-conservation legislation. Because of the group's efforts, the legislature passed bills that provide funding for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Strong partnerships and generous contributions from partners, private landowners and DU members and major donors make our conservation efforts possible. Additional partners DU works with include the Intermountain West Joint Venture and the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture.



PAT NOLAN'S LEGACY IS WETLANDS CONSERVATION

Pat Nolan's legacy of supporting waterfowl conservation will live on through generous contributions to Ducks Unlimited and a new accessible blind dedicated in his honor at Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). Nolan was a fierce DU volunteer until his death in 2015, following a long battle with multiple sclerosis. The year-long tribute raised more than \$750,000 for conservation in Montana, across the U.S. prairies, and other priority areas.

A bronze plaque at the blind tells the story of Pat's DU support and lists the names of major sponsors who contributed in his honor. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant blind helps people with mobility challenges enjoy the bountiful fall flights Pat cherished.

"I am humbled at the love and support that was so apparent during the tribute honoring Pat," said Pat's widow Ellie. "DU is a wonderful organization, and I am proud to be a part of it."

Pat's involvement with DU began in Arizona in the 1960s where he spearheaded the state's first fundraising events and became its first state chairman. He chaired the first DU National Convention in Arizona and later became a national board member. The Nolans are generous DU supporters and are recognized as Benefactor Roll of Honor major sponsors, Grand Slam life sponsors (U.S., Canada and Mexico), and Emerald Feather Society members.



Friends and family built an ADA accessible blind as a tribute to Pat.

"The whole tribute was a team effort exemplified by the blind construction which was led by DU volunteer and Grand Slam life sponsor Steve Cunningham, and completed by Pat's two sons and five grandsons, with assistance from refuge staff," said DU Director of Development Chris Hildebrandt.

Hunters with a disability conservation license who are interested in hunting the blind and obtaining special vehicle access should call the Medicine Lake NWR at 406-789-2305.



Red Lodge couple came for the people and stayed for the mission

After hunting and vacationing in Montana for a few years, Les and Lynne Jones left the East Coast to make Red Lodge their home. A friend took the couple to the local Ducks Unlimited banquet and they kept going for the friendships they made there.

"We just enjoyed the banquets, meeting new people," Les said.

Les and Lynne now co-chair the Red Lodge banquet, with Lynne serving as chapter treasurer. Les is also a district chair, meaning he oversees several chapters in the area.

"I attend their banquets and help when they need it," he said. "It's rewarding. I enjoy making new friends and getting to know others better through serving."

A hunter and outdoorsman, Les says it is Ducks Unlimited's conservation mission that keeps him interested. One of the biggest misconceptions about DU, he says, is that it is exclusively a hunting organization.

"Many members, including Lynne, do not hunt. Conservation is the key," he said. "Saving wetlands is important for everyone. What creature doesn't need wetlands? Everyone and everything needs wetlands."

Les and Lynne also invest their philanthropy in DU's mission and are recognized as Diamond life sponsors, Grand Slam life sponsors and Silver Feather Society members.

WORKING WITH RANCHERS ON MONTANA'S HI-LINE

Summer 2017, the Prairie Pothole Region witnessed one of its worst droughts in decades. Especially hard hit was Montana's Hi-Line with reduced waterfowl and agricultural production, and rampant fires. But there was a bright side. For the past decade, Ducks Unlimited and partners worked with ranchers and farmers to make this important waterfowl breeding area more resilient to climatic and economic extremes.

DU, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, help producers understand the conservation tools that can keep their operations profitable during the tough times. Larry and Michelle Smith are the heads of a Montana farming and ranching family that has successfully endured the highs and lows of agricultural production on the Hi-Line for four generations.

"You have to think outside the box if you are going to survive in the farming and ranching business in places like Phillips County," Larry said.

Part of that new philosophy is ranchers must use all tools at their disposal, including conservation easements, to keep their lands productive and

"The 30-year WRE was the right fit for our family and our operation, and it helped convert our poorest, most drought-prone farm ground back to grasslands," said Larry Smith.

operations profitable. The Smith family met with DU biologists to evaluate the benefits of several conservation easement options, including the Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) with NRCS.

Word is spreading about the benefits of conservation programs. In the last 12 months, more than 8,000 acres have been approved for WRE enrollment in Phillips County, and more than 10,000 acres are enrolled annually in other critically important land protection programs.

"These programs help keep the ranch viable and allow us to pass the operation on to our kids and grandkids," Larry said.

MONTANA DU HONORS FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE PARTNERS

The Montana Ducks Unlimited team presented four U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) employees with the 2017 Public Partners of the Year award at DU's Volunteer Celebration in Glasgow. Bridget Nielsen, Todd Boonstra, David Allen and Loren Ruport were recognized for their exceptional efforts to protect more than 30,000 acres of Montana's best Prairie Pothole Region habitat. The group works closely with DU conservation staff to educate landowners on the value of conservation easements in agricultural lands that contain quality waterfowl breeding habitat.

"The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service team provides an incredible service to the farmers and ranchers along Montana's Hi-Line," said Bob Sanders, DU manager of conservation programs in Montana.

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“They help landowners understand the variety of options available to them, evaluate the potential of their property and sign them up for the programs that fit their needs.”

FWS staff also assist landowners with infrastructure that evenly distributes grazing pressure to improve waterfowl nesting quality.

“We want to keep ranching operations strong and profitable,” said Loren Ruport, FWS Partners for Wildlife biologist. “Most ranching families we work with have been on the land for several generations. No one knows how to run their operations better than they do. We simply provide the tools for them to operate their ranches more effectively which allows them to pass the land on to the next generation. The cattle are healthier and duck nesting densities are higher.”



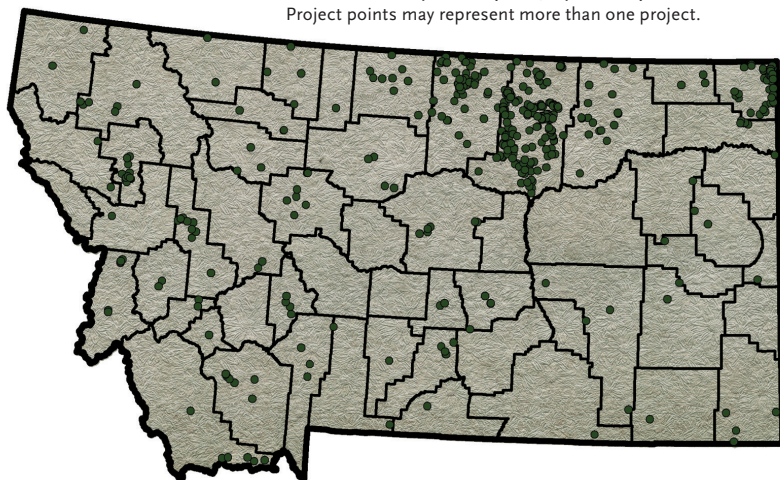
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Partners Loren Ruport, Todd Boonstra and Bridget Nielsen with DU Manager of Conservation Programs Bob Sanders (left to right).

“It’s a win for the rancher and a win for wildlife,” Sanders said. “The FWS easements keep grass on the landscape while allowing flexibility for ranching operations.”

ducks unlimited PROJECTS

● Completed (1984 - present)

Project points may represent more than one project.



Accomplishments (2017)

13,236 acres protected • 68,178 acres restored, enhanced
20,723 technical assistance

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GREAT PLAINS REGION

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our mission

Ducks Unlimited conserves, restores, and manages wetlands
and associated habitats for North America's waterfowl.
These habitats also benefit other wildlife and people.