



# fowl TALK

DUCKS UNLIMITED

## DUCKS UNLIMITED CELEBRATES \$100 million

**Ducks Unlimited (DU) recently hit a major milestone in its efforts to restore and protect important waterfowl habitat in South Dakota. According to Manager of Conservation Programs Steve Donovan, DU has now invested over the \$100 million in South Dakota since 1985.**

Most of this investment has taken place on private land, where DU works closely with farmers and ranchers to provide the assistance they need to conserve and enhance wildlife habitat. This investment in South Dakota demonstrates the importance of the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) to North America's waterfowl populations and the priority given to this landscape by DU. The condition of breeding habitat in the PPR is the number one factor driving continental waterfowl populations. DU's work to conserve these vital habitats is the organization's highest priority. The conservation success story represents a wide variety of habitat accomplishments, including the permanent protection of over 250,000 acres of wetlands and grassland habitats while also restoring and enhancing an additional 380,000 acres. Protecting wetlands and associated grasslands ensures that future generations of South Dakotans will be able to enjoy abundant wildlife populations, including the wonderful spectacle when millions of waterfowl migrate through the state, arguably the greatest mass migration of wildlife on the planet.

DU developed its South Dakota conservation program in 1984, with the first projects completed in 1985. Some of the earliest projects developed in South Dakota included the Bower and Mallard Dam projects in Lyman County that created over 90 acres of habitat, two wetland creation projects in Perkins County that established 45 acres of wetlands, the Ringer WPA and Black Slough GPA projects in Marshall County that enhanced 200 acres of wetland habitat, and the Broken Arrow and Owens Bay projects in Charles Mix County that provided over 400 acres of wetland habitat to breeding and migrating waterfowl.

In those early years in South Dakota, DU invested an average of \$500,000 per year in waterfowl habitat projects in South Dakota, a remarkable number for the time. In recent years, DU has invested an average of \$10.6 million per year into South Dakota habitat programs during 2016 and 2017. This level of investment is in large part attributable to the Revolving Habitat Program (RHP) and DU's significant contributions to support the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's conservation easement program. Through RHP, DU acquires certain high priority properties containing abundant opportunities to conserve wetlands, restores and protects those habitats, then sells the property usually to a local farmer or rancher with proceeds then reinvested into future projects.

The unique partnership DU enjoys with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is also particularly important. DU provides assistance to FWS to help

that agency with the important task of working with interested farmers and ranchers to protect important habitats with conservation easements. The interest in easements among landowners far outweighs the availability of funding, making DU's support of the program particularly important. During 2017 alone, the partnership protected over 42,000 acres in South Dakota, including over 5,600 acres of important wetland habitats, ensuring these wetlands will always provide important breeding habitat to waterfowl and many other species of wildlife.

The emergence of DU's Soil Health Program is the newest aspect of DU's conservation efforts in the state. Promoting soil health and practices that improve soil health is a rapidly growing effort promoted by many agricultural leaders, agronomists, producers, University researchers and officials from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Promoting soil health is seen by many as a necessary change in agriculture to ensure long-term sustainability and profitability while also protecting natural resources, including water quality. Ducks Unlimited quickly recognized that many of the practices being promoted for their benefits to soil health also provide direct benefits to wildlife, including ducks. Diversifying crop rotations to include small grains such as winter wheat, planting cover crops, and re-seeding marginal soils back to perennial grasses are just a few of these practices that offer significant benefits to wildlife while also helping producers with their efforts to remain profitable and sustainable in today's tough agricultural economy. DU offers both financial and technical assistance to South Dakota producers who are interested in incorporating these practices into their operation.

It took 34 years for DU to reach the \$100 million level of investment in South Dakota. However, Donovan believes it won't take nearly as long to reach the next \$100 million mark. "We enjoy tremendous support from our volunteers and donors throughout the country who recognize not only the importance of this landscape, but the urgent need to protect and enhance this vital resource", said Donovan. Indeed, in recent years the pressures to convert grasslands and drain wetlands has only increased, according to Donovan. "We have had tremendous success over the last 34 years and we need to take a moment to enjoy this monumental achievement", said Donovan, "but then we need to get back to work helping farmers and ranchers achieve their conservation goals of protecting important wildlife habitat", he added. Continuing to fill the skies with waterfowl for generations to come will depend in large part on DU's conservation efforts over the next several decades in this important landscape.



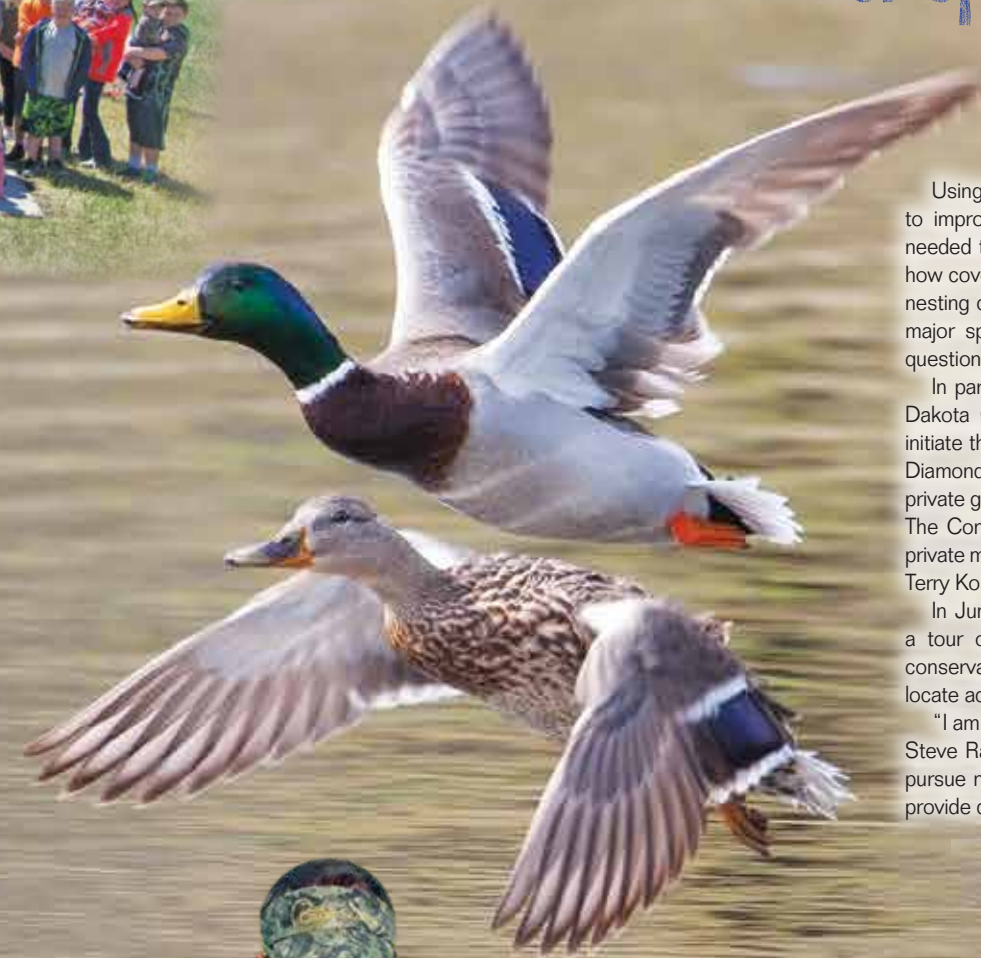
## DU Donor Supports South Dakota Cover Crop Research, a new component of DU's Preserve Our Prairies Initiative.

Using cover crops as an agricultural practice have been shown to improve soil health, water quality and reduce costly inputs needed to raise corn and beans. What is not fully understood is how cover crops in an intensively farmed landscape can improve nesting conditions for grassland bird species. A Ducks Unlimited major sponsor is helping DU do the research to answer that question.

In partnership with South Dakota State University and South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks, DU secured public funding to initiate the study. While attending a S.D. DU Major Donor event, Diamond Life Sponsor Steve Raymond heard about the need for a private gift so that DU could fully utilize the public research grants. The Connecticut donor stepped forward to provide the needed private match, following discussions with Director of Development Terry Kostinec of South Dakota.

In June of 2017, Steve came back to South Dakota to take a tour of the test areas. He worked with DU's manager of conservation programs for South Dakota, Steve Donovan, to locate active bird nests in the field.

"I am encouraged by the early results of the cover crop study" Steve Raymond said. "I appreciated the opportunity to help DU pursue new programs that not only promote soil health but also provide ducks and pheasants a place to nest in farmland."



**To find out more on how you can support DU's efforts to promote and expand our Soil Health conservation programs, Contact Terry Kostinec (605) 760-5791 or Steve Donovan (605) 633-0270.**



**Landowner Chris Lee shows Steve Donovan and Steve Raymond how cover crops improve soil health.**



**DU Donor Steve Raymond examines a pintail nest located in a cover crop field.**

**With a restored wetland and a cover crop field in the background, Director of Development Terry Kostinec (L) and South Dakota Conservation Manager Steve Donovan (r) present a Diamond Heritage sponsor pin to Steve Raymond.**