



# Fowl Talk

FALL 2015

## Late Summer Precipitation Improves Outlook for S.D. Waterfowl Season



Trying to predict the ebb and flow of a waterfowl season isn't an exact science, but South Dakota's leading waterfowl biologist feels strongly that this fall could be a good one for the state's duck and goose hunters.

The regular waterfowl season opened on Sept. 26 across much of the state, and Rocco Murano with the South Dakota Game, Fish & Parks doesn't see any reason why hunters shouldn't enjoy ample opportunities for ducks and geese.

"Predictably, we've lost some of our local birds, those early migrating ducks like blue-winged teal, but we've picked up new birds from the north, too," says Murano. "I think hunters will be pleased with what they find during the early weeks of the season."

The outlook on just what kind of season to expect in South Dakota, however, wasn't always so rosy.

When the "Trends in Duck Breeding Report" was issued by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service earlier this summer, the number of wetlands (-21%) and breeding ducks (-19%)

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# Late Summer Precipitation Improves Outlook for S.D. Waterfowl Season

*Continued from page 1*

were down considerably across the whole of the eastern Dakotas, and observations from just South Dakota were even more bleak.

What the report could not capture, Murano says, was the impact of precipitation received across areas of South Dakota from mid-May through the month of August.

"The number of ducks that settled here in the spring was down, but the ones that did have done very well because of the late moisture," says Murano. "Based my own observations in recent weeks, I'm seeing big duck broods and a lot of them."

In particular, Murano believes that the summer precipitation helped blue-winged teal and gadwalls, which are typically late-nesting ducks, and also supported the re-nesting efforts

of those mallards that settled in the state. He says that wood ducks are another species that seem to have done well this summer.

The good news for hunters continues with wetlands conditions that appear to have remained stable in many areas.

"The water that I have seen in the Brookings and Webster areas does not seem to have drawn down, and I don't think that hunters, for the most part, will have to battle large mud flats between the water's edge and the surrounding cover," says Murano. "That story would have been different, though, if we hadn't received the big rains this summer. Things are starting to dry up now, but it certainly could have been much worse."

The summer's precipitation has

fall crop conditions looking strong, too, Murano says, which will provide ducks and geese plenty of food options while they are in the state.

The pace and timing of waterfowl migrating to and through South Dakota remains the big unknown, as it does every year, and a forecasted El Niño weather pattern could further complicate the movement of ducks and geese this fall.

According to state climatologist Dennis Today, Prairie Canada and the Dakotas are certainly within the bullseye of impact from this El Niño, which he predicts will be very strong.

"The most consistent characteristic of an El Niño of this strength are warm temperatures, and it looks like we're going to stay relatively warm through both the fall and winter," says Today. "Precipitation is more

difficult to deal with, but because of the temperatures, what precipitation we do receive will likely fall as liquid or ice, which will melt quickly."

Today cautions that "nothing in climate is guaranteed," but he is confident that to some extent the El Niño will impact weather in South Dakota for the coming months.

Prognostication is not a part of a state waterfowl biologist's job description, Murano says, but he says there is little guesswork needed if the climate predictions hold true.

"If we are warmer and drier – and that's a big 'if' – particularly in those areas to the north of us that produce ducks and geese, absolutely, we'll see an impact to the migration," Murano says.

## Ducks Unlimited Protects Habitat in Brown County

Ducks Unlimited recently purchased 160 acres of wetland and grassland habitat in Brown County, South Dakota, through their Revolving Lands Program.

One of DU's most successful conservation programs, the Revolving Lands Program allows DU to purchase threatened or degraded habitats in the region from a willing seller, conduct any necessary restoration activities on the tract, and protect the habitat with perpetual conservation easements. This process ensures breeding habitat for waterfowl will remain in critical areas of South Dakota for generations to come. Once these tracts are restored and protected, they are often sold through an auction process, with proceeds returning to the Revolving Fund for future acquisitions.

This particular parcel, known as the Fettig tract near Richmond Lake, contains approximately 25 acres of unprotected shallow wetland habitat in an area capable of attracting large numbers of breeding

pairs of ducks each spring. Small, ephemeral wetlands like these are considered "at-risk" for conversion for agricultural production, and are a point of emphasis for DU's conservation efforts in South Dakota.

The wetland basins on the Fettig tract are also surrounded by native prairie grasses that will provide cover for upland nesting ducks like mallards, pintails, blue-winged teal, and gadwall, and provide breeding habitat to many other migratory and local wildlife. Protecting this prairie habitat will also provide environmental benefits to the area by improving water quality and soil health, and preventing sedimentation in adjacent wetland basins.

Once DU secures a perpetual conservation easement on the grassland/wetland complex, the tract will be sold at public auction, likely to a local livestock producer.

## 2016 South Dakota Ducks Unlimited State Convention



The 2016 South Dakota Ducks Unlimited State Convention will be held February 12-14, 2016, at the Highland Conference Center in Mitchell SD. All Ducks Unlimited members are invited to attend. You can learn more about the Highland Conference Center by visiting [highlandconferencecenter.com](http://highlandconferencecenter.com).

Be sure to make your hotel

reservations early and ask the for DU Convention rate.

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See the SDDU State Convention registration form elsewhere in this issue of Fowl Talk. Formal invitations will come out later this fall.



# Ducks Unlimited Secures a \$1.6 Million Grant



Several conservation projects in eastern South Dakota will receive a boost with the approval of an important \$1.6 million grant proposed by Ducks Unlimited.

In September, Ducks Unlimited received word that the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission had approved its "Eastern South Dakota Wetlands" proposal. The grant was

awarded to DU through the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, a highly competitive wetlands conservation grant program managed by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. With these grant funds secured by DU and matching dollars provided by DU and our conservation partners, a total of \$3.3 million will be spent on a variety of projects important to breeding ducks:

- On the Renziehausen Slough Game Production Area near Britton, a pump station and levee will be restored, giving land managers the enhanced ability to manage this important waterfowl marsh.
- The Lake Bdesaka restoration project near Sisseton was also approved, providing the funds needed to install a large water control structure and permanently restore this 250 acre marsh.
- Approximately \$1 million will be spent protecting "at-risk" wetlands from being drained

by purchasing permanent conservation easements from willing landowners interested in ensuring the long term protection of this important resource.

- An additional \$300,000 will be spent restoring approximately 50 small wetlands on private land, including DU owned properties near Platte, Watertown, Veblen, Sisseton, Woonsocket and Mitchell.

Small, seasonal wetlands like those found on these DU properties are the most important habitat for breeding waterfowl, providing the pair habitat needed by territorial breeding pairs in the spring, and then brood habitat full of aquatic invertebrates and other foods needed by ducklings.

Additional restoration dollars will be spent restoring small wetlands on DU's Engstrom property in Clark County on the south side of Swan Lake, a property that will be sold to South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks yet this fall, which will also be the site of a future Legacy Greenwing and

Major Donor recognition cairn.

The grant also includes restoration dollars for a project on the Medicine Knoll Creek Game Production Area east of Pierre and the Garden Creek wetlands project along the Missouri River south of Lake Andes.

Ducks Unlimited could not secure this grant and complete these projects without the cooperation of the many landowners involved in this effort and our conservation partners, including: The Nature Conservancy; James River Water Development District, South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks; U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Pheasants Forever chapters in Aberdeen, Sisseton and Mitchell; Izaak Walton League of America; Brown County Whitetails Unlimited; High Plains Wildlife Association; Sportsman's Club of Brown County; and the Grass Lake Conservation Club.

All of these groups pledged support for the proposal that helped provide the required matching dollars to secure this significant grant.

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NORTH DAKOTA



# Buffalo County Grass Seeding Project a Success

By Randy Meidinger

It was mid-May in eastern South Dakota and in any direction I looked I could see towering columns of dust in the distance from farmers driving tractors in fields to seed wheat into the parched soil with high hopes of getting some much needed rain soon.

Similarly, a smaller cloud of dust was hanging behind the grass drill being towed by a tractor across a field of soybean stubble - an indication of just how dry top soil conditions were across much of eastern South Dakota this early spring. Fingers in the cab of this tractor were crossed, too, in hopes of timely rains, not only to help the area farmers' wheat crop get off to a good start, but also to ensure the native grasses and forbs that were being seeded in this field received adequate moisture to germinate quickly enough to get a competitive edge on any weeds that would soon be emerging.

The parcel of ground being seeded into native grasses and forbs is called the Gricus Property, a 480-acre tract of land located in northeastern Buffalo County that DU purchased from a private landowner during early 2014 as part of the DU Revolving Habitat Program. Comprised of 305 cropland acres with the balance being seasonal to semi-permanent wetlands and a small remnant piece of native prairie grassland, the Gricus Property

was recently converted from virgin native prairie sod to cropland. DU's conservation plan for this property was to seed these marginally productive cropland acres back to a diverse stand of native grasses and forbs so the land could provide secure nesting and brooding habitat for ducks, grouse, prairie chickens, pheasants and a host of songbirds and other prairie wildlife.

The plan also includes provisions for grazing so the land once again can provide area ranchers with productive grasslands on which their livestock can graze. This DU property is located in a landscape dominated by large blocks of contiguous grasslands and lies immediately adjacent to the 720-acre Mills Waterfowl Production Area.

The restoration plan includes working with the local NRCS field office to develop a comprehensive restoration plan that includes water development and cross fencing to facilitate a rotational grazing system, and formulating a diverse native grass and forb seed mix that will benefit wildlife, livestock, and many of the declining pollinator species in the region. The seeding mix used on the Gricus Property included ten native grasses and over a dozen different forb species that normally flower at various intervals throughout the year to ensure that flowers are available to different pollinator species at any given time within the growing season.

The Brule-Buffalo Conservation District conducted the grass

planting procedure early this spring, and the development of livestock water and installation of cross fences is planned to be completed by next summer. Once the restoration plan is completed, DU will sell this property, which is perpetually protected from being cropped again, likely back into private ownership.

Upon revisiting the seeded field in late July I discovered that the clouds of dust had indeed settled due to timely spring and summer rains, which resulted in a high germination rate of the grasses and forbs that were seeded just a few short months ago. I was also pleasantly surprised to see how many of the different forbs already

had flowered and were benefiting the pollinator species in the area. In fact during my 30-minute walk through the newly seeded field I counted over a dozen different butterfly species, saw nearly a half dozen different kinds of dragonflies and saw both bubble bees and honey bees energetically flying from flower to flower.

The additional songbirds, pheasants and grouse that I saw and heard during my short visit gave me peace of mind knowing this former piece of cropland was well on its way to being a healthy functioning grassland community once again.





# Ducks Unlimited to dedicate South Dakota project to major donors for “Rescue Our Wetlands” Campaign

South Dakota Ducks Unlimited will honor major donors to the organization’s mission of habitat conservation in the state with the dedication of a Watertown-area project as part of a new continental initiative that seeks to protect wetlands vital for nesting ducks and other wildlife.

The project is a part of the “Rescue Our Wetlands” campaign, says Ducks Unlimited senior vice president and Custer resident Jeff Heidelbauer, which was announced this spring at DU’s national convention.

Heidelbauer says that the campaign is considered to be the most ambitious fundraising drive in the history of the “world’s leading wetlands conservation organization,” with a goal of raising \$2 billion dollars by the end of 2018.

“The Rescue Our Wetlands campaign will help DU deal with the rapidly growing threat to wetlands and grasslands that are so necessary for ducks and more than 900 other species of wildlife, as well as for providing clean water,” Heidelbauer said.

In addition to Ducks Unlimited supporters across the U.S., Heidelbauer says that the “Rescue Our Wetlands” campaign will involve DU Canada and DU Mexico as well.

“The focus is being placed on protecting habitat within the Prairie Pothole Region of the US and Canada, which contains the world’s best waterfowl breeding areas,” said

Heidelbauer. “Priority will also be given to protecting important waterfowl migration and wintering grounds in other parts of the US and Mexico as well.”

Heidelbauer says that each of the seven states in the Great Plains Region of Ducks Unlimited will identify a “Rescue Our Wetlands” dedication project used to honor major donors to the campaign.

South Dakota Ducks Unlimited has chosen a property located roughly 30 miles northwest of Watertown along the south side of Swan Lake in Clark County. The “Engstrom Property” is a 240-acre collection of wetlands and grasslands purchased by DU for \$450,000 in 2012 as a part of the Revolving Habitat Program. It lies adjacent to a 1000-acre game production area owned by South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (SDGF&P) and a 160-acre parcel owned by the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Steve Donovan, Ducks Unlimited’s director of conservation planning for South Dakota, says that the organization plans to restore three small wetlands on the property, which will benefit a variety of wildlife.

“The restored wetlands will provide additional habitat for nesting waterfowl, and pheasants, deer and other wildlife will benefit from the protected grasslands,” said Donovan. “The Engstrom property really is an ideal addition to an existing block of protected wildlife habitat, and

someday it will also provide excellent public hunting opportunities.”

Donovan says that Ducks Unlimited is working to transfer ownership of the property to the SDGF&P, which will help provide an additional access route to over 1000 acres of public ground.

When the “Rescue Our Wetlands” campaign is completed, Donovan says that Ducks Unlimited will hold a dedication ceremony and construct a cairn on the property at the old homestead site that sits high on a hill overlooking Swan Lake.

Heidelbauer believes that to be an ideal location to recognize those Ducks Unlimited donors and partners who helped with the “Rescue Our Wetlands” campaign.

“This is a critical time for saving these acres of grasslands and wetlands, and everyone can help with this campaign by becoming a Ducks Unlimited member, attending a local fundraising banquet or by becoming a major donor,” said Heidelbauer. “This dedication will be one way we can say ‘thanks’ for helping protect vital habitat in the Prairie Pothole Region and beyond.”



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# Public Policy and Ducks – How You Can Help!

Every year, our elected officials at all levels of government enact legislation that impacts our country's natural resources, including waterfowl habitat. Sometimes these policies can have negative impacts to ducks and sometimes these policies can have very positive impacts to ducks and other wildlife species.

One good example of the positive impact that can be made is found in the action taken by Governor Dennis Daugaard and the South Dakota Legislature during the 2015 session to create the Habitat Conservation Fund. Utilizing public funds and private donations, the Habitat Conservation Fund will be used to provide grants for projects across the state that will help increase and enhance areas of vital habitat.

The Habitat Conservation Fund was one of eight recommendations to come out of the governor's Pheasant Habitat Summit, which was held when pheasant numbers plummeted two years ago. Governor Daugaard showed tremendous leadership in recognizing the importance of pheasant hunting and wildlife habitat to South Dakotans and our state's economy. The loss of habitat occurring in South Dakota was, and continues to be, a leading cause in the decline of pheasant numbers from their highs just a few short years ago. While the outlook this year is more favorable than last year, primarily due to weather issues, the long term health of South Dakota's pheasant population is directly linked to the quantity and quality of suitable habitat.

Many people might not realize that in eastern South Dakota, ducks and pheasants use the same habitat. Grasslands provide nesting cover for both ducks and pheasants. Semi-permanent wetlands provide brood rearing habitat for ducks and winter cover for pheasants. A thick stand of cattails is absolutely the best thermal cover available for pheasants during a January blizzard. Temporary and seasonal wetlands provide excellent habitat for ducks when they are wet and great habitat to pheasants when they are dry. All of this explains why



Ducks Unlimited was very involved with, and supported, the creation of the Habitat Conservation Fund.

The creation of the Fund is a terrific example of public policy decisions that can provide significant benefits to waterfowl and other wildlife. There are those policies, however, that would be detrimental to the long-term health of waterfowl populations.

One such example is the seemingly annual effort to derail South Dakota's conservation easement law. Under current law, landowners have the right, as private property owners, to sell conservation easements on their land to interested agencies and organizations willing to own such interests in property. Some people don't think private property owners should have such rights and have

proposed legislation in South Dakota that would take that right away.

Ducks Unlimited strongly believes in protecting the rights of private property owners to place conservation easements on their land to benefit natural resources, including waterfowl habitat. Such easements can provide other benefits to society as a whole, including improving water quality in our lakes and rivers; protecting the soil that we need to grow food and fiber for future generations; and protecting places for recreational activities such as hunting, fishing, birdwatching, canoeing and camping.

SDDU needs your help in advocating for good public policies that protect wildlife and natural resources. If you would like to be informed of proposed policies being considered by our elected officials

and might be willing to contact your elected representatives to voice your concerns, please contact us. We will put your name and contact information into our system and keep you informed of proposed policies that might have an impact on waterfowl and wildlife habitat.

To have your name added to this group of concerned citizens, please email Steve Donovan, South Dakota's Manager of Conservation Programs for DU, at [sdonovan@ducks.org](mailto:sdonovan@ducks.org). Please provide Steve with your name, home address, email address and phone number.

We promise to keep you informed of important public policy issues and give you the opportunity to help us protect the South Dakota natural resources that we all treasure.

# Hunting Film Tour Set to Visit South Dakota

A national film tour that features short, independently produced hunting videos is making a series of stops in South Dakota to help kick-off the fall hunting season.

The Hunting Film Tour will be making a total of three stops in South Dakota, the first of which will be held on Tuesday, September 15 at the West Mall 7 in Sioux Falls. Theaters in Pierre (September 17) and Rapid City (October 14) will also be hosting screenings this fall.

The South Dakota Wildlife Federation is sponsoring all three events in South Dakota, building on a successful screening of the Hunting Film Tour in Brookings last year.

"The films are extremely well-done and are so different from most of what we see on television when it comes to hunting," said Mark Widman, vice president of the South Dakota Wildlife Federation. "We received tremendous feedback from the event last year, and we're excited to share those films selected to be a part of this year's tour with sportsmen as they prepare for the fall and another round

of hunting seasons."

The 2015 Hunting Film Tour features ten hunting narratives from around the globe, including mallards in western Nebraska, caribou in Alaska and a traditional archery hunt in South Africa. Each high-definition film runs about 10 minutes in length.

Widman says that the event is family-friendly, and he encourages parents to bring those children who are old enough to hunt along to the show.

"There is so much more to hunting than pulling the trigger or releasing an arrow, and these films do a great job of communicating that with the viewer," said Widman. "We all need a reminder once in a while of why hunting is such an important connection to the outdoors and to ourselves, and it is especially important to instill that in our young hunters."

All tickets will be available at each event, but they are also available for purchase online at the Hunting Film Tour website ([www.huntingfilmtour.com](http://www.huntingfilmtour.com)).

com).

The money raised at all three screenings this fall will be used to fund and promote the Camo Coalition, the legislative advocacy arm of the South Dakota Wildlife Federation that Widman says is one of the oldest conservation organizations in South Dakota, but is not very well known.

"The Camo Coalition's goal is to bring together the state's 150,000-plus sportsmen and women and other outdoor enthusiasts to prevent the privatization of the public's wildlife resources," Widman said. "Our outdoor heritage is constantly under attack, which is why we actively lobby the state legislature and work closely with the Game, Fish and Parks to protect outdoor recreational opportunities for future generations in South Dakota."

Trailers for each film are available on the Hunting Film Tour Website, and Widman says the short previews provide a great look into how the event has become the largest cinematic event in the hunting

industry.

Among the trailers is a classic late-season hunt for mallards in the snow near the North Platte River in Nebraska, which sets the stage for a Ducks Unlimited film featuring hunter and photographer Doug Steinke. For the past decade, readers of Ducks Unlimited magazine have become familiar with Steinke's photos, which frame those magical moments that captivate the hearts and minds of waterfowl hunters.

"The Hunting Film Tour is a unique event, something different than the traditional fundraising banquet model that is used by other conservation organizations," said Widman. "Come on out, support a good cause and watch some fantastic hunting stories unfold on the big screen. I guarantee that you'll leave excited for fall and the hunting season."

To see the full tour schedule, watch film trailers and purchase tickets, visit [huntingfilmtour.com](http://huntingfilmtour.com).

For more information on the South Dakota Wildlife Federation, visit [sdwf.org](http://sdwf.org).

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# Ducks Unlimited to dedicate South Dakota project to major donors for “Rescue Our Wetlands” Campaign



WATERTOWN, S.D., Sept. 3, 2015 – South Dakota Ducks Unlimited will dedicate a Watertown-area project as part of DU’s new Rescue our Wetlands campaign. DU announced the wetlands conservation campaign this spring at its national convention. Rescue Our Wetlands is the most ambitious campaign in DU history with a goal of raising \$2 billion dollars by the end of 2018.

“The Rescue Our Wetlands

campaign will help DU deal with the rapidly growing threat to wetlands and grasslands that are so necessary for ducks and more than 900 other species of wildlife, as well as for providing clean water,” said Jeff Heidelbauer, DU senior vice president and South Dakota resident.

This will be the first Ducks Unlimited Inc. campaign that includes DU Canada and DU Mexico. The campaign will focus on

the Prairie Pothole Region of the US and Canada, the world’s best waterfowl breeding area , as well as important waterfowl migration and wintering grounds in other parts of the US and Mexico.

Each of the seven states in the Great Plains Region of Ducks Unlimited will identify a Rescue Our Wetlands major donor dedication project. The South Dakota project is located about 30 miles northwest of Watertown. Called the Engstrom Property, it is a 240-acre tract of wetlands and grasslands on the south side of Swan Lake. DU purchased the property in 2012 as part of DU’s Revolving Habitat Program. It is adjacent to a large game production area owned by South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (SDGFP) and a parcel owned by the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

DU plans to restore three small wetlands on the tract. This will provide additional pair and brood

habitat for locally breeding waterfowl. The property will also provide significant upland habitat for pheasants, deer and other wildlife.

Ducks Unlimited is working to transfer ownership of the property to SDGFP, which will be a great addition to the existing GPA and enable public hunting access. Upon completion of the Rescue Our Wetlands campaign, DU, will hold a dedication ceremony and construct a cairn at the old homestead site that sits high on a hill overlooking Swan Lake.

“It is an ideal location to recognize Ducks Unlimited donors and partners who help with the Rescue Our Wetlands campaign, helping to protect vital habitat in the prairie pothole region and beyond,” Heidelbauer said. “Everyone can help with this campaign by becoming a Ducks Unlimited member, attending a local fundraising banquet or by becoming a major donor.”

## SDDU 2015-2016 Calendar of Events

(Dates are tentative)

### September 2015

- 12 - Kingsbury County Dinner, Lake Preston
- 17 - Sioux Empire Dinner, Sioux Falls
- 24 - Brookings Dinner
- 24 - Watertown Dinner
- 24 - Huron Dinner

### October 2015

- 01 - Canton Dinner
- 03 - Lookout Mountain Dinner, Spearfish
- 05 - Mitchell Sponsor Event
- 10 - Yankton Dinner
- 17 - Britton Dinner
- 19 - Pony Hills Dinner, Woonsocket
- 20 - Miner County Dinner, Howard
- 20 - Gettysburg Dinner
- 23 - Chamberlain Dinner
- 23 - Lake Poinsett Dinner, Arlington

- 24 - McPherson County Dinner, Eureka
- 24 - Springs Dinner, Wessington Springs

### November 2015

- 04 - Life Sponsor Rendezvous, Pierre
- 5 - Aberdeen Dinner
- 06 - Vermillion Dinner
- 07 - Sisseton Dinner
- 14 - Lyman County Dinner, Presho

### December 2015

- 10 - Rosebud Dinner, Winner

### January 2016

- 30 - Lake Alvin Dinner, Harrisburg

### February 2016

- 06 - Groton Area Dinner
- 06 - Tri-State Dinner, Belle Fourche
- 11 - Pierre Dinner
- 12-13 - SDDU State Convention, Mitchell
- 25 - SDSU Waterfowl Hunters Party - Brookings
- 27 - Big Sioux Dinner, Crooks

### March 2016

- 05 - Walworth County Dinner, Mobridge
- 06 - Kranzburg Dinner
- 10 - Gun Bash, Watertown
- 19 - Hartford Dinner
- 26 - Custer Dinner
- 26 - Dietrich-Schubloom Dinner, Miller
- 31 - Sioux Falls 100 for 100 Dinner

### April 2016

- 09 - Lennox Dinner
- 16 - Castlewood Dinner
- 16 - Choteau Creek Dinner, Armour
- 22 - Mitchell Dinner
- 25 - Aberdeen Sponsor Event
- 28 - Day County Dinner, Webster
- 29 - Sioux Falls Sponsor Event
- 29 - Split Rock Dinner, Brandon

### May 2016

- 07 - Rapid City Dinner
- 26-30 - DU National Convention - Alaska

### June 2016

- 22-23 - Life Sponsor Rendezvous, Spring Creek

### July 2016

- 16 - Deuel County Golf Event, Clear Lake
- 21-23 - Region 2 Leadership Conference, Deadwood



# Volunteer Day Highlights Conservation Projects in Northeast South Dakota

The South Dakota Ducks Unlimited Volunteer Day is always popular for those in attendance, and this year's event on Aug. 8 proved to be no different, with a group of supporters, young Greenwings and staff exploring the northeast corner of the state to view a variety of DU projects.

The first stop on the tour was a Waterfowl Production Area south of historic Fort Sisseton where DU recently erected a cairn to recognize the outstanding contributions that John Dale has made to help protect the future of waterfowl habitat in South Dakota. Through his significant financial gifts in support of DU's conservation easement partnership with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Mr. Dale has personally protected thousands of acres of grasslands and wetlands, habitat that is critical for nesting



ducks in the Prairie Pothole Region.

The second stop of the day was another Waterfowl Production Area north of Fort Sisseton where another cairn has been placed to recognize a large number of South Dakota Legacy Greenwing members.

Unfortunately, some of the senior volunteers on the tour that day had a "senior moment" and could not remember exactly where the cairn was located. Despite sending out a search party of young and old alike, the cairn was never found. Regardless, it was a beautiful day for a walk through the prairie.

Our next stop was a large, semi-permanent wetland on private land near Highway 10 that has been restored through the USF&WS's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. Ducks Unlimited provided financial assistance to help complete this wetland restoration project, which is an excellent example of a northeast South Dakota "hemimars" - a mix of open water and cattails that provides excellent brood rearing habitat to a variety of duck species and other wetland birds.

The SDDU Volunteer Day made its next stop at the Vig and Kemnitz properties near Veblen in Roberts

County. Work will begin this fall to restore wetlands and grasslands on both properties, which were acquired by DU as a part of the Revolving Habitat Program. The restored habitat will be protected with permanent conservation easements before being sold at auction to a conservation buyer. The funds from this sale will then be used to pursue additional conservation projects in the state. Both properties are open to the public for hunting while owned by DU and are included in the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Hunting Atlas.

Finally, the entire group enjoyed an excellent dinner at the lodge at Enemy Swim Lake before departing for home. DU is already planning another similar event for South Dakota volunteers next year and encourages everyone to consider attending.

## Welcome To LEMMON SOUTH DAKOTA

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# Pheasant Survey Indicates Successful Spring Nesting Effort

The South Dakota Game, Fish & Parks is crediting a second consecutive year of favorable winter and spring weather conditions for helping produce another large increase in the annual pheasant brood survey.

The highly anticipated survey shows a 2015 statewide pheasants-per-mile (PPM) index of 3.80, which reflects a 42-percent increase over 2014 (2.68) and is over double the index of 1.52 recorded in 2013.

According to the report, the increase in pheasant abundance is likely in response a mild winter throughout much of the primary pheasant range, as well as timely spring rains that allowed for the “quick growth of grasses and other cover such as winter wheat.”

In spite of this sizable increase, however, the 2015 statewide index remains 30-percent below the 10-year average of 5.45 PPM.

Staff from the GF&P conducted 109, 30-mile brood routes between July 25 and August 15 and used the number of broods, chicks, hens, and roosters observed to help calculate PPM estimates for localized areas, seen here in an abbreviated form:

	PPM	Change from 2014	Change from 10-year average
Chamberlain	8.84	+35%	-34%
Winner	5.97	+58%	-15%
Pierre	7.48	+44%	-17%
Mobridge	5.02	+40%	-25%
Aberdeen	3.21	+17%	-45%
Huron	4.02	+38%	-41%
Mitchel	4.55	+49%	-18%
Yankton	2.06	+52%	+47%
Sioux Falls	2.11	+100%	+7%
Brookings	1.70	+46%	-53%
Watertown	2.01	+67%	-54%
Sisseton	1.30	+70%	-31%
Western SD	2.44	+60%	-6%

The 2015 statewide PPM index is



similar to 2011, when hunters shot an estimated 1.56 million roosters during the fall season, and the current survey suggests that hunters within the Missouri River and James River corridors will have the best opportunities for filling game bags this fall.

Those areas remain the heart of the traditional pheasant range in South Dakota because of the amount of quality habitat that can be found there, says GF&P senior upland game biologist Travis Runia.

“Pheasants are an extremely resilient bird, so in areas with available habitat they are able to respond very well to favorable weather conditions, which looks to be the case this year,” Runia says.

One of the bigger surprises of the brood report this year, Runia says, is that the Mobridge routes returned numbers on par with the overall statewide PPM increase in spite of significant rainfall amounts during

the spring nesting season.

That same band of heavy rain during the month of May (in excess of 8 inches) extended into the brood survey routes for the Aberdeen area, which Runia believes explains the relative small change in that particular PPM index.

That’s not to say, however, that the hunting will be poor in the Hub City region.

“There are localized areas within every brood survey route that do not necessarily reflect the report because the availability of quality habitat varies,” said Runia. “The brood survey is not a true population estimate, and we encourage hunters to talk to landowners and others from their favorite areas to help them gauge what they might expect to see when they hit the fields this fall.”

Overall, Runia is encouraged by the figures coming out of this year’s report, and he also expects prairie

grouse hunters to see improved bird numbers when that season opens later this month.

Three other takeaways from the 2015 brood survey report:

Winter wheat boosts pheasant numbers – the nesting cover afforded by this cool-season cereal crop was mentioned again in this year’s report, underscoring the significance of seeing crop insurance expanded for winter wheat across all of South Dakota per Gov. Dugaard’s pheasant habitat work group. That said, Runia stresses that the value of winter wheat, as a form of nesting cover, is relative to the amount of grassland cover also available in the area.

Chamberlain remains on top – Redfield, Aberdeen, Huron and Mitchell may get all the press, but over the past ten years no area has dominated the PPM index like Chamberlain. The town of 3000 people on the Missouri River has quietly amassed a 10-year average of over 13 pheasants per mile; the next highest number belongs to Pierre, with just over 9 PPM. Receiving even less attention are the tremendous wing-shooting opportunities for pheasants and prairie grouse found on the nearby Lower Brule Sioux Tribe Reservation

CRP may soon need CPR – The long-term pheasant population trends with the amount of habitat on the landscape, and most recently South Dakota’s pheasant numbers have largely followed in step with the number of acres enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Pheasant abundance and CRP acreage have declined since 2007, when over 1.5 million acres of the valuable nesting habitat were available. According to the brood survey report, by 2020, those 1.5 million acres of CRP could be cut in half if the current trend continues.

To read the complete 2015 brood survey report, visit the South Dakota Game, Fish & Parks website.



# Stamped in Time

*Originally published in American News Outdoor Forum*

The very first day I walked into my wife's grandfather's workshop, I noticed King Buck, lurking on a black serving tray that was tucked away on the back of a shelf.

There was no mistaking that it was the famous black Labrador painted by Iowa artist Maynard Reece in 1959. In his prime, King Buck was considered to be one of the finest dogs in the country, and he had a pair of National Retrieving Championships to prove it.

Reece chose the then-retired King Buck as the subject of his federal duck stamp entry, portraying a proud, white-muzzled dog holding a greenhead in his mouth. King Buck's performance at retrieving competitions made him a legend, but Reece's painting etched him into history as one of the most recognizable dogs to ever retrieve a duck.

For some reason, last summer I finally took the serving tray off of the shelf. The color reprint of Reece's King Buck portrait on the face of the tray was in remarkably good condition. My wife was along, and much to her delight I eagerly began telling her the story of the stamp and King Buck when my hand rubbed across something attached to the backside of the tray.

Turning it over I could hardly believe my eyes. There, yellowed and slightly torn, was a copy of a 1959 South Dakota hunting license, including a \$2 resident game bird license issued by the Game, Fish & Parks Commission. And King Buck was there, too, in all his glory on the federal duck stamp.

A name was signed across the stamp, as required of waterfowl hunters 56 years ago and today.

"P. F. Wagner," I read aloud.

"Pearl Wagner," my wife Amber explained. "He was my great-

grandfather."

Pearl's daughter, Janet, was Amber's grandmother. Janet has since passed, but her brother Russell Wagner still lives in Sioux Falls.

I took a day to visit Russell last October to see what he knew of the print and the stamp.

Russell is 93 years-old and sharp as a tack, but he couldn't remember anything about what I had found in the workshop, other than that he remembered seeing the tray hanging in his parent's house.

Our conversation then turned to Pearl, who worked for many years as a butcher on Main Street in Dell Rapids.

"The funny thing about that," said Russell, "is that before he purchased the shop he had never worked in a meat market before.

"And I'll never forget dad's opening day special: three pounds of hamburger for \$.25."

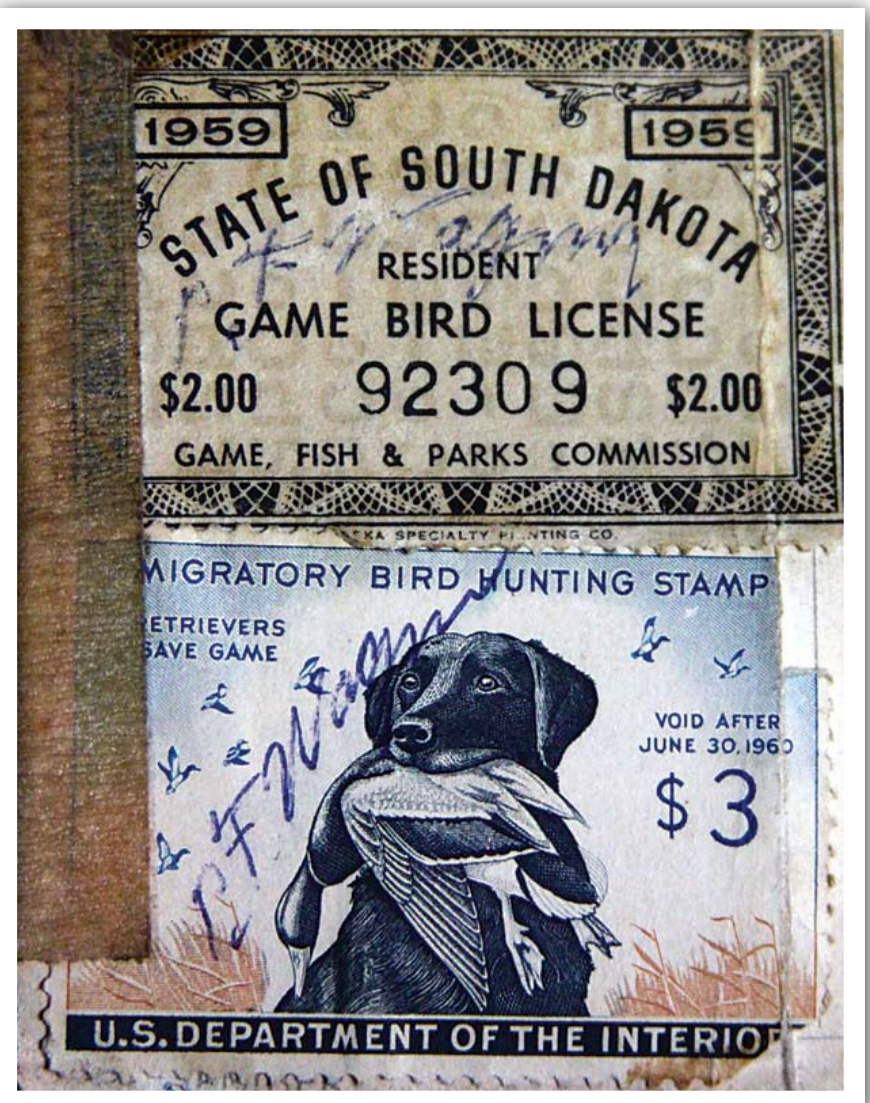
Pearl worked hard to catch up and provide for his family. He often got home from work late in the evening, but was up by 5 o'clock every morning, when he would eat a plate of bacon and eggs before heading back to the butcher shop to work another long day.

Beef and pork were staples at the Wagner Meat Market, and chickens, domestic ducks, geese and turkeys from local farms were added around the holidays.

"But at our home, the tradition at Christmas, in particular, was to eat wild game," Russell recalled. "Pheasants and ducks and geese, all birds that dad had shot. We very seldom had a turkey."

His father loved to hunt, Russell said, and ducks and geese were probably a favorite.

"When he would be able to sneak away from work, he'd load a flat-bottom duck boat on top of the car and head out to hunt," said Russell.



"He hunted Lake Thompson, mostly, when it was just a cattail slough, and other times at Patty's Slough by Chester."

Near as I can tell, Patty's Slough is what we now call Buffalo Slough just a mile or so south of Chester. Ducks and geese still visit Buffalo Slough and Lake Thompson in the fall, and hunters do, too.

Some things do stay pretty much the same after a half-century, and I suspect that waterfowl hunters will forever be captivated by the whistling of wings, sunrises over the decoys and boat rides through the cattails.

I'll never know the real reason, but I like to think that a deep appreciation for ducks and duck hunting caused Pearl Wagner to save ol' King Buck and attach his thumbnail-sized likeness to the back of that black tray. But maybe he just liked the stamp. Either way, I'm sure glad I found it.

Pearl's print, tray and stamp now rest in my office, serving as a great reminder that every hunter has a story. Occasionally you just have to turn something over to find out what it is.





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