

# STATE CONSERVATION REPORT

## South Dakota

2020

### INSIDE

- > [Rescue Our Wetlands](#)
- > [Restoration helps landowner](#)
- > [Options for working lands](#)
- > [Demonstration farm established](#)
- > [New biologist in SD](#)
- > [Conservation accomplishments](#)

## New Manager of Conservation Programs

Bruce Toay started his new role as manager of conservation programs for South Dakota in July 2019. Bruce started his career with Ducks Unlimited in 2006 at the Goebel Ranch in north-central South Dakota and has steadily increased his role and duties across the state. He will supervise field staff and coordinate with regional staff and

conservation partners to secure funding and deliver high-quality conservation across South Dakota.

“DU has a unique ability to bring



Bruce Toay

together diverse partners to accomplish our objectives in South Dakota. I’m excited for the opportunity to expand my role and increase our impact across the state,” Bruce said.

Bruce lives in Ipswich, South Dakota, and has two sons with whom he enjoys sharing a passion for the outdoors and the prairies.

- Bruce Toay, Manager of Conservation Programs

Most people aren’t going to soon forget 2019. Starting with exceptional snowfall and continuing with record-setting rainfall throughout the year, South Dakota likely had more water on the landscape state-wide than ever before. From a duck’s perspective, life was good and production was excellent. However, for many people, the water proved challenging. Infrastructure was damaged, crops went unplanted and properties were submerged. Conservation was difficult as soils were too wet to plant grasses, dirt was too wet to move, and cropping and grazing plans had to be modified on the fly.

High water prompts many to seek short-term solutions to rapidly shed water off the landscape. On the bright side, big challenges lead to big opportunities and Ducks Unlimited remains on the forefront of the discussion around landscape-level management of water, using a working-lands approach to conservation. DU works with landowners to develop sustainable, profitable and eco-friendly agricultural practices. Not only do our projects fill the skies with waterfowl, they also improve water quality, help prevent excessive runoff that can cause flooding and balance precipitation extremes.

In 2019, we partnered with federal and state agencies, non-government conservation organizations, corporations and private donors to deliver more than 62,000 acres conserved and spent more than \$14 million in our state. We

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## DU celebrates *Rescue Our Wetlands*

Ducks Unlimited honored South Dakota donors and Legacy Greenwings who contributed to the *Rescue Our Wetlands* campaign with a recognition at Swan Lake Game Production



Area (GPA). *Rescue Our Wetlands* was the most ambitious campaign in DU history, having raised \$2.34 billion and conserved more than 2.2 million acres.

“This project exemplifies the unique relationships DU has developed with our conservation partners and major donors that help fund these projects,” said Terry Kostinec, DU director of development for South Dakota. “The view from the dedication site is sure to inspire future conservationists.”

The South Dakota project is about 30 miles northwest of Watertown. Initially 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 its Revolving Habitat Program. The property is adjacent to two public areas, one owned by

South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (SDGFP) and the other by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Ducks Unlimited restored three small wetlands and reseeded grassland on the property. Then DU transferred ownership to the SDGFP for management and to incorporate into the Swan Lake GPA. The improvements provide additional pair and brood habitat for breeding waterfowl. The property also provides significant upland habitat for pheasants, deer and other wildlife.

“This property improves habitat for waterfowl, and expands public access to hunting and other outdoor recreation,” said Bruce Toay, manager of conservation programs in South Dakota.

Swan Lake is in the Prairie Coteau region of South Dakota, a region significant to breeding waterfowl and with a strong waterfowl hunting heritage. The dedication site rests on an original homestead on a hill that overlooks Swan Lake. [Front page >>](#)

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permanently protected 50,983 acres with conservation easements, restored and enhanced 9,342 acres of habitat and secured 1,983 acres into our Revolving Habitat Program. Our agronomist and biologists provided on-site technical assistance to farmers and ranchers, improving more than 6,500 acres of habitat.

Our partnerships and habitat delivery start with volunteers, memberships and donations. I am continually amazed and humbled by the hard work and dedication our volunteers demonstrate and their ability to raise money and awareness to further Ducks Unlimited’s mission. These are folks who find time out of their busy schedules to set up banquets, solicit raffle donations, develop relationships with partners, major donors and sponsors, and advocate for conservation at a moment’s notice. Volunteers are truly the backbone of Ducks Unlimited. Thank you for what you do! [Front page >>](#)

## Wetland restoration helps landowner weather the rain

This year’s heavy rains in South Dakota have been a curse for many but a blessing for rancher Randy Barondeau. The abundant water showed what wetland conservation can do for his operation and the ducks have noticed.

“The area has been in a drought for the last three to four years, but it made a complete 180 this year and filled every basin out there,” said Bruce Toay, DU South Dakota manager of conservation programs. “The ducks have responded incredibly.”

Rain has been rare on Barondeau’s South Dakota ranch and when it did fall it just kept going, running

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into creeks and rivers. Barondeau wanted to retain the water so his buffalo would not have to travel as far to get a drink, trampling good grass along the way.

He restored and protected thousands of previously cropped acres, but the work had not included the degraded wetlands. Ducks Unlimited stepped in to help restore and enhance wetlands on the property to benefit livestock and waterfowl.

Toay says DU's recent restorations improved more than 100 acres of wetlands. Restoring wetlands makes the prairies more drought-resistant and ready to hold water when the rains come, helping waterfowl populations recover after dry years. DU also helped enhance the restored grass with more native species. The increased diversity improves grazing and bird nesting cover.

"Driving around, I bet I saw 80 ducks in one place," Barondeau said. "Some of the sloughs used to dry up quickly. Now there is canary grass 6 feet tall. This country is feast or famine, but now the water will last longer." [Front page >>](#)



*Duck nest in field where soil health practices are being implemented.*

## DU provides options for working lands conservation

With the majority of eastern South Dakota privately owned, Ducks Unlimited is targeting resources to improve habitats on working farms and ranches. Biologists and agronomists utilize public and private funding sources to provide technical and financial assistance to agricultural producers in areas with the greatest conservation benefit to waterfowl. In 2019, DU staff completed 44 agreements with private landowners, impacting 9,194 acres of habitat. DU also partnered with county conservation districts

and other partners to provide workshops, field events and bus tours educating private landowners about land use alternatives.

Conservation staff work with agricultural producers to identify habitat concerns and develop management plans that incorporate practices beneficial to the resources and to achieve land-use goals. Many management plans include rotational livestock grazing that can improve the health of the ecosystem.

"Any time we can promote grazing or the ranching industry and maintain cattle on the landscape, we're keeping grasslands, wetlands and wildlife on the landscape, which is a win for ducks," said Randy Meidinger, DU biologist in South Dakota.

DU agronomists identify problematic soils with soil monitoring services. These analyses identify the health of the soil and the potential to improve crop productivity and ecosystem services.

"Soil health monitoring provides baseline data on cropland soils, helping us develop site-specific crop management plans and cover crop mixes to maximize benefit," said Brad Schmidt, regional agronomist for DU in South Dakota. "When we tie those benefits to net profit gains, we are likely to see long-term use." [Front page >>](#)

*For more information about soil health management practices contact: Brad Schmidt at [bschmidt@ducks.org](mailto:bschmidt@ducks.org) or 605-592-1277*

## DU CEO signs agreement for demonstration farm in Beadle County

Ducks Unlimited CEO Adam Putnam signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on a new regenerative agriculture

demonstration farm south of Huron. The MOU represents an agreement between DU and the Beadle Conservation District

(Beadle CD) to develop a soil health and regenerative agriculture demonstration farm on the 310-acre Baum property.

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“Regenerative agriculture brings conservation and agriculture together to benefit a producer’s operation and wildlife,” Putnam said. “The Beadle County farm will demonstrate soil health practices landowners may not have tried. The farm will help us refine these management tools and reduce the producers’ risk for adopting the practices by allowing them to observe and learn before they try them.”

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service holds easements on the wetlands, South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks administers agreements that keep the land open for public hunting access and the Natural Resources Conservation Service provides technical and financial assistance for habitat restoration, capital improvements and management.

The land purchase is financed through private philanthropy and public grants. Beadle CD will own the property and a committee with representatives from DU, Natural Resources Conservation Service and Beadle CD will manage the property. [Front page>>](#)



CEO Adam Putnam (left) and Agronomist Brad Schmidt discuss soil health.

## DU Biologist Cassie Auxt

Cassie Auxt, a graduate of South Dakota State University with a degree in Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences, is the new biologist for Ducks Unlimited in South Dakota. Originally from Central Pennsylvania, she worked for multiple wildlife agencies, including federal, state and non-government organizations, contributing to her conservation background. Cassie worked for Ducks Unlimited previously as an intern on a brood survey crew in North Dakota, where her love and respect of waterfowl and wetland and grassland ecosystems flourished.



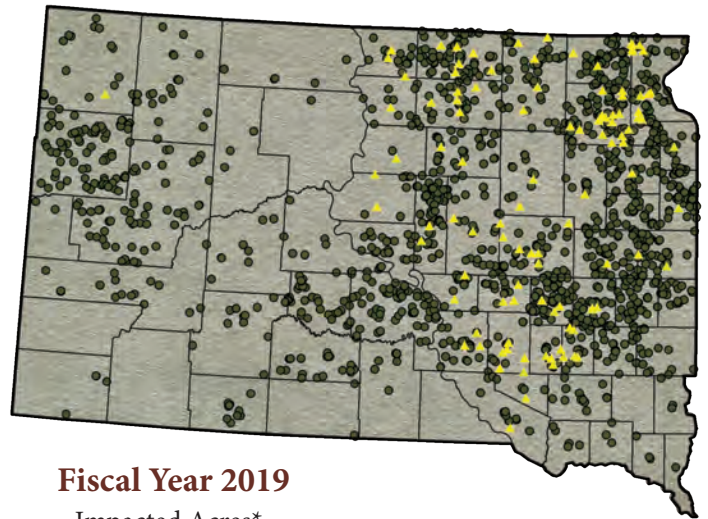
Cassie Auxt and Porter

Cassie believes creating lasting relationships with producers and conservationists is key to ensuring habitat will continue to be restored and protected for generations to come. In her spare time, she enjoys hiking, hunting and spending time with her dog, Porter. [Front page >>](#)

## South Dakota Projects

1984 through the end of Fiscal Year 2019

● Completed projects    ▲ Fiscal Year 2019 projects



### Fiscal Year 2019

- Impacted Acres\*
  - 62,308 acres protected, restored and/or enhanced
- Dollars Invested - \$14,154,188

\*Impacted acres combine unique conservation acres with acres where DU has multiple project objectives.

[Visit the SD interactive project map >>](#)

### State contacts:

**For information on DU’s conservation programs:**  
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