



80 Years of Conservation

DU CONSERVATION REPORT

2017

(SOUTH DAKOTA)

STEVE DONOVAN

Manager of Conservation Programs for South Dakota

As I reflect on the success of Ducks Unlimited's South Dakota conservation programs, I am encouraged about the coming year. The Christmas Day rains that fell on frozen ground across eastern South Dakota were a good prescription for filling prairie pothole wetlands in the spring. The ducks that arrived last spring found a dry landscape across most of South Dakota. Few ducks stopped here. Fortunately, the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) is a vast landscape and more favorable wetland conditions existed farther north. The variability of precipitation and resulting habitat conditions is a good reminder why

Ducks Unlimited focuses on conserving habitat throughout the PPR. We can't control weather but we can restore and protect good habitat that, when weather cooperates, provides ideal conditions for breeding waterfowl.

In 2016, we enjoyed a strong year of conservation delivery. Ducks Unlimited invested more than \$10 million in South Dakota on a variety of conservation programs. Our partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to deliver conservation easements permanently protected almost 29,000 acres of grassland and wetland habitat. We also

invested heavily in restoration and enhancement projects on private and public land to improve 26,000 acres.

Ducks Unlimited launched a cover crop program to provide waterfowl nesting habitat on crop fields. Cover crops are non-cash crops grown by farmers to improve soil health. Cover crop rotations include planting a variety of grasses and forbs on harvested wheat acres, then planting a cash crop the following spring into that residual cover. DU will initiate a multi-year study in 2017 to determine the benefits of cover crops to nesting ducks.

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RESEARCH BEGINS ON COVER CROPS AND WATERFOWL NESTING HABITAT

Ducks Unlimited will begin evaluating strategies to increase nesting habitat in South Dakota's working croplands. Rotating supplemental cover crops with standard cash crops has rapidly expanded across the Prairie Pothole landscape. In conjunction with minimal tillage practices, cover crops provide waterfowl nesting habitat, improve soil health, reduce erosion and runoff, and increase infiltration from precipitation.

Many cover crop mixes include annual grasses like cereal rye that produce vegetative cover in late spring. This dense, early green-up grass is attractive to upland nesting waterfowl like mallards and pintails. Depending on the timing and disturbances created by the planting process, these row-crop acres, traditionally devoid of nesting habitat, could attract and support nesting ducks.

In partnership with South Dakota State University (SDSU) and South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks, DU will study nest survival in cover crop fields. Ducks Unlimited provided financial incentives to 24 agricultural producers across eastern South Dakota to introduce cover cropping practices that include planting cereal rye and practicing minimal tillage.

A graduate student at SDSU will locate and monitor duck nests in cover crops and adjacent habitat throughout the nesting season. Part of the funding for the project is provided by a \$75,000 Conservation Innovation Grant from the South Dakota Natural Resource Conservation Service. This grant will be distributed over a three-year period and DU is seeking additional funding sources.

SPONSORSHIPS AND PARTNERSHIPS TOGETHER IMPROVE SWAN LAKE GPA



Honoring Major Sponsors of the Preserve Our Prairies Initiative on Swan Lake GPA

Sponsorships and partnerships are what make conservation happen. These two came together to improve and add a 240-acre tract to the Swan Lake Game Production Area (GPA) in Clark County. Through the Revolving Habitat Program, DU purchased, restored and sold the property to the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Department (SDGFP), which manages the GPA.

Major sponsorships of DU's Preserve our Prairies (POP) Initiative and partnership with the Izaak Walton League and Grass Lake Conservation Club secured additional funding from the North American Wetlands Conservation Act. Ducks Unlimited restored five acres of shallow wetlands on the property which will provide habitat for breeding waterfowl and wildlife.

Ducks Unlimited obtained funding from the South Dakota Habitat Conservation Fund to restore 80 acres of upland to a diverse mix of native grasses and forbs, providing nesting habitat for waterfowl and pheasants. Pollinators will also benefit from this restoration.

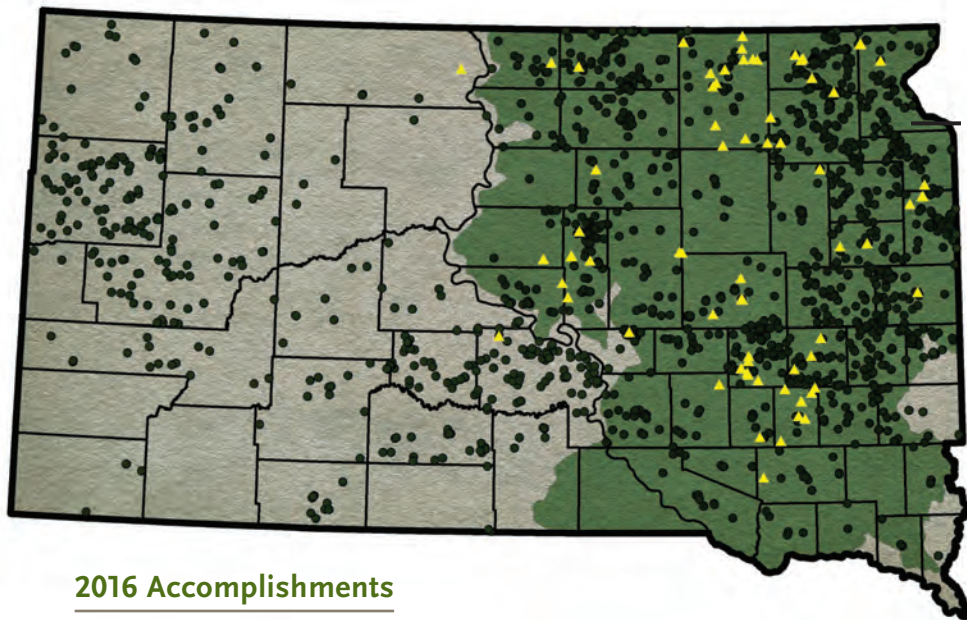
"Public grants require private matching funds. Increasing private support allows our conservation staff to apply for and receive additional public funds for on-the-ground work," said Terry Kostinec, DU director of development for South Dakota.

"We track new revenues from major sponsors, which allows us to budget private gifts into our grant proposal schedules," said Steve Donovan, South Dakota manager of conservation programs.

To honor supporters from Minnesota and Iowa who contributed to POP, Ducks Unlimited dedicated a cairn on the property to recognize their generosity. South Dakota's volunteer leadership attended the dedication to say thank you to their DU neighbors for supporting work in South Dakota. Plans are in place for 2019 to recognize the South Dakota donors who made significant contributions during the *Rescue Our Wetlands* campaign.

ducks unlimited SD PROJECTS 1984-2016

- Completed projects - YTD
 - ▲ 2016 Completed projects
- Note: Project points may represent more than one project.



Prairie Pothole Region
The Prairie Pothole Region is a lush ecosystem of wetlands and grasslands and provides highly productive waterfowl nesting and breeding habitat.

2016 Accomplishments

54,792 Acres protected, restored or enhanced • \$10,418,000 invested



Maddie Saylor, Regional Engineer

MEET MADDIE SAYLOR

Maddie Saylor joined the Great Plains engineering team in October. She began working for Ducks Unlimited in 2013 at its Great Lakes/Atlantic Regional Office. Maddie was the primary engineer for Indiana and Kentucky. She was also the leader of multiple projects in Michigan and Ohio. Her responsibilities in the Great Plains Region include survey, design, drafting, and construction management support for regional projects, especially in the Dakotas. Maddie is an engineer-in-training and is expected to become a licensed professional engineer by this fall. Maddie spends her free time ice fishing, hunting, kayaking, curling, and playing with her yellow lab, Gunner.

Contact information: msaylor@ducks.org or (734) 645-5030

DRAINED WETLANDS GET NEW LIFE IN ROBERTS COUNTY

Drained wetlands don't have to remain that way. Ducks Unlimited's conservation efforts target areas with high waterfowl density and high conservation potential to bring back habitats that will improve North America's waterfowl populations. This is the case on a 480-acre property in Roberts County. Ducks Unlimited purchased the property with 60 small wetland basins that were previously drained decades ago. DU restored the wetlands by filling drainage ditches with soil, allowing water to be retained in the basins after snow melt and heavy rainfall.

These smaller wetlands will complement the 24 larger wetlands on the property and provide a functioning wetland complex that will support ducks during their stay in South Dakota.

The property has 400 acres of former cropland that DU will restore to grassland this year. This grassland habitat will provide secure cover for nesting ducks and other ground-nesting birds. In the final stage of this project, Ducks Unlimited will install fencing and water sources for livestock, and implement a rotational grazing schedule.

Once complete, DU will place conservation easements on the property. Funding for this project was provided by North American Wetland Conservation Act, the Wildlife Conservation Society's Climate Adaptation Fund, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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Another highlight is the restoration of 127 wetland basins on lands owned by DU through the Revolving Habitat Program. These small, temporary and seasonal wetlands are important to breeding waterfowl. Many small wetlands support more breeding duck pairs than fewer large wetlands due to the territorial nature of breeding waterfowl.

The snow and rain we are getting this winter should result in good to excellent spring habitat conditions. It's never too early to get excited about enjoying the sights and sounds of another spring migration in South Dakota and another successful year for DU's conservation efforts.



Excavating a depression and filling a drainage ditch to hold water in previously drained wetlands.

SOUTH DAKOTA STATE CONTACTS:

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For information on event fundraising:

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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.