

DU CONSERVATION REPORT

South Dakota
2018



*Steve Donovan
Manager of Conservation Programs for South Dakota*

Another year is in the books and it is time to reflect on our conservation successes while developing plans to meet challenges facing waterfowl habitat and wetlands in South Dakota. An extremely dry spring and early summer reduced wetland habitat and waterfowl production in the state. Ducks weren't the only wildlife impacted, pheasants and other species were hit hard too.

As a duck guy, I kept reminding myself that drought is natural and important to wetland systems. Drought recycles nutrients in wetlands and ultimately sets the stage for dramatic productivity when water returns. We hope to see that recovery in 2018.

While drought impacted production in 2017, it didn't slow our conservation accomplishments. More than

42,000 acres of wetland and grassland habitat were permanently protected. We also enhanced or restored more than 16,000 acres, directly improving habitat for waterfowl and other wildlife. These accomplishments should be celebrated by the entire Ducks Unlimited family of members, volunteers, donors and staff.

As we look ahead, we are seizing opportunities to ensure a future with healthy habitat and plentiful waterfowl. We are embarking on a partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to promote soil health practices and integrate wildlife habitat. Thanks to the generosity of John and Cheryl Dale, we have created a large conservation program in the Bitter Lake watershed. With continued support from First National Bank of Omaha, we developed a successful conservation program in the James River Lowlands.

South Dakota can be proud of the habitats we have and the healthy wildlife populations they support. Many visitors from Minnesota and Iowa come to South Dakota to hunt pheasants because habitat loss in those states has resulted in low pheasant populations. It's DU's mission in South Dakota to ensure we continue to be blessed with sufficient habitat to support healthy wildlife populations.

IMPROVING SOIL HEALTH AND WILDLIFE HABITAT

Ducks Unlimited is promoting soil health practices and associated wildlife benefits by providing financial assistance to interested farmers. By diversifying crop rotations, reducing tillage and incorporating cover crops, producers can improve soil structure, improve water infiltration and storage, increase organic matter, and increase microbial diversity in their soil. These practices provide economic benefits to farmers

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by increasing nutrient and water availability to plants and reducing fertilizer loss. They also improve adjacent aquatic habitat by reducing runoff and sedimentation in wetlands and providing other benefits to wildlife.

“We’re particularly interested in using fall-emerging cover crops, like cereal rye. Not only because of the benefits they provide to soil and water, but they can also potentially provide nesting cover to upland birds,” said Steve Donovan, DU’s manager of conservation programs in South Dakota.

In 2016 and 2017, DU provided cost-share assistance to more than 30 producers in eastern South Dakota to incorporate cover

crops, including cereal rye, into their cropping rotation. One of the producers was Dennis Fagerland, in Marshall County.

“My primary goal is improving soil health, so we plan to use cover crops on 25 percent of our farmed acres annually,” Fagerland said. “I was impressed with the cereal rye this year, as I was able to graze the cover crops last fall after corn harvest, and again this spring, and still had tremendous growth through May prior to planting soybeans.”

As soybeans approached four inches high in late June, the rye grass still provided up to two feet of vegetative cover that could support grassland nesting birds during the primary nesting season.



Waterfowl nest in cover crops.



Conservation is part of family heritage

Jeff Scherschligt grew up knowing Ducks Unlimited through his father. Jeff’s initial involvement with DU was helping with the Sioux Falls DU banquets and Greenwing programs. He later assumed responsibility of running both events. Today he supports the DU mission by hosting major sponsors events at his farm. Jeff is also a Heritage Sponsor and a DU President’s Council member.

“I have worked with Jeff for two years on major sponsors events. He is a generous host and his farm exemplifies the beauty and importance of the Prairie Pothole Region,” said Terry Kostinec, DU director of development in South Dakota.

“On my farm we are planting grass and plugging drains. I have conservation easements, so the habitat will always be there for wildlife. I want to preserve this part of the prairie, especially in a time when people seem to be draining wetlands and plowing grass,” Jeff said.

Every year, Jeff hosts a family reunion on his farm during the opening of pheasant season. Jeff is passing on his conservation ethic to his children and grandchildren and teaching them that nature has a place and is important. “This family tradition connects us and celebrates wildlife habitat. Family members come from all over the country and some of my young nephews have never seen the prairie before,” Jeff said.

Jeff and his mother, Arlette, will accept the Frank Heidelbauer Conservation Award on behalf of his father, Les Scherschligt, at the 2018 South Dakota state convention. The award honors volunteers and supporters of Ducks Unlimited in South Dakota.

CONNECTICUT DONOR SUPPORTS COVER-CROP STUDY

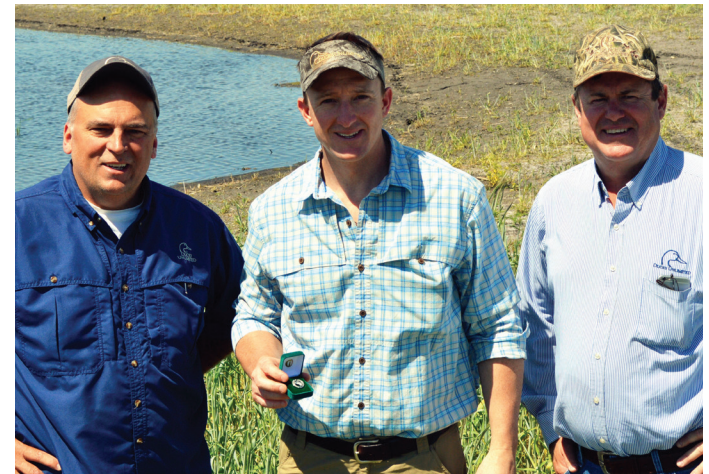
Cover crops improve soil health, water quality and reduce costly inputs needed to raise corn and beans. What is not fully understood is how cover crops can improve nesting conditions for grassland bird species. A Ducks Unlimited major sponsor is helping DU answer that question.

In partnership with South Dakota State University, Natural Resources Conservation Service and South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks, DU secured funding to initiate the study on nest survival in cover crops with associated no-till farming practices.

While attending a South Dakota DU major sponsors event, Diamond Heritage Sponsor Steve Raymond heard about the need for a private gift so DU could

fully utilize public research grants. He stepped forward to provide the needed private match, following discussions with Director of Development Terry Kostinec of South Dakota.

The study began in May when Raymond came back to South Dakota to take a tour of the test areas. He assisted DU Manager of Conservation Programs Steve Donovan in looking for active bird nests in a cover crop field.



(left to right) Director of Development Terry Kostinec, Steve Raymond and Manager of Conservation Programs Steve Donovan.

“I appreciated the opportunity to help DU pursue new research that will support innovative programs that not only promote soil health but also provide ducks and pheasants a place to nest in farmland,” said Raymond.

With the data from the initial year of research, DU biologists and SDSU researchers have developed a master’s student research project to be implemented in 2018-2019. The project will investigate duck production in cover crops. Thus far, a variety of species have been found nesting in cover crops, including mallard, northern pintail, northern shoveler, blue-winged teal, gadwall, ring-necked pheasant and marbled godwit.

GREENWINGS CELEBRATE 20 YEARS



Sixty Ducks Unlimited Greenwings and their families gathered near Madison this summer to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the South Dakota Greenwings program. More than 200 people were on hand to dedicate a new Legacy Greenwing site, the state’s seventh.

The site’s bronze cairn is on U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service land managed for ducks and other wildlife. The cairn has the names of more than 200 youth who became Legacy Greenwing members in the last few years. The ceremony recognized the support the Greenwings and their families have shown for DU and wetlands conservation.

South Dakota’s first Legacy Greenwing member, Vincent Bickner, says he has been around Ducks

Unlimited as long as he can remember. Bickner, son of the 2017 DU State Chair Harold Bickner, continues to be an active volunteer.

“I volunteer because I’m an avid hunter and I like what we do,” Vincent said.

The dedication site is about three miles southeast of Madison, approximately three-fourths of a mile south of the junction of Highways 34 and 19. The cairn is placed along a paved tour route that includes several wildlife interpretive signs.

Another Legacy Greenwing dedication will be held in 2019 to celebrate the conclusion of the *Rescue Our Wetlands* campaign at Swan Lake Game Production Area near Webster.

AGRONOMY – LEADING DU’S CONSERVATION WORK INTO THE FUTURE

Agronomist Brad Schmidt and intern Austin Peterson are leading the Ducks Unlimited Soil Health Program in South Dakota to improve waterfowl habitat on working agricultural lands. The agronomists meet with landowners to devise an individual plan for planting cover crops and other practices designed to improve soil health. Their goal is to mimic natural processes, avoid tillage, diversify crop rotations and implement cover crops. They work with more than 30 cover crop species, some of which will green up in

early spring and provide potential waterfowl nesting cover. In the fall, there will be grain for the farmer to harvest.

“Ducks Unlimited’s approach includes more than just wetland restoration. We will have more opportunities to conserve and create habitat if we help landowners understand the benefits of improving soil health on their agricultural operations. We can improve waterfowl habitat while also benefiting the landowner’s bottom line,” Schmidt said.

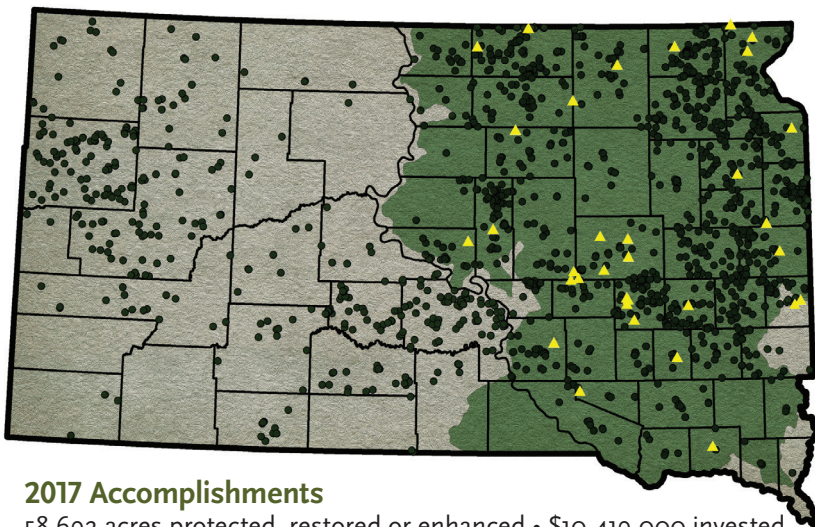


Agronomy intern Austin Peterson (left) and Agronomist Brad Schmidt (right)

ducks unlimited SD PROJECTS 1984-2017

- Completed projects
- ▲ 2017 Completed projects

Note: Project points may represent more than one project.



2017 Accomplishments

58,692 acres protected, restored or enhanced • \$10,419,000 invested

■ Prairie Pothole Region

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

STATE CONTACTS

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GREAT PLAINS REGION

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.