



30 YEARS 30 MILLION ACRES

The North American Wetlands Conservation Act continues to be one of the most important and successful conservation programs in history

by **CRAIG LESCHACK** and **GILDO TORI**

PEOPLE WHO ARE PASSIONATE ABOUT WATERFOWL AND WETLANDS ARE CELEBRATING THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE NORTH AMERICAN WETLANDS CONSERVATION ACT (NAWCA). DURING THE LAST THREE DECADES, MORE THAN 6,200 NAWCA PARTNERS HAVE CONSERVED OVER 30 MILLION ACRES OF WETLANDS AND ASSOCIATED HABITATS, INCLUDING PROJECTS IN EVERY STATE, PROVINCE, AND TERRITORY IN NORTH AMERICA. THE BENEFITS FOR WATERFOWL AND WATERFOWL ENTHUSIASTS HAVE BEEN EXTRAORDINARY. HERE'S HOW IT HAPPENED.

CARY R. ZAHM



LEGISLATIVE HISTORY

It was the mid-1980s. The flyway councils, state and federal fish and wildlife agencies, and nongovernmental organizations like Ducks Unlimited had just put the finishing touches on the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP), a comprehensive and detailed blueprint for the future of waterfowl. This ambitious international plan was designed to ensure that hunters, bird-watchers, and others could enjoy waterfowl in perpetuity. Conservation of important waterfowl habitats was the foundation of the plan; however, it included no provision for funding.

After NAWMP was signed in 1986, federal and state agencies joined with private groups like DU to get creative about securing funding. They worked with key legislators (Senator George Mitchell of Maine and Representative Silvio Conte of Massachusetts) to introduce NAWCA as a new conservation funding mechanism. In 1989, the Senate and House quickly passed NAWCA, and President George H.W. Bush signed it into law. Bush also pledged a new policy of “no net loss of wetlands.” It was a historic moment, and the waterfowl community celebrated one of its most important achievements.



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NAWCA's primary responsibility is to support the habitat objectives listed in NAWMP and related joint ventures. The joint ventures cover the most important waterfowl habitats in specific regions, stepping down larger habitat goals to more specific and achievable pieces. The joint ventures pioneered a partnership approach to conservation, in which many different groups work together to achieve success. NAWCA encourages that approach by requiring each federal dollar to be matched with a nonfederal dollar. By working together, these partners secure significant funding for meaningful habitat work.

In the act's first year, Congress appropriated \$14.9 million for NAWCA projects. Additional funding was to come from fines, penalties, forfeitures, and interest accrued on the NAWCA fund. The waterfowl community could now use that funding to put more habitat on the ground in the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Since 1989, NAWCA grants totaling more than \$1.7 billion have leveraged \$3.6 billion in matching funds and another \$1.4 billion in nonmatching funds from thousands of partners. These contributions have far exceeded match requirements, allowing for implementation of over 2,900 projects on more than 30 million acres of wetlands and associated uplands across North America. Ducks Unlimited Inc. (DU), Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC), and Ducks Unlimited de Mexico (DUMAC) have been strong partners with NAWCA since the program's inception.

NAWCA FACT Over its 30-year history, NAWCA funding has been used to conserve over 30 million acres of important wildlife habitat. That's an area about the size of Pennsylvania.



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NAWCA funds are used to restore, enhance, and protect waterfowl habitat across North America. This work also reduces flooding, recharges aquifers, purifies water sources, and provides thousands of jobs annually.



SCOTT FINK

NAWCA IN THE UNITED STATES

Across the US, Ducks Unlimited secures NAWCA grants to help fund conservation work on the most important waterfowl breeding, migration, and wintering habitats. Along the Gulf Coast of Louisiana and Texas, NAWCA has provided approximately \$5 million annually to conserve habitat where nearly 14 million ducks and 2 million geese historically wintered. In the Central Valley of California, one of the most important wintering areas for northern pintails, DU and its partners are conducting large-scale restoration projects that not only improve habitat for ducks and imperiled fish species but also increase the efficiency of water use.



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On the US breeding grounds, DU is in a race to conserve the best nesting habitat for North America's waterfowl. This includes purchasing conservation easements that protect native grasslands and prevent wetlands from being drained while helping farmers and ranchers maintain their livelihoods. In the Midwest, NAWCA grants have helped DU and its partners conserve vital migration habitat along the Mississippi River and its tributaries. Many of the NAWCA projects that DU delivers improve hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation opportunities on public lands.

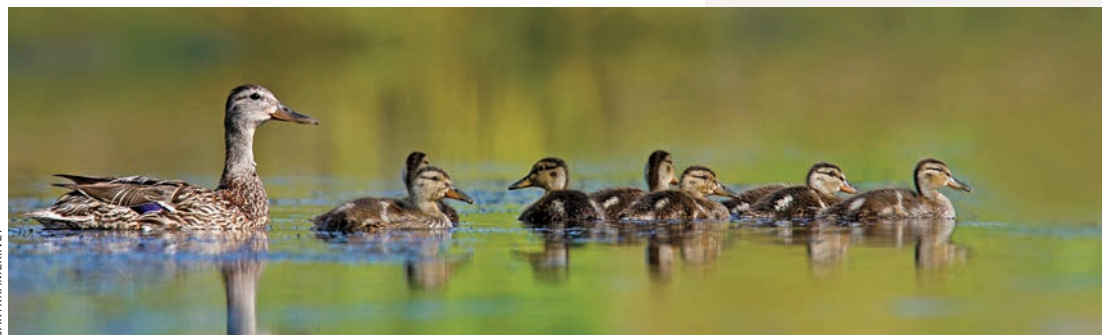
INTERNATIONAL CONSERVATION

One of the key early provisions of NAWCA includes a mechanism to fund conservation work in Canada and Mexico. The NAWCA dollars sent to both countries have to be matched with nonfederal US dollars before crossing the border. The

STATE SUPPORT DRIVES CONSERVATION IN CANADA

For 55 years, state wildlife agencies have been key partners in Ducks Unlimited's habitat work on the Canadian breeding grounds. However, the launch of NAWMP in 1986 and NAWCA in 1989 provided new incentives for states to increase their investments. In support of NAWMP, and in recognition of the need for nonfederal matching funds required by NAWCA, the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies established the State Contributions to Canada Program. DU matches every dollar contributed by state agencies through this program, and then works with DU Canada to match those dollars with NAWCA and Canadian partner funds.

In 2019, a record 43 states contributed \$3.39 million to Canadian conservation projects. With matching funds from DU and NAWCA, these state contributions leveraged more than \$16.3 million for conservation. Through these partnerships, state agencies have contributed over \$100 million, which has been used to conserve 6.5 million acres across Canada.



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In some key waterfowl breeding areas in Canada, as much as 90 percent of wetlands are gone. NAWCA dollars are matched by states and by organizations like DU to fund conservation work in these areas.



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Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies and Ducks Unlimited work together to use state duck stamp money and DU funds as a match for federal money. Over the years, this has funded work on breeding habitats north of the border and wintering grounds south of the border.

NAWCA IN CANADA

NAWCA has become a cornerstone of waterfowl conservation in Canada, and nowhere is this more evident than in the Prairie Pothole Region of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. DUC and its partners have committed more resources to this area than any other region in North America. However, on some of Canada's key waterfowl production landscapes, as much as 90 percent of prairie wetlands have been drained in the past 100 years. This persistent loss of wetlands and natural upland cover is a significant threat to the long-term productive capacity of the landscape. DUC partners with NAWCA to deliver programs that protect existing habitats and restore what has been lost, while also developing new habitats that are compatible with agricultural production.

DUC works throughout the rest of the Canadian provinces on important conservation initiatives funded by NAWCA. One example is Quebec, which occupies 46 percent of the Atlantic Flyway and provides habitat for 29 species of breeding waterfowl and more than 10 million migrating ducks, geese, and swans. Quebec's Saint Lawrence River lowlands are an important staging area and an ecological bottleneck of continental importance for waterfowl in the Atlantic and Mississippi Flyways. Canada geese, Atlantic brant, and greater snow geese stop here to acquire the fat and protein reserves necessary to migrate, produce eggs, and initiate incubation on the arctic tundra. NAWCA-funded projects are helping to conserve and protect these valuable wetlands.

Science-based conservation work provides a significant return on investment. Abundant wildlife across North America generates billions of dollars in economic activity from hunting, fishing, wildlife watching, and other outdoor recreation.

NAWCA IN MEXICO

Mexico is rich in natural diversity. More than 25 million acres of wetlands in this country provide important wintering habitat for millions of waterfowl and other migratory birds. These habitats are also crucial to local economies and to people whose lives and well-being depend upon natural resources. Conservation of Mexico's wetlands is an important component of DU's continental work. Since 1974, Ducks Unlimited de Mexico has conserved over 1.9 million acres of wetlands, and NAWCA has played a pivotal role in those accomplishments.

WHAT IS THE NORTH AMERICAN WETLANDS CONSERVATION ACT?

NAWCA is a nonregulatory, incentive-based, voluntary wildlife conservation program that stimulates public-private partnerships to protect, restore, and manage wetland habitats for a variety of migratory birds and other wildlife. The program provides matching grants for wetland conservation projects.

NAWCA BY THE NUMBERS

- Grants: \$1.7 billion
- Matching Funds: \$3.6 billion
- Nonmatching Funds: \$1.4 billion
- Conservation Projects: >2,900
- Partners: >6,200
- Acres Conserved: >30 million
- US Jobs Created: approximately 7,500 annually
- US Worker Earnings: >\$200 million annually

Mangrove ecosystems provide vital wildlife and fish habitat, and they also capture and store carbon, but Mexico has lost over 800,000 acres of these important habitats since 1980. DUMAC is using NAWCA funding to protect and restore hydrology in mangrove wetlands along the Pacific Coast and Yucatan Peninsula.

Lake Cuitzeo, in the Central Highlands region of Mexico, is one of the nation's key waterfowl habitats. It also provides a foundation for the livelihoods of many rural communities. DUMAC is partnering with NAWCA to lead an integrated management approach by implementing a watershed plan, installing eco-technologies for waste disposal and nutrient management, conducting workshops in environmental education and agricultural best management practices, and monitoring water quality impacts. All this will benefit millions of waterfowl and migratory birds as well as people in local communities.

DUCKS AND MORE

The impacts of NAWCA reach far beyond its primary purpose of conserving habitat for waterfowl and other migratory birds. Habitats conserved through NAWCA store water and recharge aquifers, securing future water supplies and reducing soil erosion during floods. These habitats also preserve water quality by removing phosphates, nitrogen, and pesticides.

NAWCA funds have created, on average, nearly 7,500 new jobs annually in the US. These jobs generate more than \$200 million in worker earnings each year. NAWCA has benefited the national economy by translating \$1.7 billion in federal funds into more than \$6.7 billion in on-the-ground conservation and economic activity in North America. The abundance of wildlife supported by NAWCA projects, including many species of migratory birds, fish, and mammals, generates billions

of dollars in economic activity from hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, photography, and other forms of outdoor recreation. On average, Americans spend \$887 billion on outdoor recreation annually, and the recreation industry directly supports over 7.6 million jobs.

HELP US GET NAWCA REAUTHORIZED

For a federal program to be successful and continue, it needs congressional authorization (program validity) and appropriations (money). NAWCA authorization expired in 2012, but it continues to receive annual appropriations, largely because of support from its partners, especially DU volunteers and members.

Ducks Unlimited is working to get NAWCA reauthorized. In January 2019, after more than 100 DU volunteers and staff went to Capitol Hill to support the act, reauthorization bills were introduced in the Senate (S. 261) by Senators Martin Heinrich (NM), Bill Cassidy (LA), Tom Carper (DE), and John Kennedy (LA), and in the House (H.R. 925) by Congressmen Mike Thompson (CA) and Rob Wittman (VA). Both reauthorization bills would extend NAWCA for five years at a ceiling of \$60 million per year.

If you haven't done so already, please contact your senators and representatives and ask them to cosponsor and support these NAWCA reauthorization bills. You can do this directly through the DU website at ducks.org/nawca. Thank you for doing your part to ensure the future of waterfowl and waterfowl habitat for the next generation. 🦆

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NAWCA FACT Each federal dollar contributed through NAWCA is matched on average by three dollars from partners including DU, private landowners, foundations, corporations, and other conservation groups.