

Prairie Pothole Conservation Protects Unique Waterfowl Habitat

The Lamb/Bushfield family placed a conservation easement on their Saskatchewan land to preserve their wetlands forever

By Jessica Shea

Celebrating
30 Years of
Wetland 
Conservation

Over 30 million acres

Richard McBride grew up on the prairies of Saskatchewan, Canada. Working for Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) for the past 24 years, McBride has developed an intimate understanding of the prairie pothole wetlands and the waterfowl that nest there. McBride led a project to secure the Lamb/Bushfield conservation easement—one of the largest ever in Canada’s Prairie Provinces—funded in part by the North American Wetlands Conservation Act.

Thousands of years ago when glaciers receded over modern day central Canada, they dropped ground up rocks. When the land settled after glaciation, there was unevenness in the landscape, which caused deep depressions. These depressions became wetland potholes on the prairie. The basins range in size from a fraction of an acre to several acres, and they fill with water from snow melt every year. The abundance and scattered distribution of the potholes makes them ideal for waterfowl nesting. Biologists estimate that there are 40 to 60 breeding pairs per square mile (2.5 square kilometers).

Because of the high density of waterfowl, the soundscape of the prairie pothole wetlands near Saskatoon, Saskatchewan changes with the seasons, explains McBride. In spring, the air hums with millions of insects as flocks of waterfowl return from their southern wintering grounds to gorge on the bugs. After the birds have refueled, the prairie song comes alive with the quacks, whistles, burrs, and grunts of their mating calls.

The symphony decrescendos during summer while birds nest; being quiet helps keep predators from discovering their nests. In fall as waterfowl congregate, their noise intensifies with the mounting anticipation of their migration south. The symphony reaches its crescendo when great flocks of birds take to the air with boisterous avian good-byes as the wind whistles through millions of feathers. When the last flock has departed, the silence of winter descends.

Of the dozens of species of waterfowl that nest in the prairie pothole region, ruddy ducks are one of the showiest birds. Ruddy ducks make up for their diminutive size with their bright blue bills, stylish black caps, white cheeks, and jaunty upright tails. These birds add their own unique but infrequent calls and sounds to the pothole symphony.

Ruddy ducks nest predominantly in the prairie potholes region of Saskatchewan. The distinct look of this diving-duck species captured the attention of cattle rancher John Lamb. Lamb grew up outside of Calgary, Alberta surrounded by plenty of birds but no ruddy ducks. When Lamb bought land in the Allan Hills region about an hour outside of Saskatoon, he commented many times to McBride that he loved seeing the ruddy ducks.



Nicole Bushfield, on her family's decision to sign the largest conservation easement with DUC in Saskatchewan: "It's great to have opportunities to continue doing what I love and enhance grasslands at the same time."

Photo: Ducks Unlimited Canada

McBride and DUC staff spent half a dozen years developing a working relationship with the Lamb/Bushfield family. "I've met very few landowners who have the same level of commitment to keeping their land wildlife friendly," McBride explains. "John told me he wanted to protect his land because he felt strongly that it was the right thing to do." The Lamb/Bushfield family enjoys the wildlife on their property, not only the ruddy ducks and other waterfowl but also the moose and elk that graze on the fertile land.

From their desire to be good stewards of the land grew the Lamb/Bushfield family's interest in putting conservation easements on their property. Ducks Unlimited Canada used funds from donations and grants to compensate the family for placing a conservation easement on their land, which means the land will be in a perpetual state of conservation; the land cannot be developed even if it switches owners. The Lamb/Bushfield family used the money they gained from the easement to buy more land to both conserve and use for cattle grazing. Ultimately, the conservation easement on their land makes it more stable and profitable.

"Twenty-five years ago we thought that grazed land was less productive for waterfowl," McBride explains, "but research has shown that waterfowl does better coexisting with cattle than previously thought. The key is to not overgraze."

In 2015, Ducks Unlimited Canada received a grant from the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) to help make the Lamb/Bushfield Conservation Easement possible. NAWCA has provided funding for wetland habitat conservation projects in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico since 1989.

Over the past 30 years, NAWCA has grown into one of the most significant conservation programs in history. More than 3,000 NAWCA-funded projects have conserved 30 million acres of wetlands and related habitats. The projects span nearly every state, territory, and province in Canada, the U.S., and Mexico. The goal of the multi-billion dollar grant program is to guarantee waterfowl and other wetland-dependant

species success across the continent, from breeding to wintering grounds, in perpetuity. Many of the projects have improved birdwatching, hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation opportunities.

“NAWCA’s impact on wetland conservation in Saskatchewan has been huge,” McBride says. “It has been one of our key sources of funds for preserving good wetland habitat in the province.”

Preserving wetland habitat ensures that the prairie pothole symphony will reverberate across the province for years to come.

To join the celebration: www.nawmp.org/nawca30



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