

BY Robert Schwartz



RUSS [CC BY 2.0 (HTTPS://CREATIVECOMMONS.ORG/LICENSES/RY/2.0)]

Bird species such as sandhill cranes have benefitted from the North American Wetlands Conservation Act.

FOR THE BIRDS:

The North American Wetlands Conservation Act

From TV to music, fashion to politics, everywhere you look, Americans are paying homage to all-things '80s. From the big hair to the bright colors, the decade that saw the launch of the Land Trust Alliance is now having a sudden rebirth. The same is true of a critical conservation program established during that time, one that all land trusts should be aware of when seeking out important conservation dollars. I'm talking, of course, about the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, or NAWCA for short.

The Birth of NAWCA

While the 1980s may be best remembered as a time that ushered in massive socioeconomic changes worldwide (the fall of the Berlin Wall, Live Aid and, perhaps, padded shoulders), it also was the decade that saw a severe decline in North American waterfowl populations. Recognizing this as a problem, leaders within our

community began envisioning strategies for how best to protect, restore and enhance critical wetland habitats. These efforts resulted in the 1986 signing of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP). A "vision of collaborative conservation," the plan outlined a detailed partnership model whereby private and public entities would come together to provide for the long-term protection

of wetlands and associated upland habitats. However, as the plan gained traction, funding remained an issue. That is until April 1989 when former Senator George Mitchell of Maine stepped in to offer a solution.

Mitchell, the Senate Majority Leader at the time, recognizing a critical need to fund NAWMP, introduced the North American Wetlands Conservation Act on April 17, 1989. Within eight months, the bill would be signed into law by then-President George H.W. Bush.

Established as a cost-sharing program, NAWCA is now funded by a combination of congressional appropriations, fines, penalties and forfeitures from the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The funds, which reached more than \$70 million for Fiscal Year 2019, are placed into a specific conservation trust that distributes grants to worthy private organizations working to protect wetland habitats for waterfowl and other migratory birds.

Now, 30 years after first being enacted, NAWCA is as important as ever—helping state and local governments as well as private organizations, such as land trusts, complete important conservation projects.

The NAWCA Advantage

The next time your land trust is looking to secure funding for a land conservation project, consider applying for a NAWCA Standard or Small Grant administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Division of Bird Habitat Conservation (DBHC). Each year these grants support land trusts in completing important work that may not otherwise have been funded—efforts that in the past have helped control floods, reduce coastal erosion and improve water and air quality nationwide.

The Standard Grants Program has two grant cycles in a fiscal year, providing funding of up to \$1 million per project, while the Small Grants Program provides funding of up to \$100,000 per project during its once-a-year grant cycle. The application process is similar for both programs.

When a land trust applies for a Standard Grant, its proposal is first reviewed by DBHC staff for eligibility. Next, the North

American Wetlands Conservation Council (NAWCC), a nine-member committee, evaluates and ranks eligible proposals, scoring them based on several technical guidelines. Once proposals are scored and ranked, NAWCC submits its proposed slate of approved projects to the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission, a seven-member panel, which has final authority over what projects receive Standard Grants. Small Grants go through a similar process, but NAWCC makes the final decision regarding which projects will receive funding.

"It's an honor and a privilege to participate in these important conservation conversations," says Wendy Jackson, the Land Trust Alliance's executive vice president who also serves as an ex-officio member of NAWCC. "If your land trust is involved in the protection and restoration of wetland habitats, NAWCA grants can be an excellent funding source. Not only do these grants provide critical conservation monies, they assist our nation's land trusts in ensuring that we are advancing our conservation mission every step of the way."

In fact, over the past 20 years, NAWCA has allocated more than \$1.6 billion in grants, supported 2,800 individual projects and helped conserve, restore and enhance 30 million acres of habitat. In other words, land trusts like your own should explore opportunities to participate, especially as there are fewer opportunities to obtain federal funding. NAWCA not only protects habitat for migratory birds and other species that rely on wetlands, it also supports local economies, creating on average nearly 7,500 jobs annually. And, of course, wetlands play a significant role in improving and maintaining water quality. Yet despite these achievements, NAWCA still faces some uphill challenges related to its future funding and reauthorization.

Advocate for NAWCA

While fiscal year 2019 saw Congress appropriate \$42 million for NAWCA, future funding and reauthorization remain uncertain. To address these concerns, in January 2019, the North American Wetlands Conservation



A sandhill crane colt gets weighed at the White Oak conservation facility in Florida.

Extension Act was introduced in both the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate. The legislation would reauthorize NAWCA through 2024 while increasing authorized funding to \$60 million annually.

To see the latest status of this bill and ensure your members of Congress are signed on as co-sponsors, visit congress.gov and search by bill numbers for S. 261 / H.R. 925.

And as your own land trust seeks out new funding opportunities, don't forget about NAWCA.

NAWCA's success over the past 30 years is impressive. Across the United States, NAWCA funds have helped protect significant amounts of wetland habitat and played a tremendous role in increasing bird populations across the country. And for land trusts, that funding is what has often made the difference in being able to complete important work.

To learn more about the program and how to apply for funding, visit, www.fws.gov/birds/grants/north-american-wetland-conservation-act.php.

ROBERT SCHWARTZ IS AMBASSADOR PROGRAM MANAGER FOR THE LAND TRUST ALLIANCE.