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# SAVING WETLANDS

**A History of the Duck Stamp**

BY LISA BALLARD



I was invited on my first duck hunt in fall 1987. I was living in New Hampshire at the time, and the plan was to set up a portable blind on a pothole adjacent to the Connecticut River in the pre-dawn hours, then wait for the mallards. I went with two friends who were experienced waterfowlers. They brought the blind, the decoys, the dog, and the duck calls. I was in charge of coffee and my own shotgun, camo, and waders.

“Got your hunting license?” one of my mentors asked as we hunkered in the blind, watching the first tendrils of dawn poke into the dark sky.

“Of course,” I whispered back.

“Got your duck stamps?” asked my other friend.

“You bet,” I replied.

I was fascinated by those two stamps, one issued by the federal government and the other by the state of New Hampshire. They were beautiful! The federal stamp, officially known as the Federal Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp, had two drakes and a hen, all redheads, flying over low whitecaps. The artist had drawn the wings with such detail that I could see every feather. The New Hampshire stamp showed two Canada geese, wings set as they peered down, about to land. That stamp was equally detailed. When the clerk told me to sign across the stamps after I put them on my license, I cringed at the thought of defacing them.

My hunting mates and I settled onto our stools, waiting and watching the sky. About a half-hour later, the sun inched its way smoothly, gracefully above the trees, lighting up the pothole. Suddenly, a tension filled the air as if chased there by the sunlight.

We could see four ducks flying our way. The dog started vibrating.

One of my friends made a few quacks with his duck call. The ducks looked at the pothole. We thought they had no interest, but as they passed by us, they made a big arc to our right, losing elevation.

“Get ready,” whispered the duck caller.

The ducks set their wings.

“Now!”

We stood and shot. Two of the four ducks splashed into the water about 30 yards from our blind. The dog bound in after them. My heart



pounded with excitement. It was an unforgettable moment in a lifetime of outdoor pursuits.

Thirty years later, I still look forward to fall, eager to go duck hunting and curious what the annual duck stamps will look like. But today I understand the connection between my duck stamps and robust duck populations.

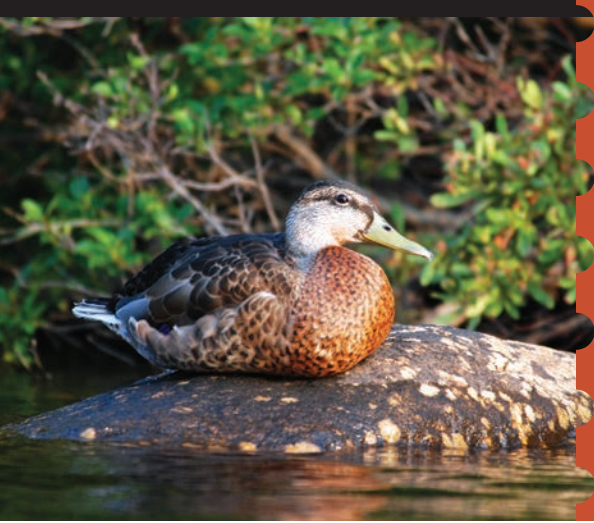
### Wetlands in Crisis

It's hard to imagine the United States without ducks, geese, and other water birds. Without beavers, muskrats, mink, salamanders, or other animals that rely on wetland habitat. Not to mention fish species – including Northern pike, yellow perch, carp, smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, bluegill, bullhead, and minnows – that spawn in marshy bays and backwaters. Yet it almost happened in the 1920s.

In a nationwide effort to boost agricultural production after World War I, the United States drained more than 100,000 square miles of wetlands to create farmland. The wetland crisis hit the western half of the country especially hard.

“Picture, if you can, millions of sick and dying ducks, many of them helpless little fledglings baked to death under the rays of a scorching sun, all for lack of fresh water,” urged Seth Gordon, the Izaak Walton League's conservation director at the time, in *Outdoor America* magazine. Gordon was referring to a report by D.H. Madsen, Utah's Game and Fish Commissioner, which cited the demise of 10 million birds in the West. Much of the devastation was in Utah's Beaver River Marshes, a major breeding ground for waterfowl and shore birds that migrated throughout Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Idaho, Utah, Arizona, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico.

To reverse the draining and deterioration of America's wetlands, the League partnered with the National Audubon Society, American Game Protective Association, Western Association of



## CONSERVING OUR WETLAND HERITAGE

From the founding of the nation through most of the 20th century, agriculture won out over wetland conservation. Americans turned millions of acres of marshland and floodplains into crop land with little regard for the impact on wildlife.

The great conservation leaders of the early 20th century, including duck stamp creator Ding Darling and author-ecologist Aldo Leopold (both League members), were greatly challenged by a national sentiment that considered draining wetlands as “progress.”

Today, we know that wetlands have value for wildlife conservation and our economy. Preliminary data from the “2016 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation” by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service show that wildlife-related recreationists spent \$156.3 billion in 2016 – one percent of our country’s gross domestic product. Without wetlands, a substantial portion of this revenue would be lost because these habitats are nurseries for innumerable waterfowl and many other game (and non-game) species.

Wetlands deliver other important benefits. Marshes and their surrounding riparian areas are Mother Nature’s strainers – they absorb pollutants in runoff and prevent erosion. Wetlands catch and hold rain and snowmelt, reducing flooding downstream and recharging groundwater supplies that farmers depend on to irrigate their crops, especially in the arid West.

In the past, the federal government helped farmers drain wetlands. Today, conservation programs that are part of the federal Farm Bill support farmers who restore wetlands, plant buffer strips between crop fields and wetlands, and provide permanent protection for rural wetlands through conservation easements, says IWLA Agriculture Program Director Duane Hovorka.

“Unfortunately, in the 2014 Farm Bill, Congress cut funding for wetland conservation,” Hovorka says. “Wetlands protected through federal conservation easements dropped from 246,000 acres in 2010 to less than 40,000 acres in 2016. A 20-percent cut to the Conservation Reserve Program also reduced opportunities to fund buffer strips that protect wetlands.”

Congress is now ramping up work on the next Farm Bill. “As Congress considers funding for conservation programs that protect wetlands, reduce polluted runoff, and provide wildlife habitat, the Izaak Walton League will be there,” Hovorka says. “As we have been since our founding, the League will be a voice for America’s wetlands and the many people who understand the vital role wetlands play in our nation’s health and economy.”





State Game Commissioners, and International Association of State Game, Fish and Conservation Commissioners in 1925 to persuade Congress to redirect the 10-percent excise tax paid on firearms and ammunition – about \$3.5 million per year at that time – to wetland conservation and creation of wildlife refuges. No luck. The sentiment in Congress was to eliminate excises taxes altogether.

So the League and other supporters of federal wetlands conservation efforts backed a bill to create a \$1 federal hunting license, which hunters would be required to obtain in addition to their state hunting license. The proceeds from the license would fund waterfowl refuges. But Congress defeated this bill too.

“The ducks are rapidly going the way of the passenger pigeon,” wrote Gordon in the December 1927 issue of *Outdoor America*. “Do we want ducks or don’t we? It is now squarely up to the American people.” Members of the League and partner organizations rallied, sending Congress more than 200,000 telegrams and letters in support of wetland conservation.

### **Hatching the Duck Stamp Idea**

In 1929, President Herbert Hoover signed the Migratory Bird Conservation Act (also known as the Norbeck-Anderson Act) into law. The act established the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission to review and approve land acquisitions for much-needed waterfowl refuges. There was only one problem: Congress failed to provide a means to fund those acquisitions.

The dilemma was resolved five years later by League member Jay N. “Ding” Darling. A nationally syndicated and Pulitzer-winning cartoonist, Darling was also an avid hunter, angler, and advocate for wildlife conservation. He often used conservation themes in his influential cartoons, which resonated across the country. In 1934, despite his lack of experience in wildlife management, President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Darling as director of the Bureau of Biological Survey (forerunner of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service). It was during Darling’s short year-and-a-half in that position that he came up with the idea for the federal waterfowl stamp program. He also drew the first stamp: a male and female mallard, wings set, about to land in a marsh.





## HOW MUCH ARE MY DUCK STAMPS WORTH?

Like other stamps, many people collect duck stamps as a hobby. Some states produce limited editions. Certain collectors place a premium on stamps that are signed in limited quantities by the governor of a state or the artist. If the artist embellishes a stamp, it is often seen as adding value. Other collectors want only stamps that are in mint condition. In other words, there are no set rules when it comes to what a duck stamp is worth. The value is in the eyes of the collector.

That said, older stamps in mint condition tend to be worth the most. For example, the original stamp drawn by Ding



Darling is currently valued between \$190 (used) and \$2,000 (mint). Stamp dealers estimate that the federal duck stamp from 1959-1960, which has a picture of a Labrador retriever carrying a duck in its mouth and cost \$3 at the time, will fetch about \$120 today (mint). My 1987-1988 stamp with three redheads, which originally cost \$10, is only worth around \$12 today. Bottom line: unless you have a very old stamp in mint condition, the real value of your duck stamp is in your contribution to wetland conservation when you purchased the stamp, not in its resale value.

The Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act (as amended), commonly called the Duck Stamp Act, requires all waterfowl hunters age 16 and older to purchase a federal hunting stamp. For the first five years of the program, the stamp cost \$1 — the same amount as the previously proposed federal hunting license, but a stamp was apparently more palatable to Congress. Since then, the price has gradually increased to its current rate of \$25.

Of every dollar spent on a federal duck stamp, 98 cents is deposited into the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund to purchase vital habitat or acquire conservation easements for protection in the National Wildlife Refuge System. Since 1934, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has spent more than \$1.4 billion from the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund to permanently protect more than 5.7 million acres of waterfowl habitat. In 2016 alone, FWS spent \$59 million from the Fund to add more than 6,000 acres of waterfowl habitat to national wildlife refuges and protect nearly 47,000 acres of Waterfowl Production Areas in the Prairie Pothole Region. More than 300 national wildlife refuges have been created or expanded using federal duck stamp dollars.

## AND THE WINNER IS...

Each year, wildlife artists throughout the United States vie for the honor of having their drawing selected as the image on the federal duck stamp. More than 2,000 artists enter the competition each year, which is the only art competition of this nature sponsored by the U.S. government. The winner receives only a sheet of the stamps, but he or she may sell prints of the winning design and signed stamps, which can be lucrative.

Think you've got what it takes? Here how the competition works:

- The competition opens June 1 and closes August 15 each year.
- Artists must be a U.S. citizen, age 18 years or older.
- Artists choose their own medium. The artwork must be created by hand (no photographs or computer-aided design).
- Designs may be in color or black and white.
- The artwork must measure 10 inches wide by 7 inches high.
- The artwork must be submitted in a bright white, one-inch mat – making the overall entry 12 inches wide and 9 inches high – and no more than ¼-inch thick.
- The dominant subject of the entry must be one of five designated waterfowl species for that contest year. For 2017, those species were mallard, gadwall, cinnamon teal, blue-winged teal, and harlequin duck.



The judges, who are appointed by the Secretary of the Interior, look for original, eye-catching composition with good contrast and shading. The background should be simple with space for letters and numbers without overlapping the central design. And the drawing must look good reduced to stamp size. (The judges use a reverse magnifying glass to see how artwork looks at a reduced size.)

The process of judging all the entries has turned into an event that includes duck carving contests, hunter education classes, outdoor skills classes, and other related activities.



### Today's Duck Stamp

Federal duck stamps are issued annually on July 1 and are valid through June 30 the following year. In addition to waterfowl hunting, a federal duck stamp allows its owner free entry into national wildlife refuges that charge an entrance fee. The federal duck stamp is the longest running stamp with a single theme in the United States. It also inspired stamp programs in all 50 states, tribal governments, conservation groups, and several other countries – all with the purpose of protecting wetlands.

State duck stamps are issued annually by the wildlife departments in every state (though not all states print actual stamps any more). There's no standard rate – the cost of a state duck stamp varies from \$3 to \$25. Some states issue low-priced resident stamps and raise the rate for nonresidents.





## JUNIOR DUCK STAMP PROGRAM

Since 1989, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has conducted an annual Junior Duck Stamp Conservation and Design Program for grades K-12. The program includes an educational curriculum in science and the visual arts with a focus on wildlife and wetland conservation, wildlife art, and the collection and study of stamps. Entries can include an optional written conservation message.



More than 27,000 students enter the Junior Duck Stamp design contest. Entries are first judged at the state level, and the best-of-show entries from each state are judged in a national competition. In April 2017, a pair of trumpeter swans painted by 12-year-old Isaac Schreiber was selected as the winner from among entries from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The 2017 Conservation Message Contest winner was 14-year-old Catherine Wang, who wrote, "Conservation is the promise that the children of tomorrow will witness the beauty of today."

The goal of the Junior Duck Stamp Program is to help create the next generation of waterfowl and wetland conservationists. The stamps are sold by the U.S. Postal Service and other postal stamp suppliers for \$5 per stamp. The proceeds support conservation education, scholarships for students, and stipends for teachers who participate in the program.

For more information about the program, visit [www.fws.gov/birds/education/junior-duck-stamp-conservation-program](http://www.fws.gov/birds/education/junior-duck-stamp-conservation-program).

In addition to waterfowl hunters, birders have also become significant purchasers of duck stamps as way to support habitat conservation for all water birds, including bitterns, terns, stilts, avocets, eagles, and numerous songbirds. Some of the most popular birding destinations are national wildlife refuges. By no coincidence, Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge in Sanibel, Florida, is one of those places, home to over 245 bird species.

### The Next Generation

In April 2014, my husband Jack and I were married near Sanibel. My son Parker (then age 17) and Jack's teenage children were there. As a family activity over the weekend, we went to Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge to go bird watching.

"Who was Ding Darling?" asked Parker as we photographed an egret stalking an unseen fish in a grassy marsh.

"He invented the duck stamp," I replied. "Do you remember your first duck stamp?"

Parker had shot his first duck eight years earlier.

"It had a white goose on it, a Ross' goose," he recalled. "I've still got it!"

Perhaps saving duck stamps runs in the family, but I would like to think it's the passion for waterfowl hunting that's hereditary. And the duck stamps that have allowed us to do it.

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