

# Running the

# Duck Factory

How Montana manages its nationally significant (but often unrecognized) waterfowl populations. **BY DAVE BOOKS**

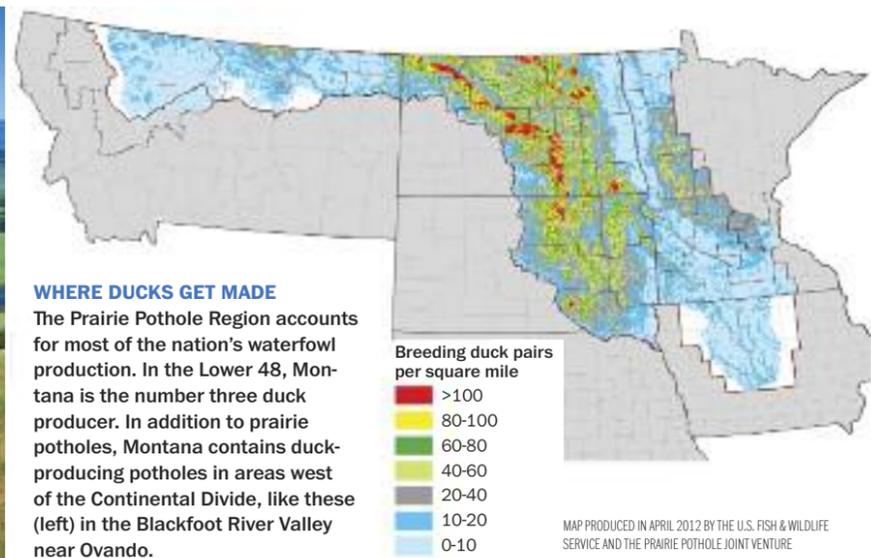
Arriving before dawn, my hunting partner and I tossed out two dozen mallard decoys and settled into the cattails surrounding a small north-central Montana pothole, while two excited Labradors explored the muddy, shallow shoreline.

Ducks had left the pond in a flurry of quacks when we'd walked up. Now, 20 minutes later, we could hear the whistle of wings in the darkness overhead—a good omen.

Time stands still while you're waiting for legal shooting time on opening day of duck season. As I watched the sky gradually lighten in the east, I thought about other duck hunting dawns I'd witnessed across Montana, from Swan Lake in the northwest to Medicine Lake in the far northeast. Though my partner and I had this little pond to ourselves this morning, I knew that legions of like-minded hunters were opening the season at Ninepipe and Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuges west of the Continental Divide, Freezout Lake Wildlife Management Area along the Rocky Mountain Front, and Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge near Malta. Others were hunkered down along countless reservoirs, river sloughs, and potholes all the way to the North Dakota line.

There's no question that Montana is a great state for duck hunting. Waterfowlers from across the country make a pilgrimage

**HERE THEY COME** As dawn approaches, and with it incoming mallards, a hunter quickly sets a decoy spread to lure birds into shotgun range. Though Montana produces more ducks than almost any other state in the nation, it lacks the rich waterfowling lore and culture found in places like Arkansas, Minnesota, and Massachusetts.



here each fall in pickups and SUVs packed with decoys, camping gear, and retrievers steaming up the windows. Montana is also one of the nation's most fertile waterfowl factories, ranking third in duck production in the Lower 48, trailing only the Dakotas.

Yet mention "Montana" to hunters outside of, or even within this state, and relatively few would conjure the image of drake mallards streaming across the sky or potholes packed with feeding teal.

Why is a state that produces so many ducks not considered a "duck state," complete with a long, rich waterfowling culture,

tana and the Dakotas combined actually produce more ducks than all of prairie Canada."

#### BOTH WATER AND GRASS

Such a prodigious output of waterfowl seems odd for a state known for its dry climate and periodic droughts. "It's because we have wetlands and we have grass, and both are blessings for waterfowl," explains Hansen. He says that while the rest of the United States has lost about half of its original wetlands, as well as more than 90 percent of its native prairie, Montana has managed to keep a large share of both.

receded, they left behind shallow depressions that became wetlands rich in aquatic life. Known as North America's "duck factory," the region supports as many as 30 million breeding ducks when favorable water conditions prevail, as in the early 2010s.

Just as important as water—where ducks feed and avoid predators—is nearby grass for nesting. That's why the Conservation Reserve Program has been critical for waterfowl and other wildlife. Enacted in 1985, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) pays landowners to plant vegetation, primarily grasses, on environmentally sensitive land.

According to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), during the years when CRP enrollment by landowners was highest, the additional grasslands in Montana and the Dakotas added two million ducks per year to the fall migration.

Unfortunately, economic conditions have changed to the detriment of wetlands and grasslands. High prices for corn, especially, convinced many farmers to plow up their CRP grasslands. "In the last eight years we've lost a million and a half acres of CRP across Montana's portion of the Prairie Pothole Region alone," Hansen says. "Duck numbers are still strong, thanks to a series of wet years, but we'll need to work even harder to keep our remaining grasslands from being plowed under and converted to crops."

#### IT HAPPENED BEFORE

For that to occur, duck advocates will need to redouble efforts and work even more cooperatively and strategically. There's plenty of precedent. In the early 20th century,

waterfowling helped ban market hunting, passed laws to regulate duck harvest, and formed conservation groups like Ducks Unlimited (DU), a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing habitat for waterfowl. Bob Sanders, manager of DU's conservation programs in Montana, says that hunters have always paid most of the nation's waterfowl management costs by purchasing hunting licenses, paying excise taxes on guns and ammunition, and supporting conservation groups like DU. "Hunters pushed hard for passage of a federal duck stamp back in the Dust Bowl days, and Montana's annual share of that revenue—about \$800,000 in recent years—funds a lot of wetland conservation work," he says.

Established by Congress in 1934, the federal duck stamp, officially known as the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp, has provided more than \$750 million for wetland habitat nationwide over the years. Just as important as the money was formation of a new model for waterfowl conservation embodied in an act of Congress that created the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP) in 1986. The plan came in response to alarming declines in the continental duck population, caused by habitat loss.

A key provision of the NAWMP was creation of several "joint ventures" throughout North America to conserve wetlands

and associated habitats. Within each joint venture, agencies, organizations, corporations, tribes, and individuals cooperatively conserve habitat for priority bird species and other wildlife. Montana is part of three joint ventures: Prairie Pothole, Intermountain West, and Northern Great Plains. While the conservation work targets waterfowl, it also creates great living and breeding habitat for shorebirds, prairie songbirds, and other grassland and wetland species.

#### MORE FEDERAL MONEY

Though joint venture projects were able to use some federal duck stamp revenue, they required additional money for acquiring easements, identifying critical habitat, and helping landowners restore and protect private wetlands and grasslands. So in 1989, Congress passed another act that provides matching grants to organizations and individuals who cooperate on wetland conservation projects that conserve wildlife habitat, purify water, prevent erosion, and lessen flood damage.

These federal funds are often tripled or even quadrupled with matches by local partners. In Montana, more than \$22 million in federal funds has been matched with an additional \$100 million in partner contributions to protect nearly 320,000 acres of wildlife habitat. Montana's Migratory Bird Wetland

Program, enacted by the state legislature in 1985 and administered by FWP, provides one important source of those matching funds (see sidebar on page 22 for details).

"These programs put dollars on the ground and ducks in the air for the benefit of all Montanans," says Sanders. Partnerships often include DU, FWP, The Nature Conservancy, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the USFWS, and private landowners. "Ranchers are our most important ally in a lot of these efforts," says Sanders. "Several excellent public programs pay them to conserve grasslands and improve livestock operations in ways that benefit wetland wildlife."

Other than weather, the most important factor affecting duck production is the federal Farm Bill and its conservation provisions. The latest Farm Bill, passed in 2014, disappointed many conservationists because it lowered by 15 percent the amount of CRP acreage nationwide that Congress would fund. Fortunately for wildlife, the new bill requires landowners to use good conservation practices if they hope to qualify for federal crop insurance. Landowners who drain wetlands or till virgin prairie put their insurance eligibility at risk. The new Farm Bill also provides some funding to the states for developing or strengthening public access programs like FWP's Open Fields.

## Here in Montana, cattle need water and they need grass, and so do ducks."

like, say, Minnesota or Arkansas or even northern California? "Chalk it up to an embarrassment of riches," explains Jim Hansen, FWP waterfowl biologist in Billings. "We have so many other wildlife species and hunting opportunities—elk, antelope, deer, upland birds, and trophy big game species like bighorn sheep, mountain goats, and moose—that waterfowl tend to get lost in the crowd.

"I suspect that few Montanans—except our dedicated corps of duck hunters—realize how important we are in the overall waterfowl picture," Hansen adds. "In some years, Mon-

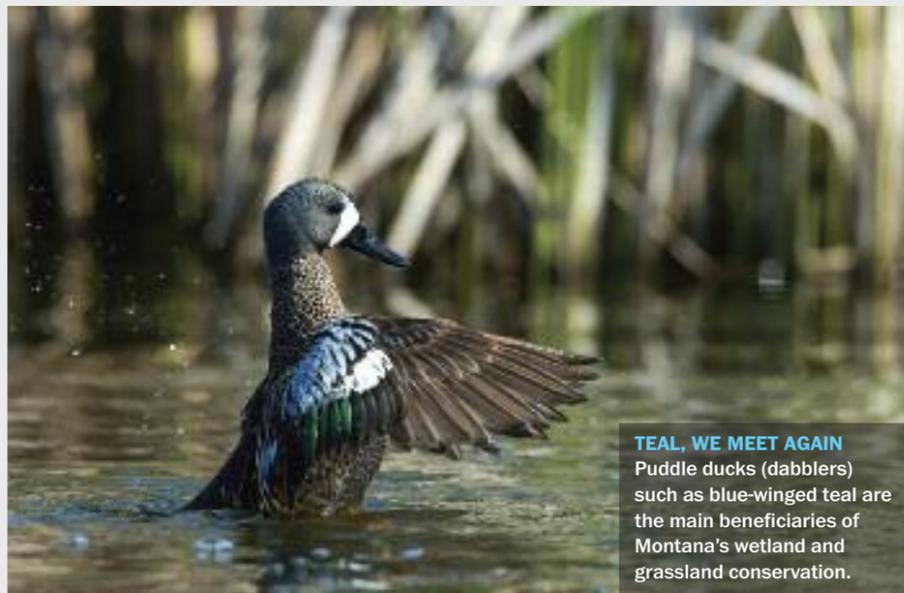
Because the soil here is less fertile and rainfall less abundant than in states farther east, Montana farmers have less incentive to drain their wetlands and convert the land to crops—although that definitely occurs. "States like Iowa have lost most of their duck-producing areas to wetland drainage," says Hansen. "Here in Montana, where we have a thriving cattle industry, we've kept more of our wetlands. Cattle need water and they need grass, and so do ducks."

It is also Montana's good fortune that the northeastern and north-central portions of the state fall within the Prairie Pothole Region, a vast glaciated area stretching south from the Canadian provinces through the Dakotas and east to parts of Minnesota and Iowa. When glaciers from the last ice age



**PERFECT MIX** Ducks need both grass, for nesting, and water, for feeding and avoiding predators. Ideal precipitation conditions in the early 2010s created record fall flights. But the rapid loss of CRP grasslands spells trouble for ducks—and duck hunters—in coming years.





**TEAL, WE MEET AGAIN**  
Puddle ducks (dabblers) such as blue-winged teal are the main beneficiaries of Montana's wetland and grassland conservation.

## Montana's "stamp" is gone, but benefits to ducks remain

To hunt waterfowl in Montana, you need a basic hunting license and two special migratory game bird licenses. One is the federal Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp (duck stamp), which you can buy at any post office and some sporting goods stores and FWP offices. The other is the state migratory bird license, available wherever you purchase your Montana hunting license.

Federal duck stamp dollars are used to acquire wetlands within the National Wildlife Refuge System or buy conservation easements on private wetlands or grasslands. State migratory bird license dollars are used by FWP to protect, conserve, and create wetlands. Montana's share of federal duck stamp revenue has been about \$800,000 in recent years, while the state migratory bird license generates about \$270,000 annually.

Recognizing that Montana had lost one-third of its original wetlands to drainage, the 1985 Montana Legislature authorized FWP to sell a migratory bird hunting stamp, or license, to help fund wetland conservation. Though the actual stamp and accompanying art contest were discontinued in 2004, the license provision remains intact. Revenue from sale of these licenses supports FWP's Migratory Bird Wetland Program, which is overseen by the citizen-based Wetland Protection Advisory Council.

"While waterfowl production is the main thrust, the program benefits all wetland-dependent species and provides critical ecosystem functions like water purification, flood control, and groundwater recharge," says Catherine Wightman, an FWP wildlife biologist who coordinates the program. "The

goal is to stem the loss of wetlands and create a net gain in water quality and quantity across the landscape."

The council's five members represent migratory game bird hunters, wildlife watchers, and the agricultural industry. Council member Henry Gordon, a Chinook-area rancher, maintains that family cattle ranches are vital to maintaining Montana's wetlands and wildlife. "I'm a firm believer in preserving native grass and putting money into wetland improvements for the benefit of both waterfowl and cattle," he says.

Wightman points to several accomplishments of the Migratory Bird Wetland Program over the past three decades:

- ▶ restored, enhanced, or created 633 wetlands encompassing 5,162 acres;
- ▶ enhanced 9,807 acres of grasslands near wetlands; and
- ▶ permanently protected 3,700 acres of previously unprotected wetlands and grasslands.

"Our emphasis has shifted in recent years from projects that create wetlands to ones that protect and restore wetlands. This allows us to improve waterfowl breeding habitat over larger landscapes in Montana," Wightman says. "We often partner with the USFWS as well as private groups like Ducks Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy, and Pheasants Forever."

Wightman says that Montana's Migratory Bird Wetland Program also increases hunting opportunities whenever possible. "If there's a proposed easement that appears to have hunting potential, we negotiate with the landowner to provide access," she says. ■

### HARVEST HOW MANY?

Conserving and restoring habitat to grow ducks is half of waterfowl management. The other half is regulating hunter harvest.

Hunters can kill a certain percentage of ducks in a population without affecting its size down the road. This "harvestable surplus" replaces natural mortality, such as from predation and disease, that would otherwise reduce the population by roughly the same amount. Biologists figure out how many ducks hunters can shoot each fall by looking at spring breeding numbers, habitat conditions, and the previous year's harvest.

For the purposes of setting seasons and limits, the United States and Canada are divided into four "flyways" (Atlantic, Mississippi, Central, and Pacific), each with a flyway council composed of federal and state rep-

**The ducks have returned to the marsh, but the hunters haven't. That's a big concern.**

representatives. Montana falls within two flyways, Central and Pacific. (The dividing line runs down the state's middle, from about Havre to West Yellowstone.) Advised by technical committees that evaluate waterfowl population and hunter harvest data, the councils recommend hunting seasons and bag limits to the USFWS, which in turn establishes a regulatory framework for each flyway. States can impose regulations more restrictive than the federal framework, but not more liberal.

"Federal frameworks dictate shorter seasons and smaller bag limits when duck numbers decline or breeding conditions deteriorate, like during the early 1990s drought that struck major duck-producing



**HOMECOMING** A drake mallard drops into a Montana marsh. Each year Montana receives roughly \$1 million in state and federal duck stamp funds used to purchase wetlands and conservation easements that benefit waterfowl and other wetland wildlife.

states and provinces," says Jim Hansen, Montana's representative on the Central Flyway's waterfowl technical committee. When conditions improve, he adds, such as during recent wet years, the federal framework allows for increased season length and bag limits.

### NO CHILD LEFT UNCAMOED

It's a warm morning in early August, but judging by all the decoys, dogs, shotguns, and other hunting gear on display at Freezeout Lake Wildlife Management Area, it could be opening day of duck season. The event is a youth waterfowl and upland bird hunting clinic, sponsored by FWP and the USFWS with help from the Golden Triangle Sporting Dog Club and the Great Falls chapter of DU. Before the day is over, the boys and girls here will learn how to identify ducks, estimate shooting distance, set decoys, call ducks, and handle retrieving dogs.

The kids here today represent the future of Montana's waterfowl hunting—not to

**BETTER THAN XBOX?** A young hunter-to-be watches ducks approach a blind as his dad calls the birds closer. Despite record duck numbers in recent years, hunter numbers have not rebounded as in the past. Kids provide waterfowl's hope for the future.

mention waterfowl conservation.

Hansen says such clinics are vital to stemming the decline in hunter numbers. During the drought of the 2000s, fewer Montanans went duck hunting. "We expected that," Hansen says. "But in recent years, even with record duck populations, we haven't seen as much of a participation rebound as in the past. The ducks have returned to the marsh,

Maryland with its Chesapeake Bay, the Dakotas with their thousands of potholes, or Arkansas with its national duck calling championship," says Hansen. "Fortunately, Montana has a large chunk of North America's duck factory. As long as we can conserve that, we'll always have ducks in this state, and that gives me hope for the future of the sport." 🦆



LEFT TO RIGHT: STEVE OEHLENSCHLAGER; DONALD M. JONES; DEWEY BRYAN