

DUCKS UNLIMITED SPECIAL FEATURE



DU'S RESCUE OUR WETLANDS CAMPAIGN

THE REMARKABLE STORY OF HOW TEAM DU BANDED TOGETHER
TO MAKE CONSERVATION HISTORY by **Emily Robinson**

DEAN PEARSON



DUCKS UNLIMITED HAS ALWAYS THOUGHT BIG. In fact, DU's mission—to sustain healthy waterfowl populations through the conservation of wetlands and associated habitats on a continental scale—couldn't be more ambitious. But nothing important or lasting has ever been accomplished by thinking small. Therefore, it was in keeping with the organization's history of bold and decisive action that the Rescue Our Wetlands campaign was launched at DU's 75th Anniversary National Convention in Nashville, Tennessee, in 2012. It was nothing short of the most ambitious campaign ever undertaken on behalf of wetlands and waterfowl conservation.

"I was in a National Development Committee meeting when I learned that our goal for the Rescue Our Wetlands campaign was \$2 billion and I thought to myself, I feel like I'm standing at the base of Mount Everest; this is a huge mountain to climb," said Doug Frey, DU's advisory senior vice president for development. "But as I looked around the room I thought, as passionate as the people in this organization are, I don't think there's a better team to make it to the top of that mountain. In fact, we could move that mountain if we had to."

DU's supporters did indeed move mountains. When the campaign closed in December 2018, the lofty \$2 billion goal had not only been met but blown wide open, with a final total of \$2.34 billion raised for wetlands and waterfowl conservation across North America. This record-breaking fundraising effort went hand in hand with astonishing conservation work on the landscape, resulting in more than 2.2 million acres conserved from the breeding grounds of the prairies and Boreal Forest to the wintering habitats of Mexico.

"The success of this campaign has shaped not only our organization but also the future of wetlands conservation for many years to come," said DU Chairman of the Board Paul Bonderson Jr. "Rescue Our Wetlands was a continental effort and comprehensive in nature, meaning everyone at every level within all DU organizations played an important role."

In keeping with the campaign's theme, "Banding Together for Waterfowl," leaders from Ducks Unlimited Inc., Ducks Unlimited Canada, Ducks Unlimited de Mexico (DUMAC), and Wetlands America Trust (WAT) stood side by side onstage in May as they revealed the landmark achievements of Rescue Our Wetlands to volunteers and staff gathered at the 82nd Annual Ducks Unlimited National Convention in Waikoloa, Hawaii.

"When I became president of Ducks Unlimited in 2017, one of my many goals was to see that this ambitious continental campaign reached its goal. We did that and



more in terms of both dollars raised and acres conserved during the campaign," said DU President Rogers Hoyt Jr. "I am proud to have played a part, along with the millions of DU volunteers, members, donors, and supporters who made this happen."

Rescue Our Wetlands was divided into five key priorities. Waterfowl Forever was an opportunity for all DU supporters to make a difference for the ducks. Breeding Landscapes and Wintering and Migration Landscapes focused on North America's most important waterfowl habitats. Conservation Education supported youth outreach and recruitment. And Conservation Legacy helped build a stronger foundation for DU and its conservation work.

"In most cases we didn't pick out a particular area to ask for support—individuals migrated to what was most important to them," said Mike Woodward, a DU at-large board member, who served as advisory senior vice president for development when the campaign launched.

Throughout the campaign, DU and its partners conserved more than 1.3 million acres and positively influenced another 10.2 million acres in the Prairie Pothole Region of the United States and Canada.

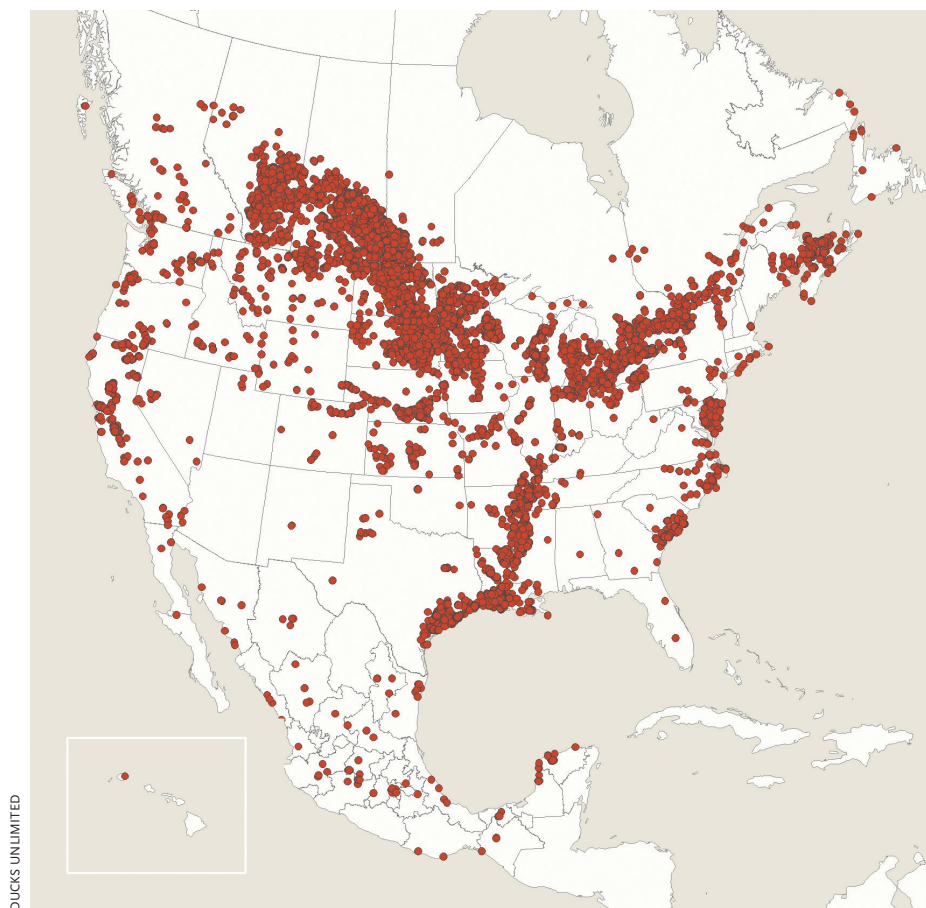
"One of the enduring characteristics of the DU family is the deep belief that we can make a lasting difference for wetlands and waterfowl. That's what Rescue Our Wetlands was all about."

WATERFOWL FOREVER

This priority was the core of the Rescue Our Wetlands campaign. Ducks Unlimited's success depends on all its supporters—members, volunteers, Major Sponsors, and partners—to fulfill its mission. "Everyone who contributed to the campaign helped us conserve crucial habitat for waterfowl, other wildlife, and people," said DU First Vice President Doug Schoenrock, who also served as advisory senior vice president for marketing and

Working with the Pew Charitable Trusts and many other partners, DU influenced the conservation of 64.8 million acres in Canada's Western Boreal Forest during the campaign.

DUCKS UNLIMITED CONSERVATION PROJECTS COMPLETED IN 2012–2018



Over the seven-year span of the Rescue Our Wetlands campaign, DU raised more than \$2.34 billion and conserved over 2.2 million acres of waterfowl habitat in high-priority areas across North America.

communications and youth and education during the campaign. “Whether you attended a DU dinner, a shooting event, or an Evening of Conservation, or contributed through the mail or online, you have provided the fuel that powers our conservation work.”

At the heart of the Waterfowl Forever priority was DU’s event system, driven by an army of dedicated volunteers. “As the senior volunteer leader for the event system, I felt the obligation to help our great volunteers and staff meet our fundraising goals as part of the campaign,” said Rex Schulz, former DU advisory senior vice president for event and volunteer management and current at-large board member. “Part of doing that was allowing them to be creative, find new avenues for revenue, and

create a new culture. The calendar raffle and many other new ideas came from the volunteers and our staff and were central to the campaign’s success.”

Through these innovative ideas and the passion of DU’s loyal volunteers and supporters, the Waterfowl Forever priority brought in \$722.8 million during the Rescue Our Wetlands campaign. “At the onset of the campaign our plan was for the final year to be a major financial push across the finish line,” said Shawn de Cento, DU’s advisory senior vice president for event and volunteer management. “While we knew it would be special, we never planned for it to be record-breaking. For the past year to be recorded as Ducks Unlimited’s best ever for event fundraising is the ultimate example of the dedication

“RESCUE OUR WETLANDS WAS A CONTINENTAL EFFORT AND COMPREHENSIVE IN NATURE, MEANING EVERYONE AT EVERY LEVEL WITHIN ALL DU ORGANIZATIONS PLAYED AN IMPORTANT ROLE.”

and hard work of DU’s 58,000 volunteers and 100 field staff, who make up our local chapter fundraising operations.”

DU’s membership also soared to new heights during Rescue Our Wetlands, reaching 737,000 by the conclusion of the campaign. Growing the membership base not only brings in more revenue but also gives the organization a stronger voice in the public policy arena, which is vital to DU’s mission. “Our volunteers, members, staff, and corporate sponsors—everybody helped raise the bar to accomplish this campaign’s ambitious goals,” said Kathy Christian, DU advisory senior vice president for membership. “We could not have done this without each and every one of you.”

BREEDING LANDSCAPES

Ducks Unlimited’s founders understood that conserving wetlands on the breeding grounds was essential to restoring North America’s waterfowl populations, and this remains a primary focus of our work today. The crown jewels of this continent’s waterfowl breeding areas are the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) and the Western Boreal Forest. Overall, DU’s supporters contributed an astounding \$787.2 million to these vital areas through the Breeding Landscapes priority.

Known as the Duck Factory for its importance to breeding mallards, northern pintails, canvasbacks, and many other waterfowl species, the PPR supports the majority of all surveyed breeding ducks when habitat conditions are favorable. As part of the Breeding Landscapes priority, DU conserved more than a half million acres of habitat across the Canadian

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prairies and positively influenced another 10.2 million acres through public policy efforts and partnerships. On the US prairies of the Dakotas and Montana, DU conserved more than 826,000 acres over the course of the campaign.

North America's Boreal Forest is the world's largest remaining intact, productive ecosystem, encompassing more than 1.5 billion acres of pristine forests, wetlands, lakes, rivers, and streams. Working with its partners, including leading industries, First Nations, other conservation groups, and the Pew Charitable Trusts, DU influenced the conservation of 64.8 million acres of crucial wetlands and other wildlife habitats in the Western Boreal Forest during the campaign.

"Nowhere are the results of the Rescue Our Wetlands campaign more dramatic and more convincing than on the breeding grounds. More and more of this land is

also need healthy and abundant wetlands on their wintering grounds—places where ducks and geese can thrive during the coldest months of the year and acquire fat reserves for the upcoming spring migration and breeding season.

"Through the Wintering and Migration Landscapes priority, DU highlighted the importance of conserving areas in all four flyways for waterfowl to rest, refuel, and find mates," said DUMAC CEO and Executive Director Eduardo Carrera. "The goal was to conserve 315,000 acres of habitat on these landscapes during the campaign, but DU's supporters ensured that we did not stop there. From vital Great Lakes marshland in Ohio to wastewater-treatment facilities in the heart of Mexico, \$581.8 million was invested in conserving over 761,000 acres of crucial habitat for wintering and migrating waterfowl as part of Rescue Our Wetlands."

were completed during the Rescue Our Wetlands campaign, and the program is on track to positively impact more than 1,000 farms and 770,000 acres by 2024.

"The partnership we've formed with USA Rice is one that will benefit not only waterfowl and other wildlife but also rice producers, hunters, and American citizens alike," said Al Montna, DU advisory senior vice president for public policy and a California rice farmer. "Going forward, we will continue to work together and build upon our common interests and challenges to sustain waterfowl and rice production on the landscape."

CONSERVATION LEGACY

While gifts made directly to DU's work on the ground are vital, we must have a strong safety net to ensure that our mission of wetlands and waterfowl conservation can be carried out for generations to come. This security is made possible through DU's endowment fund, which is the beneficiary of the Conservation Legacy priority of Rescue Our Wetlands. That priority alone brought in more than \$227.8 million during the campaign.

"Ducks Unlimited spends at least 80 percent of every dollar on habitat conservation and conservation education," said WAT President Steve Maritz. "Planned gift commitments and endowment gifts generated through this campaign will contribute to a strong, stable future for DU's mission and supporters. We have been at work for 82 years and plan on continuing our conservation work today, tomorrow, and forever."

Seven years ago, Wetlands America Trust trustee Jim Kennedy, chairman of Cox Enterprises, helped kick off the Rescue Our Wetlands campaign. The largest individual donor in Ducks Unlimited's history, Kennedy joined representatives from DU and WAT onstage in Hawaii to celebrate the campaign's success and urge supporters to keep up the good work.

"We should celebrate raising \$2.34 billion, but we cannot rest on our laurels," Kennedy said. "Every acre that's left unprotected is a target. There is so much work left to be done. And I will do everything I can for as long as I can to help continue our success and make this the greatest waterfowl organization in the world."



MICHAEL PETERS

being converted to feed and fuel the world. This makes protecting the habitat needs of waterfowl an enormous challenge," said DU Canada CEO Dr. Karla Guyn. "Fortunately, the Rescue Our Wetlands campaign ignited our creativity as well as our conviction, and together with our partners we delivered record-breaking success throughout North America's breeding landscapes."

WINTERING AND MIGRATION LANDSCAPES

Few events in nature can rival the annual spectacle of waterfowl migrating along the length of this continent. In every flyway, migrating waterfowl inspire us with their beauty and grace. Waterfowl

Conserving vital wintering and migration landscapes was another top priority of Rescue Our Wetlands. DU conserved more than 761,000 acres of these habitats over the course of the campaign.

One of the most significant pieces of DU's work on North America's migration and wintering landscapes is the USA Rice-Ducks Unlimited Rice Stewardship Partnership. DU's partnerships with agricultural producers are vital across the continent, but they are particularly notable in areas such as California's Central Valley, the Gulf Coast of Texas and Louisiana, and the Mississippi Alluvial Valley, where rice fields support vast numbers of ducks and geese during migration and winter. The first five years of this valuable partnership



(Left) Former Wetlands America Trust President Jim Kennedy gave a rousing speech at DU's 82nd national convention in Hawaii. Kennedy encouraged all DU supporters to keep working to put crucial habitat on the ground for waterfowl, other wildlife, and people.

CONSERVATION EDUCATION

When it comes to tomorrow, Ducks Unlimited has no greater priority than its youth volunteers. This up-and-coming generation of DU supporters is picking up the torch today to create a brighter future for waterfowl. Never in DU's history has there been a greater focus and commitment on youth and education. DU's Greenwing program attracts junior members to the organization by the tens of thousands, the Varsity chapter program continues to grow by leaps and bounds in high schools, and the University program is thriving on college campuses across the nation.

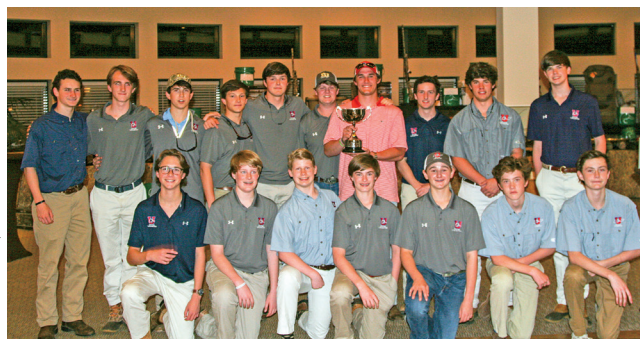
This growth and success of DU's youth programs exploded during the life of Rescue Our Wetlands. "At the beginning of the campaign, our youth chapters were raising about \$600,000 per year, but now they are bringing in an astounding \$2.5 million," said Ronal Roberson, DU advisory senior vice president for youth

and education. "I was so proud to see them take ownership of the campaign."

Of the many youth and education accomplishments made during the Rescue Our Wetlands campaign, among the most significant was the launch of DU's National Scholarship Program. This program awards 61 onetime college scholarships per year to graduating high school seniors who are DU members. The opportunity to honor these exceptional young people was made possible by strong support of the Conservation Education priority during the Rescue Our Wetlands campaign, totaling over \$17.4 million.

"When we invest in our young people, we no longer need to search for tomorrow's leaders—they are right in front of us," Roberson said. "I look around our Third Term collegiate leadership summit and I see all this great potential. I guarantee there will be future presidents of Ducks Unlimited that come out of Third Term and our collegiate chapter program."

DU's youth and education programs grew dramatically during the campaign, bolstering DU's fundraising efforts and inspiring a new generation of conservation leaders.



JOHN HOFFMAN, DU

LOOKING AHEAD

Even as we celebrate the successes of this campaign, we remain focused on the challenges that lie ahead for wetlands and waterfowl conservation. Ducks Unlimited is committed to continuing to utilize sound science to guide its work, using public policy to further its mission, partnering with likeminded organizations and individuals to reach shared goals, and putting its mission at the forefront of all our endeavors.

Rescue Our Wetlands has put DU on secure footing today, but what about tomorrow? To address the challenges that lie ahead for wetlands and waterfowl, we must continue to grow our supporter base, build our brand, influence public policy, and ensure that DU remains a powerhouse for conservation.

"Together we must ask ourselves, what more can we do? How can we make our events even better? How can we attract more people to leave a legacy for Ducks Unlimited?" said DU CEO Adam Putnam. "This team has made sure that we have a strong organization, but now we have an opportunity to take our story, track record, and scientific expertise to a whole new level to attract more conservationists to our cause.

"DU represents values that are timeless and enduring—family and faith, stewardship and conservation, leaving the world a better place. We will not fall prey to the flavor of the month or the fad of the day. This institution is built for the ages and we will protect it, burnish it, adjust it, and make it agile and nimble to take on the challenges of 2020 and beyond." 🦆