



RESTORING WETLANDS ALONG MONTANA'S HI-LINE

In partnership with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), Ducks Unlimited (DU) strives to keep ranchers on the Big Sky landscape by utilizing conservation programs that work with their operations. Working lands conservation easements provide flexibility for ranchers to operate while keeping wetlands and grasslands intact within Montana's Prairie Pothole Region. These voluntary programs provide financial incentives for ranchers and help improve grazing infrastructure with native grass plantings and stock water tank and fence installations. This past year, DU helped implement grazing plans that demonstrated the positive benefits grazing livestock can have on grassland restoration efforts.

In 2023, the wetland restoration efforts associated with the Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) were a focus for DU and NRCS staff across multiple easements in Phillips County, which improved 4,980 acres of priority waterfowl breeding habitat.

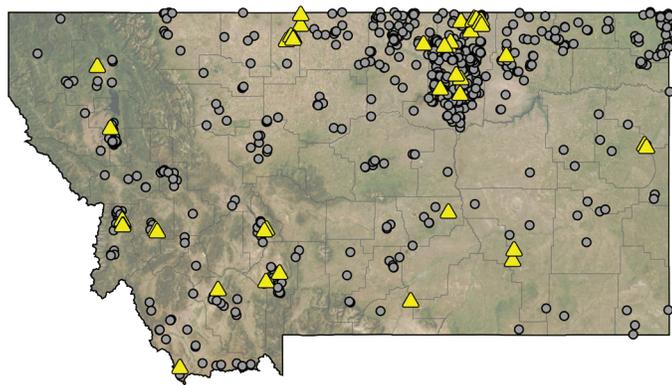
The wetland restoration projects within these easements were the final chapter of a process that started back in 2016 when DU staff had initial conversations with landowners.

The natural hydrology on these temporarily flooded, ephemeral wetlands was significantly altered over time because of sediment build-up from farming. DU's goal was to restore wetland hydrology while improving and maintaining wetland and grassland connectivity. Through a developed relationship with a local contractor and help from NRCS engineers, DU began to accomplish its goal this past summer and fall.

DU staff met with Ed Peigneux and Sons Construction Inc. alongside landowners to prioritize project objectives, concentrating specifically on the complex of smaller ephemeral wetlands across the landscape, providing crucial breeding habitat for migrating waterfowl. Peigneux and his crew worked diligently to remove accumulated sediment within these wetlands and strategically spread topsoil throughout the landscape.

DU staff partnered with Jason Hanlon of ExploreUAS Creative Aerial Imagery to provide drone footage and photos of these projects. Through this partnership, we will continue to monitor the progression of wetland restoration and demonstrate how important this area of Montana is to breeding waterfowl.

DU and its partnership with the NRCS in Montana played an important role in wetland restoration along Montana's Hi-Line in 2023. Thanks to the delivery of USDA programs like the WRE and Agricultural Land Easements (ALE), DU biologists were able to impact and protect over 32,620 acres in 2023.



**Ducks Unlimited
PROJECTS**

● Completed Project(s) ▲ Completed 2023
Note: Project points may represent more than one project.





DU, PHILLIPS 66, AND ZOOMONTANA OPEN THE FOSTER WATERFOWL REFUGE

On Wednesday, July 19th, 2023, Ducks Unlimited, Phillips 66, and a host of other partners, sponsors, supporters, and donors assembled at Billings’ ZooMontana for a ribbon-cutting ceremony to open the \$1.5M Foster Waterfowl Refuge—one of the largest projects in the zoo’s history, and the first of its kind in the Big Sky State.



Thanks to the help of DU personnel like Montana’s Manager of Conservation Programs Abby Rokosch and Kaylan Kemink, DU’s Great Plains Region’s Director of

Conservation Science and Planning, visitors now have an up-close and personal view of various waterfowl species making a pit-stop on their migration routes.

There are several educational kiosks throughout the display that highlight facts about the types of birds that possibly visit the refuge, how other wildlife species benefit from wetlands, and how visitors can pledge to do more to help conserve and protect the landscape’s resources. There’s also a raised observation deck, underwater viewing windows, and boardwalks to help visitors get up close and personal with the wetlands.

“This project has been something that I’ve been thinking of since I started at the zoo 12 years ago,” said Zoo Montana director Jeff Ewelt. “It’s the largest project the zoo has taken on in the current administration. To see what this landscape has transformed into today has been an absolutely amazing experience. I want to thank everyone that worked and supported the project for believing that we could make this happen.”

The refuge design intends to host migrating waterfowl as they move through the urban area, exposing zoo visitors to DU’s conservation work across the continent. At the end of the tour, visitors are asked to fill out a postcard with a pledge to support conservation within six months of their visit. People who take the pledge will be challenged to help clean up a local wetland, join a wetland conservation organization, or buy a federal duck stamp.

“With more than 100,000 guests visiting ZooMontana annually, this is a great opportunity to illustrate the value of wetlands to a broad and diverse audience,” said Kemink. “We have designed a research project that will help us learn if a call to action will increase positive environmental behaviors when coupled with a visit to the zoo’s exhibit.”



DUCKS UNLIMITED conserves, restores, and manages wetlands and associated habitats for North America’s waterfowl. These habitats also benefit other wildlife and people.

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MONTANA NUMBERS

2023

- 11 projects
- 32,619 acres conserved
- \$1,032,796 invested

HISTORICAL

- 304 projects
- 549,945 acres conserved
- \$30,618,016 invested



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FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT
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