



The Colorado Waterfowl Stamp

Can the Legacy Continue?
20th Anniversary, 1990-2010

By Brian Sullivan

Pintail drake



Breep, breep, breep . . .

the familiar call of a drake mallard emanated from the dawn and sent a chill of excitement down my spine. It was legal shooting time, and I had just settled into a makeshift blind on a small pond. "Don't move, they're close," I thought as I scanned the horizon, moving only my eyes. "There they are!" A mixed flock of 25 mallards and pintails cupped their wings and pitched toward my setup without hesitation, the first birds splash-landing in the decoys as I rose to shoot.

This hunt took place not at some exclusive private club, but on the South Republican State Wildlife Area (SWA), a public hunting area in eastern Colorado. Each year since 1990 this scene has repeated itself countless times across the state, thanks in part to the Colorado Waterfowl Stamp program. The program, supported by waterfowl hunters and citizens through the purchase of waterfowl stamps and other artwork, generates funds to support wetland conservation projects. Presently there are more SWAs and more places to hunt waterfowl on public lands than ever before.

So all is well with the Colorado Waterfowl Stamp Program, right? Well, not exactly. The financial landscape of the program has changed since 1990, and a plethora of issues have emerged to threaten its future. Can the success of the past be maintained in the future?



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History

Thanks to the foresight of sportsmen and conservationists, the Colorado Waterfowl Stamp was authorized in 1989 by the passage of Senate Bill 102. The primary sponsor was Tilman Bishop of Grand Junction, a 24-year veteran of the state Senate. The bill authorized the production of a stamp from original artwork, allowed a nonprofit conservation organization in partnership with the Colorado Division of Wildlife (DOW) to solicit and market the artwork, and required persons aged 16 and older to purchase the \$5 stamp for hunting waterfowl. It also required the proceeds to be used solely for wetland conservation projects. The first stamp, a pair of Canada geese over the South Platte River, was produced in 1990. Initially, Ducks Unlimited managed the artwork production, but more recently the Colorado Wildlife Heritage Foundation has assumed this role.

The waterfowl stamp was not an easy sell to Colorado legislators. In fact, Senator Marty Hatcher of Gunnison previously had introduced similar legislation, but it had failed. The 1989 legislation contained a sunset clause requiring the program to be reviewed and evaluated. Thanks to its early success, the program was reauthorized in 1993 without this provision. The program would not have succeeded without the leadership of Senator Bishop and many others, including the Wildlife Commission, former DOW Director Perry Olson and Jill Olsen, former state chairwoman for Ducks Unlimited.

How the Program Works

Each year the program begins with a waterfowl stamp art contest held in early March. All contestants paint original scenes of the same waterfowl species. In 2010 a record 43 original pieces depicting the northern pintail were submitted, representing artists from 22 states and two Canadian provinces. A waterfowl stamp art committee comprised of wildlife artists, citizens, hunters and nonprofit and agency volunteers and staff selects three winning artists to share \$5,000 in prize money. Delaware artist Richard Clifton, a former federal waterfowl stamp contest winner, took first place in 2010 with his stunning entry titled "Flying Pintails." Tennessee artist Douglas Walpus placed second with "A Colorado Sunrise," and Colorado artist Dan Andrews of Lakewood placed third with "Icy Reflections." The annual contest is a labor of love for the art committee. Some of its members,

including Senator Bishop, have served for the entire history of the program. Note: See <http://wildlife.state.co.us/LandWater/WetlandsProgram/WaterfowlStamp/> to view the 2010 stamp contest winning entries.

Production of stamps and art prints is coordinated by the Colorado Wildlife Heritage Foundation following the con-

test, and these products are available starting in July. To raise funds for wetland conservation, Ducks Unlimited auctions prints of the current Colorado waterfowl stamp at each of its annual chapter banquets. The Foundation markets and sells current and older art products throughout the year. Traditionally, proceeds from art-

Some Public Hunting Lands Habitat Projects Funded with Colorado Waterfowl Stamps

Colorado Division of Wildlife State Wildlife Areas (SWA)

Andrick Ponds SWA
Banner Lakes SWA
Brush Prairie Ponds SWA
Centennial Valley Ranch SWA
Elliott SWA
Horsethief Canyon SWA
Jackson Lake SWA
Kemp-Breeze SWA
Lake John SWA
Little Hills SWA
Piceance SWA
Pueblo Reservoir SWA
Red Lion SWA
Rio Grande SWA
South Republican SWA
Tamarack Ranch SWA
Tarryall SWA
Yampa SWA

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service National Wildlife Refuges (NWR)

Alamosa NWR
Arapaho NWR
Brown's Park NWR
Monte Vista NWR

U. S. Bureau of Land Management Properties

Blanca Wetlands
Hebron Sloughs
La Garita Meadows
McIntyre Springs

U. S. Forest Service Properties

The Glade Wetlands, San Juan
National Forest



Pintail duck

work sales were used for habitat projects in northern breeding areas, including Canada, that produce ducks that migrate to Colorado.

The DOW awards funds from the sale of hunting stamps to wetland habitat improvement projects in Colorado through a competitive grant program. The emphasis is on

projects that improve opportunities for public waterfowl hunting or that produce ducks for the fall flight. Ducks Unlimited is a major applicant and has delivered many stamp-funded projects throughout the state. In 2010, the DOW awarded stamp funds for new projects at the Andrick Ponds and Lake John SWAs.

Success and Accomplishments

Initially, stamp funds were the sole source for the Division's wetland conservation initiatives, but the program's success helped leverage other funding. In 1997 Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) awarded \$4.5

The Canadian Connection

Many of the migratory waterfowl that spend the fall and winter in Colorado are produced in northern breeding areas. For ducks harvested in the state, band recoveries suggest a strong link to production areas in the Canadian province of Alberta. Colorado contributions to Canadian habitat projects are matched by Ducks Unlimited, other partners and the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, often at a ratio of 5 to 1 or more. So, a \$50,000 contribution from Colorado results in at least a quarter million dollars of conservation projects in Canada. Clearly, contributions to projects that secure and restore duck nesting habitat in Canada are a wise investment for the future of waterfowl hunting in Colorado.

How to Purchase Collector Waterfowl Stamps and Prints

The Colorado Wildlife Heritage Foundation sells collectable stamps, prints, T-shirts, and other items. Contact Terrie Deloria, (303) 291-7212, e-mail tdeloria@cw hf.info or visit www.cw hf.info.



2010 Colorado Waterfowl Stamp, "Flying Pintails" by Richard Clifton.

million of lottery proceeds to the DOW through a legacy grant, spawning a major initiative to protect and restore wetlands and riparian areas. GOCO continues to support the DOW's Wetlands Initiative. DOW also began allocating hunting and fishing license revenues for wetland and riparian conservation, further increasing and diversifying the funding base.

The program has been a resounding success, providing habitat for waterfowl and other wildlife, and public hunting opportunities on SWAs and other properties that would not otherwise be available. As just one example, nine shallow wetlands totaling 70 acres were developed at Jackson Lake SWA with stamp funds. This property has one of the highest hunter-success rates of any SWA, and competition for limited reservations is intense.

To date the program has generated more than \$3 million in funding and leveraged millions of dollars of matching funds for more than 130 projects impacting nearly 20,000 acres. Project sites are scattered throughout Colorado, and several projects have been funded on northern breeding areas in Montana and Alberta, Canada. As Senator Bishop points out, "The program benefits not only Colorado, but the entire flyway."

Challenges

Both the need and demand for wetland restoration funding by DOW and its partners remains high. Wetlands and places to hunt waterfowl continue to be lost due to varying causes. Wetlands on public properties need periodic restoration and enhancement to remain productive and attractive to migratory waterfowl and other wildlife. When the DOW acquires new SWAs, some of them, like the new Andrick Ponds property, need major wetland improvements.

Along the South Platte River, hunters have expressed concern about waterfowl-hunting quality. The DOW appointed a panel that recommended a suite of habitat improvement strategies. The DOW has taken these recommendations and implemented new habitat management practices such as sandbar clearing designed to improve waterfowl habitat and populations during the hunting season. These projects cost hundreds or thousands of dollars per acre.

"We've seen the cost of getting projects completed increase dramatically as the costs of materials like concrete and steel have increased, as well as the cost of con-



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tractors who move the dirt," said Greg Kernohan, manager of conservation programs for Ducks Unlimited in Colorado. "Over the past five years alone, we've seen about a 50-percent increase in the cost of getting wetland restoration work done on public wildlife areas in Colorado, but the need for quality habitat for the birds and quality areas for public hunting has increased during the same time period."

Although demand for wetland improvements remains high, revenues are declining. Mirroring a nationwide decline in the number of hunters and anglers, sales of Colorado waterfowl stamps to hunters have declined from about 37,000 in 1991 to about 28,000 today. New technologies such as point-of-sale license terminals and Internet sales are customer-friendly, but come with new costs to the program. Also following a pattern observed in other states, artwork revenues have declined steeply as the market has become saturated with new editions from state and federal waterfowl art programs.

As a result, net annual revenues for the Colorado Waterfowl Stamp Program have declined below \$100,000. Overall revenue declines have led to a 15-percent reduction in other DOW funding for wetlands conservation. Finally, inflation has taken its toll. For context, recall that when the

stamp was instituted in 1990, the price of gasoline was \$1.34 per gallon, compared with more than \$2.60 today. The price of the hunting stamp has remained \$5 since 1990, but the inflation-adjusted purchasing power is just \$3 today, a 40-percent reduction.

The bottom line is that the demand for wetland work is high, revenue is decreasing and expenses are increasing. This situation poses a challenge for the future of wetland conservation in Colorado.

Solutions

The DOW and its partners recently began taking steps to reduce expenses and increase revenues for the program. Hunters who wish to receive the gum-backed art stamp in addition to the stamp validation for hunting now are charged \$2.50. This fee recovers postage and handling costs and transaction fees formerly subsidized by waterfowl stamp revenue. The Wildlife Heritage Foundation has developed a marketing plan and began implementing new marketing strategies, including more focused and aggressive advertising.

"These steps, while helpful, are not enough to restore the Waterfowl Stamp Program to its former capacity to fund habitat work," said Tom Remington, DOW director. "We need to engage Colorado waterfowlers in a conversation about the size of wetland program they desire and ways to adequately fund it."

"Hunters have always shown a willingness to step up to the plate to help fund important habitat and restoration work to ensure wildlife populations remain healthy and huntable for the long term," said Mikk Anderson, state chairman for Ducks Unlimited. The \$5 Colorado waterfowl stamp is among the least expensive in the nation. Most other states charge from \$7 to \$15 for their waterfowl stamps. Increasing the stamp fee would require amending the existing legislation authorizing the stamp. It is up to waterfowl hunters to decide whether that is the appropriate solution.

"The Colorado Waterfowl Stamp Program has been rewarding and has exceeded my expectations," said Senator Bishop with pride. "The people of Colorado appreciate the sights and sounds of migratory birds and other wildlife on these wetland projects. We have preserved a part of our heritage." 🍷

Brian Sullivan is the DOW's wetlands program coordinator.