

News Release

migratory bird conservation commission

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BUYING HOMES FOR WATERFOWL: THE MIGRATORY BIRD CONSERVATION COMMISSION TURNS 50

The spectacle of millions of ducks and geese migrating every fall and spring might be a thing of the past had it not been for the foresight of Congress which, 50 years ago this month, enacted the Migratory Bird Conservation Act. This landmark legislation, passed on February 18, 1929, authorized the Federal Government to acquire land and water areas for waterfowl refuges and set up the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission.

The Commission has the unusual task of acting as a sort of real estate agent for migratory birds. It studies areas proposed as migratory bird refuges by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; evaluates the needs, locations, and acquisition costs; and decides which areas shall be purchased or leased and added to the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Commission includes the Secretaries of the Interior, Agriculture, and Transportation, two members each from the Senate and the House of Representatives, and the chief conservation officer of the State where a land purchase is proposed.

Although its work usually takes place behind the scenes, the Commission plays a vital role in preserving waterfowl for the future. Since 1929, the Commission has overseen the establishment of 311 refuges in 42 States--over 10 million acres of marshes, prairie potholes, hardwood bottoms, and other havens for waterfowl, scattered from Maine to California and from Washington to Florida. These refuges are strategically located along the four major north-south waterfowl migration routes to provide breeding habitat, sheltered resting places, and safe wintering areas for the birds.

The Commission's work began in earnest in the early 1930's when it became apparent that the Nation's waterfowl were seriously threatened by the disappearance of vital habitat. Millions of acres of wetlands--crucial nesting, resting, staging, and wintering areas--were being drained for agriculture. Many of these marshy areas were marginal for farming but vital for waterfowl production. At the same time, a record drought was drying up swamps and ponds throughout key waterfowl breeding areas.

As waterfowl populations declined, alarmed sportsmen and conservationists became aware of a major defect in the 1929 law--it provided no continuing funds for acquiring waterfowl habitat. Their efforts to remedy this situation resulted in the passage of the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act in 1934.

(over)

SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR, Chairman
SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE
SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION
HENRY BELLMON, Senator from Oklahoma

SILVIO O. CONTE, Representative from Massachusetts
JOHN D. DINGELL, Representative from Michigan
WALTER R. McALLESTER, Secretary

Under this law, every waterfowl hunter age 16 and older must buy a "duck stamp." (Today the stamp is officially known as the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp because nonhunters also buy the stamps to contribute to the program.) Proceeds from duck stamp sales go into the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund to buy and lease waterfowl habitat. Over 2.3 million acres of habitat have been preserved so far with duck stamp funds.

Passage of the duck stamp law did not by itself ensure security for the Nation's waterfowl, however. Draining of wetlands for agriculture and filling for houses, industry, and highways continued at a rapid rate. Realizing that preservation of wetlands was a task that could not wait, Congress in 1961 authorized a 15-year, \$105 million loan for wetlands acquisition. The Migratory Bird Conservation Commission and the Fish and Wildlife Service immediately began an accelerated habitat acquisition program, preserving nearly 2 million acres of wetlands since then.

In 1975, as the loan approached its cut-off date, the Commission and the Service reviewed the situation of waterfowl habitat and found the need to protect it even more urgent than in 1961. With 75 percent of annual duck stamp receipts earmarked to repay the 1961 loan, the acquisition program would have practically stopped.

Congress responded by extending the loan until September 30, 1983, and increased the maximum amount to be loaned to \$200 million. Now with 200 to 300 thousand acres of wetlands being destroyed each year, the Commission and the Fish and Wildlife Service are working under the pressure of time to acquire an additional 1.7 million acres of wetlands nationwide by 1986.

The prime focus is on preserving the most important breeding and wintering habitats in each flyway, particularly those most threatened by development or other changes. Special areas to meet the needs of species in trouble such as redheads, canvasbacks, and black ducks are also being acquired. These areas will be added to the National Wildlife Refuge System, joining the more than 300 refuges now being managed for migratory birds. Tens of millions of ducks, geese, and swans as well as hundreds of species of songbirds, raptors, and other birds depend on these refuges during some part of their lives.

In addition to providing sanctuaries for birds, many National Wildlife Refuges also serve as havens for people looking for opportunities to renew their contact with nature through birdwatching, photography, and nature study. Some refuges have been opened to waterfowl hunting and programs have been developed to provide quality hunting experiences--some recompense to the hunters whose dollars saved the marshes. Many refuges also serve as centers for conservation education.

As key tracts of land are set aside, they become much like natural resource bank accounts with guaranteed dividends for the future to all Americans. For years to come, the decisions of the Commission will continue to play a central role in preserving America's waterfowl--one of the Nation's most precious natural resources.

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EDITORS: An information packet on the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission and wetlands is available by calling 202/343-5634