

The Duck Stamp Story

In 1849, about the time gold fever struck California, another national treasure amazed early explorer and mountain man Howard Stansbury. As he gazed across the vast expanse of Utah's Bear River delta, he wrote: "The marshes were covered by immense flocks of wild geese and ducks. I had seen large numbers of these birds before in various parts of the country . . . but never did I behold anything like the immense numbers here congregated together. Thousands of acres, as far as the eyes could reach, seem literally covered with them. . ."

Even as Stansbury recorded those wonders, an embryonic agricultural and industrial revolution was setting the stage for decline of most of America's great waterfowl populations. By the early 1930s millions of acres of prime waterfowl habitat had been drained away to the sea, sealing the future of massive flocks of ducks and geese. As marshes great and small disappeared, indiscriminate shooting and market hunting accelerated demise of the great flocks. Even Nature joined the onslaught when the Nation plunged into a drought of historic proportions.

"The first Duck Stamp, issued in 1934."





Those dust bowl years, coupled with wetland drainage, left north-central U.S. marshes bereft of water . . . and waterfowl. These important habitats were the “factories” which, together with wetlands of the Canadian prairies and Alaska, fledged the bulk of North America’s waterfowl. Also lost were crucial staging and migration rest areas in mid-America, and more recently the bottomland timbered swamps of southern river systems and lush Gulf Coast marshes, winter havens for the flocks.

Congress reacted to these threats by enacting the Migratory Bird Conservation Act in 1929. The law authorized a program of land acquisition for waterfowl refuges but failed to provide a stable flow of funds for wetland purchase. Conservationists and sportsmen, led by nationally-known political cartoonist Jay N. “Ding” Darling, set about correcting that oversight. Darling, cartoonist for the *Des Moines Register*, was an avid duck hunter who had witnessed destruction of prime waterfowl habitats in his native Iowa. His biting cartoons, depicting the demise of America’s ducks and geese, set the tone for a campaign to secure permanent funding for habitat acquisition. One of Darling’s most important contributions was the idea of a Federal revenue stamp to generate the needed money.



Efforts of conservationists and sportsmen like “Ding” Darling paid off on March 16, 1934 when Congress passed the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act, requiring every waterfowl hunter 16 years of age or older to buy and carry a signed Federal duck stamp. Proceeds from the stamp were used to buy and lease waterfowl habitat.

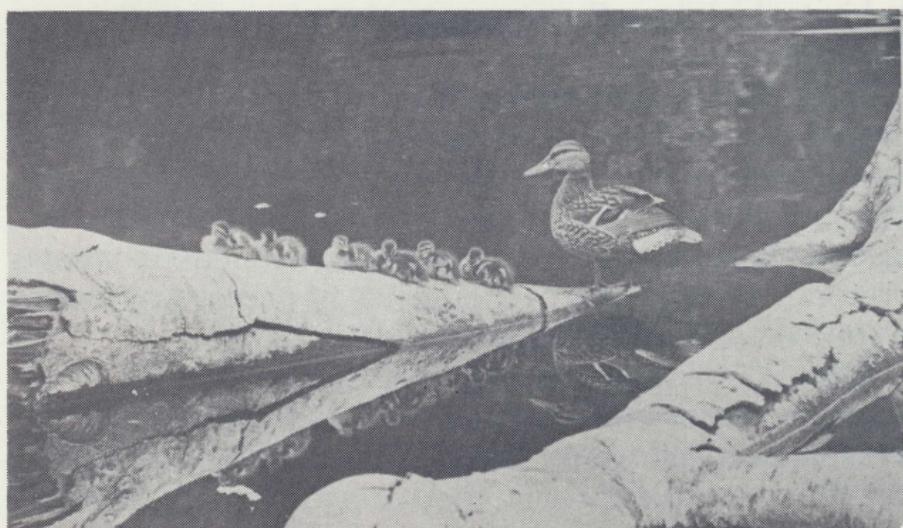
From the beginning, the stamps pictured waterfowl in natural surroundings. The first stamp design, a pair of alighting mallards, was drawn by Darling. President Roosevelt had recruited Darling to head up the Bureau of Biological Survey, predecessor of today’s U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Until 1949, one of the nation’s top wildlife illustrators was commissioned each year to prepare a duck stamp design. In 1949, however, the duck stamp contest began, and became the Federal government’s only continuing art competition. Today any artist can enter the contest, submitting a 5 × 7-inch waterfowl design in



pen and ink, acrylic, oil, etching, watercolor or pencil. The winning entry, reproduced on the stamp, is chosen by a panel of waterfowl and art experts. The winning artist is awarded a sheet of stamps bearing his design. From the beginning, duck stamp artists sold prints of their design to collectors. In recent years, with the growing popularity of wildlife art, such sales have greatly escalated for members of the elite fraternity who are contest winners. The duck stamp competition mirrors this rising interest: entries increased from a handful in 1949 to over 1,300 in 1979.

The popularity of duck stamps was evident from the start. Some 635,000 of the first stamp, showing Ding Darling’s mallards, were sold at \$1.00 each. In 1938, sales topped one million. Those were the days when prime wetland habitat could be bought for as little as one dollar an acre in some areas. During the late 1930s and 1940s, the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission



approved purchase or lease of vast tracts of such wetlands. A major focus was the upper midwest, the nation's waterfowl breadbasket, where breeding areas were preserved.

As the years went by, cost of habitat steadily climbed. Land that could once be bought for as little as \$1 to \$10 an acre now may cost as much as \$1,000 an acre. As a result, new refuge purchases tend to be much smaller than in the past.

The focus too has changed. The goal in recent years has been to preserve key wintering and breeding habitats in each of the four major north-south waterfowl flyways, particularly those most threatened by development. Efforts are also underway to save areas needed by species such as canvasbacks, redheads and black ducks whose numbers are low or declining.

The price and sales of duck stamps have gone up along with the value and scarcity of wetlands. Sales reached two million in 1946-47, and hit a peak of over 2.4 million in 1970-71. Meanwhile, the cost of a stamp (now called the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp) rose to \$7.50 in 1979. Between 1934 and 1979, over 79 million stamps were sold. The \$210 million raised figured directly in the purchase of nearly 2.5 million acres of prime waterfowl habitat—



habitat which benefits many species of wildlife other than waterfowl.

Thus, American sportsmen and conservationists have played a central role in preserving the nation's ducks and geese—one of our most precious natural resources. Many migratory bird refuges are open for hunting and also serve as centers for conservation education where visitors can view tens of thousands of graceful, colorful waterfowl and other kinds of wildlife.

Over 300 of these refuges in 42 states are now scattered across the country, from Florida to Washington and from Hawaii to Maine. Located along the four principal flyways, they provide waterfowl with breeding grounds, staging areas, sheltered resting stops and secure wintering areas. However, the task remains unfinished; an estimated 300,000 acres of wetland habitat continue to disappear each year under the pressure of human development.

The goal of the Fish and Wildlife Service is to preserve another 1.7 million acres of such habitat by 1986, financed by millions of duck stamp dollars paid each year by the Nation's sportsmen and conservationists. Thus, each colorful duck stamp is an investment toward ensuring that future generations will be able to share some of the wonder that mountain man Howard Stansbury felt over a century ago as he gazed at America's magnificent waterfowl flocks.



**Department of the Interior
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**