

80 years of the duck stamp

BY PAUL BAICICH

The 20th century began with a phenomenal increase in U.S. agricultural productivity with mechanization and wetland draining rapidly spreading across the U.S. — especially through the Great Plains. This produced an abundant harvest of crops, but also left an impoverished natural landscape, a trend that continued into the 1920s, devastating wetlands. Powerful ammunition, rapid-fire guns, lenient bag limits and practices like baiting live decoys exacerbated the hardships for waterfowl.

In response to these stunning losses of wetlands and waterfowl, a vigorous discussion arose in the 1920s concerning the possibility of creating a Federal Waterfowl Hunting license. This would be a handy stamp to permit waterfowl hunting, the proceeds which could be invested in saving wetland habitat.

On Aug. 22, 1934, 80 years ago, the first federal duck stamp sold.

The creation of the duck stamp followed a complicated and drawn out debate that raged for years.

Part of the problem during the 1920s was a disagreement between conservationists of good will. One argument supported a federal license or stamp costing \$1 per year to reinvest into saving wetlands; another approach was to charge one cent per shell to be similarly reinvested. The dollar-a-year forces were gathered around the American Game Protective Association (predecessor of the Wildlife Management Institute), while the penny-a-shell option was favored by More Game Birds in America (predecessor of Ducks Unlimited). Not only were these two alternate solutions in conflict, but also plaguing them both was another argument that any public shooting grounds could be a functional shooting gallery and worsen the situation for waterfowl.

After testimony from more than 100 witnesses, the Senate's Special Committee on the Conservation of Wildlife Resources voted in April 1932 in favor of the stamp proposal.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, sympathetic to the cause of conservation, appointed a "Committee on Wild-Life Restoration" consisting of Thomas H. Beck, Jay Norwood "Ding" Darling, and Aldo Leopold.

The "Beck Committee" submitted its report within a few weeks. The report identified a series of visionary projects to secure an initial 5 million acres of "submarginal" lands for broad-scale wildlife conservation. The ambitious proposal included a call for new federal conservation expenditures of \$50 million (about \$860 million in today's dollars), supplemented by federal "duck stamp proceeds."

Simultaneously, a bill to establish the stamp was being promoted in Congress. The proposal would require all waterfowl hunters, 16 years of age or older, to buy a stamp annually. Such stamps would be available at post offices at every county seat in the country and in every town with a population over 2,500. Originally, 75 percent of the funds would be used for acquisition, administration, maintenance and development of areas suitable for waterfowl habitat; 20 percent would fund law enforcement of any Act protecting migratory birds, and five percent would pay for production and



Jay Norwood "Ding" Darling rushed to create a design for the first duck stamp and submitted ideas he thought of as mere concepts, but the engravers chose one and started printing it immediately.

distribution of the stamps.

The new bill was signed into law on March 16, 1934. With Roosevelt's signing of the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act, popularly known as the Duck Stamp Act, funds from stamp sales would be deposited in a special treasury account, the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund.

The law arrived none too soon. By one knowledgeable estimate, 1934 marked an all-time low for migratory waterfowl populations, at 27 million.

Just 10 days before the bill signing, Darling, one of the three conservationists on the "Beck Committee," was appointed the chief of the Bureau of Biological Survey (in the Department of Agriculture) and charged with designing the first stamp. Darling's rushed artwork for the now famous first stamp (1934-1935) soon followed, with a pair of landing mallards. Darling provided six model sketches for the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, all produced on laundry cardboard stiffeners that happened to be in Darling's office. He approached these works as mere concepts, but the engravers actually chose one and began stamp production.

The entire process moved quickly, and the first day of sale was on Aug. 22. In the first year, 635,000 stamps sold at \$1 each, with revenue generated from the stamp directed to the Department of the Agriculture for wetland conservation.

Vocal critics predicted the federal stamp would not even raise \$1 million per year. (This would be equal to about \$17 million per year in today's dollars.) But by 1939 sales surpassed that mark. With the new U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service created in June 1940, stamp authority was transferred to the Department of the Interior to buy or lease wetland habitat.

The duck stamp would grow, and the distribution formula, price, and other improvements would change multiple times with amendments to the act.

Getting the lead out

BY RICH PATTERSON

The big doe dropped in its tracks a split second after I'd tried something new. I'd been using lead core pistol bullets in my muzzleloader. But, when Barnes brought out copper bullets I bought a box, used them when sighting in my Knight rifle and found them deadly accurate. And when the doe fell, I knew they'd also humanely drop a deer.

That was about 15 years ago and I've not used a lead hunting bullet since and with the copper alternative, no one needs to.

More than 20 copper-killed deer have gone in our freezer without ever losing a wounded one. A few years later I chucked lead completely and now use nontoxic shot for all small game.

Calling a bullet nontoxic may be the ultimate oxymoron. Copper is selective.

It's deadly to the deer yet kind to any scavenging creature that feasts on a gut pile or unrecovered animal.

The impact of lead bullets on California condors is well known, but a new study on Upper Midwest bald eagles shows that lead is also deadly to bald eagles and other wildlife.

Over a two year period federal biologists examined 168 dead eagles and found lead in 48 percent of their livers — 21 percent had lethal levels.

"Although most eagles showed no visible external signs of lead poisoning, internal examination showed clinical signs and gross lesions of lead poisoning that included distended and bile-engorged gall bladders," said Ed Britton, project leader and manager of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge's Savanna.

A secondary study found lead fragments in 36 percent of gut piles recovered from the Lost Mound unit of the Upper Mississippi

Refuge in Illinois. When you consider the hundreds of thousands of gut piles left in the field and the enthusiasm eagles show for feeding on them the impact is enormous.

Banning lead ammunition is controversial, and I might not favor a ban if effective alternatives weren't available — but they are. Copper based bullets are now readily available for muzzleloaders, shotgun slugs, and rifles.

We got lead out of paint, gasoline, and waterfowl ammunition years ago. Now it's time to get it out of the deer woods. ■



Rich Patterson is an avid deer hunter and member of the Circle of Chiefs.



You can see the duck stamp dollars at work anytime you visit wetlands, riparian and grassland habitats in the National Wildlife Refuge. **Photo by Paul Baichich.**

While waterfowl were the principle target of the stamp and its funds, other birds, fish and mammals benefited as well.

Since that first sale in 1934, stamp funds have reached more than \$900 million. To see what that money has done, visit wetland, riparian and grassland habitats in the National Wildlife Refuge System, secured by stamp funds.

Additional resources on the history of the Duck Stamp:

Jay Norwood "Ding" Darling

www.dingdarling.org/

Migratory Bird Conservation Commission

www.fws.gov/refuges/realty/mbcc.html

Essential Stamp Facts

www.fws.gov/duckstamps/

www.postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibits/2e_artistic.html

www.friendsofthestamp.org/ ■



Paul J. Baichich has been writing about bird conservation and conservation history for years. He is president of the Friends of the Migratory Bird/Duck Stamp, and, earlier this year, he received the Ducks Unlimited Wetland Conservation Achievement Award in the category of Communications.