

# “Duck Stamp” Dollars Reserve Native Prairie Tracts

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The **glaciated prairie pothole region** is a primary production area for ducks in the Northern Great Plains. In the continental United States, the region lies between the western edge of the deciduous forest, the Canadian border, and east and north of the Missouri River starting near Sioux City, Iowa. Presently the prairie pothole region is a diversified composite of croplands interspersed with islands of native rangelands. The only two physiographic regions still containing significant amounts of native prairie rangeland within this region are the Prairie Coteau of southwestern Minnesota and northeastern South Dakota and the Missouri Coteau of central South Dakota and central and northwestern North Dakota.

Formerly the prairie pothole region was a continuous prairie ecosystem interrupted by many natural wetlands (potholes) and with occasional motts of trees and shrubs or wooded draws and water drainages. The prairies were always home for many species of wildlife, but the demands of people have made a change in the prairies and the wildlife.

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Buffalo are no longer the most obvious wildlife in the area. They were mostly gone even before the plows of the settlers disturbed the prairie soils and flora. Ducks and other waterfowl are now among the most abundant groups of wildlife remaining in this region and especially in the prairie pothole ecosystem.

In the early 1960's a program known as the “Small Wetlands Program” was initiated to reserve a number of wetland-upland complexes specifically for the future perpetuation of ducks. This program was funded by the sale of “duck stamps”, also known as Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamps. The primary purchase and easement targets for these “duck stamp” dollars were wetlands with some adjoining uplands for bird nesting and other wildlife benefits. During the period 1960-1978, approximately 169,830 acres of wetlands and 265,740 acres of uplands were purchased on 2,352 wetland-upland complexes known as Waterfowl Production Areas with “duck stamp” dollars. Of the upland acres 93,492 were included in native prairie tracts and they were located on 1,746 different areas. A native prairie tract on a Waterfowl Production Area in this paper



A view of one of the 1,746 prairie-wetland tracts that was purchased with “duck stamp” dollars during 1960-1978. Public use of these tracts is encouraged.

included the sum of all units of original sod prairie and all units of go-back prairie that had not had a tillage history for approximately 25 years or longer. The range condition of a prairie was not used as a selective factor in the inventory as long as some native plant species were present in the floral composition.

These native prairie tracts range in size from 1 to 1,416 acres. As of December 1978 their distribution and acreages in the glaciated prairie pothole region were as follows: Nebraska: 1 tract and 38 acres; Montana: 39 tracts and 2,598 acres; Minnesota: 390 tracts and 14,788 acres; North Dakota: 884 tracts and 58,852 acres; and South Dakota: 432 tracts and 17,216 acres. These data were obtained from refuge Resource Inventory and Planning cards.

**One main purpose of these native prairie tracts** is to provide food, nesting areas, and cover for ducks and other wildlife; however, they also provide additional benefits to the general public. For example, hundreds of acres of native prairie were released from wildlife production purposes in the summers of 1976 and 1980 and were made available to farmers and ranchers as livestock forage and hay to help ameliorate the effects of extreme drought and low herbage production in this region. Many of the native prairie tracts are also used annually for demonstration and education purposes by high school and college biology, ecology, and range management classes.

The amount and kinds of wildlife occurring on any one tract of native prairie depend a lot on the kind of vegetation present and its use. Compared to most other prairies, the management of the vegetation on these 1,746 prairie tracts is unique. The vegetation is managed primarily for better duck production. Vegetation management practices include burning, idling (no use), mowing, haying, and grazing. The latter two practices are accomplished through cooperative agreements with neighboring farmers and ranchers. All management practices are usually designed to induce changes in vegetation structure, which will produce changes in plant communities and wildlife populations. Manipulating cover to benefit wildlife is an old art. Procedures for better prairie and wetland management systems are continually being researched and developed to benefit and maintain these prairie wetland complexes as natural as possible and to improve their potential for wildlife habitat. Many of the guidelines from these studies will also be useful in preparing management strategies for better wildlife and red meat production on private and public rangelands.

**Most native rangeland remaining** in the glaciated prairie pothole region is in the stewardship of the private landholder. The future fate of many private holdings is very tenu-

ous under the present system of economics. Grain farming with push-button and hydraulic technology and 6 months of effort is very attractive to a large percentage of the rural population when such farming is compared to the year-round requirement of animal husbandry. We should all be proud of the remaining prairie remnants. They are special, just as are the national parks, national grasslands, and national forests.

The prairie-wetland complexes alluded to in this paper help support the traditional flights of waterfowl each spring and fall. Management and regulation of these specific prairie-wetland complexes are a responsibility and function of the National Wildlife Refuge System of the U.S. Department of the Interior. These prairie-wetland complexes are open to the general public with the exception of some restriction of the kinds and times (season) of use. Bird enthusiasts, photographers, trappers, fishermen, and others use these complexes as base areas for their hobby endeavors. However, the greatest public use of these prairie-wetland complexes is by duck hunters, and rightfully so, because this group purchases the largest share of "duck stamps" sold each year.

**Specific information about the location**, size, use, flora, and fauna of these prairie-wetland complexes can be obtained at National Wildlife Refuge headquarters or Wetland Management District Offices at the following locations: Medicine Lake, Montana; Kearney, Nebraska; Detroit Lakes, Fergus Falls, Benson, and Litchfield, Minnesota; Crosby, Coleharbor, Kenmare, Upham, Devils Lake, Kulm, Pingree, Valley City, Moffit, and Cayuga, North Dakota; and Waubay, Columbia, Madison, and Lake Andes, South Dakota.

Ducks and wetlands are inseparable in the prairies. Hunters know this, bird watchers know this, wildlife managers know this, and most importantly people who manage the croplands and rangelands know this. The 1,746 tracts of native prairie within these upland-wetland complexes known as Waterfowl Production Areas are not the only lands purchased with "duck stamp" dollars. Considerable acreages have also been purchased in central and southern parts of the United States to provide staging, resting, and wintering areas for waterfowl. Since 1934, when "duck stamps" were first sold, nearly 2.5 million acres of waterfowl habitats have been acquired or taken under easement within the United States with revenue from these sales. By purchasing "duck stamps", more than 2.2 million people provide over \$16.5 million in annual revenue. It is certainly gratifying to know that some of the remaining native prairie remnants in the Northern Great Plains are being reserved for the future with "duck stamp" dollars. ●

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**People travelling from Mexico to Calgary for SRM convention in February 1982 may wish to contact:**

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