



Minnesota Waterfowl Association's Wetland Restoration Program

William Murray

The Minnesota Waterfowl Association (MWA) was formed in 1967 when some residents from Albert Lea noticed that many wetlands in the area were disappearing. The group joined to form the structure of the Minnesota Waterfowl Association. The MWA is a nonprofit organization throughout the state and is funded through donations, fund-raisers and proceeds from memberships and grants.

The Minnesota Waterfowl Associations has a "mission to preserve, restore, develop, enhance and protect Minnesota's wetlands and associated uplands through public education, legislative initiatives and projects to benefit waterfowl, wildlife and the environment" (Minnesota Waterfowler 30:4). In the last thirty years, MWA has been successful in all areas of its mission. MWA has been involved in many projects to restore Minnesota's wetlands.

To date, the MWA has been involved in more than 600 wetland restoration projects. These projects are said to have benefited more than 600 wildlife species as well as the targeted waterfowl. "It has been documented that more than 580 species of wildlife, including some birds and fur-bearing animals, are major users of our wetland complexes" (MWA, par. 5). Money raised through MWA stays in Minnesota and is put to use in projects close to donor's place of residence. Contributors can see their dollars at work for the environment in their area. Thirty years ago, the MWA provided the initial leadership for improving management of lakes and wetlands. MWA brings attention to the deteriorated resources, provide legal assistance, and raises necessary funding to enhance Minnesota's water resources. A large portion of funding comes from the Minnesota State Waterfowl Stamp program. "In 1977, MWA was successful in initiating and passing the Minnesota State Waterfowl Stamp program" (MWA, par. 3). Earnings from the stamp have raised over \$7.5 million for the preservation of wildlife habitat in the last decade. The money is used to enhance state owned wetlands, designate wildlife lakes, and increase waterfowl habitat. MWA is one of the main waterfowl organizations in the state of Minnesota that provides a voice in the state legislature. Another major step in legislation promoted by the MWA was passing the 1991 Minnesota Wetlands Heritage Act that increased protection of Minnesota's wetlands.

The MWA created the Game Lake Designation Program that created 50,000 acres of wetlands for Minnesota's waterfowl. Included in the 50,000 acres are 36 lakes that are designated as game lakes. The lakes vary in size, the largest being 9,000 acres, to the smallest of 71 acres. The majority of game lakes are designated in southern Minnesota because the lakes in this area are in need of management for wildlife habitat improvements.

MWA Practices

MWA does not actually go out and look for sites to restore. People in the area, such as farmers looking to have their wetlands restored, approach MWA local chapters. Once the appropriate forms are filled out and reviewed, wetland technicians from MWA conduct a field assessment of the land. Every site is different and the criterion for each site is different depending on what MWA is looking for that year. Sites vary from large acre wetlands to small acre wetlands, along with upland prairie. No project is too big or small if the funding is available. When funds for a project are approved, and the plans are drawn, the construction begins. Work is contracted out to various companies, depending on what the project needs. The majority of the contracts are made with excavating companies. Upon completion of the project, in most cases, the landowner is responsible to take care of the land. The projects are monitored depending on what the project involves. For example, if the restoration project was simply to remove drain tile and let the water levels rise for aquatic vegetation to re-establish, the monitoring would be minimal. On the other hand, if the restoration project involved multiple factors such as re-introduction of aquatic vegetation, controlling rough fish, and maintain a certain standard of water clarity, monitoring the project will be continuous. Monitoring each project helps determine if the project was successful in meeting its intended goals. If the project meets the intended goals that MWA set out for it, the project is a success. For example, if a wetland was restored to provide nesting habitat for Canadian geese, and geese are using it for nesting grounds, then the project is a success. According to Matt Milligan, a wetland technician for MWA, success is measured by any increase in wildlife habitat, and is also measured by a positive affect on the environment. Craig Follett, the Director of Memberships for MWA, stated that "success can only be determined on a project by project basis, and sometimes you don't know if you're successful or not". According to Harvey K. Nelson, special consultant for the MWA, projects involved with the state and federal agencies are surveyed for evaluation on an annual basis to determine success. Projects done through private organizations and landowners are rarely surveyed for success. Mr. Nelson would like to see a change in the amount of surveys done on private projects. He feels this would help the efficiency and effectiveness of future projects throughout the state.

Current Projects

The MWA is currently working on two main projects, one of which is The Straight River Marsh Project, and the other is The Grass Lake Project. The Straight River Marsh Project consists of a shallow lake restoration that incorporates upwards of 2,000 acres under easement. Of those easements, the lakebed consists of 1,300 acres. The project involves 31 landowners covering 10 sections of south central Steele County. The land originally was farmed, but was a continuous problem due to seasonal flooding and early frostout. Landowners chose to put their land into the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). The CRP worked well for about 11 years, but contracts were starting to expire, and landowners were in need of a new program. Being a wetland technician, Matt Milligan's job is to purchase wetland easements from landowners. Mr. Milligan informed the landowners of their options. The landowners had two options, one was to try to farm the land again, or incorporate their land into the Straight River Marsh Project through WRP or RIM. Contracts have been made with 25 of the 31 landowners that have put into protection over 800 acres. Some additional landowners have interest in putting another 350 acres into

protection. Until enough contracts are made for the full-scale restoration project, Matt Milligan will continue to do lake and wetland restoration for each landowner, one at a time.

The second project is the Grass Lake project, located in southern Freeborn County. This project is similar to the Straight River Marsh Project because it also needs to incorporate 2,000 acres of a shallow lakebed, and the landowners are in the same situation with problem lands. There are two main differences between the projects. One is that Grass Lake is very flat, with little to no elevation change, whereas Straight River has multiple hills and valleys. The second main difference is that Grass Lake will incorporate some high quality upland habitat that will help restore the Grass Lake watershed. Fifteen landowners have made contracts that incorporate 900 acres into the protection project that is almost half way to Mr. Milligan's ideal goal of 2,000. He is currently pursuing another 15 landowners that will help complete his goal of a successful restoration project in Freeborn County.

MWA not only restores wetlands but also upland prairie grasses for nesting cover. Originally, Minnesota had about 9 million acres of native northern tallgrass prairies. Today, less than 1 percent of the original tallgrass prairie remains. MWA is one member of the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture (PPJV). The PPJV is an important player in restoring prairie wetland communities throughout the state. The partnership received over \$1 million in grant money in 1996 to restore grasslands for critical breeding habitat for many bird species. The projects are not only throughout the southern part of Minnesota, but also throughout 19 counties in northwestern Minnesota.

In September of 1997, an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was released by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service evaluating tallgrass prairies and the impacts of humans. Another EIS will be released in June of 1998 for the final decisions for a large-scale prairie preservation area throughout Minnesota and Iowa called the Northern Tallgrass Prairie Habitat Preservation Area (NTPHPA). Acquisitions and easements will be done through the Fish and Wildlife Service, but the MWA will provide assistance along with many other organizations. Assistance from MWA will come in the form of funds and technical expertise.

Analysis

The Minnesota Waterfowl Association's main goal is preserving, creating, and restoring wildlife habitat in Minnesota. In the process of reaching this goal, MWA has introduced and funded multiple programs, increased habitats for multiple species, increased wetlands that act as natural filters and flood control structures, and pushed legislation to protect our remaining wetlands. MWA looks at success in their projects as simply being an increase in wetland and nesting habitats. Restoration success only comes when a productive habitat is reached. Success for both habitat and restoration go hand in hand because if a wetland is created, there is habitat for waterfowl, and the restoration is a success. There is a direct correlation between the number of birds nesting in Minnesota to the increase of wetland acres. Roughly 30-35% of the waterfowl harvested in Minnesota are raised in Minnesota. This is evidence that the MWA's restoration projects are successful in creating wetlands and nesting habitat.

As Mr. Nelson noted, most private restoration are not surveyed after completion. This seems hard to believe after all the time and money invested in a restoration. The majority of MWAs projects are evaluated, however. Assessment of success is an area MWA could improve on that can benefit their own cause. The earlier problems of an unsuccessful project are corrected the more cost effective the restoration will be. MWA also needs to acquire more funding for northern Minnesota restorations to improve waterfowl habitat and wetland in that region of the state. They could transfer some funds from the southern chapters to help out projects in the north; no matter where the projects take place we all benefit from their success.

References

Personal Interviews

Cooper, Tom. Wetlands Technician, Minnesota Waterfowl Association. 08 Apr. 1998.

Follett, Craig. Membership Director, Minnesota Waterfowl Association. 01 Jun. 1998

Milligan, Matt. Wetlands Technician, Minnesota Waterfowl Association. 24 Apr. 1998

Nelson, Harvey. Special Consultant, Minnesota Waterfowl Association. 27 Apr. 1998

Periodicals

Carlson, Elizabeth. "New Minnesota Wetlands Conservation Plan To Guide Wetland Conservation" Minnesota Waterfowler (1998) : Vol. 30 / Is. 4

Larson, Thomas. "Prairie Winds" Minnesota Waterfowler (1998) : Vol. 31 / Is. 1

Milligan, Matt. "Named Private Lands Technician for the MWA" Minnesota Waterfowler (1998) : Vol. 30 / Is. 4

Norrgard, Ray. "Wildlife Lake Designation." Minnesota Waterfowler (1998) : Vol. 31 / Is. 1

Norrgard, Ray. "MWA and Lake Management" Minnesota Waterfowler (1998) : Vol. 31 / Is. 1

Pardo, Barbara. "North American Waterfowl Management Plan" Minnesota Waterfowler (1998) Vol. 30 / Is. 4

Minnesota Waterfowl Association. The MWA Story. 1997

Online Sources

Minnesota Waterfowl Association. "Wetlands, Waterfowl and Wildlife." Online. Internet.

23 Apr. 1998. Available: www.up-north.com/mnwaterfowl/