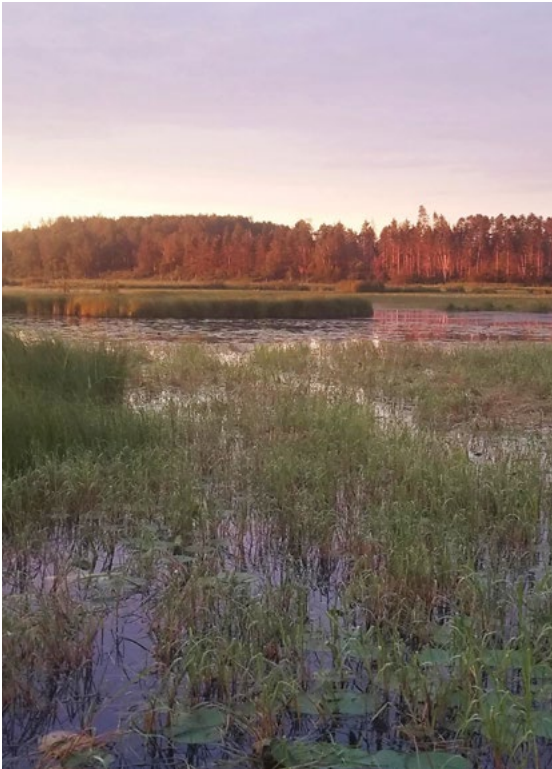


DUCK ACTION PLAN

2025–2030



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Wetlands provide critical habitat for ducks, filter sediment and store floodwater.

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Executive summary

The restoration, protection, and enhancement of duck habitat is a vital part of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resource's (DNR) mission. Abundant duck populations provide recreational opportunities for hunters and birdwatchers, and the participants in these activities help bolster rural economies in Minnesota and throughout the Migratory Bird Flyways. Participating in hunting and bird watching can also help bring families together and connect people to the land. In addition, duck habitat supports many other species and provides floodwater storage, groundwater recharge, carbon sequestration and sediment filtration that improves the quality of life for all Minnesotans.

The DNR developed this Duck Action Plan (Plan) to prioritize the work done in pursuit of these benefits. This Plan will guide the DNR's focus on funding and conservation efforts, enhancing and developing partnerships, improving communication about ducks and their habitat, and conducting research and monitoring that foster Minnesotans' stewardship of duck populations and habitat. The Plan identifies the goals, objectives, and strategies the DNR will implement during the next five years. Additionally, the Plan identifies strategic issues that influence duck conservation. The scope includes both ducks that breed in Minnesota and those that stop in Minnesota during spring and fall migration.

This document builds upon the DNR's 50-year Long-Range Duck Recovery Plan and 2020-2023 Duck Action Plan.



Enhancing duck habitat, like in this wetland, is vital to abundant duck populations and a variety of other wildlife species.

The DNR's role

The DNR is a leader in duck habitat and population management in Minnesota. Implementing this Plan will involve dedication to collaborative work with conservation partners, both on public and private lands. The DNR commits to management, research, and monitoring in accordance with the department's mission.

The DNR's 2025-2030 Duck Action Plan goals are to:

1. Increase the amount of protected wetland, grassland and forest habitat for ducks.
2. Maintain, enhance and restore wetland, grassland, and forest habitat for ducks.
3. Increase opportunities for and participation in outdoor recreation related to ducks and their habitat.
4. Increase public awareness and appreciation of wetland conservation for ducks and people.

In addition to working closely with partners to implement this Plan, the DNR will annually report progress and successes using specific performance indicators identified in the Plan.

Performance indicators are specific to the strategy they are below. In cases where no performance indicator is listed below a strategy, it was determined that progress would be very difficult to track and report using easily quantifiable measures. For these strategies, qualitative assessments will support evaluation of progress.



Working closely with conservation partners is key for DNR to fulfill its role as the leader in duck habitat and population management in Minnesota.

Introduction

Duck management vision for the future

Abundant and quality wetland, grassland and forest habitat provides the foundation for strong Minnesota duck populations, which results in excellent duck hunting and wildlife viewing. Other wildlife and pollinator species also benefit from diverse and productive wetlands, grasslands and forests. Beyond wildlife habitat, wetlands, grasslands and forest habitat help secure societal benefits, including water storage, groundwater recharge, sediment and pollutant filtration, and carbon sequestration. Minnesotans recognize the breadth of benefits from duck habitat conservation and support actions that benefit duck management.

Purpose of plan

This five-year Plan will help the DNR focus funding and conservation efforts, enhance existing and develop new partnerships and conduct research and monitoring that improves our collective understanding and stewardship of ducks and their habitats.

This 2025-2030 Plan is complementary to other DNR plans (see Appendix A) and identifies issues influencing

duck habitat and populations. It also helps agency staff coordinate with conservation partners and informs the public and those who fund conservation work by identifying the DNR's goals, objectives and strategies over the next five years.

Plan development

Recognizing the importance of grassland habitat for pheasants and ducks alike, the DNR developed this Plan in parallel with the 2025-2030 Pheasant Action Plan. The DNR provided the public with the opportunity to comment on past plans and provide ideas for the development of the 2025-2030 Duck and Pheasant Action Plans. A summary of the comments received, and the responses provided to these comments, can be found in Appendix B. The DNR also hosted two scoping workshops in the spring and summer of 2024 to collect input from conservation partners for both the Duck and Pheasant Action Plans. The ideas collected at these meetings, input gathered from the public, as well as the plans mentioned above are the basis for the 2025-2030 Duck and Pheasant Action Plans. In addition, the DNR conducted ongoing engagement with the 11 federally recognized Tribes within Minnesota's borders and partner organizations. The DNR also gathered public comment on draft versions of the Plan and analysis from technical experts.



Recruitment, retention, and reactivation of waterfowl hunters is important for preserving Minnesota's outdoor heritage.

Background and current conditions

Ducks are migratory and their abundance across North America is influenced by multiple factors including climate, precipitation and land use. Ultimately, the amount and quality of wetland, grassland and forest habitats drive continental duck populations, especially during the breeding season. The abundance of water is also extremely important in where and how many ducks settle across the landscape.

Duck habitat management is complicated because each species has different habitat requirements for breeding and migration. For example, blue-winged teal rely on seasonal and semi-permanent wetlands embedded in Minnesota's prairie and agricultural regions while common goldeneyes require cavity trees and large lakes in the forested part of the state. Minnesota's breeding populations of ducks have fluctuated over time as habitat quality and quantity has changed. Agricultural programs that set aside grassland habitat like the United States Department of Agriculture's Soil Bank Program in the 1956 Farm Bill, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in the 1985 Farm Bill, the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), the Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) program, and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) programs (Regional Conservation Partnership Program [RCPP], Environmental Quality Incentives Program [EQIP], and Conservation Security Program [CSP]), have all

benefited nesting waterfowl in Minnesota. CRP acres have ebbed and flowed over time, but recently have seen significant declines. From 2007-2022 Minnesota lost 833,000 acres of CRP, and with it a loss of upland habitat necessary for nesting.

In addition to grasslands, other wetland-associated uplands provide critical nesting habitat and require protection, restoration, and enhancement efforts. Increasing development along lakes and wetlands in Minnesota reduces nesting habitat for ducks. While acres of deepwater wetlands in Minnesota are showing moderate gains in recent years, small temporary and seasonal 'pothole' wetlands that give the Prairie Pothole Region its name continue to decline. These prairie pothole wetlands are critical for breeding ducks, providing most of the food and cover needed to successfully nest and raise a brood of ducklings.

Abundant duck populations are important to hunters, birdwatchers, and others. Estimated numbers of breeding mallards over the last 20 years, according to the Minnesota May Waterfowl Survey, are relatively stable. Populations of blue-winged teal and other ducks have varied more than mallards throughout the survey. Duck hunters in Minnesota have reported relatively high satisfaction in recent years; results of a 2023 DNR survey of waterfowl hunters indicated 58% were

either slightly, moderately or very satisfied with their overall waterfowl hunting experience. Despite this high satisfaction, the number of Minnesota duck hunters continues to decline, in line with national trends.



Tree cavities are very important nesting sites for some duck species like wood ducks and common goldeneyes.

DNR duck management

Minnesota waterfowl management promotes abundant duck populations, the high-quality habitat they need, clean water and soil conservation benefits, and opportunities for outdoor recreation. Many other species of wildlife also benefit from duck habitat management. Because waterfowl are migratory and many only spend a short period in Minnesota, the DNR also works closely with and supports conservation efforts along the Mississippi Flyway and throughout the region.

Ducks require a variety of habitat components throughout the year, and the scope of DNR management includes both ducks that breed in Minnesota and those that stop in Minnesota during migration. Therefore, management focuses on providing high quality habitat for nesting, brood rearing and migration. Breeding ducks on the prairies are dependent on the abundance of high-quality wetlands, especially habitat complexes that provide a range of wetland types embedded in sufficient upland nesting habitat. Duck populations increase when more habitat complexes are available on the landscape. The DNR protects, restores and enhances wetland, grassland and forest habitat within an extensive state Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and Aquatic Management Area (AMA) system.

Outside the prairie portion of Minnesota, wetlands are more permanent, although seasonal wetlands still play an important role. Wild rice lakes, slow moving streams, shallow areas of deeper lakes, and vernal ponds, along with nesting uplands and nesting cavities in trees, are also important habitat components for ducks.

DNR duck habitat management includes shallow lake and wetland drawdowns, and vegetation management such as invasive cattail control, prescribed fire, tree removal, haying, and conservation grazing. The DNR also restores habitat on degraded sites and acquires new parcels for the WMA/AMA system. Permanent protection and continued enhancement of wetlands, grasslands and forests are critical to ensure these important habitats and populations exist into the future.

The DNR participates in technical committees with biologists from Minnesota and other states and

Canadian provinces to stay up to date on current duck management programs and collaborate on research.

Work by the DNR to benefit ducks and their habitat supports the DNR's mission "to work with Minnesotans to conserve and manage the state's natural resources, to provide outdoor recreation opportunities, and to provide for commercial uses of natural resources in a way that creates a sustainable quality of life."

This work is enabled by statute 97A.045, which states,

"The commissioner shall do all things the commissioner determines are necessary to preserve, protect, and propagate desirable species of wild animals. The commissioner shall make special provisions for the management of fish and wildlife to ensure recreational opportunities for anglers and hunters."

In brief, work done by the DNR to benefit duck populations falls within the following three broad categories:

Duck population management

- Population monitoring and research.
- Disease surveillance and management.
- Surveys of hunters.
- Coordination with Tribes.
- Supporting the development of federal frameworks which apply to all states in the Mississippi Flyway, the bird migration route that includes Minnesota.
- Development of state hunting regulations.

Habitat management

- Long-term habitat protection through fee-title acquisition and conservation easement programs.
- Enhancement and maintenance of existing duck habitat.
- Restoration of drained or developed wetlands to restore wetland functions.
- Restoration and enhancement of grassland and forest habitat.

- Research and monitoring to inform wetland habitat management decisions.
- Financial support of Farm Bill Assistance Partnership staff to deliver voluntary private lands conservation.
- Continuing and strengthening partnerships with non-government organizations that promote waterfowl conservation.

Promotion of recreation and habitat benefits

- Delivering and supporting programs to promote the recruitment, retention and reactivation of duck hunters and duck-related recreation.
- Promoting duck management's benefits to ecosystems and society.

Strategic considerations

The DNR has identified several important considerations that will influence the success of the 2025-2030 Duck Action Plan.

Legacy amendment funding

The Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment, which Minnesota voters passed in 2008, designates a portion of sales tax to be allocated toward various conservation and arts initiatives through 2034. Thirty-three percent of these revenues go to the Outdoor Heritage Fund (OHF). The OHF specifically supports habitat protection, restoration and enhancement. OHF provides over \$175 million annually in legislative appropriations for critical habitat work. These funds are often leveraged by the DNR for federal aid match and by partners through the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, Joint Venture funding, as well as other one-time state and federal appropriations. This funding is vital for habitat protection, restoration, and enhancement throughout the duck range. This is a key time in Minnesota to implement priority conservation actions.

Private lands and the need for partnerships

Most of the land in Minnesota's grassland and forest transition regions is privately owned; Minnesota's forested region is a patchwork of private, public and tribal ownerships. Therefore, private land stewardship is

critical to conserving ducks and their habitat. Although local DNR staff engage with private landowners in the course of our work, other agencies and organizations are better positioned to influence conservation on private lands. The DNR will enhance its partnerships and coordination to support private lands work.

Continued loss and degradation of habitat

As Minnesota's human population grows, pressures for land use and development increase. Grasslands and wetlands have declined more than 95% in western and southern Minnesota since the mid-1800s. Increased agricultural tile drainage removes temporary wetlands and continues to hamper the management of water levels for ducks and other wetland-dependent species. Excess nutrients impair water clarity, which in turn decreases aquatic vegetation. Hybrid cattails and other invasive plants also outcompete native vegetation and degrade wetland quality. Over half of the lakes in the prairie region of Minnesota have poor habitat. Minnesota continues to lose more native prairie every year. When grasslands are not managed, trees and invasive species encroach and reduce the benefits for ducks and other wildlife. Forested wetlands continue to be degraded by shoreline development, invasive species, and loss of trees mature enough to support cavity-nesting ducks.

Changing recreation demands and preferences

Changes in recreational preferences affect funding for state duck management activities. The number of duck stamps sold in Minnesota peaked in the 1970s at greater than 160,000 and has declined to an average of 70,000 in recent years. Social, economic and resource trends are expected to continue influencing changes in the public's recreational preferences and participation. Despite opportunities from dedicated funding, such as the OHF, the decline in hunting license sales presents a significant challenge. Hunting license revenues fund many DNR wildlife management activities. The DNR also matches these license sales to federal Pittman-Robertson funds from an excise tax on firearms, ammunition, and archery equipment. The DNR's 4 The Outdoors initiative is working to identify additional mechanisms for stable and sustainable funding sources.

Need for multiscale collaboration

Because ducks are migratory, agencies and partners need to coordinate their management and conservation efforts not just within Minnesota, but across North America. Many of the ducks harvested by Minnesota hunters are hatched in the prairies and boreal forests of Canada and many will overwinter in southern states or Mexico. Continued collaboration will ensure partners effectively use funds to address the greatest priorities.

Tribal collaboration

Ducks and duck habitat are important to tribal members and other indigenous people of Minnesota, contributing to a subsistence lifestyle and continuation of cultural relationships. Tribes have recently expressed concerns about factors that influence duck populations in the state, including the effects of declining cavity tree availability, increased precipitation events on wild rice production, and competition among native wetland plants and non-native hybrid cattail. The DNR recognizes and respects the sovereignty and treaty-reserved rights of the Tribes. Continued cooperation, coordination and consultation with Tribes in Minnesota is crucial to conservation efforts for ducks across the State and will inform our collective management actions.

Climate change

Global and regional climate patterns are changing, and climate change has both known and unanticipated effects on habitat and wildlife populations throughout Minnesota. For example, increasing frequency and intensity of storms, persistent drought, and warmer winters all affect wetlands. Climate change may complicate habitat management efforts by impacting the prescribed burn season, encouraging the spread of invasive and woody species, and altering regional hydrology with more intense rainstorms and longer periods without precipitation.

Goals

1. Increase the amount of protected wetland, grassland and forest habitat for ducks.
2. Maintain, enhance and restore wetland, grassland and forest habitat for ducks.
3. Increase opportunities for and participation in outdoor recreation related to ducks and their habitat.
4. Increase public awareness and appreciation of wetland conservation for ducks.



Increasing the amount of wetland and grassland habitat is essential to abundant duck populations.

Objectives, strategies and performance indicators

DNR staff, along with input from partners, identified the following objectives and outlined supporting strategies to meet the goals listed on previous page:

Objective 1

Acquire additional habitat by maintaining the current pace of WMA acquisitions overall while increasing the proportion within priority areas. Additionally, improve access to private land for outdoor recreation by increasing acres enrolled in the DNR's Walk-In Access Program.

Strategies

- 1.1 Focus WMA acquisitions to benefit ducks primarily in the Prairie and Prairie/Forest Transition, and in association with wild rice lakes in forested habitats.

Performance indicator: Maintain an average rate of 4,500 acres per year of WMA acquisitions, including those initiated by partners, in the Prairie, Prairie/Forest Transition, and in association with wild rice lakes in forested habitat.

- 1.2 Work with partners to identify and acquire priority wetland, grassland and forest wildlife habitat through local technical teams or other county level meetings with Tribes, conservation organizations, and local, state, and federal partners.



Wildlife Management Areas provide habitat for ducks while also providing people with opportunities for hunting and wildlife watching.

Performance indicator: Work with partners to develop a new Waterfowl Strategic Habitat Support Tool to refine duck priority areas in which to focus protection, restoration and enhancement of habitat for ducks; and, where appropriate, to consider other environmental benefits like protecting water quality and drinking water by January 2028.

- 1.3 Adjust the DNR's WMA acquisition parcel scoring criteria within the existing DNR Geographic Information System tool to emphasize acquisitions in high priority waterfowl habitat identified by the newly developed Waterfowl Strategic Habitat Support Tool.
- 1.4 Strengthen the DNR's relationship with counties, including county Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) and county governing authorities, on land acquisition, habitat restoration, and enhancement activities.

Performance indicator: Meet with each county or SWCD at least once every year to discuss land acquisitions and/or habitat efforts on DNR and private lands.

- 1.5 Seek long-term and/or new funding to sustain and expand the DNR's Walk-In Access program.

Performance indicator: Obtain permanent funding to annually enroll 35,000 acres into the program.

- 1.6 Explore opportunities and select WMA sites located with a focus on enhanced facilities, wildlife and habitat education, and connecting new users with information about the broader WMA system and associated recreational opportunities.

Objective 2

Increase the quality and quantity of duck habitat through restoration and enhancement on state-administered land and managed shallow lakes.

Strategies

- 2.1 Identify wetlands and associated uplands in need of restoration or management within strategic waterfowl habitat areas of the state.

Performance indicator: Assess 1,000 wetland acres or 500 wetlands for enhancement or restoration annually.

Performance indicator: Identify five WMA habitat complexes for intensive habitat management (e.g., addition of water control structures, intensive vegetation management) annually, with a preference for areas identified by the newly developed Waterfowl Strategic Habitat Support Tool.

- 2.2 Implement restoration and enhancement actions on wetlands and associated uplands on state administered lands, with an emphasis on strategic waterfowl habitat areas.

Performance indicator: Enhance 5,000 wetland acres or 500 wetland basins through various management practices (e.g., cattail control, disking, roller chopping, RX burning, haying, sediment removal) annually.

Performance indicator: Implement intensive habitat management (e.g., addition of water control structures, intensive vegetation management) on five WMA habitat complexes in areas identified by the newly developed Waterfowl Strategic Habitat Support Tool annually.

- 2.3 Maintain current staffing in the wetlands management program and consider future expansion and/or other partnerships to address identified wetland habitat needs.

- 2.4 Continue the work of the DNR's shallow lakes program, including in-lake management, habitat assessments, adaptive management and management on new basins.

Performance indicator: Conduct shallow lake assessments on 35,000 acres or 70 basins annually.

Performance indicator: Manage 90 shallow lakes annually.

Performance indicator: Manage 80 wild rice lakes annually.

- 2.5 Add to the number of lakes managed for wildlife benefits through Wildlife Lake Designation under M.S. 97A.101 and other authorities (i.e., acquisition, easements, M.S. 103G.408).

Performance indicator: Designate or secure other management authority on two new shallow lakes annually.

- 2.6 Ensure that duck habitat and other habitats are taken into consideration through DNR interdisciplinary forest management coordination and in discussions with other resource managers (e.g., Tribal, federal and county).



Shallow lake drawdowns are an important tool used by DNR managers to enhance wetland habitat for ducks.

Objective 3

Support the work of partners to protect, restore and enhance duck habitat throughout the State of Minnesota in alignment with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) Migratory Bird Joint Ventures and the North American Waterfowl Management Plan.

Strategies

- 3.1 Support and encourage partner-led habitat enhancement activities and acquisition work on state lands through local, state and federal funding including the Conservation Partners Legacy program, traditional OHF grants, and Adopt-A-WMA agreements.
- 3.2 Engage with both the USFWS Migratory Bird Joint Ventures in Minnesota as well as local USFWS Wetland Management Districts and National Wildlife Refuges to coordinate the protection, restoration and management of additional waterfowl habitat.

Performance indicator: Participate in biannual meetings of the USFWS Migratory Bird Joint Ventures and advocate for management actions that would benefit Minnesota habitat and waterfowl throughout the Mississippi Flyway.

- 3.3 Coordinate with interested partners, including Tribes, to promote and improve wetland habitat work in Minnesota. Explore and develop new partnership opportunities, including within and beyond the traditional conservation community.

Performance indicator: Facilitate and participate in biannual habitat management discussions and initiate a new habitat enhancement meeting.

- 3.4 Engage with interested partners, including Tribes, to cooperatively assess and develop waterfowl habitat models for Minnesota and identify waterfowl priority areas to focus habitat acquisition, restoration, and enhancement work as outlined in Strategy 1.2.

Performance indicator: Identify Waterfowl Strategic Habitat Areas and communicate them to staff and partners by January 2028.

- 3.5 Continue to engage with watershed districts, drainage authorities and other flood control authorities to partner on projects that will benefit ducks while also providing water quality and storage benefits in local communities.
- 3.6 Continue to support Canadian waterfowl habitat work, which benefits the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies Fall Flights Program and North American Waterfowl Management Plan.
- 3.7 Continue to support the Farm Bill Assistance Partnership, which funds staff in partner agencies to assist private landowners.



DNR coordinates with partners and Tribes on wild rice management, which is important for many species of ducks that migrate through Minnesota.

Objective 4

Develop and deliver messages on wetlands, grasslands and forest habitat, highlighting private land stewardship, DNR management, recreational opportunities, and the contribution of this habitat to a vibrant Minnesota.

Strategies

- 4.1 Annually update and monitor traffic on the DNR **private lands web pages** to provide current information for landowners to learn about conservation programs, how they can protect and improve habitat for ducks, and where to go for assistance and more information.
- 4.2 Provide a general wildlife habitat and management field operations outline to Fish and Wildlife Division outreach staff to assist them in researching and capturing the “boots-on-the-ground” work of area wildlife staff.

Performance indicator: Communicate at least one story/post monthly focused on ducks and their habitat.

Performance indicator: Create and display short web vignettes that highlight how this work benefits ducks, monitor web traffic, and promote vignette availability. Track related references/referrals from other communications channels.

- 4.3 Pitch “boots-on-the-ground” work story opportunities to area, regional and statewide media, tying in broader habitat and conservation themes when possible and resulting in pictures and stories of the work the Section of Wildlife does.
- 4.4 Enhance messaging about wildlife habitat within the Section of Wildlife’s web pages, so visitors see an integrated, informative and interpretive approach to habitat conservation, enhancement and acquisition. Tie in the benefits and science behind habitat enhancement practices such as shallow lake and wetland drawdowns, vegetation management and prescribed fire.

Performance indicator: Create a wildlife habitat web section by 2030, promote its availability, and monitor traffic and use with an eye toward continuous improvement.

- 4.5 Utilize and integrate existing resources (e.g., online WMA finder, Walk-In-Access maps) into the **learn to waterfowl hunt web pages**. Craft a marketing approach/plan that features duck hunting and drives traffic to the web page(s).
- 4.6 Enhance the wetland research page(s) to better tell the story of research and monitoring of ducks and their habitat.
- 4.7 Use the Wildlife e-newsletter to promote new and updated web content produced as part of strategies 4.1-4.6. Refer readers to that information so it always is available to all rather than recasting it in a stand-alone, subscriber-only format of a newsletter.
- 4.8 Seek out additional ways to promote ducks and their habitat to local stakeholders, elected officials and partners to highlight our work; attend local and statewide events to discuss wetland and other associated habitat; expand conservation partnerships within diverse communities.
- 4.9 Distribute the Plan and communicate key messages to area and program staff and include Plan priorities in the annual work plans.

Objective 5

Refine research and monitoring priorities for ducks and their habitat and implement and continue research and monitoring work to address these priorities.

Strategies

5.1 Continue efforts to identify and prioritize research and monitoring needs related to ducks and their habitat through engagement with wildlife staff from within DNR, Tribes, federal agencies, conservation organizations, and academic institutions.

Performance indicator: The Waterfowl Committee and Habitat Programs review the priority research and monitoring project list annually. Research staff will create proposals with budgets and project timelines, enlist collaborators, and identify potential funding resources for projects.

5.2 Monitor the status of duck populations, habitat resources, duck hunters, and duck harvest in Minnesota and surrounding regions of North America. Evaluate and adapt existing monitoring programs to achieve these goals. Utilize existing habitat data from all available sources.

Performance indicator: Present annual findings on monitoring and survey programs, describing their purposes and value, and make them available on the DNR website.

Performance indicator: Support annual monitoring efforts at local and Flyway scales. Report metrics of waterfowl breeding pairs and habitat conditions.

5.3 Conduct research and monitoring projects that inform management of ducks and their habitat.

Performance indicator: Report on funds invested and the number of active research projects on an annual basis.

Performance indicator: Share information internally using DNR Wildlife Research Summaries, annual project progress reports, one page Research Information Briefs (RIBs) for completed projects and presentations at internal meetings.

Performance indicator: Share findings of research and monitoring projects externally via use of Wildlife Research Summaries and RIBs, peer-reviewed publications, professional presentations and public interest articles.

5.4 Review existing waterfowl refuges, migratory waterfowl feeding and resting areas, wildlife sanctuaries, and state game refuges to determine appropriateness.

Performance indicator: Comprehensively review all waterfowl refuges, feeding and resting areas, sanctuaries, and state game refuges for duck use by 2028.



DNR researchers annually monitor the status of duck populations in Minnesota via banding and aerial surveys.

Appendix A

Relationship to other plans

The DNR will implement this Plan in conjunction with existing DNR plans and plans adopted by conservation partners. This table highlights some of those plans along with their purposes and connections to overlapping work within the Duck Action Plan.

DNR PLANS AND PLANS ADOPTED BY CONSERVATION PARTNERS

Plan Name	Year	Purpose	Connection to this Duck Action Plan
North American Waterfowl Management Plan	2018	Sustain North American waterfowl populations; broaden engagement to increase conservation support.	Coordinate with Migratory Bird Joint Ventures in Minnesota to advance NAWMP habitat and engagement objectives.
Prairie Pothole Joint Venture Implementation Plan	2017	Provide goals for protecting, restoring, and enhancing wetlands and grasslands; uses a working lands approach to conservation; and promotes hunter access and retention.	Identify and prioritize duck habitat priority areas that overlap with PPJV focal areas.
Upper Mississippi River and Great Lakes Joint Venture	2017	Provide habitat objectives for emergent wetland habitat and forest habitat.	Identify and prioritize duck habitat priority areas that overlap with Joint Venture focal areas, focusing on wetland quality, long-term forest management and nest cavities.
DNR Shallow Lakes Plan	2010	Increase management of shallow lakes (implementation plan resulting from 2006 Duck Plan).	Shallow lake management direction supports 2006 Duck Plan and 2025-2030 Duck Action Plan.
DNR 50-year Long Range Duck Recovery Plan	2006	Sets a long-term aspirational vision for duck management in Minnesota.	2025-2030 Duck Action Plan compliments this effort with actionable strategies.
DNR Pheasant Action Plan	2025-2030	Improve grassland habitat in Minnesota to benefit pheasants and other grassland-dependent species.	Coordinate on acquisition, partnering and habitat enhancement strategies that overlap.
Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan	2018	Focus efforts of conservation community into priority areas, uses a working lands approach to conservation.	Coordinate efforts among partners for protection, restoration, and enhancement in areas that overlap with duck priority areas.
DNR State Wildlife Action Plans	2015-2025 2025-2035	Focus efforts of conservation community into specific areas, focuses on Species of Greatest Conservation Need.	Conservation focus areas inform duck habitat priority areas.
One Watershed, One Plan (MN Board of Water and Soil Resources)	Multiple	Comprehensive watershed management plans.	Informs a strategic landscape-level approach to watershed management.

Plan Name	Year	Purpose	Connection to this Duck Action Plan
Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategies (Minnesota Pollution Control Agency)	Multiple	Identify ways to restore and protect waterways.	Informs a strategic watershed-level approach to restoration and protection.
WMA/AMA Strategic Plan	2018	Focus acquisition priorities in Minnesota.	Geographic priority areas and existing WMA/AMAs inform priority wetland and upland habitat acquisition.
DNR WMA Master Plans	Multiple	Guide major unit habitat management throughout the State.	Guides habitat management of major unit WMA important to ducks.
Section Forest Resource Management Plans	Multiple	Guide forest management activities on state-administered lands.	Guide forest management activities on state-administered lands important to ducks.



Protecting wetland habitat is core to this Plan and other existing DNR plans.

Appendix B

2025-2030 Duck Action Plan engagement report

Introduction

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) developed the 2020-2023 Duck and Pheasant Action Plans by engaging with Tribes, partner organizations, and the public. In early 2024, the Fish and Wildlife Division began a process to refresh the Duck and Pheasant Action Plans for the next five years (2025-2030). The plan updates were initiated to incorporate new information and knowledge, as well as to revise objectives and strategies as needed in response to current conditions and public priorities. Partner engagement, public input, and the diverse viewpoints of Minnesotans were incorporated throughout the process using a variety of strategies. This document provides an overview of the engagement undertaken as part of these updates.

Process overview

The DNR began the engagement process in March 2024 with tribal notification. Tribes participated throughout the planning process through staff coordination and leadership consultation, and through involvement in workshops. Tribes were sent the draft plans for review in July and August 2024.

In April 2024, the DNR solicited public input on near-term priorities for pheasant and duck management in Minnesota to inform the plan updates. A questionnaire was posted on the Engage with DNR platform to receive public input.

The DNR held two stakeholder workshops in April and July 2024. The first stakeholder workshop invited partners to review report cards developed for each plan to assess progress, consider recent public input on plan priorities, and identify any gaps in the 2020-2023 plans as well as potential changes to the updated plans. The second stakeholder workshop invited partners to provide feedback on drafts of the updated Duck and Pheasant Action Plans.

In September 2024, the DNR released the draft updated plans for public review. A second questionnaire was posted on the Engage with DNR platform to receive feedback from the public. During

the review period, an online webinar was held to provide a platform for stakeholders to respond to the draft plans. Responses were also accepted in the form of phone calls, physical mail, and e-mails.

Summary of public input

The DNR solicited public input to inform scoping for the Duck and Pheasant Action Plan updates through a questionnaire on the Engage with DNR platform from April 1 to 19, 2024. The questionnaire was advertised with a news release, an e-newsletter and social media. The scoping questionnaire received 332 responses.

Findings emerging from the survey included the following:

1. 61% of respondents were interested in both the duck and pheasant planning efforts, 26% of respondents were only interested in ducks, and 13% of respondents were only interested in pheasants.
2. When asked to rank the goals from the 2020-2023 Duck Action Plan, increasing the amount of wetland and grassland habitat for ducks ranked as the most important goal for 62% of respondents.
 - a. Maintaining and enhancing existing wetland, grassland and forest habitats for ducks ranked as the second most important goal for 55% of respondents.
3. When asked what priority the DNR should place on the six objectives from the 2020-2023 Duck Action Plan, most respondents said that the DNR should place high priority on the following objectives: increasing the quality and quantity of habitat (63% of respondents), maintaining the pace of acquisitions (52% of respondents), and supporting the work of partners (50% of respondents).
 - a. Most respondents said that the DNR should place either moderate or high priority on the remaining objectives: increase implementation coordination (65% of respondents), improve access to land (60% of respondents), develop and deliver messages (50% of respondents), and define research and monitoring priorities (58% of respondents).

4. Most respondents said it was moderately or very important to them that pheasant and duck habitat work also provide the following benefits:

- a. Conserve open space (77% of respondents).
- b. Maintain Minnesota's natural systems (78% of respondents).
- c. Provide ecosystem services (64% of respondents).
- d. Protect and enhance native plant communities (66% of respondents).
- e. Provide recreational opportunities (62% of respondents).
- f. Enhance non-target species populations (62% of respondents).

5. Most respondents expressed support for DNR acquiring land (89% of respondents), partners acquiring land (83% of respondents), and private land easements (82% of respondents) as methods for protecting pheasant and duck habitat in Minnesota.

- a. 85% of respondents also expressed support for increasing funding to expand the Walk-In Access program.

6. Most respondents reported that they have used hunting season harvest reports (72% of respondents), August roadside survey reports (62% of respondents), the Wildlife Management Area search tool on the DNR website (57% of respondents), and weekly waterfowl reports (50% of respondents) to inform viewing and/or hunting efforts for pheasants or ducks.

7. When asked what kind of information regarding pheasants and ducks do they want the DNR to provide, responses included:

- a. Roadside counts.
- b. Migration reports.
- c. Reproduction monitoring.
- d. Winter mortality.
- e. Flock health.
- f. Management activities on state-owned lands.
- g. Condition of breeding grounds and wetlands.
- h. Regular updates on habitat expansion and loss through acquisition and restoration of DNR-owned lands, lands owned by partners, and lands enrolled in CRP.
- i. Science-based research backing up management actions.
- j. Accessible and, up-to-date information on public hunting locations – both on WMAs and other public lands – and where public access points are located.
- k. How to access hunting areas within WMAs
- l. General information on species biology/management.
- m. Access to management plans and data.
- n. Progress on plan goals.
- o. Funding transparency.
- p. Season setting.
- q. R3 plans/results.

8. When asked if they had any other comments regarding pheasant or duck management in Minnesota, respondents mentioned the following themes:

- a. Increase the quality and quantity of food plots.
- b. Establish more incentives for private landowners to protect duck and pheasant habitat on their lands.
- c. Increase quality nesting habitat.
- d. Remove and control invasive plants and plants that are detrimental to habitat quality.
- e. Create wildlife corridors to provide connectivity among public lands.
- f. Preserve and restore seasonal prairie pothole wetlands and install more water control structures to increase duck habitat.
- g. Improve water quality in lakes, ponds, and wetlands utilized by ducks through riparian buffers and runoff mitigation.
- h. Remove fish, including invasive carp and DNR-stocked fish, from wetlands managed for duck habitat.
- i. Eliminate the early teal season and early youth hunt.
- j. Tighten duck season regulations (e.g., reduce the bag limit, shorten the daily hunting hours, push back the season opener).
- k. More land acquisitions for public hunting.
- l. Increase public access to private land.
- m. Predator control.
- n. Farm-raised birds.
- o. Increase communication between the DNR and hunters, farmers, and the public on management issues and priorities.
- p. Work collaboratively with other governmental organizations and non-profits on species management.
- q. Utilize volunteer groups for WMA management activities.



Hybrid cattail and other invasive plant management was often cited during public input as important habitat work DNR should focus on.

Summary of public review

On September 12, 2024, the DNR published a news release that invited members of the public to review the draft updated Duck and Pheasant Action Plans. Comments were accepted via mail, email, and an online questionnaire on the Engage with DNR platform. This questionnaire queried public support for the updates and provided an opportunity for respondents to share their opinions in open-ended responses. Comments were accepted through October 11, 2024.

The DNR held a webinar on October 1, 2024, to give members of the public an opportunity to learn about, ask questions about, and comment on the DNR's draft Duck and Pheasant Action Plans. There were six non-DNR-staff attendees during the Duck Action Plan portion of the webinar. DNR staff gave a presentation outlining the draft Duck Action Plan: its goals, objectives, and strategies, and the planning process to-date. Subsequently, a panel of DNR staff replied to questions submitted by attendees. There were two questions received; one about DNR collaboration with partners around drain tile projects, and one about how DNR works with counties.

Satisfaction with the Duck Action Plan overall was mixed. A little over half (54%) of respondents who shared their overall level of satisfaction were either somewhat or very satisfied with the Duck Action Plan, while a little under half (42%) of respondents were somewhat or very dissatisfied with the Plan. The remaining respondents (4%) who shared their overall level of satisfaction were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the Duck Action Plan.

The Duck Action Plan received 78 comments from 44 respondents. Comments were generally supportive of the Plan's focus on increasing, maintaining, enhancing, and restoring duck habitat; however, many comments asked for more detail or additional considerations. The open-ended comments are categorized and summarized below.

HABITAT

Several comments mentioned that wetland loss and retention should be mentioned in greater detail in the Plan.

- **DNR Response:** DNR recognizes that wetland loss and degradation continue and outlines issues in the Strategic Considerations portion of the Plan. Wetland management is further outlined in Objectives 1 and 2.

Some comments suggested including more emphasis on specific management activities, including cattail control, increased nesting habitat (e.g., old forest tree cavities, mallard nest tubes), and prescribed burns.

- **DNR Response:** Vegetation management, including non-native cattail control and prescribed fire are priority management activities for the DNR wildlife section staff (DNR wildlife). Nesting habitat is prioritized within the prairie portion of the state and is managed with activities such as prescribed burning, grazing, and woody removal. Nesting structures are present on many WMAs throughout the state and DNR wildlife works with partner organizations such as Delta Waterfowl and volunteers to maintain 2,000 annually.

Some comments asked for a greater focus on improving existing habitat instead of acquiring new habitat.

- **DNR Response:** This Plan highlights both habitat management and acquisition as priorities in Objectives 1 and 2. The DNR believes both objectives can be pursued simultaneously to maximize the benefits to the resource.

A few comments expressed concern about beavers negatively affecting waterfowl habitat and advocated for beaver control and dam removal.

- **DNR Response:** DNR wildlife works with private and contracted trappers to remove beavers and dams from lakes where wild rice management is a high priority. DNR area wildlife managers also monitor many other basins for beaver activity.

Several comments expressed concern about the effect of drain tile projects on waterfowl habitat.

- **DNR Response:** DNR acknowledges that agricultural drain tile can negatively impact waterfowl habitat, but most tile projects are beyond the regulatory authority of the DNR. Outreach efforts are aimed at educating the public about wetland and duck management best practices to protect, enhance, and restore duck habitat.

Some comments expressed concern about minnow rearing having a negative impact on waterfowl habitat.

- **DNR Response:** Fish management within wetland basins and shallow lakes is challenging. Increased connections among wetlands and shallow lakes, higher water levels and reduced ice coverage, and our decreased ability to source and use Rotenone have further reduced our ability to manage undesirable fish populations within wetlands and shallow lakes. Fathead minnows and other undesirable species have a negative effect on wetland habitat conditions, including both water quality and aquatic vegetation. Minnow stocking and harvest is prohibited on basins completely within

WMAs unless a permit has been issued, while private basins are permitted by the DNR fisheries section. Walleye rearing and stocking of other game fish (i.e. northern pike and yellow perch) on some shallow lakes has proven effective at controlling fathead minnows.

OUTREACH

Comments recommended spending resources on habitat acquisition and improvement instead of public awareness.

- **DNR Response:** A key part to being able to continue the work we do is educating the public on what we are doing and why. The resources that contribute to public awareness has a minor impact on the DNR's ability to acquire land.

A few comments expressed support for greater outreach efforts showing the work and outcomes of habitat improvement projects.

- **DNR Response:** DNR is committed to showing the benefits of duck habitat on the landscape and efforts to do so are outlined in the Plan.



Providing information to the public regarding DNR's work on ducks and their habitat is important messaging.

PARTNERSHIPS AND PRIVATE LANDS

Comments were generally supportive of the Plan's emphasis on partnerships and emphasized continual collaboration with groups such as Ducks Unlimited and Delta Waterfowl, as well as with private landowners.

Some comments wanted more specifics on how to enhance CRP participation.

- **DNR Response:** The DNR does participate in high level coordination with state and federal agencies and partners to provide input on CRP enrollment and implementation. On the local level, area wildlife managers work with neighbors and local partners to enhance private lands, such as through encouraging CRP enrollment in and around public lands. DNR is also engaged in fee title purchase of lands enrolled in CRP which could eventually save those properties from future cropland conversion.

Some comments expressed skepticism that private land partnerships could be successful by promoting positive benefits of conservation.

- **DNR Response:** At this time, DNR wildlife supports private lands work via the Farm Bill Partnership program and coordinates with partners such as SWCDs, DNR Scientific and Natural Area program, and the USFWS who have staff and programs

devoted to private lands conservation. This work is highlighted in Objective 3.

Some comments asked for more coordination with local governments and partners.

- **DNR Response:** DNR has made a commitment in this Plan update to engage more with local units of government and conservation partners. Examples of coordination improvements are outlined in Objectives 1 and 3.

GOAL METRICS

Many comments asked for more specific metrics to measure Plan success; comments ranged from asking for more details in general to requesting specific numbers (e.g., breeding population and hunter number goals).

- **DNR Response:** We have worked to make more measurable performance indicators throughout the Plan, particularly in Objective 2. The Duck Action Plan, 2025-2030, is intended to serve as a short-term actionable plan that supports implementation of the Long-Range Duck Recovery Plan, 2006-2056. The Long-Range Duck Recovery Plan lists specific objectives for hunter numbers, breeding population, and duck harvest numbers.



Partnerships with conservation groups are essential to getting quality duck habitat work accomplished, like this water control structure to manage shallow lake levels.

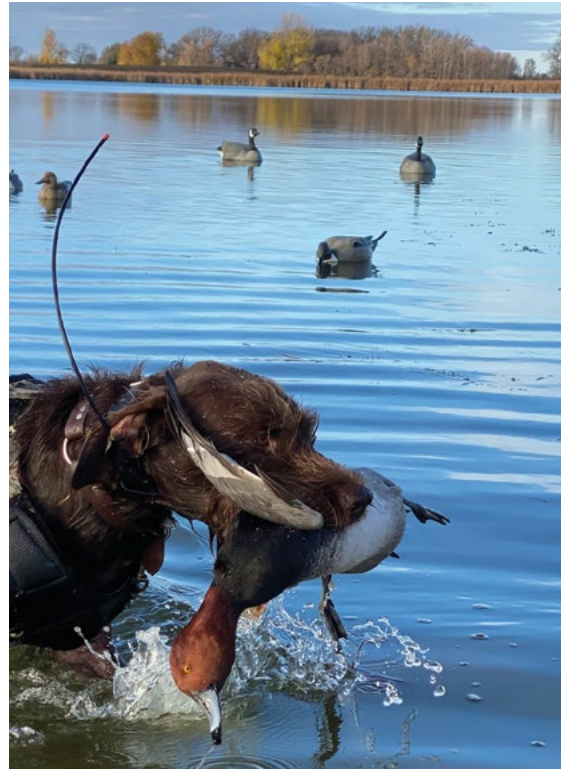
POPULATION MANAGEMENT

Many comments expressed disapproval with the current waterfowl hunting regulations; however, opinions were divided about whether regulations should be more stringent to help duck populations or more lenient to increase hunter numbers.

- **DNR Response:** Annual hunting regulations are outside of the scope of this Plan. These comments will be considered by staff responsible for monitoring populations and recommending hunting regulations. Members of the public interested in discussing hunting regulations are encouraged to contact relevant staff in the section of wildlife or the DNR Information Center (staff in the information center can route the inquiries to the appropriate staff).

A few comments suggested predator control as a means for increasing duck populations.

- **DNR Response:** Research has shown that predator management is not an effective tool for increasing duck populations at large scales. Instead, increasing the amount and quality of habitat is the most effective way to increase duck populations, which is the focus of this Plan.



Waterfowl hunting regulations, though outside the scope of this Plan, are an important tool DNR uses to manage waterfowl populations.



Annual lesser scaup banding on Pool 19 of the Mississippi River is one example of Flyway wide duck population management DNR assists with.



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