



Revolving Land Program

Returning your investment in habitat

By Keith McKnight and Jim Ringelman

Some places in the Prairie Pothole Region are too good to let go—special lands that contain the magical mix of wetlands and grasslands needed by breeding waterfowl. When such places come up for sale and there is a significant chance that critical resources will be lost, then it's time for Ducks Unlimited to get creative. How can the habitat be protected in a cost-effective way when the landowner doesn't want a conservation easement, is intent on selling out, and DU does not want to assume long-term ownership of the land? The answer is Ducks Unlimited's Revolving Land Acquisition Program (RLAP).

In addition to its cost effectiveness, the RLAP might be called conservation with a compassionate touch. That's because DU has found a way to transact land deals in a manner that addresses the individual circumstances and desires of landowners. A retired farmer who needed to relocate closer to town for health care, a partnership that was dissolving and needed to liquidate land to recover capital, and a husband and wife who were simply tired of the small town social scene and anxious to move closer to grandkids—all real-life examples of landowners who have opted to sell their land to Ducks Unlimited. In meeting their individual needs we have discovered a new approach to securing the future of waterfowl, and we compound the benefits by focusing this program on the best-of-the-best waterfowl breeding habitat in the world: the Missouri Coteau region of North and South Dakota.

DU has set an ambitious goal of protecting 2 million acres of Missouri Coteau grasslands and wetlands from further loss or degradation over the next 15 years. The reasons are obvious. Keeping this treasured landscape intact is a key element in ensuring that prairie-nesting duck populations are sustained into the future. The quality habitat provided by the Coteau was a primary reason that waterfowl populations were able



to reach historic high levels when water returned to the prairies in the late 1990s. But such an audacious conservation goal requires some creative approaches. The RLAP is one such approach.

The gist of the program is fairly straightforward. Ducks Unlimited identifies a property for sale with much of the habitat value intact, but where there is a high risk of losing this habitat because it is not protected by easements and is adjacent to intensively cropped lands. We then purchase it from the willing seller at market value, restore those habitat features that are degraded, and place a conservation easement on the property. Once restored and protected from future demise, DU sells the property to a conservation buyer. Potential buyers include ranchers and other conservation-minded private individuals, and state or federal natural resource management agencies.

There are two main ingredients in making this approach successful. The first ingredient is the capital to start the cycle. Through generous support of DU members and a few major contributors, we have been able to get the ball rolling in South Dakota (see sidebar and Goebel Ranch—September/October 2001 Ducks Unlimited magazine). However, the need for conservation in the Coteau continues to exceed our capital. With a large portion of this land set to change hands when the current landowners retire from ranching and farming in the next few years, the fate of the Coteau hangs in the balance. DU needs to grow its capital in the Revolving Land Fund tenfold if we are to ensure that the grasslands and wetlands of this region remain intact and continue to be the heart of production in the Prairie Pothole Region.

The second and equally important ingredient is the fact that conservation buyers find real value in natural working landscapes that can provide economical and ecological returns. If this were not so, resale of these protected, and often restored, landscapes would not provide cost recovery for the original purchase and restoration. Under such a scenario, it would be a “devolving” land program instead of a “revolving” land program. With the original costs recovered, we then move on to the next property and turn the cycle again. In the wake of this cycle we leave ranchers able to retire debt, able to retire with extra security from the revenue of the sale, or educate their children; preserve and restore landscapes capable of sustaining and growing duck populations; and create opportunities for quality hunting and other outdoor recreation.

One other aspect of this program is particularly important to its ultimate value for waterfowl production (indeed, to a whole suite of wildlife species). Purchase of properties is not arbitrary. Using satellite imagery, long-term waterfowl data, and land-use information, we are able to focus our efforts in the areas of greatest value to waterfowl, and cluster this work around existing protected areas to create large blocks of breeding habitat. Further, by buying entire properties we are able to do more complete wetland/grassland restoration (as opposed to a restored wetland in a sea of cropland).

We certainly haven't discovered the secrets of cold fusion here (i.e., something for nothing), but this approach will allow DU, along with its partners, to make far more efficient use of hard-earned conservation dollars than would otherwise be possible. So far, 20,234 acres have been protected through this program. And springing from the success of the RLAP in the Coteau, similar approaches are just beginning to blossom in other priority landscapes such as the Rainwater Basin/Platte River ecosystem of Nebraska. You should be hearing a lot more about this program in the future. And who wouldn't want to know that their conservation dollars are being invested wisely?