



The Birth of DU

BY MICHAEL FURTMAN

*The amazing story of how a small group of waterfowlers
changed the course of conservation history*

The banks of a trout stream may seem like a strange place for the birth of an organization devoted to waterfowl, but that is indeed where Ducks Unlimited was born. The stream was upper New York's famed Beaverkill River, but the organization did not exactly spring forth that day as if by immaculate conception.

DU's founders had already formed and funded an organization known as the More Game Birds in America Foundation, which had laid out a 10-year plan of action for increasing upland game bird populations. But now they were about to do something incredibly bold, something that had never been done before—create an organization that would manage habitat on a massive scale to impact species that spanned an entire continent.

Sitting at the fishing camp of the hard-charging, never-take-no-for-an-answer Joseph Palmer Knapp, the men discussed possible names for an organization that would restore duck numbers. With Knapp at the lodge were John C. Huntington, Arthur M. Bartley, and Ray E. Benson. Benson was on More Game Birds' staff as publicity director and had helped organize this meeting. He would later become secretary of Ducks Unlimited.

Huntington was the son of Dwight Huntington, a St. Louis attorney who as early as 1912 had begun promoting restoration of game birds and was active in the Game Conservation Society. It was his vision that led to the creation, by his son, of America's only gamekeepers' school, the Game Conservation Institute of Clinton, New Jersey. This school would eventually be acquired by the More Game Birds in America Foundation.

It was that acquisition that led to John Huntington becoming an important player in the Foundation.

Bartley was More Game Birds' vice president and also the director of field operations. He was a man who liked to get his hands dirty and his feet wet, and he spent years touring waterfowl breeding grounds. He would eventually become the executive director of Ducks Unlimited, a post he would hold until 1962. Bartley had served with John Huntington during World War I, and both had gone to work for the senior Huntington at the Game Conservation Society soon after the war.

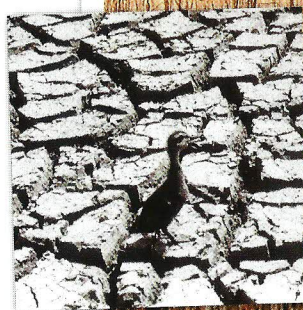
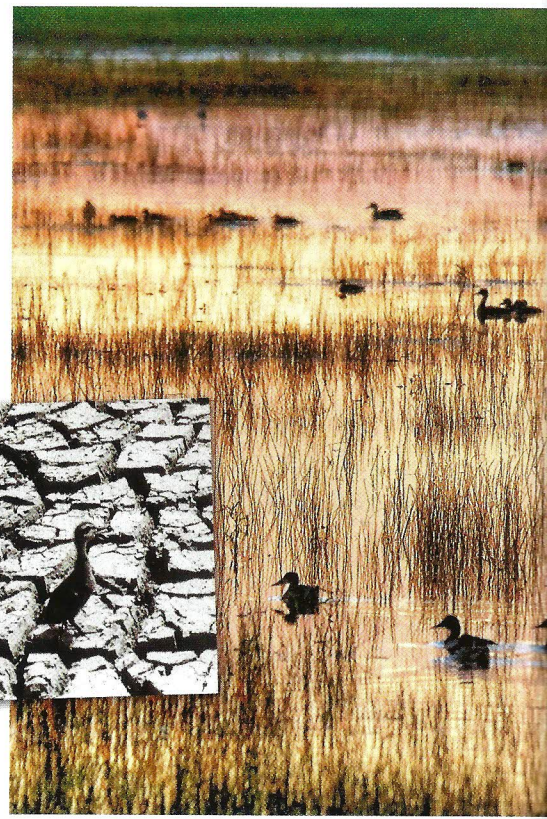
Of the men in the room, it was Joseph Knapp who was the captain behind the wheel, the coal in the furnace. Well educated and wealthy, Knapp had become enthralled with the idea that wildlife could be raised and managed following the European model, and that science could offer answers to the problems facing game birds. The European model depended largely on the artificial raising of birds to be released before the gun, and this was to be the focus of Knapp's—and More Game Birds'—solution. To that end, after founding More Game Birds in 1930, he directed that the organization take over Huntington's well-regarded gamekeepers' school. Although More Game Birds took over management, funds for its operation came from the deep pockets of Mr. Knapp himself.

The End of Waterfowling?

A fire crackled in the large fireplace, and the men sat and chatted, eventually turning to a discussion about the disappointing duck season of the past autumn, yet one more in a series of nearly duckless hunting seasons of recent years. Like many hunters who've experienced disappointment, they lamented that things weren't as good as they used to be. But unlike many other hunters, these men were not content to simply sit and complain.

It was seven years after the Wall Street Crash of October 1929, and the world was still in the midst of the Great Depression. It was also seven years after the beginning of a devastating drought across the Prairie Pothole Region that had yet to relinquish its grip. The ducks were suffering their own depression, and many hunters believed they were about to see the end of waterfowling.

The federal government did what it could in the United States, creating many of the national wildlife refuges we know today, focusing on the prairies of the United States as well as down the flyways, providing breeding habitat in the north and migration and wintering habitat elsewhere. In 1934, at the behest of waterfowlers, the first "duck stamp" was issued, with the money earmarked for duck habitat. But it was not nearly enough. The Bureau of Biological Survey, which would become the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, could only work within the



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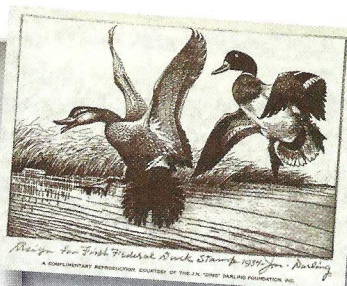
United States and only spend duck-stamp dollars there. And there was no counterpart at the time, and no money to even create or fund a counterpart, in Canada, where the majority of the continent's ducks were raised.

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In *The Ducks Came Back*, published in 1945, author S. Kip Farrington Jr. described the mood of duck hunters in 1936:

Duck hunters all over the United States were putting their fowling pieces in mothballs or attempting to sell them. Many devotees of the sport who were in moderate circumstances refused to buy even a federal duck stamp or a license, let alone a box of shells. They claimed that it was not worth the trouble . . . From all corners of the United States, the same old cry was sounded—"It just isn't worthwhile to go duck hunting these days—having to get up early in the morning or sit out in hard weather for a shot or two all day. I wouldn't want my son to pursue a sport that I love so well that has sunk to such a low level after the way I have known it."

A great debate among waterfowlers had come to a head a year earlier at the 21st annual American Game Conference, sponsored



Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial cartoonist Jay N. "Ding" Darling, who in 1934 designed the first duck stamp (pictured above), used his immense talents to build public support for the emerging conservation movement.

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by the American Game Association, forerunner of the Wildlife Management Institute. On the closing day of the conference, held in New York City in January 1935, the *New York Times* published an article headlined "Proposed Ban on Duck Shooting Brings Sharp Debate at Game Conference," which captured the unfolding drama:

The campaign for a closed season on migratory waterfowl, one of the most controversial issues ever to come before the nation's sportsmen, precipitated a stormy session at the American Game Conference in the Hotel Pennsylvania yesterday morning . . .

More than 800 delegates, the largest gathering in the history of the organization, jammed the north ballroom and for four hours listened to leading sportsmen, officials, conservationists and scientists present their arguments.

Speakers for both sides were cheered and applauded, indicating a sharp division of opinion regarding the advisability of a one-year ban on duck shooting.

In view of the pronounced disagreement, leaders predicted last night that the conference would not take a definite stand on the question.

In the end, the conference did take a stand, rejecting the resolution to close the duck season. But the mere fact that duck

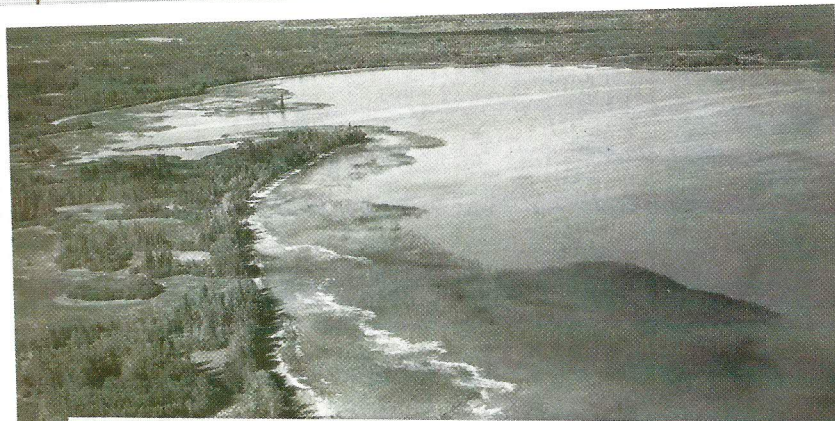
hunters were voting on whether to ban duck hunting illustrates how dire the situation had become. Even more remarkable, the final vote was 38 committee members against the ban and 22 for it. Sportsmen were indeed divided.

The Wild Duck Census

Faced with the prospect of shortened or closed duck seasons, Knapp and More Game Birds had decided that immediate action was required. But first they would have to gain a fuller understanding of the causes of the duck decline. To do so they undertook what has been called the "granddaddy of all wildlife surveys": the 1935 International Wild Duck Census.

Today we accept such technology as routine. But at the time, counting wildlife from the air had never been done. In fact, Bert Cartwright, who became Ducks Unlimited Canada's chief naturalist in 1938, wrote that not only was the method new, it was "a method received in many quarters with skepticism; in others, with outright ridicule. Suffice it to say, the method has since become standard practice among those whose business it is to know what the waterfowl population is from year to year."

State and provincial wildlife agencies, as well as sportsmen's groups, were telegraphed, alerting them to the upcoming survey. All wired back their approval and promised wholehearted assistance. The survey was partially funded by arms



Form 1

SASKATCHEWAN
INTERNATIONAL WILD DUCK CENSUS, 1935

Municipality reported on North 81st + 53rd

Tally Sheet Number	Township Range	NAME INVESTIGATOR	Total No. of Ducks with Bands	Total No. of Young Ducks	No. of Water Ponds	Total No. of Ducks Banded	Total No. of Ducks with Bands and Old	
1	53-22	R. Fuchs	360	1464	6	287	2111	
2	53-22	John Kay	130	665		245	1040	
3	53-24	W. L. Bailey	298	2033		506	2887	
4	54-22	Ray Huntington	26	80		18	124	
5	54-22	J. Schinnerer	36	238		21	291	
6	54-24	W. Fuchs	28	171	1	27	272	
7	55-22	Arthur Bartley	34	134		84	261	
8	55-23	E. J. Busch	376	2025		874	2447	
9	55-24	W. J. Cameron	850	4920		615	6265	
10								
11								
12								
13								
14								
15							16030	
							Total	16991

One Tally Sheet and Plat should be used for each township in your municipality. Please number both so you may tabulate the results in the above columns. The number of the townships and the name of the field investigator should be inserted in the tally sheets before they leave your hands.

Duck breeding areas investigated should be indicated on the plat.

While the last day set for field work is Sunday, August 11th, it will be very helpful if the investigations can be completed and returns gathered at an earlier date.

Immediately results are tabulated above, please send this sheet with plats and tally sheets attached to Saskatchewan Fish and Game League, Box 111, Regina, Sask.

Henry Huntington
Municipal Secretary

One of the survey tally sheets used by volunteers in the province of Saskatchewan.

International Wild Duck Census crew members (from left) C.S. Bedell, Cecil McNeal, A.C. Camerle, Carl Yule, John Huntington, and Arthur Bartley. (Above) An aerial photo taken during the 1935 census.

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and ammunition manufacturers, and the Chrysler Corporation donated the use of Dodge cars for the ground crews. In each of the states, one man was hired by More Game Birds to coordinate efforts there. But in Canada these jobs were assumed by Huntington in Manitoba, A.C. Camerle in Saskatchewan, and Bartley in Alberta.

The aerial survey was largely done north of the prairies—as far north as Great Slave Lake—and the surveyors on those flights were the three men just named, with assistance from William Vogt of the Audubon Society. In three weeks the men logged nearly 14,000 air miles and took nearly a thousand photos of habitat using hand-held cameras.

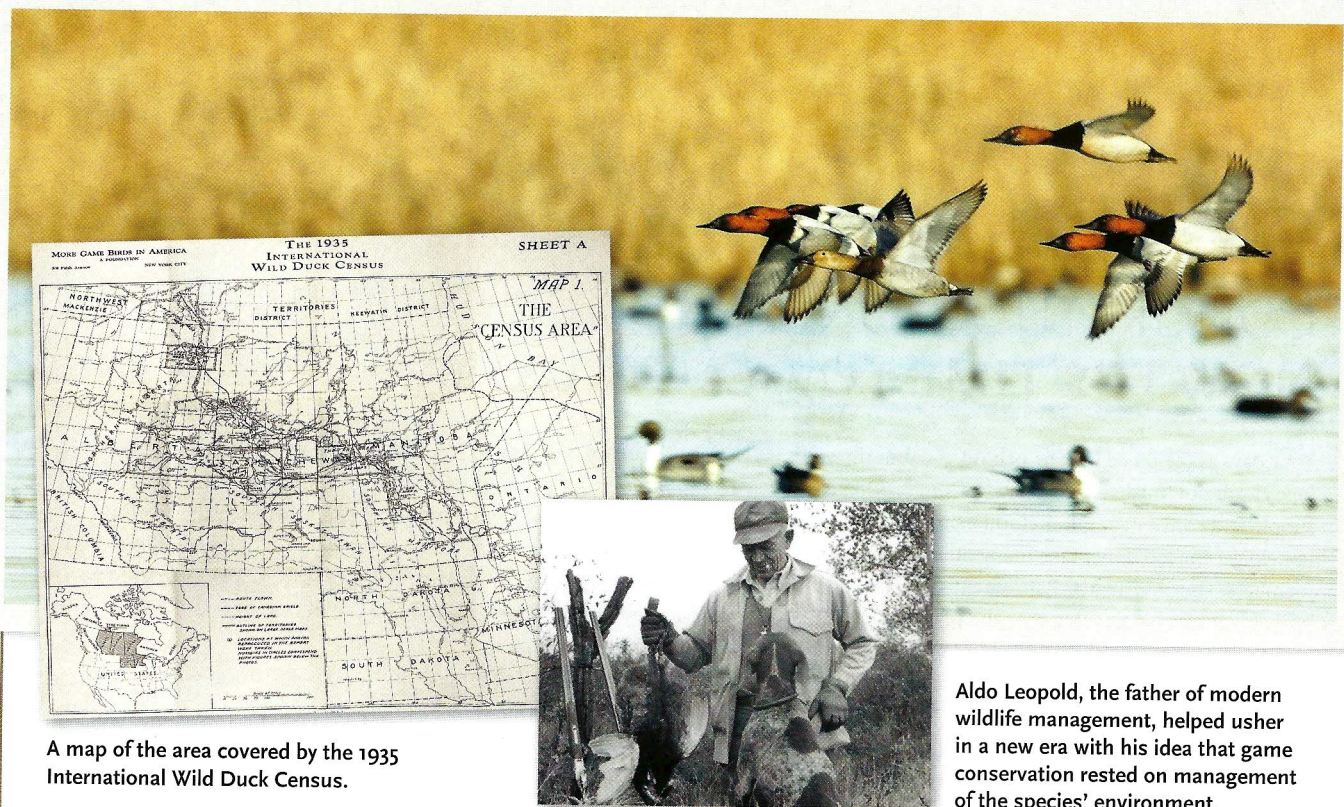
Most of the Prairie Pothole Region was surveyed from the ground, using volunteers or wildlife agency personnel. Many of the 1,500 volunteers were the landowners themselves, mostly farmers, on whose property marshlands were found. Thousands of standardized forms were mailed to the volunteers so that information collected would be consistent.

When the survey was completed and the information tallied, More Game Birds issued its findings. Estimating the continent's total duck population at 65 million birds, More Game Birds reported that it believed there were 42.7 million ducks in the surveyed area. The organization estimated that North Dakota held 1.2 million ducks, South Dakota 350,000, and Minnesota 650,000—for a total of 2.2 million ducks in the United States.

Most important, the census dramatically reinforced for the duck-hunting constituency the need to focus on the prairies of Canada. The fledgling Bureau of Biological Survey was already acquiring land in North and South Dakota for the benefit of waterfowl, an emphasis greatly supported by More Game Birds, which worked feverishly to ensure that the federal government provided the funds needed to acquire those lands. The cost, however, of working in the United States, and the fact that so much more duck breeding habitat lay in Canada, made it clear that it was in the latter country that the private foundation would do its work.

The Big Idea

Consider that at the time these men sat in Knapp's fishing cabin pondering the future of waterfowl, wildlife management was in its infancy. State and federal agencies were just getting their feet wet in this new science, pioneered by Aldo Leopold, professor of game management at the University of Wisconsin. Other universities and colleges were only beginning to offer courses in wildlife biology and management—thanks to the efforts of another conservation pioneer, Jay N. "Ding" Darling, who as chief of the Bureau of Biological Survey secured seed money in 1935 for launching what would become the cooperative wildlife research unit program at land-grant colleges.



A map of the area covered by the 1935 International Wild Duck Census.

Aldo Leopold, the father of modern wildlife management, helped usher in a new era with his idea that game conservation rested on management of the species' environment.

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While the conservation movement struggled for an identity and direction, so too had Knapp and More Game Birds. Initially, the Foundation had focused heavily on mimicking what was being done in Europe—raising and releasing domesticated birds into the wild.

Although More Game Birds experimented with raising and releasing ducks, they soon realized that preservation of wildfowl could not rely on a put-and-take approach. Waterfowl are international in their travels, and do not live and die in small areas, but over the course of a year use diverse habitats thousands of miles apart. They cannot be owned by an individual—even domestically raised and released mallards will eventually fly somewhere else, where they are considered fair game. Avid waterfowlers, one and all, the founders of More Game Birds understood these differences from the outset, and so began to assess what could be done to increase waterfowl populations. In the end, they adopted a strikingly different approach than the one they prescribed for upland birds.

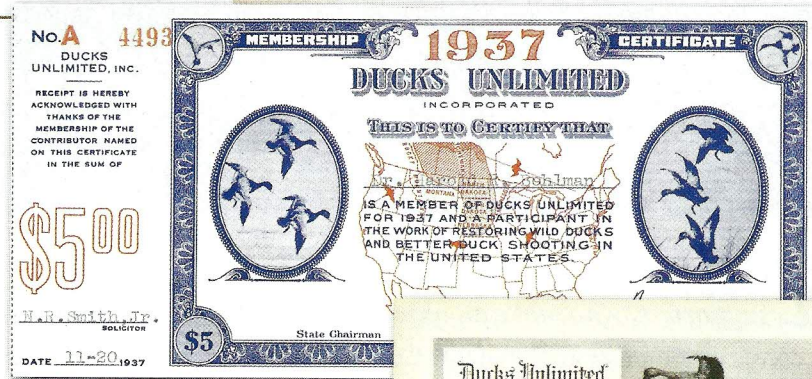
Hatching eggs and releasing birds onto a farm is a pretty small idea. What ducks needed was a big idea, which was fleshed out in More Game Birds' book *More Waterfowl by Assisting Nature*, published in August 1931. Distilling the science of the day, More Game Birds laid out what needed to be done for ducks:

It is not what man does but what he does not do for migratory waterfowl which is chiefly responsible for diminishing numbers. What is urgently needed is a program which will take no account of international boundaries, but will bring neighbor nations of the North American Continent into harmonious accord for the good of the game.

With the realization that what was needed was more habitat, instead of just more regulation, Knapp and his cohorts had placed themselves in the vanguard of the conservation movement, which was undergoing an "evolution of philosophies," as Curt Meine called it in his book *Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work*. "The old idea of game protection rested primarily on the control of hunting," Meine wrote, while "the new idea of management rested on the control of the species' environment, of which hunting was but one factor."

The environment DU's founders would seek to manage was the Prairie Pothole Region of Canada. To do so, they would raise money from American sportsmen. But in order to operate in Canada, or to be able to purchase or own land there, the new organization would need to be incorporated according to Canadian laws. With that in mind, the men in the lodge set about to come up with a name for their new creation.

After a few names were bandied about, such as "More Ducks," Knapp suggested it be named simply "Ducks." Bartley reminded



Soon after its incorporation, Ducks Unlimited launched a nationwide membership drive. These rare items—a pin-back button and two membership certificates—date from DU's inaugural year.

him that in Canada, corporations are legally designated as "Limited," which would mean that the new organization would be incorporated as "Ducks, Limited." Knapp, who had a quick temper, immediately snapped at Bartley, "Dammit, we don't want limited ducks!" At which point Bartley retorted, "Ducks Unlimited, then." And it stuck.

If the name Ducks Unlimited was born of a swift exchange of sharp wits, the events that led to its creation were neither swift nor without struggle. Just months after Knapp's summit on the Beaverkill, Ducks Unlimited was incorporated, on January 29, 1937. It was an auspicious beginning, but these were just the first steps in the long process of not only creating an organization, but also laying the foundation for its success. ☞

Excerpted from The Ducks Unlimited Story by Michael Furtman, which explores original source materials to provide the definitive account not only of DU's founding, but also of how DU's dedicated volunteers created the fundraising engine that made DU the world leader in wetlands and waterfowl conservation. For more information on how to order this exciting new book, please see the ad on the next page.

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