

# The “Duck” Stamp: A Birder’s Imperative?

*Paul J. Baicich*



This year’s Federal Duck Stamp pictures this pair of flying Redheads, painted by wildlife artist Scot Storm from Sartell, Minnesota. The 2004–2005 Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp, informally known as “The Duck Stamp,” goes on sale on July 1.

This year’s “Duck Stamp” will soon be offered at post offices, national wildlife refuges, some national retail chain stores, and various sporting-goods stores nationwide.

The Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp, which is the stamp’s official name, has been a grand success story in its 70-year history. Started in the mid-1930s to address a major crisis in bird conservation and wetland habitat loss, the stamp has been used as a highly effective funding mechanism for our refuge system, having accrued over \$670 million and having been used to secure more than five million acres of valuable wetland habitat for the system. About \$25 million a year is currently collected through yearly stamp sales.

Proceeds from the \$15 stamp go into the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund, used to purchase wetlands for the National Wildlife Refuge System. (Indeed, 98 percent of the revenue from the stamp goes through the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund to purchase these refuge wetlands.) In addition to waterfowl hunters required to have a stamp, there are stamp collectors, wildlife-art enthusiasts, wildlife conservationists, and birders who also buy Duck Stamps to add to their collections, to enjoy as a miniature work of art, or simply as a way to support bird conservation and the refuge system. The stamps can also be used to gain admission to any National Wildlife Refuge in the country which charges an entry fee.

The Duck Stamp program has now reached a milestone, since every regularly occurring North American waterfowl has appeared in the series— some of them multiple times (e.g., Canada Goose, Mallard, Northern Pintail, and Canvasback). This occasion presents concerned birders with an opportunity to engage in a dialogue with the USFWS and the “waterfowl community” about ways in which the stamp might be improved and expanded beyond the vital, but limited, purpose of refuge wetland habitat acquisition. Fortunately, the involved parties have already begun this effort.

Among the changes that birders hope to see incorporated into the program are: 1) inclusion of more species; 2) inclusion of more types of habitat; and 3) the support of a broader constituency.

1) When we consider benefiting more species, we recall that the stamp was created by bird conservation visionaries in 1934 when our waterfowl species were in deep crisis. The stamp and the refuge system succeeded splendidly in helping to save waterfowl. Now other bird species are in similar trouble (just see, for example, the Partners In Flight WatchList). These other species in need could be highlighted, and their conservation and management problems could be addressed through stamp sales.

2) When we consider more habitat, we can appreciate that the stamp has been a mainstay of refuge wetland habitat acquisition. Still, other, “drier,” habitat, from grasslands to deserts, could benefit from stamp-funding sources.

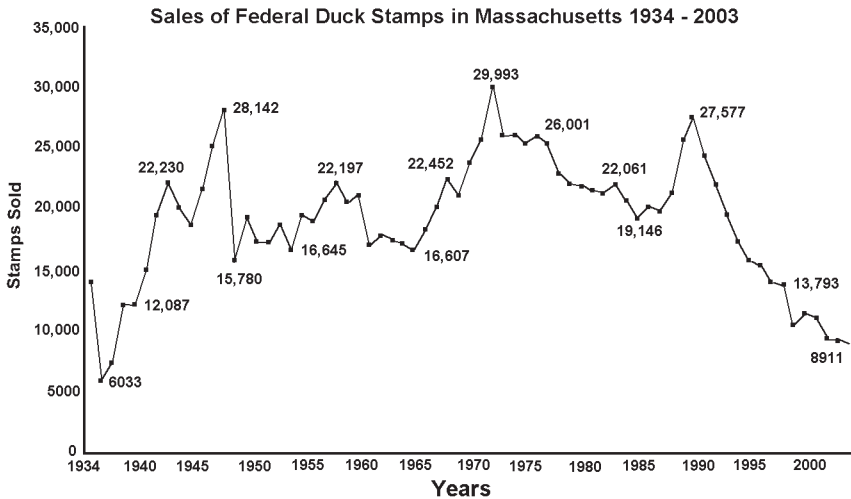
3) When we consider a broader constituency, we are focusing on our community of birders, as well as those immediately beyond our ranks. Indeed, when the stamp’s original name (Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp) was augmented to include the word “conservation” in 1977, it was thought that the change would bring a new cadre of conservationists into the fold of stamp supporters. Unfortunately, beyond changing the name, little was done to adjust or modernize the stamp.

There are other bird-conservation causes on the continental level that could benefit from a stamp funding-mechanism. Some of these could easily include the development of the existing bird plans (e.g., Partners in Flight, the Waterbird Plan, the U.S. Shorebird Plan), a supplement to the Neotropical Migratory Bird Fund designed to benefit neotropical science and education, the promotion of International Migratory Bird Day, the addition of funding to NAWCA (North American Wetlands Conservation Act), and other causes.

Finally, implied in a retooled stamp is also a willingness to modify the artwork on the current stamp and to give the stamp greater value. Modifying the artwork might mean deliberate cycling of the art through the featuring of other family groups beyond waterfowl (e.g., shorebirds, passerines, raptors, upland gamebirds, waterbirds) or including other bird species on the stamp alongside the waterfowl. Giving the stamp added value also might mean using it as an expanded entrance pass or a de facto “discount card,” something good for waterfowl hunters and nonhunters alike.

All the while, we must make sure that the legacy and grand achievements of the current stamp are appreciated and maintained. Concerned birders should aim to build on the stamp’s successes, strengthening the foundations, not scrapping the past. This

is one of the reasons why an expanded stamp, and not a new, alternative, stamp, has been proposed. (Such an expanded or revised approach would have to be based on a “wetlands first” prioritization; then it could take up more causes for all birds with any extra funds raised.)



Credit: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. See <<http://duckstamps.fws.gov>>.

Over the decades, 1.32 million of the stamps have been purchased in Massachusetts. The funds have been used to support wetland habitat acquisition all over the country, but also including specific acquisitions at Great Meadows, Monomoy, and Parker River NWRs. (Other regional NWRs that have been the beneficiary of stamp proceeds have been Stewart B. McKinney in Connecticut, Missisquoi in Vermont, Lake Umbagog in New Hampshire, and Moosehorn in Maine.) The accompanying chart shows the trend in sales (with every other year labeled) in Massachusetts. We can recognize real peaks (e.g., late 1940s, early 1970s, and late 1980s) and intervening valleys. Recently, statewide sales have been less than a third of what they were in peak years. Indeed, we are currently witnessing slipping sales, both locally and nationally. (On a national level, the last year that over two million stamps were sold was back in 1980.) Clearly, the stamp program needs to be reinvigorated, and birder-conservationists need to participate in a more vociferous and creative fashion.

In the meantime, during the first week of July, you have the opportunity to support wetland habitat acquisition in the refuge system by buying and using a new stamp. The refuge system, the birds, and, yes, even you would greatly benefit. 🦋

*Paul J. Baicich, coauthor (along with Colin Harrison) of Nests, Eggs, and Nestlings of North American Birds, worked for the American Birding Association for over a decade in multiple capacities and is now one of the two Community Leaders for the Swarovski Birding Community in North America.*