

Outdoor Heritage Fund Protects Wild Rice

By Paul Sandstrom
and Dan Steward



A thousand mallards circled in the distance then dropped into the thick brown field of aquatic grain along the shoreline a half a mile away. Our sixteen-foot boat sat in a bed of rushes out on the main lake with a hundred decoys bobbing down wind.

These fat northern mallards joined by hundreds of ringnecks, were gorging on wild rice along the distant shoreline. The ducks ate and rested, safe and undisturbed in the lush rice stand on that fine October morning last fall. The long forested shoreline was a special place, no houses, or cabins, no boat docks or outboards, no disturbance.

Ducks know the places where they can rest and feed. A unique program born from the Minnesota's Legacy Act is now helping private landowners protect these special places. The **Wild Rice Shoreland Protection Program** was developed by a group of dedicated, biologists and conservationists applying for and using Minnesota's Outdoor Heritage Fund.



Gary Drotts, DNR Wildlife Biologist (now retired) led the program development effort. Workers from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), MN DNR Wildlife, seven Northern Soil and Water Conservation Districts, along with Ducks Unlimited are now delivering the Shoreland Protection program to willing landowners.

Pictured left is Gary Drotts at his retirement receiving an award from Dan Steward, BWSR.

People who own undeveloped tracts of shoreline, along water producing outstanding stands of wild rice, now have an opportunity to preserve this precious resource.

The Reinvest In Minnesota (RIM) Program is a longstanding conservation easement program that has successfully protected fragile farmland and wetland resources in the state. Expansion of the program to include forestland easements under the wild rice program is a new innovation making RIM work for Northern MN. In addition to RIM, fee title acquisition through Ducks Unlimited or MNDNR is also an option for landowners who wish to transfer ownership of especially unique tracts.

The program protects rare and fragile wild rice waters from development. Minnesota is lucky to have an abundance of wild rice producing water lined by “wild” shoreland. Wisconsin, Michigan and Iowa have all lost the majority of their wild rice producing areas primarily to shoreland development and the host of cumulative impacts development brings.

Increased boat traffic and outboard motor use associated with development have direct impacts on wild rice and waterfowl. Wild rice is extremely sensitive to water level changes, especially in the early summer floating leaf stage. The wake from an outboard motor is enough to pull the young plant roots from their tenuous hold on the lake bottom.

The damaging wake of an outboard to young rice in June is magnified tenfold in terms of disturbance to resting and feeding waterfowl in October. Ringneck ducks make up a staple of the hunters bag in Minnesota each fall. This homegrown diving duck loves rice but hates disturbance. Lakes and rivers free of regular boat traffic become primary refuge, feeding, and staging areas for ringnecks along with a host of other species.

Intact and undisturbed wild rice producing waters form a critical part of Minnesota's waterfowl habitat infrastructure by attracting, holding and refueling birds on their fall migration.

Through implementation of the first phase of the **Wild Rice Shoreland Protection Program** Minnesotan's now have **ten miles** of shoreland along priceless rice producing water permanently protected for an average cost of **only \$36 per foot**.

We are happy to report that the Outdoor Heritage Council recommended and the state legislature funded phase two of the program in July 2013. The Outdoor Heritage Council has also recommended funding for phase three to keep this valuable program working for the state. The special places where ducks and a host of other waterfowl and wildlife find food and rest free from disturbance now have a chance to be protected permanently.

The place we hunted, described at the beginning of this article, has had such protection for years. The mallards and ringnecks fed in rice beds lined by shoreland in the Chippewa National Forest.

On that fine October morning last fall we drank hot coffee while absorbing the autumn splendor and the majesty of migration. The ducks were quite safe from our guns with the exception of a beautiful drake mallard and hen ringneck that decoyed in after being roused from the rice by a disturbance of the natural kind, two bald eagles also hunting ducks in a very special place.

It's good to be a Minnesotan.

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