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# WINGTIPS

Friends of the Migratory Bird/Duck Stamp

## Looking Forward to the 80th Anniversary of the Stamp: 16 March

From: the Friends of the Migratory Bird/Duck Stamp

*This is a special edition of Wingtips, an issue devoted to the origins of today's Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp, including the circumstances surrounding its establishment, some of the parties involved, and the consequences of the effort. This issue of Wingtips, furthermore, is intended to prepare partners and colleagues for the 80th anniversary of the Stamp. March 16th of this year, a little more than two months from now, will mark that anniversary, the day that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the bill into law in 1934.*

### The Scene



Mechanization on the Prairies

The start of the 20th century saw a rapid increase in this country's agricultural productivity. If anything, the American entry into WW I accelerated this trend, with agricultural mechanization and wetland draining rapidly spreading across the U.S., especially through the Great Plains. This produced an abundant harvest of needed crops, but it also created an impoverished natural landscape. The trend continued after the war and into the 1920s, with devastating wetland consequences. The use of more powerful ammunition, rapid-fire guns, lenient bag limits, and practices like baiting and the use of live decoys in waterfowling only exacerbated the

plight of waterfowl.

In response to these stunning losses of wetlands and waterfowl, a vigorous discussion arose in the 1920s concerning the possibility of creating a Federal Waterfowl Hunting license. This would be a handy stamp not unlike licenses that many states had been using for many years for hunting, the proceeds from which could be invested in saving wetland habitat.

In 1921, [Frederic C. Walcott](#), of Connecticut, wrote an article for the American Game Protective Association in their *Bulletin*, an article which raised the potential of a Federal stamp/license for waterfowl hunting. Walcott would soon rise to head the Connecticut Board of Fisheries and Game and become further engaged in national politics. Walcott's article was accompanied by a design for a model federal hunting license, replete with a sketch of a flying Canada Goose (by Belmore Browne), which remarkably resembled the design of future federal waterfowl stamps.

## The Debate

The next year, Senator Harry New (R-IN) and Congressman Dan Anthony (R-KS) introduced identical Congressional bills to strengthen "game refuges" and to create a federal license costing \$1. The license would be sold in U.S. Post Offices. Under this proposal, 45 percent of the proceeds would go toward the purchase or rental of public shooting grounds and adjacent migratory bird refuges, the latter which would be off-limits to hunting. This effort, noble in intent, failed.

The entire issue was bogged down in controversy for years which kept it from being seriously considered, let alone resolved. Part of the problem during the 1920s was the disagreement between conservationists of good will. One argument supported a federal license or stamp costing \$1 per year to reinvest into the wetland resource; another approach was to charge one cent per shell to be similarly reinvested. The dollar-a-year forces were gathered around the American Game Protective Association (predecessor of the Wildlife Management Institute), while the penny-a-shell option was favored by More Game Birds in America (predecessor of Ducks Unlimited). Not only were these two alternate solutions in strong conflict, but also plaguing them both was the argument that any "public shooting grounds" could be functional shooting galleries and might actually worsen the situation for waterfowl.

Years, conservation opportunities, and wetlands were lost. As the unproductive battle of words raged, the status of wetlands and waterfowl continued to deteriorate, all setting up an environmental catastrophe that would soon be known as the "[Dust Bowl](#)."

With the 69th Congress, Senator [Peter Norbeck](#) (R-SD) championed a revived conservation effort, but his bill eventually had the federal license portion stripped from its content. What ultimately passed - the [Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929](#) - had a number of important elements (including the creation of a Migratory Bird Conservation Commission), but it had no reliable funding mechanism. Under the existing 1929 Act, only unlikely annual federal appropriations could sustain MBCC acquisition decisions.



Senator Peter Norbeck (R-SD)

The Stock Market Crash of 1929 dashed most hopes for federal appropriation for this sort of conservation. It was almost inevitable, therefore, that the stamp-funding issue would arise once again.

As drought conditions worsened, the International Association of Game, Fish, and Conservation Commissioners (predecessor of today's Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies), at its convention in 1931, voted unanimously to back a federal migratory bird hunting license, one to cost a dollar a year and to be sold at post offices.

Senate hearings on the subject in April 1932 seemed to resolve the debate between most of the contending forces. The Senate's Special Committee on the Conservation of Wildlife Resources heard more than 100 witnesses and eventually voted in favor of the stamp proposal. The same Frederic Walcott who had raised the issue in 1921 was now a Republican Senator from Connecticut and a leading voice on the committee. Walcott was also a member of the executive committee of the Boone and Crockett Club and a leader in the pro-dollar-a-year American Game Protective Association.

A new President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, was also sympathetic to the cause of conservation.

For example, he was particularly attuned to the issue of soil conservation, having gained experience in this issue through his time as Governor of New York State and also as an amateur farmer and forester. And in his first 100 days as President, in 1933, FDR seized on the conservation issue to create the [Civilian Conservation Corps](#) (CCC) a program which would be used, among other things, to build roads, bridges, dams, and impoundments at well-established and new refuges.

FDR soon appointed a Presidential "Committee on Wild-Life Restoration" consisting of three perceptive conservationists. The first was Thomas H. Beck, editor of *Collier's Weekly* and leader at *More Game Birds in America*. [Jay Norwood "Ding" Darling](#), dedicated conservationist and Pulitzer-Prize winning cartoonist from the *Des Moines Register*, was second. The third was [Aldo Leopold](#), innovative naturalist and the very first Professor of Game Management in the Agricultural Economics Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. (Leopold actually replaced John Merriam of the Smithsonian Institution who could not serve on the committee.) In fewer than two dozen pages, the insightful "[Beck Committee Report](#)" identified a series of visionary projects to secure an initial five million acres of "submarginal" lands for broad-scale wildlife conservation. The ambitious proposal included a call for new federal conservation expenditures of \$50 million (about \$860 million in today's dollars), supplemented by federal "duck stamp proceeds."

At the same time, a bill to establish the stamp was being promoted in the U.S. Senate by Senators Norbeck, the prime author of the migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929, and Walcott, who had been voicing concerns over wetlands and waterfowl losses for at least 15 years.

In the House of Representatives, Congressman [Richard Kleberg](#) (D-TX) took the lead. Kleberg's efforts were made possible through the work of his indispensable secretary, an effective 25-year-old Lyndon Baines Johnson. The proposal in the House, H.R. 5632, introduced in May 1931, required all waterfowl hunters, 16 years of age or older, to buy a stamp annually. The stamps would be available at post offices in every county seat in the country and in every town with a population over 2,500. Seventy-five percent of the funds would be used for acquisition, administration, maintenance, and development of areas suitable for waterfowl habitat; 20 percent would fund law enforcement of any Act protecting migratory birds, and five percent would pay for production and distribution of the stamps.

### Success



FDR signing in 1934

The new bill passed 10 months later and was signed into law by President Roosevelt on March 16, 1934. With Roosevelt's signing of the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act, popularly known as the Duck Stamp Act, funds from stamp sales would be deposited in a special treasury account, the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund (MBCF). With this innovation, the MBCC was finally provided the means to carry out meaningful wetland and bird conservation.

Just ten days before the bill signing, Ding Darling was appointed the Chief of the Bureau of Biological Survey (in the Department of Agriculture) by FDR. The artwork for the very first stamp (1934-1935) soon followed, showing a pair of landing Mallards. It was created by Darling in about an hour. This was a preliminary sketch prepared for a luncheon meeting with the head of the postal service engraving department. But due to an urgent printing deadline, his somewhat hasty sketch became the first stamp!

In the first year, 635,000 stamps were sold at \$1 apiece. The revenue generated from the stamp was directed to the Department of the Agriculture for wetland conservation.

## Results

The rest, as they say, is history. Skeptics had predicted that the federal stamp would not even raise an insufficient \$1 million per year. (This would be equal to about \$17 million per year in today's dollars.)

But by 1938-1939 that threshold was surpassed, and there would be no turning back. With the new U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service created in June 1940, stamp authority was transferred to the Department of the Interior to buy or lease wetland habitat.



The first Stamp: 1934-5

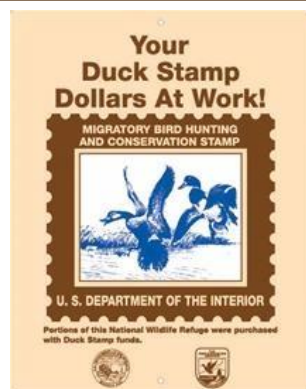
Even those sometime rivals favoring the penny-a-shell approach would soon have their day of recognition, with a variation of that solution in the [Pittman-Robertson Act](#) in 1937. (Officially called the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937, the law directed an excise tax on guns and ammunition to provide funding to each state to manage wildlife and associated habitats.)

The "Duck Stamp" would continue to grow, and the distribution formula, price, and other improvements would change with amendments to the Act, especially in 1958, but also including 1961, 1976, 1982, and 1984.

Now, 80 years after the signing of the Act in 1934, we can review the use of stamp funds, a cumulative total in excess of \$900 million, and actually visit the wetland, riparian, and grassland habitats in the National Wildlife Refuge System that have been secured through the oversight of the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission. Waterfowl, other birds and wildlife, and the American public have all benefited from the Stamp, and we can certainly celebrate that fact after these 80 productive years.

*You can find a short summary of this stamp history [on our Friends website](#).*

## Some possible 80th Anniversary activities to consider:



Here are some suggested activities for you on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the Stamp (March 16, 2014):

1. Creating website/blog/facebook content, all recognizing the anniversary.
2. Publishing newsletter/magazine/newspaper articles on the anniversary.
3. Using informational images to tell the stamp story, starting with 1934.
4. Holding a local celebration and selling Stamps.

Feel free to use the background material in this issue of *Wingtips* as a resource for your own anniversary-related copy. (Acknowledgment, with a link to our [website](#), would be appreciated.)

## About the Friends of the Migratory Bird/Duck Stamp

The [Friends of the Migratory Bird/Duck Stamp](#) is an independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to the promotion, preservation, sales, and better understanding of the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp (commonly called the Duck Stamp). The organization fosters an appreciation of how the funds collected through the Stamp build the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Part of our emphasis is that the purchase of a Stamp is not something that will just benefit ducks. Among scores of other bird species, numerous kinds of shorebirds, long-legged waders, and wetland and grassland songbirds are dependent on habitat derived from Stamp purchases.



Furthermore, it's not only birds that benefit from the Stamp. Reptiles, amphibians, fish, butterflies, all flourish through Stamp investments. Water quality is also strengthened!

[Become a Friend!](#)