

Pulling Our Weight

By GREG D. JACKSON

BIRDERS IN ALABAMA HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO improve their image in the eyes of the public, the outdoor community, and government agencies. We've often suffered from a perception problem; many federal and state lands utilized heavily by birders have received little financial support from us (other than through tax dollars), whereas these same lands are, to varying degrees, purchased and maintained by fees and licenses paid by those who hunt and fish. We do pay entrance fees for some areas (and should *always* do so), and birders have supported purchase of private lands, such as through Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries, land trusts, and The Nature Conservancy. However, public land support is often left to hunters and fishermen. This creates a credibility gap with other outdoor enthusiasts, and can influence the way governmental agencies view us and our concerns.

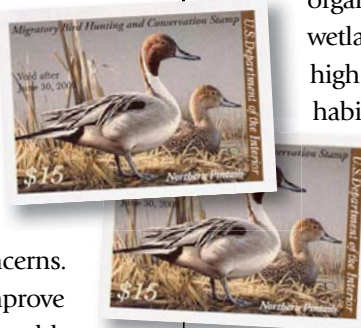
Several opportunities are available to improve this perception problem, some new, some old. Some of these programs involve a bit of cooperation with the hunting and fishing crowd, and for that reason a few members may feel uncomfortable. However, in my opinion that is a poor, and rather illogical, reason not to support these programs; the funds are used to purchase and maintain bird and wildlife habitat, not promote consumptive use. I'm not a hunter myself, though certainly I utilize animals in my daily life for food and clothing; I feel it would be hypocritical to condemn these programs on philosophical grounds, except perhaps by vegans! I would like to encourage AOS members to, at a minimum, look beyond the association with hunting, and embrace the idea of cooperating with other groups to protect the land and habitat needed for our birds.

One way to contribute, available for many years, is the federal Duck Stamp program. This is one of the most efficient ways to support the purchase of wetland habitat; a whopping 98% of all donations go directly into land purchases for National Wildlife Refuges. Several ornithological societies, such as our neighbors in Georgia, have arranged to sell Duck Stamps

to their members and others (look online at <http://www.gos.org/duckstamp/duckstamp.htm>). Duck Stamps cost only \$15 per year, and a side benefit is free admission to many National Wildlife Refuges which charge admission. This is a fantastic way to support wildlife conservation, and I encourage AOS to participate in the promotion and sale of these stamps. For more information on the benefits of the program, look at www.fws.gov/duckstamps/Info/Stamps/stampinfo.htm.

On a related subject, I urge birders to support Ducks Unlimited. I've been a DU member for several years. This organization does a tremendous job in conserving wetlands all across North America. They have a high efficiency rating in terms of dollars going to habitat conservation, not wasted on administrative overhead. For example, in fiscal 2005, DU conserved 220,000 acres of land in North America, and 87% of all donations went to land conservation; in fiscal 2006, this dropped slightly to 169,000 acres preserved and an 83% donation efficiency, still excellent. Better yet, they are impressively able to obtain an average of 6:1 matching funds, so your contribution is multiplied greatly. This group works well with corporations and those in government (regardless of political party); they are effective lobbyists in achieving legislative efforts positive for habitat issues. Check them out at www.ducks.org.

Alabamians now have a way to support wildlife habitat in our own state, through the new Wildlife Heritage License. This is only \$10 per year, and the monies generated are boosted by 3:1 federal matching grants. Funds are used to purchase and maintain habitats and support non-game research and monitoring programs. Notes about this program have appeared a couple of times in this newsletter, and I hope some of our members have taken advantage of this opportunity to support our local habitats. Yes, the license does also give one the right to fish and hunt small game, but purchase does NOT equate to support of hunting (if that is an issue for some). As this is an actual state license, AOS cannot sell these. They can easily and quickly be purchased online at www.ducks.org.



outdooralabama.com/licenses/WildlifeHeritageLicense.cfm; a downloadable brochure with more information on the benefits of the program is available there as well.

Another state program which secures bird habitat is Forever Wild. By purchasing a Forever Wild auto tag, or redirecting some of your Alabama income tax refund, you are supporting the purchase and maintenance of high priority wild lands in the state. This project has already purchased 53 tracts of special habitat totaling 113,000 acres, from the Tennessee

line to the Gulf. I know from seeing car tags at meetings, that many AOS members already support this effort, but I encourage more to do so.

The name of the game for all these programs is benefiting wildlife habitat, which helps the birds we love. If AOS and its members will support these ventures, and let it be known we do, I believe it will improve our credibility with other outdoor enthusiasts, who have shouldered a disproportionate share of the financial burden in the past.

A O S W I N T E R M E E T I N G , J A N U A R Y 2 3 - 2 5 , 2 0 0 9

Meet the Speaker: Roger Clay

Roger Clay is a certified wildlife biologist with the Alabama Nongame Wildlife Program in the Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries and is a graduate of Auburn University with a degree in wildlife biology. Before graduating, Roger interned two summers while conducting surveys of Brown Pelicans and other colonial nesters on Gaillard Island. Joining the Nongame Program in October 1988, he is one of three biologists in the program. He works from the District V offices in Spanish Fort. Roger is a board member of the Mobile Bay Audubon Society, a member of the Weeks Bay Estuarine Research Reserve advisory committee, and is co-chair of the Mississippi/Alabama Initiative Team of the Gulf Coast Joint Venture.



AS PART OF THE ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION and Natural Resources, the Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries' focus has primarily been on the management of the hunting and fishing resources. The Division enforces hunting and fishing regulations and maintains and monitors its 36 public wildlife management areas and 20 public fishing lakes. Recognizing the need to address the concerns of those species that are not necessarily harvested, the Nongame Wildlife Program was created in 1984 within the Division's Wildlife Section.

It has been my pleasure and privilege to work for the Nongame Program for over 15 years while stationed in the District V offices in Spanish Fort. During my tenure, I have had the opportunity to work with a variety of species of Alabama's abundant and varied wildlife.

Birds have always played a prominent role in the Nongame Program's activity. Since the program was ideally to be supported through voluntary state tax check-off proceeds, working with such a popular group of animals was a logical strategy. One of the earliest programs was "Bring Back the Bluebird." The Nongame Program built more than 10,000 bluebird boxes that were distributed to some 1,000 volunteers. Bluebird workshops were conducted in cities and towns across Alabama instructing bluebird enthusiasts on proper nest box construction, placement, and management. I feel confident that the Nongame Program can take some credit for the abundance of bluebirds across the state.

Perhaps the most rewarding project I have been involved in was the Nongame Program's efforts to restore the Bald Eagle as a breeding resident bird. The demise of the eagle in Alabama and the Southeast is well chronicled. When the nongame program began "hacking" and releasing its first juvenile Bald Eagles in 1985 there were no Bald Eagles nesting in the state. In 1991, the release program ended with a mega-hack, releasing 54 juvenile eagles that year. I manned and managed hacking towers in Choctaw and Lowndes County. The many hours devoted to this project certainly paid off. Today there are likely 100 eagle nests statewide and no doubt the Nongame Program had more than a hand in this bird's return.

While the bluebird program and eagle hacking had limited life spans, some activities annually recur. Contributing to the Breeding Bird Survey, I now run six routes in southwest Alabama. Over the years, I have conducted 81 BBS routes making many tick marks on BBS forms.