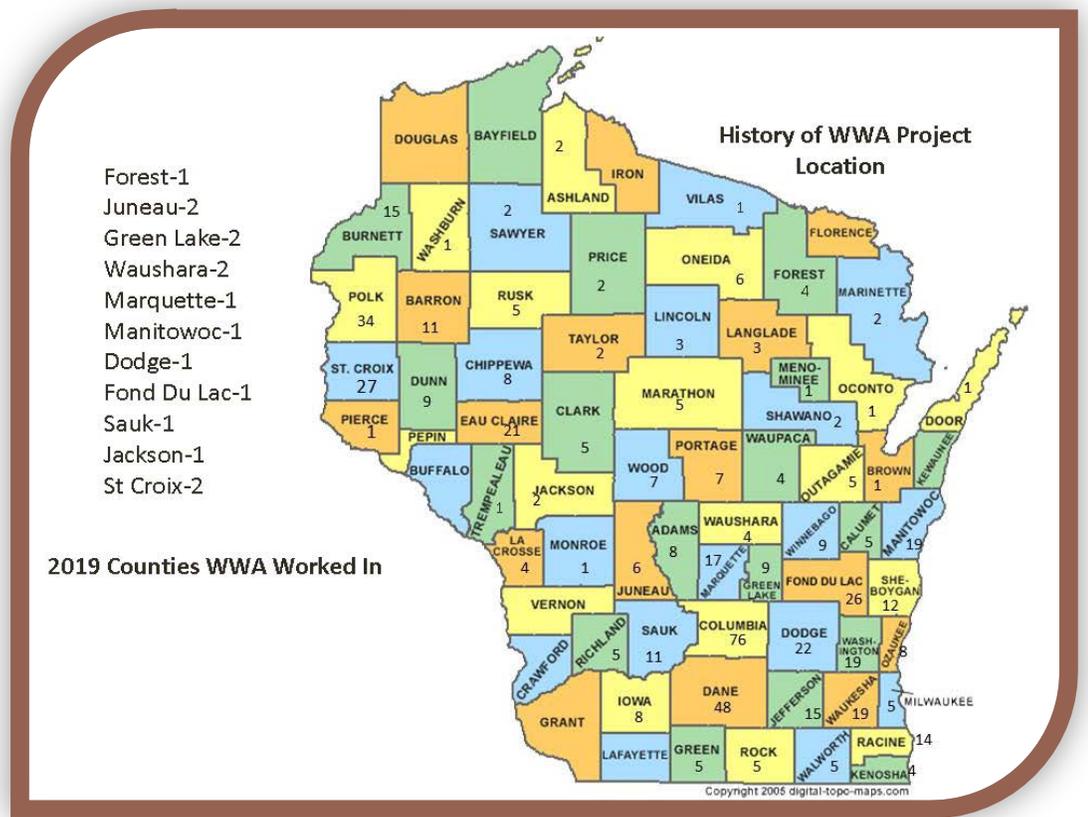


# Wisconsin Waterfowl Association 2020 Annual Report



*The Wisconsin Waterfowl Association is a 501(c)(3), membership-based, non-profit organization, founded by hunters in 1984, acting exclusively in Wisconsin, with this mission: The purpose of the Association shall include: work to further restoration and conservation of Wisconsin's waterfowl and wetland resources, the implementation of education programs for Wisconsin youth that heighten awareness of our wetland resources, and promotion of legislation that protects Wisconsin's resources and the rights of citizens to hunt and fish.*

## WWA 2020: Weathering the Storm, Emerging Stronger

Wow, what a year! The horizon had no visible storm clouds when WWA started 2020, but they quickly gathered after our two first events in February. March’s COVID-19 alarms brought community restrictions that forced cancellation or postponement of our traditionally strong Spring events. With lowered revenue expectations, we reduced forecast expenses accordingly, staff and contractor compensations bearing the brunt of these cutbacks.



As warmer weather arrived, outdoor events started our recovery, and soon the events we conducted broke records for attendance and financial success. The largest number of raffles we’ve ever conducted were successful, filling in revenue gaps. By year’s end, WWA’s financial resilience assured its strong emergence from this pandemic on an even financial keel.

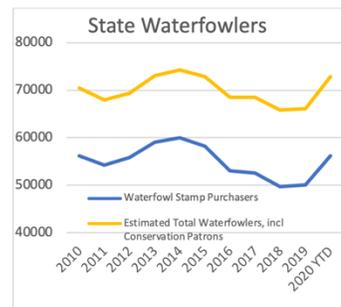


A debt of gratitude is owed to volunteers and members whose enthusiastic support that would be the envy of any non-profit organization.

2020’s storm has taken a toll on WWA, however: Fragile chapters that were unable to hold their events may not return in 2021, and WWA’s heavy dependence on event fundraising was highlighted. Counterintuitively, growing the number of chapters, while reducing our dependence on their event fundraising, are among our key challenges ahead. Member numbers dipped as well, reflecting fewer membership events.

Fortunately, WWA’s strong year-end balance sheet allows us to sustain operations even with reduced expectations for early events in 2021, and offers opportunities for strategic growth investments.

This is important since 2020 state waterfowl stamp purchases reached a 6-year high in the state, as COVID-forced isolations resulted in a growing appreciation of a personal connection to the outdoors. WWA has a strategic opportunity to capitalize on this resurgent interest in waterfowling to grow WWA membership.



Accompanying this growing statewide outdoor engagement, WWA saw its number of volunteers grow. They have raised their hands in record numbers to be involved with our mission-focused state committees. These volunteers are important force multipliers for increasing WWA’s impact across the state in our three mission areas: duck hunter advocacy, waterfowler education, wetland restoration, and a new initiative, [the inaugural Waterfowl Hunters EXPO](#).

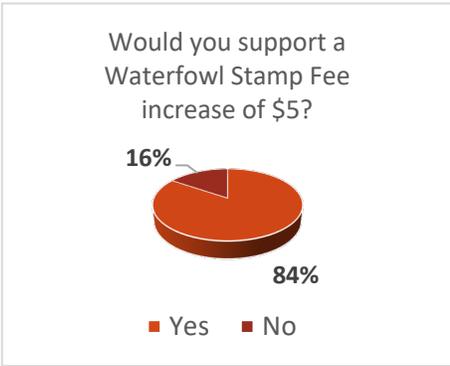
## Advocacy: Respected as Responsible Users of the State’s Natural Resources

WWA was founded in 1984 with a primary focus on bringing the duck hunter’s voice to Madison. To strengthen that voice in 2020, WWA identified as a lobbying organization for the first time, registering Bruce Ross, Executive Director, as a lobbyist, and built a strong volunteer policy committee (that includes former senior DNR executives, a professional lobbyist, and a former state senator, among others). This

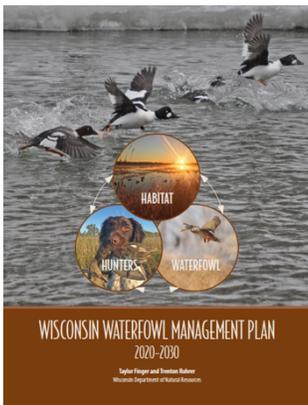
team is taking on regulatory and legislative topics as guided by the most well-responded to survey in WWA’s history, as well as responding to the ad hoc issues that arise during the year that impact our constituency.

Partnering with Wisconsin Wildlife Federation we surveyed the state’s waterfowlers, using the results from the 700 respondents to advise the DNR on the historic creation of a “Big Water Zone” (more than 500 feet offshore in Lake Michigan and Green Bay), as well as open/close/split dates. We were successful in advocating for the issues a majority of our members wanted addressed.

With the support of over 84% of Wisconsin’s waterfowlers, it’s tough to understand why we’ve been frustrated for 10+ years in advocating for a long-overdue adjustment to the state’s duck stamp. This year, WWA met with 22 key legislators and



Administration leadership, via Zoom and in the field, to build understanding that this stamp generates funds critical to restoring the wetlands habitat. This habitat creates successful hunts (while providing many other community benefits). Gubernatorial and Legislative action will be required to get this ball across the goal line in 2021.



**Figure 2: Wisconsin's Waterfowl Management Plan, developed with help of WWA**

WWA served on key state waterfowl policy committees, testified at the Natural Resources Board, and documented member issues to DNR and local officials throughout the year. And it shouldn’t be forgotten that WWA worked for a couple of years with the DNR and other partners to develop a state-wide strategy to protect and enhance waterfowling in the state. Published as the “Wisconsin Waterfowl Management Plan, 2020-2030” this document lays down markers for the state’s waterfowl managers that WWA will monitor accomplishment of in the years ahead. WWA’s ability and willingness to effectively engage on the state’s hunting, as well as conservation issues, remains a foundational responsibility for WWA.

### Education: The Waterfowler’s Arc

WWA, known for its NexGen waterfowler education, also recognizes a responsibility to reliably inform all generations of the state’s duck hunters. Waterfowl hunters progress through stages. First, they set about acquiring the knowledge and skills needed to successfully harvest ducks and geese. They grow into advocates for the wetlands and policies that support their outdoor passion. And finally, they seek to ensure future generations will benefit from similar outdoor experiences. The Wisconsin Waterfowl Association (WWA) supports waterfowler education in all aspects of this trajectory.

While WWA volunteers were prepared to hold a record four Learn-to-Hunts (LTHs) this year, the state’s decision to cancel such in-person experiences disappointed both mentors and mentees. And newly minted hunters are in the field without the field experience that normally accompanies our hunter education programs.

The pandemic may have restricted our in-person LTH efforts, but other education continued. digital and electronic media outlets allowed remote educational opportunities: an aquatic invasive video, guest talking roles on Wisconsin Public Radio, regional outdoors radio show “The Big Wild” and other public and hunter outreach opportunities. We filled our traditional role at the new Duck Warden School, and saw regular coverage in Wisconsin Outdoor News.

WWA’s e-newsletter is the standard-carrier for the state’s duck hunters with a subscriber list that grew to over 15,000 this year. With a broadening range of relevant topics - from duck biology and regulatory insights, to veterinary advice, flyway patterns and duck hunting historical lore - the e-newsletter brings WWA a competitive advantage with industry-busting open and click-through rates.



At the beginning of the year, WWA hosted an education-focused Annual Meeting, open to all comers and well-attended. It was consciously planned as the testing ground for an initiative that has the potential to be game-changing for the state’s waterfowlers: the inaugural Waterfowl Hunters EXPO, scheduled for August 28<sup>th</sup> of



2021. This celebration of all things waterfowl will invite the state’s 65,000+ waterfowlers and industry representatives to Oshkosh for a day of seminars, demonstrations, exhibitions, and hands-on opportunities. This effort, initiated in partnership

with WWF early in 2020, and planned throughout the year in collaboration with every duck organization in the state, will continue to demand significant WWA energy in the years ahead, providing a needed and deserved service to Wisconsin’s strong waterfowling cohorts.

### Habitat Programs: Small-scale Wetland Restoration at a Landscape Scale

It’s well documented that 50% of Wisconsin’s historic wetlands have been erased, with 75% of the remaining wetlands in private hands - and an even greater percentage (85%) of restorable wetlands are held privately.

With DNR research indicating 50-70% of a Wisconsin’s waterfowler’s harvest is hatched in this state, it’s apparent that maintaining fall duck harvests (a key component of duck hunter satisfaction) warrants strong attention to private, restorable wetlands. This is Wisconsin Waterfowl’s focus area, particularly the small, sometimes seasonal wetlands that are, acre-for-acre, more productive than larger wetlands for waterfowl nesting and brood-rearing.

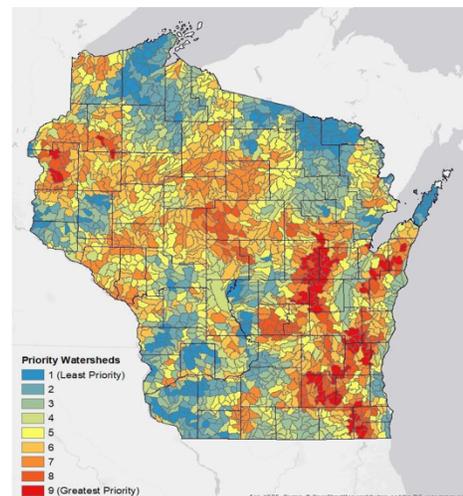
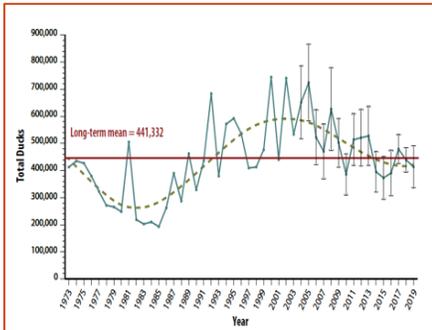


Figure 3: WI Priority HUC 12 Watershed Heat Map – priority restoration areas

While small wetlands may be more biologically productive than their larger counterparts, they also require more organizational energy to find and manage to a finished restoration. WWA challenges include:



**Figure 4: Wisconsin's breeding duck population, 1973-2019**

- Increasing difficulty in identifying willing landowners of suitable properties. Wisconsin's low-hanging restoration "fruit" has already been plucked.
- Focusing effort in the areas recently designated as high priority HUC 12 restoration areas elevates this challenge.
- Landowners may require some financial encouragement to shoulder the significant effort and expense of restoring a wetland.
- Ensuring all state waterfowlers appreciate that having nesting infrastructure - even on land that is not publicly huntable - is important to fall hunting success where public hunting is permitted.
- Doing all of the above, at a sufficient scale to contribute significantly to the Wisconsin Waterfowl Management Plan's goals.



**Students "plant" wild rice in Northern Wisconsin with WWA**

Despite a slow start to the project year (due to federal and state partners COVID-restricted from collaborative field activities), WWA restored over 130 acres of wetlands in our ecosystem-based design approach. This approach includes ditch-plugging, berm raising, drain-tile pulling, and water control structure installations to restore the hydrology that was once on the site. And with seven good projects in the queue, WWA anticipates finishing its current NAWCA grant strongly in September of 2021, approaching 500 acres in the 2-1/2 years of the \$90,000 grant. WWA's Wild Rice seeding program also continued strongly in 2020 with projects in four counties: Oconto, Juneau, Forest and Manitowoc.

This past year, WWA began prototyping a program to engage volunteers to identify potential wetland restoration projects. Getting projects "into the queue" remains a limiting factor, and having local eyes and ears (and voices) to identify such projects will leverage WWA ecologist Peter Zeigler's efforts.

WWA's Adopt-a-Wildlife Area program, established and run entirely by our chapter volunteers, was adversely impacted by state COVID restrictions in 2020. While some individuals did manage solo clean-up activities on our adopted state properties, for the most part, group projects were limited by state fiat. We did close out a \$12,000 grant for improving nesting habitat at Zeloski Marsh Wildlife area in southern Wisconsin. This grant provided for private-public work to remove trees from nesting islands, eliminate invasive species, and conduct a 200-acre cattail burn.



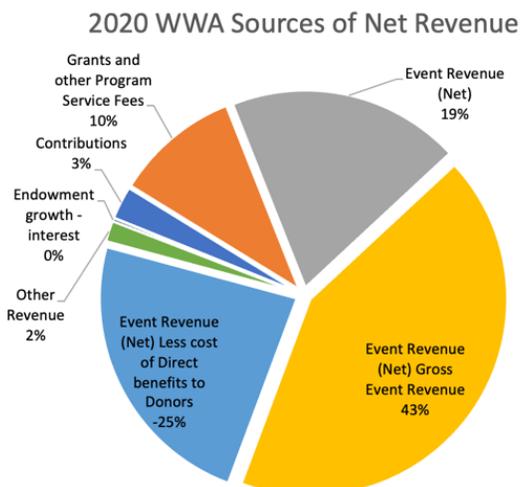
A highlight of the AWA program this year was a black tern nesting program undertaken by Waukesha chapter chair Mike Alaimo. After noticing this endangered bird was having little nesting success at Rome Pond in southern WI, Mike had prototyped different floating platforms unsuccessfully for three years. But in 2020, Mike's evolving platform design found success when several broods of terns successfully hatched when so many others' efforts had failed. This breakthrough drew a lot of positive attention to WWA's habitat program from regional news outlets, the DNR and birding groups, and Mike's persistent creativity earned him a hand-carved black tern from nationally awarded decoy carver (and Board President), Bruce Urben.



### Financial Overview

Even with fewer chapter events due to community COVID restrictions, the cumulative results of later events were encouraging, with nine chapters achieving super goal status, the highest level of financial success a chapter can reach. Nevertheless, WWA found ways to reduce expenditures, mostly with compensation reductions (somewhat offset by the federal Paycheck Protection Program) and consolidation of storage facilities. The net effect left WWA on a solid financial footing for the challenges that remain in 2021 and beyond, while offering some strategic investment flexibility.

WWA Statement of Activities		2020	2019
Revenue, Support, and Gains (Losses)		year-end	per IRS Form 990
	Contributions	\$ 12,850	\$ 52,238
	Grants and other Program Service Fees	\$ 131,559	\$ 112,207
	Event Revenue (Net)	\$ 245,560	\$ 197,941
	Other Revenue	\$ 21,544	\$ 13,606
	Endowment growth - interest	\$ 3,040	\$ 3,987
	<b>Total Revenues, Support, and Gains (losses)</b>	<b>\$ 414,553</b>	<b>\$ 379,979</b>
<b>Expenses</b>			
	Program Services: Habitat Restoration, Education, Advocacy and member Benefits	\$ 229,916	\$ 241,021
	Management, General Admin	\$ 19,371	\$ 32,690
	Fundraising	\$ 73,254	\$ 105,613
	<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$ 322,541</b>	<b>\$ 379,324</b>
	<b>Change in Net Assets</b>	<b>\$ 92,012</b>	<b>\$ 655</b>
	<b>Net Assets - Beginning of Year</b>	<b>\$ 271,197</b>	<b>\$ 270,542</b>
	<b>NET ASSETS, END OF YEAR</b>	<b>\$ 363,209</b>	<b>\$ 271,197</b>



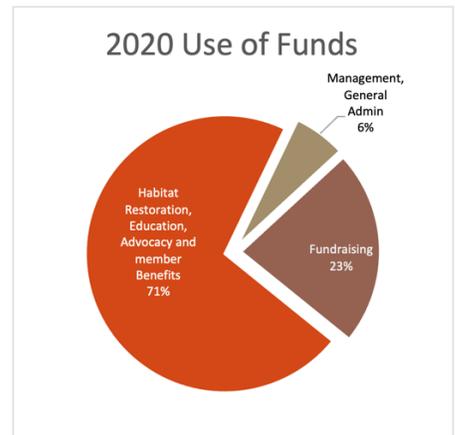
WWA leadership, recognizing its heavy dependence on event fundraising, accelerated efforts to diversify funding streams in 2020. Early recurring sponsor efforts are beginning to bear fruit, and two direct appeal efforts also contributed to the positive financial result this year.

This pandemic "black swan" event forced a new look at the economics of running a small 501(c)(3) conservation organization. Always important to WWA's success, corporate sponsorship efforts have expanded. Our strong communication channels - a remarkably well-received e-newsletter, a rapidly growing social media presence, and a rich website/e-commerce site - will be leveraged through a

professional [media kit](#) developed this year to attract donors, philanthropists and corporate sponsors.

We are pleased to report that after two years, WWA has achieved its goal of surpassing two significant accountability standards promoted by the Better Business Bureau as indicators of well-run charities:

- Using at least 65% of our total expenses on program activities. WWA spent approximately 71% in 2020, and,
- Using less than 35% of related contributions on fundraising. WWA spent less than 25% last year.



### The Course Ahead

Demonstrating WWA’s ability to use funding efficiently to achieve mission impact is important to potential donors and supporters... including donors like Jim Didier whose father Les was a well-respected



wildlife artist in the last part of the last century. Les painted two winning Wisconsin duck stamp paintings--amongst many other well-loved and -recognized paintings. In 2020, Jim wanted his father’s work to help sustain WWA into the future and has donated 4 original pieces—including the two winning duck stamp pieces! These will be converted into funds this coming year, and the proceeds will become part of WWA’s endowment fund to help WWA have a continued impact in the years ahead.

WWA exists only because of the dedicated volunteers, supportive members, and committed conservationists like Jim. Thanks to all of these folks who not only kept our ship upright in 2020’s stormy weather, but they also strongly shaped a course to a more impactful future.

See you on the water...

*Bruce Ross, Executive Director*



### 2020 Board of Directors

- Bruce Urben – *President*
- Dennis Nelson – *Vice President*
- Russell Olson – *Treasurer*
- Randy Helbach – *Secretary*
- Ian Bartelmez
- Mike Depies
- Andy Ducato
- George Ermert
- Jim Freck
- Joe Gonyo
- Todd Schultz
- Patrick Smith

### Staff

- Bruce Ross – *Executive Director*
- Peter Ziegler – *Project Director, HRP*
- Rob Monette – *Regional Director*
- Tom Seibert – *Class A /Event Consultant*
- Kelcy M. Boettcher – *Director of Administration*

