

Whenever bird or duck hunters or recreational shooters get together, there is often a serious discussion about conservation of both land and hunting. And almost always, there is the comment that today, in order to conserve both, there needs to be a greater participation of families in general, and women in particular. During a break at a Richmond Chapter Ducks Unlimited dove shoot, I sat down with several members of the team who are directing the current focus and mission of Ducks Unlimited in the Richmond area: Hunt Gunter, vice-Chairman of the Richmond Ducks Unlimited; Derrick Davis, regional director of DU for Eastern Virginia; Mike Budd, DU regional biologist for Virginia and West Virginia; and a few other Richmond DU committee members.

Gunter expressed the shift to family focus among DU members this way. "I first joined DU over 15 years ago to meet other people who shared my interest in hunting, but my involvement has evolved over the years. What I did not expect was for DU to transform my opinion about hunting and protecting the environment. It used to be, I wanted to go out and shoot my limit of birds every day of the season, but now it is about so much more. I love sharing hunting with my son and daughter, teaching them the importance of protecting the environment, and putting my money where my mouth is by contributing to a cause that will benefit my children and grandchildren in enjoying the outdoors."

When you attend Virginia chapter fund-raising dinners and events, you will typically hear very much the same theme throughout. Christopher Brennan, a DU sponsor at the Chesterfield chapter's dinner, put it this way: "I brought my son to the DU dinner this year and last. He loves the outdoors, and this event gives me the chance to



DUCKS UNLIMITED

by
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Photos by Trischa Franklin

spend a little one-on-one time with him. My hope is that this event helps nurture his love for the outdoors and motivates him (as he ages) to spend more time hunting, fishing, camping. The added benefit is that an event such as this encourages him to interact with

adults and learn something about giving to others."

Ducks Unlimited has benefited greatly as more and more women have taken up shooting sports. Maylisa McGrath and Tori Baldwin, who attended the recent



Jefferson's Country Ducks Unlimited dinner held at the King Family Vineyards in Crozet, praise the fresh energy and perspective seen at DU events these days. "I think that the sport of hunting has changed over the

years because women are becoming more involved in the sport, as well as having an interest in preserving it," Tori commented. "Ducks Unlimited is a great organization, and women have become a crucial part in making it a success."

It is the energetic members and volunteers who make any charitable organization successful, and Ducks Unlimited is no exception. Current Virginia state chairman Richard Hudson, in addition to working his regular job, attends about 37 DU events a year across the state and has traveled as far as Maine for a DU function. He is a strong supporter of the Greenwing DU events that are designed for kids. "I strongly support all chapters admitting youngsters to their regular events free of charge. That's where the future is. DU National and Virginia DU support and encourage a family atmosphere at all our functions," Hudson states.

The core of Ducks Unlimited's mission, to conserve wetlands and other habitat for North America's waterfowl, has not changed since its inception approximately 70 years ago. This was long before our country decided to go nouveau green. The organization's dedicated members and volunteers have had a great impact on our state's environment. Julian Ottley, the gentleman who replaces Hudson in January as the new Virginia state DU chairman, praises their efforts. "In 2007, the Virginia DU committees and the 13,535 Virginia DU members raised over \$995,000 to support the Ducks Unlimited mission. In Virginia alone, DU has conserved over 37,609 acres and spent over \$8,213,015.00 on these projects in the state. In 1968 DU had a total income of just over \$1 million; in 2008 DU generated revenue and support of over \$213 million. Eighty-seven percent of this money goes directly to Waterfowl/Wetlands Conservation and Education."

One of the ways in which Ducks Unlimited has been able to have such an impact is the effort the members put into

land management education and their ability to undertake conservation projects jointly with the Virginia Department of Game & Inland Fisheries and similar conservation entities. If you are fortunate enough to meet either Mike Budd, DU's biologist for Virginia and West Virginia, or David Norris, wetland project leader for Virginia's Department of Game & Inland Fisheries, you will be impressed. They know not only about wetland management but also what waterfowl require for a viable habitat.

The Pamunkey River Correctional Farm, site of a coordinated restoration project involving Ducks Unlimited, illustrates how different conservation entities can pool their resources. "Preserving wetlands does not just help waterfowl; it helps all species that depend on clean water," Norris points out. "Besides providing habitats to other wildlife along with waterfowl, projects such as Pamunkey Farm act as filters for water runoff, sending fewer pollutants into larger water sources. A cleaner stream in

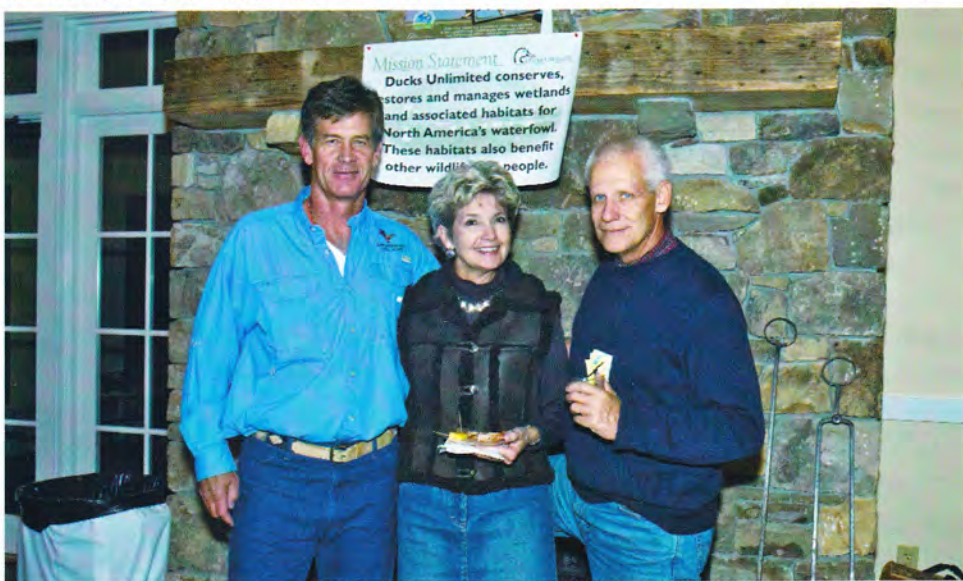
Bill Bolin, 20-year member of Ducks Unlimited and manager of Environmental Biology at Dominion Resources, demonstrates duck calling.





Pamunkey Farm project: Creation of wetlands filters pollutants before they flow into the Chesapeake Bay.

David King of King Family Vineyards, Linda Harding and Albermarle County Sheriff J.E. Harding (Photo by Dwight Dyke)



Nelson or Fluvanna counties eventually helps shellfish in the Chesapeake Bay.”

The Woolford property project on the Mattaponi is scheduled to start in 2009.

It too offers another aspect of wetland management. This will be the first project funded by the Virginia Migratory Waterfowl State Duck Stamp. As Budd explained,

“Wetlands aren’t always wet. The area we are looking at preserving may be dry in summer.” As both gentlemen pointed out, projects such as these “act as kidneys for the land.”

Any interested landowner can contact Mike Budd of Ducks Unlimited or David Norris of the Virginia Department of Game & Inland Fisheries through their organizations’ Web sites. “We like to do projects that are five acres or larger, but we have done smaller. Each site goes through an analysis to see whether it will be effective and beneficial to both waterfowl and the landowner,” says Budd.

Both men say that many landowners, having once seen the benefits of programs such as the Pamunkey River Farm or King Family Vineyard project, want to undertake similar projects on their own properties. A

majority of those landowners may be duck hunters, who envision a site on their properties where they can shoot ducks. According to Norris, "The first thing they want is a flooded corn field. What they don't think about is that corn, once it gets wet, turns to mush and will attract ducks for only a very short while. We educate the landowner on the seeds and grasses that provide the longest and greatest benefit to waterfowl." Norris notes, "The odd thing, however, is that once these projects are in place and ducks begin to use it, there seems to be a change in the property owner's original intent. He enjoys watching the ducks coming into his conservation area and has little desire to shoot *his* ducks. He also wants to keep them on his property because if he forces them to leave, *his* ducks may go somewhere else and get shot."

As Carrington King of Crozet, who with his family has been active in Ducks Unlimited wetland reclamation, points out, "Watching wetland plants burst out of the seed bank that has been dormant for more than 40 years is amazing. Just one week after flooding the impoundments, we

had green-wing teal using the habitat. Overnight, land that had been useless to wildlife became a spot for waterfowl to refuel and rest and even nest!"

It is this type of enthusiasm, this type of energy, and this type of commitment to a cleaner environment that has made Ducks Unlimited one of the largest private, non-profit waterfowl and wetland conservation organization in the world.

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