Natural History of the Prairie Pothole Region

Prior to settlement, this portion of Minnesota was part of a broad, sweeping grassland known as the Northern Tallgrass Prairie which remains the wettest portion of the American Great Plains. This vast prairie offered nesting habitat for many species of ground nesting birds including waterfowl, songbirds, and prairie grouse. With the easterly progression of increasing amounts of rainfall and the absence of expansive wildfires, drought, and nomadic bison grazing; the lanky grasses and picturesque wildflowers yielded to oak savannah and eventually to the dense forested regions of the eastern United States. It was on the eastern edge of the Northern Tallgrass Prairie that the battle between grassland and forests took place, and the Fergus Falls Wetland Management District is located today in that transition zone.

Interspersed throughout this open landscape was an abundance of small ponds in every shape, size, and depth imaginable. This "pothole country" was formed 12,000 ago when retreating glaciers melted and filled the erratic depressions left in their path. With its abundance of grasslands and wetlands, this prairie pothole country was a virtual duck factory – producing mallards, blue-winged teal, redheads, geese, swans, canvasbacks, and other water birds by the millions.

The various sizes and depths of wetlands provided the required habitats of waterfowl and many other wetland-dependent species of wildlife. Dabbling ducks like mallards and teal thrive in the invertebrate rich shallow water of temporary and seasonal wetlands where they can "tip up" to feed. Diving ducks like canvasbacks, redheads and scaup (bluebills) prefer deep clear marshes with abundant submerged aquatic plants. Whether temporary half-acre ponds or large, open water marshes, all wetlands are important and necessary for waterfowl to thrive.

When the organic material from decomposing prairie vegetation blended with the mineral rich soil left behind by the glaciers, some of the most fertile soil in the world formed in this region of Minnesota. Once discovered, this fertile soil accelerated settlement of the prairie and would eventually be its own demise. Human expansion did not blend well with wetlands and thick prairie sod. In the past century, ninety percent of the historic wetlands in prairie portions of Minnesota have been drained for agriculture and development, and less than one percent of the original prairie remains. Nesting waterfowl populations have declined significantly, and other wildlife species have suffered.

The following excerpt is from Ducks Unlimited Cattails magazine, originally published in Forest and Stream, circa 1880. Reprinted with permission.

"This land is covered by a carpet of the richest verdure, interspersed with flowers of every shade. Everywhere there is the same waving prairie surrounded by groves of majestic oaks. . . The lakes and waters of the most perfect purity swarm with wildfowls, ducks, geese, and swans. For surely in no place have I ever seen game more abundant."