



Wisconsin Waterfowl Association Annual Report 2021





Letter from the President of WWA's Board



I'm pleased to present WWA's Annual Report. It is filled with information about the efforts of WWA to support the interests of Wisconsin waterfowlers in 2021. And despite the pandemic, it was a good year for WWA.

Grassroots fundraising knocked it out of the park, with exceptional financial results for each and every event. Volunteers stepped up in ALL of WWA's mission areas and corporate supporters flocked to WWA through the inaugural Waterfowl Hunters EXPO. Habitat work that had been slowed by pandemic implications, has begun to accelerate—both the do-it-yourself kind by volunteers and by our professional ecologist. Thanks for being part of the WWA team that made this happen!

Bruce Urben

Bruce Urben
President, WWA Board of Directors

Letter from the Executive Director

Some of you know that in late 2020 I acquired a new retriever—Tack—with the highest hopes of being my best hunting companion ever. And of course, I wanted it to happen in very short order. As Tack enters his second year of training, he makes a point of reminding me that such achievements require time.

We are pleased to report that seeds planted by the Board of Directors also in late 2020, with only a little time, energized focus, but more than a little good fortune yielded significant fruit in 2021. This annual report celebrates those achievements without shying away from the challenges, risks—and opportunities—ahead. New initiatives like the Waterfowl Hunters EXPO and the state committee structure, coupled with greater financial stability, active leaders, and corporate sponsors should help us deliver for state waterfowlers in the years ahead. I can't wait to get there!

Bruce (and Tack!)

Bruce Ross
Executive Director





Wisconsin Waterfowl Association's 2021 Annual Report

The Wisconsin Waterfowl Association celebrated its 37th year in 2021. Notwithstanding the specter of the coronavirus pandemic that loomed over the state, nation, and world, 2021 may prove to be a positive inflection point for WWA's financial and mission results.

2021 highlights include:

- All local chapters exceeded fundraising goals while achieving noteworthy habitat results.
- WWA led state waterfowling organizations in establishing the pre-eminent gathering of the state's duckhunters—the Waterfowl Hunters Expo in Oshkosh.
- Habitat efforts that had been slowed by pandemic impacts increased and were boosted by volunteer efforts to grow the number of acres we can restore.
- More effective marketing and greater involvement in important state happenings gave WWA greater visibility.
- Important legislative goals were achieved.
- Successes at the state and chapter level, along with operational efficiencies, allowed us to close 2021's financial books in our best financial position in over a decade.
- The Better Business Bureau validated WWA's non-profit management practices and accounting.

WWA Mission

The 37-year-old Wisconsin Waterfowl Association

- *Restores and conserves Wisconsin's waterfowl and wetland resources,*
- *Educates state waterfowlers as they progress from natural resource consumer to steward; and*
- *Promotes governmental policies that protect Wisconsin's resources and uphold the rights of citizens to hunt.*

In aggregate, WWA is organizationally and financially positioned to make strategic investments that will accelerate the results we deliver for the state's waterfowlers. This will be important as we grow our pandemic-impacted restoration efforts, address known challenges, and face an uncertain economic future.

This 2021 Annual Report covers the results achieved in each WWA mission area—policy, habitat, education—and our organizational and financial successes.

POLICY: Promoting policies that protect Wisconsin's resources and uphold the rights of citizens to hunt.

WWA's policy team represents a remarkable collection of volunteers: a former state Senate majority leader, a former DNR executive, former DNR chief warden, a professional state lobbyist, and a strong complementary cast. The team has high energy, strong experience, and together with grassroots support notched the most WWA policy wins in decades.

Modern day waterfowlers have consistently demonstrated the commitment needed to earn the respect of policymakers and our communities as responsible users of the state's resources. They give more back to their community and the environment than they take. Period. There is no better example than our efforts to raise the price of the state's Waterfowl Stamp.



State Duck Stamp Adjustment - A Policy Success 10 Years in the Making

Despite overwhelming hunter support, Wisconsin's duck hunting organizations struggled for nearly a decade to convince legislators to adjust the price of state duck stamp for inflationary erosion. It had been at \$7 since 1997, and with the costs of goods and services dramatically increasing over the last twenty-four years, fewer and fewer acres of wetland habitat were able to be restored each year.

Working with several other organizations, WWA went all-in to get the increase passed in 2021. And finally, the Governor and Legislature were convinced to include the \$5 adjustment in their 2021 – 2023 biennial budget. This will result in nearly \$350,000 additional dollars per year dedicated to wetlands work. This additional funding, when leveraged against other private, federal and corporate funds, will yield well over \$1 million annually towards wetland work that directly benefits Wisconsin waterfowlers--not to mention the communities served by those wetlands.

Other policy initiatives

Re-authorization of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program

Wisconsin's sportsmen and women achieved a significant conservation victory in 2021 when the state legislature voted to reauthorize the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program for another four years with funding at \$33.25 million per year. This program is Wisconsin's biggest conservation funding engine but had been floundering for several years under insufficient funding and without long term re-authorization. All outdoorsmen and women—and their progeny—would suffer without this program.

WWA worked closely with a coalition of more than 70 organizations – led by Gathering Waters: Wisconsin's Alliance for Land Trusts – to ensure this vital conservation tool continues to benefit future generations. WWA volunteers met face-to-face with state lawmakers from across Wisconsin to advocate for this program. And just as important to the successful outcome was the grassroots support by WWA members who generated hundreds of communications to let state lawmakers know how important they viewed this program to be.

Open Water Zone – a unique season for this unique duck hunting environment

Based on membership input, WWA advocated for adjusting the three allowable Wisconsin duck hunting zones to consider the offshore waters of Lake Michigan. This environment, which features sea ducks and wide expanses of open water (requiring layout boats and heavy weather preparedness), offers a unique experience for the state's waterfowlers. WWA worked with the DNR to shape this significant change to the state's season structure that was implemented in 2021.

A Wisconsin sandhill crane hunt?

Wisconsin's population of the sandhill crane is over 90,000 and growing by 6-10% per year. Other populations bring the total US sandhill crane population to nearly 750,000. The U.S Fish and Wildlife Service declared the Wisconsin sandhill crane population supports a hunt over a decade ago when it was one third of today's population. With the unchecked and rapidly growing population, farmers are experiencing significant crop damage.



Sandhill cranes in a field of young corn.



Despite these facts, a sandhill crane hunt has not been established in Wisconsin as it has in many other states and Canadian provinces. Recent polling showed 94% of WWA membership supports pursuing the legislative action needed to initiate a sandhill crane hunt in this state.

Early in 2021, WWA published a series of articles on sandhill crane background, science, and other relevant issues, and then engaged stakeholders on both sides of the issue. When sandhill crane hunt legislation was introduced in 2021, WWA was one of the first organizations to support an ethical and sustainable crane hunt in Wisconsin. WWA staff and volunteers spent many hours meeting with stakeholders, bill authors and legislators to advocate for this legislation and make improvements to proposal.

While the bill failed to pass the legislature this past session, WWA continues to believe the issue should be decided on the science. We are committed to working with the legislature and stakeholders to that end.

HABITAT: Restoring and conserving waterfowl and wetland resources.

Private land restorations

WWA's historical focus on private wetland restoration is based on the premise that Wisconsin hunters harvest mostly Wisconsin ducks. Smaller private wetlands more efficiently support waterfowl breeding, so ignoring the 75% of Wisconsin's wetlands that are private will hurt the state's waterfowlers.

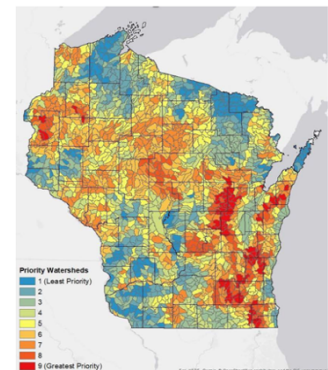


Figure 1: High priority state watersheds (in red)

WWA uses the funds raised at events to employ an ecologist who manages our habitat program. He surveys and designs wetland projects, submits required permits, and solicits earth-moving contractors and equipment providers. But actual on-the-ground restoration work requires additional funds that WWA acquires or coordinates to complete the project. In 2021, these sources of funds included:

- Federal grants (primarily funds from the North American Wetlands Conservation Act—or NAWCA)
- State grants (primarily funds generated by the state Waterfowl Stamp)
- County or municipality or foundation funding
- Landowner cost-shares.

WWA managed three grants during 2021: one state duck stamp grant, and two NAWCA grants, totaling \$150,000 and worked with partners to bring additional funding to this important effort. In 2021, one NAWCA grant was closed out, which spanned 3 years. In that grant alone, over 440 acres were restored or enhanced.

Leveraging the initial WWA member investment to gain the benefit of this combined funding, means that as little as \$300 of WWA funds can restore an acre of wetlands.



WWA restoration initiatives faced strong headwinds, but we made significant progress in 2021 to overcome the challenges and put more wetlands on the state's landscape. Twelve restoration projects were completed in 2021, covering 95 acres. These projects included 7 water control structures, 6 ditch fills/plugs, and 3 scrapes.

Partnership for Fish and Wildlife

The lingering effects of the pandemic were also felt in our restoration partnership with the US Fish and Wildlife Service. For the past five years, WWA has partnered with the USFWS to administer grants under their Partnership for Fish and Wildlife a federal program similar WWA's private lands restoration program. Our agreement with the USFWS allows otherwise unmatched WWA funds to put more wetland acres on the ground.

But in 2021, necessary permits were slow to arrive, and construction companies were more difficult to engage. The results (sidebar) show an associated slowdown in restored acreage. The good news is that 2022 should see a return to historically higher activity.

WWA Habitat: Private Land Headwinds

Despite nearly 75% of the state wetlands being held by private landowners, it remains a challenge to find the right restoration projects in sufficient numbers to move the needle towards state Waterfowl Management Plan restoration goals. Why?

- The easy projects have already been done--Wisconsin's low-hanging restoration "fruit" has already been plucked.
- Recent flyway definition of targeted, priority watersheds narrows the statewide opportunities.
- Wetland restorations can be expensive - Landowners may require financial incentives to shoulder the significant effort and expense of restoring, then maintaining, these wetlands.
- Pandemic-related effects in 2020-21 slowed permitting and landowners more challenging to engage, while construction contractors were more difficult to schedule.

Year	Upland Acres	Wetland Acres	Private Landowner Match	**WWA Match	USFWS Funding
2017	196	122.2	\$98,504	\$18,000	\$72,000
2018	370.1	201.5	\$155,514	\$22,500	\$150,000
2019	72.3	88.07	\$120,746	\$12,525	\$83,500
2020	164.6	57	\$234,789	\$27,900	\$186,000
2021	73	18	\$4,800	\$19,100	\$191,000
Total	876	486.77	\$614,352	\$100,025	\$682,500

Figure 3: Table of partnership restoration efforts with US Fish and Wildlife Service.



Figure 2: Black tern chicks await weighing and gender determinations.

Local habitat projects

Chapter Adopt-a-Wildlife Area activities began to rebound after the impact of COVID. Highlights include:

- Over 150 wood duck boxes hung and hundreds more were maintained in 2021 by WWA volunteers.
- Improved logistics led to sales of over 120 wood duck boxes – one of our best years ever.
- Our work with black tern nesting platform broadened beyond nesting projects to include the banding of returning terns for further scientific study.



Wild Rice restoration.

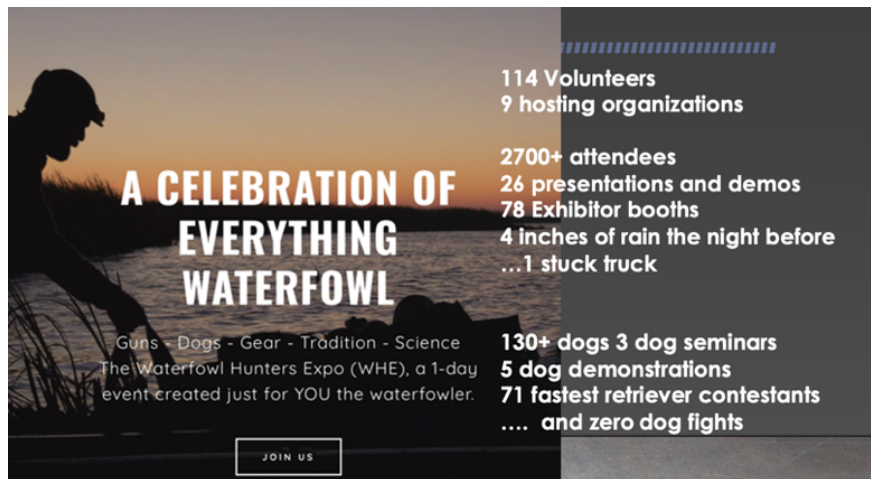
2021 was also a challenging year for WWA's wild rice efforts. Poor wild rice production around the state limited statewide supply, leading to WWA seeding only one area—Collins Marsh in Manitowoc County. However, during 2021 WWA agreed to a DNR partnership to become the distribution agent for the state's wild rice program. Funded by state duck stamp funds, this would be a significant expansion of our historical role.

EDUCATION: *Encouraging waterfowlers on their progression from natural resource consumer to natural resource steward.*



The Waterfowl Hunters EXPO

The concept for the Waterfowl Hunters EXPO evolved from the loss of two iconic gatherings of waterfowlers: the Great Outdoors Days and the Waterfowl Hunters Conference. When the latter folded in 2019, Wisconsin was left with no state-wide event to celebrate the community and science of waterfowling. Working closely with the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, WWA led the charge to plan and execute the inaugural Waterfowl Hunters EXPO that took place on August 28th, in Oshkosh. The EXPO operates under WWA's non-profit umbrella consistent with its mission, but it required a unique collaboration that included all the state's waterfowling organizations (WWF, DU, Delta, including the DNR and UW-Stevens Point). This effort was supported, *pro bono*, by professional event organizers and marketing gurus at Bast Durbin and Swift Waters. The EXPO was an attendance and financial success with nearly 3,000 visitors (of the two-legged and four-legged versions). The EXPO provides WWA with increased visibility by both duck hunters and the industries that want their attention and will provide revenue to initiatives important to state waterfowlers.



Other Education Initiatives

The Green Bay Chapter continued its long-running learn-to-hunt waterfowl program in 2021, giving nine new waterfowlers a quality waterfowling





experience. Participants ranged from a 60-year-old first time hunter to a 20-something participant and a youth aged 12. The Prairie du Chien chapter held its 7th annual youth hunt that introduces young hunters to waterfowling. 13 kids got their first taste - literally - of ducks at this well-received program.



WWA's monthly newsletter continues to be the premier Wisconsin-based communication focused on state waterfowling issues, resonating with waterfowlers across the entire "Waterfowler's Arc" (sidebar). This digital educational tool brought readers information that ranged from sandhill crane history and invasive species concerns to DNR regulatory changes and WWA happenings. This e-newsletter enjoyed well-above-average open and click-thru rates and is gaining attention from corporates who want to leverage its 15,000 subscribers.

WWA education efforts are attracting attention. Late in 2021, the DNR told us WWA had been chosen to receive a \$50,000 grant to bring under-represented communities into the state's waterfowling fold. Stay tuned for how this develops in the years ahead.

Communications

WWA enjoyed significant visibility in the outdoors community in 2021 thanks to well-covered policy efforts, EXPO marketing initiatives, and our sandhill crane initiative.



WWA Communications

Director George Ermert took the helm of WWA's social media efforts as chair of WWA's Communication / Membership Committee. Facebook followers through interesting and frequent posts and regular promotions. As a professional state lobbyist, George was also key to WWA's success in getting the duck stamp increase passed in 2021. For these and other reasons, George was named one of WWA's two volunteers of the year for 2021.

The Waterfowler's Arc

Waterfowlers progress through recognizable phases as they gain more experience. WWA is committed to providing the knowledge and encouragement in that progression from wannabe and newbie to seasoned veteran and beyond.

- New waterfowlers want to pull triggers, to fill limits; to become technically proficient with tools of the hunt.
- Journeymen waterfowlers seek more success by understanding where ducks want to be and why. They begin to cherish the duck hunting experience and camaraderie as much as the harvest.
- With more seasons in the rear-view, well-seasoned veterans revel in the tradition and focus on how to ensure the next generation has the opportunity to be shaped by these outdoor experiences.



Hall of Fame inducts 6th class

This progression through the waterfowlers arc was epitomized by Erich Pitz, longtime patron of our wood duck box program. Erich passed in 2020 and was inducted into the WWA Hall of Fame in 2021.

Two other WWA-ers joined Erich in the 5th WWA induction ceremony. Green Bay's Eric Urben—whose team leadership raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for WWA. And long-time corporate sponsor Sherper's was inducted in 2021 in recognition of its sustained and important contributions to the organization.



33% of Wisconsin Outdoor News issues included WWA articles, the state's largest newspaper featured 6 mentions, and we enjoyed several TV features. WWA also benefited from 20% social media growth.

WWA ORGANIZATION: *Fun, Focused, and Funded*

WWA's growing impact is premised on volunteer commitment of time, energy, and resources to its missions. The **ONLY** way to grow WWA's impact currently is to keep our volunteers engaged and to attract more to the cause. And our volunteers delivered in a big way in 2021.

Valley Committee: **A model chapter**

Under Brad Miller's leadership, the Fox Valley chapter had fun year-round doing just about everything that WWA can offer a volunteer: wood duck box hanging, sporting clays shoots, banquet fundraising and more. This team sets an example of what a fun, focused, and funded WWA chapter can be. Brad's leadership, and extra support of state level staff as a "management consultant", earned him a nod as one of two 2021 WWA Volunteers of the Year.



Grassroots fundraising

Every single WWA chapter achieved "Super Goal" status—meaning their fundraising exceeded expectations in a significant way. Despite the largest amount ever raised by the Green Bay chapter in a single event (almost \$50,000!), Waukesha chapter played "small ball" by hosting multiple smaller events that aggregated an amazing \$66K, earning "Top Gun" honors for the year—demonstrating in dramatic fashion that big banquets are not the only way to raise WWA funds. Raffles not associated with events were also an important part of WWA financial success.



Membership and Chapters

The pandemic created the conditions to allow already weakened chapters to succumb—we lost 3 chapters over the past two years. WWA is working to better adapt our grassroots model to the current volunteer interests in 2022. Despite the loss of a few chapter banquets, membership has remained strong and continues to grow while event revenue also saw growth. In 2021 membership stood just above 7,000 members, and volunteer activity is growing.

BBB Accreditation in 2021

After a thorough review of 20 categories of operations, the Better Business Bureau certified

WWA as an "accredited charity" that complies with their expectations for a well-run non-profit. This accreditation should give WWA's members, volunteers, donors, and sponsors confidence that their resources are being well-used towards the purpose of the organization.



Searching for New Sources of Income

WWA started its first "legacy gift" program to allow individuals who value WWA's unique contributions to support it through estate planning. It may take some time for this program to deliver its first financial returns, with the first such gift, we expect it to be a high return-on-investment program.



The EXPO afforded stronger WWA connections with the waterfowling industry by providing a unique event to showcase that industry to the state’s 65,000+ waterfowlers. This is expected to yield financial dividends in the years ahead.

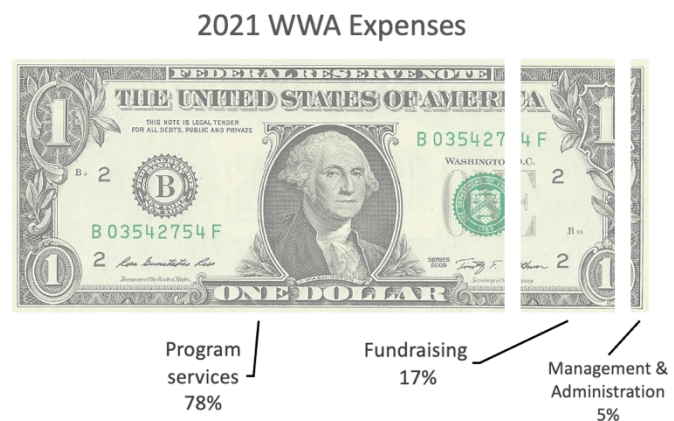
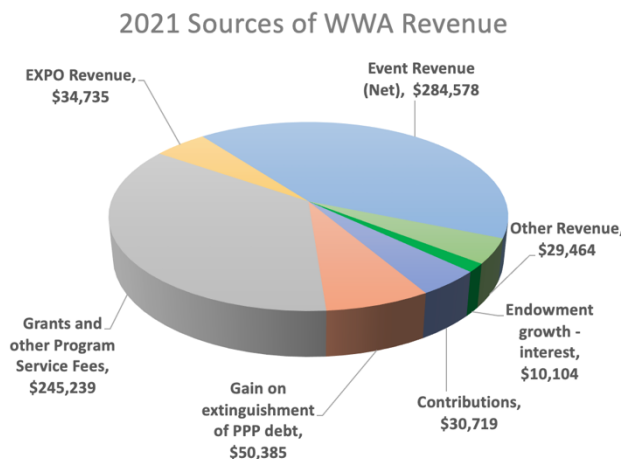
Financial Results: A remarkably good year

Financial Statements

WWA’s 2021 financial year can only be described in glowing terms. Chapters over-delivered in their fundraising endeavors. Two modest federal PPP loans that were granted to sustain WWA during the height of the pandemic were forgiven (total: \$50K). State-fundraising events, membership drives, and sustaining memberships, grant income, EXPO, and income from program service fees--all contributed to a better-than-expected bottom line: \$200K of net revenue on our statement of activities.

This net revenue helped WWA balance sheet significantly. 2021 closed with a WWA equity (“net assets”) of nearly \$555K—an astounding 57% improvement!

WWA Statement of Activities		2021
Revenue, Support, and Gains (Losses)		compiled
	Contributions	\$ 30,719
	Gain on extinguishment of PPP debt	\$ 50,385
	Grants and other Program Service Fees	\$ 245,239
	EXPO Revenue	\$ 34,735
	Event Revenue (Net)	\$ 284,578
	Other Revenue	\$ 29,464
	Endowment growth - interest	\$ 10,104
	Total Revenues, Support, and Gains (losses)	\$ 685,224
Expenses		
	Habitat Restoration, Education, Program Services: Advocacy and Member Benefits	\$ 377,620
	Management, General Admin	\$ 25,684
	Fundraising	\$ 81,359
	Total Expenses	\$ 484,663
Change in Net Assets		\$ 200,561
Net Assets - Beginning of Year		\$ 353,927
NET ASSETS, END OF YEAR		\$ 554,488





2021: Elevating WWA's Trajectory

Risks—or are they opportunities?

WWA's success in 2021 must be considered in the context of its challenges. WWA's effectiveness in its mission areas is growing, but the trend is no guarantee. Despite high staff competency and energy, WWA remains subject to impactful single point failures. More chapters are leveraging broad volunteer opportunities to attract and retain new members, but some chapters remain fragile. State-level committees are offering new and rewarding volunteer opportunities, but these initiatives demand sustained volunteer commitment.

Current cash reserves are the best in decades and WWA has begun actively diversifying revenue streams to avoid too much reliance upon a single funding stream like banquets. But WWA's small size and still-limited reserves leaves it vulnerable to broad economic dynamics like an inflated economy or a recession. Each of these risks must be addressed in the coming years to stabilize—and expand—the WWA impact seen in 2021.

2022: Forward

2021 was a strong year for WWA that laid the groundwork for even stronger years ahead. With sufficient operating capital, the largest WWA reserve in decades, and additional financial resources, WWA's Board of Directors is afforded more strategic investment options than at any time in the past decade.

With an active Board of Directors leading energized membership, with increasingly diversified revenue streams improving cash flows, and as creative investments result in greater mission impact, WWA is moving forward. With several initiatives planned for 2022 to expand our restoration, education, and development efforts, WWA is adapting to a changing non-profit environment. And we will continue to fill the state-based waterfowl hunting role envisioned by our founders 38 years ago. Thanks for your support in this effort!

See you in the marsh!

Bruce

Bruce Ross, Executive Director