

Restoring Historic Wetlands in the Chesapeake Bay Region

A report to: Waterfowl Festival, Inc.

September 2026



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Overview: Restoring Historic Wetlands on Maryland's Eastern Shore

Ducks Unlimited (DU) is grateful for Waterfowl Festival's continued partnership in restoring high-value wetlands across Maryland's Eastern Shore. With your support, Ducks Unlimited is working with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (Maryland DNR) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to return historically wet landscapes on public lands to productive habitat for waterfowl, shorebirds, and other wetland-dependent wildlife.

These restoration projects address some of the Chesapeake Bay region's most pressing conservation challenges. Wetland loss, shoreline erosion, sea-level rise, invasive species, agriculture, and development continue to reduce the habitat waterfowl need across the Atlantic Flyway. By restoring wetlands on publicly accessible lands, DU and Waterfowl Festival are improving habitat, strengthening water quality, and demonstrating the lasting value of local conservation investment.

Project Progress and Conservation Impact

Waterfowl Festival's grant is advancing wetland restoration at Browns Branch Wildlife Management Area, LeCompte Wildlife Management Area, and Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. Browns Branch and LeCompte have now been completed, and Blackwater is moving toward construction before the end of this year. Together, these projects will restore approximately 60 of shallow emergent freshwater wetland habitat and leverage secured public funding to deliver conservation in the Chesapeake Bay region.



Browns Branch WMA after wetland restoration

At Browns Branch Wildlife Management Area, DU and the Maryland DNR restored 16.2 acres of agricultural field to shallow emergent wetlands. The project was completed on May 13, 2026. Ditches and drain tile previously altered the site's natural hydrology. Restoration work reestablished shallow pool areas and sheet-flow wetlands by constructing low berms, performing shallow excavation, and installing water control structures. The Maryland DNR has also invested additional funding to drill freshwater wells to improve management of these wetlands. DU has submitted a proposal to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to restore an additional 25.5 wetland acres at Browns Branch WMA. We expect a response to the request in September 2026. The proposed work at Browns Branch is expected to

strengthen habitat for waterfowl, shorebirds, and other wildlife while also reducing an estimated 826 pounds of nitrogen, 21 pounds of phosphorus, and 38,873 pounds of suspended solids from the Chesapeake Bay watershed each year.

At LeCompte Wildlife Management Area, DU and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources restored 16.6 acres of agricultural land to a managed wetland cell designed to produce shallow emergent vegetation for waterfowl. We completed the project on June 19, 2026. After construction, partners seeded the site with brown millet that is now establishing well. Located near the Nanticoke River, the project adds important habitat within a watershed that has historically supported a major share of the Eastern Shore's wintering waterfowl. Seasonal water-level management promotes native moist-soil vegetation and create food-rich habitat during migration. The

project is expected to reduce an estimated 1,114 pounds of nitrogen, 47 pounds of phosphorus, and 59,715 pounds of suspended solids from the Chesapeake Bay watershed each year.

At Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, DU is helping restore habitat within one of the Chesapeake Bay region's most important waterfowl landscapes. The Refuge provides critical resting and feeding habitat for migratory and wintering waterfowl and welcomes more than 180,000 visitors annually. All permits for the Blackwater project have been approved. DU is now moving the project through the bidding process, with construction expected to begin before the end of November 2026. Waterfowl Festival's support helps unlock public funding and advance restoration of approximately 23 acres of shallow emergent freshwater. These restored wetlands are expected to reduce nitrogen runoff by 1,800 pounds and sediment by 161.34 tons each year while improving long-term food resources and habitat conditions for waterfowl.



LeCompte WMA following project completion in June 2026.

Partnership Benefits

Waterfowl Festival's investment is helping deliver conservation outcomes that reflect the Festival's roots and advance its conservation priorities. By supporting restoration on state and federally owned lands, the Festival is improving habitat in places that hunters, birders, photographers, anglers, students, families, and other visitors can experience firsthand. These public sites connect people to Maryland's outdoor traditions and show how local philanthropy can produce lasting results on the landscape.

The projects also improve water quality by filtering runoff before it reaches local waterways and the Chesapeake Bay. Healthy wetlands absorb water during heavy rainfall, reduce pressure on nearby communities, and sustain the native plants, invertebrates, fish, and wildlife that support a resilient Bay ecosystem.

Next Steps

DU will continue coordinating with project partners to complete bidding, construction management, and restoration activities across the three sites. In addition to the restoration work supported by Waterfowl Festival, DU and its partners have secured additional funding to install two water wells at Browns Branch WMA, an investment of approximately \$31,000. DU is also working with private donors and the USFWS to implement a freshwater well at Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, which is estimated to cost more than \$33,000. Reliable access to water is critical for managing these restored wetlands. It allows partners to support the wetland plant communities that migrating waterfowl and waterbirds need for food, energy, and cover.

Thank you for investing in Ducks Unlimited's wetland conservation work on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Waterfowl Festival's partnership is restoring habitat, improving water quality, and strengthening public lands, benefiting waterfowl, wildlife, and people for years to come. We are proud to continue this partnership and grateful for your commitment to conservation in the Chesapeake Bay region.