

Frozen feet, a few ducks and sunrise in a blind; great things can blossom from that simple formula. The dynamic is a difficult one to explain to someone who hasn't experienced the camaraderie that comes with sharing sweaty pre-dawn work and a damp, bone-deep chill, but it was a given for a group of wildlife and wetlands professionals gathered at Lake Eufaula for a duck hunt last week. A visit from Ducks Unlimited southern regional biologist and communications specialist Andrea "Andi" Cooper of Jackson, Miss., initiated the meeting in the mud. This was as much a time to build contacts and experience as it was a duck hunt. Cooper represents 13 states, but only one marks where she first experienced hunting public land and bagged her first mallard. "It helps me tremendously to experience it firsthand," she said. Cooper represents one leg of a trio that is key to Oklahoma's wetlands, waterfowl, and waterfowl hunters. Ducks Unlimited is well represented here. "You've got about 14,000 waterfowl hunters in Oklahoma and we have almost 7,000 Ducks Unlimited members ... so clearly the guys in Oklahoma kinda get it," she said. While dozens of private, non-profit and other government entities own or are involved in wetlands, the big three on the 12,000 acres of state public lands used by Oklahoma's hunters are the Department of Wildlife Conservation, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service and Ducks Unlimited. V Department information supervisor Micah Holmes arranged the hunt. He brought Cooper to Oklahoma City for a communications workshop then arranged for Cooper and representatives of the Wildlife Department, Natural Resource Conservation Service - and me - to visit the Harold Stuart Refuge at the Deep Fork Wildlife Management Area and some of his personal duck hunting haunts on the Eufaula Wildlife Management Area. On the hunt, they teamed up to create one of the department's Outdoor Oklahoma television episodes to focus on wetlands development and the cooperative federal, state and non-profit relationship. "We're proud of the fact that DU, NRCS and ODWC work so closely together," Holmes said. "I think that's a pretty unique deal and thought this was a pretty good opportunity to showcase that."

Talking to Cooper, NRCS Wetlands Reserve Program Specialist Steve Barner and, later, Wildlife Department wetlands biologist Alan Stacey, lit up an aspect of these projects that gets little press. If a wetland project could be considered the public face of a clock, then acronyms like NRCS, ODWC, DU, WDU and WRP would replace the numbers on that face and individuals working for those groups would be the cogs and wheels that make everything tick. Barner pointed out that wetlands projects seldom are the same, but a consistent factor over the years has been the people he works with who understand how the funding, planning, engineering and natural systems work. "Those relationships are invaluable," he said. "I have a lot of guys that have 35, 40 years of really solid technical experience." Roles filled by the agencies may vary project-to-project, year-to-year because of the land status, budgets or politics. The people involved know what needs to be done and they work together to plan who will do what and who can foot the bill, he said. Cooper put it succinctly: "It is integrally a partnership. You can't get any of it done without everybody," she said. Before she left for Mississippi I asked Cooper what she gained from hunting Oklahoma. Relationships and experience topped a list that went right on down to her frozen toes. "There's just something about spending time in a blind, doing any outdoors pursuit really, that builds relationships in a way I don't know any other way to build," she said. Oklahoma wetland collaboration Who does what? Ducks Unlimited : Planning, engineering, contract administration, inspections, grant writing, funding Natural Resources Conservation Service: Wetlands Reserve Program, engineering, funding Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation: Long-term management, project coordination, lands acquisition, funding Joint projects The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation has restored, created or enhanced 12,000 acres of public wetlands in the state. Cooperation with many partners, but principally Ducks Unlimited and the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service, has been key. Hackberry Flat – 4,000 acres, DU/ODWC/NRCS Mountain Park (Tom Steed Reservoir) – 200 acres, DU/ODWC Waurika (2 contracts underway) – 320 acres, DU/ODWC Steven Spring – 80 acres, ODWC/NRCS Walnut Slough at (Fort

Cobb Lake) – 30 acres, DU/ODWC
Drummond Flat – 5,000 acres, DU/ODWC/NRCS
Cottonwood Creek (Keystone L
– 220 acres, DU/ODWC
Herald Stuart Refuge (Deep Fork) – 90 acres, DU/ODWC
Swift Bottoms (Deep
Fork) – 100 acres, ODWC/NRCS
Copan – 350 acres, DU/ODWC
Overcup Bottoms (Oologah Lake) – 200
acres, DU/ODWC
Chouteau on McClelland-Kerr – 320 acres, DU/ODWC
Deep Fork (Eufaula Lake) – 700 acres,
DU/ODWC
Fourche Maline – 260 acres, DU/ODWC
Grassy Slough – 1,100 acres, ODWC/NRCS
Red Slough – 5,814
DU/ODWC/NRCS
SUBHEAD: Agencies come together to help public lands
Original Print Headline: Wetland partners