

DU, supporters celebrate rebirth of Freeborn Lake

By Chris Sebastian
Ducks Unlimited

Freeborn, Minn.— Ducks Unlimited supporters, partners, and members of the public on June 27 celebrated the transformation of Freeborn Lake from pea-green soup into clean, welcoming habitat for wildlife and people.

An open house dedication capped off the enhancement of Freeborn Lake and recognized the effect of Ducks Unlimited's Living Lakes Initiative.

Since 1909, Freeborn Lake in southern Minnesota had been struggling to survive. That was the year the outlet of this 2,222-acre shallow lake was dammed to control flooding, prevent drought-like conditions in the lake, and promote farming downstream.

The dam held water and supported new agriculture, but an unintended consequence was a less resilient lake with water levels unable to naturally fluctuate with wet and dry seasons. After invasive common carp took over, plants died and water quality diminished. Fluorescent green water, choked with algae, hosted scarce wildlife and little to no vegetation.

In 2014, Freeborn County leaders and the Minnesota DNR turned to Ducks Unlimited for a solution. The answer was replacing the aging, failing dam with a modern water-control structure. The design also includes a fish barrier, which prevents invasive fish from entering the lake where they destroy vegetation and re-suspend bottom nutrients.

Today, for the first time in more than 100 years, the lake is a clean, healthy body of water for ducks and residents alike.

Local Ducks Unlimited volunteer and donor Mark Jenzen was



Attendees at an open house ceremony observe a marker that credits the many groups and individuals that made restoration of Freeborn Lake in southern Minnesota a reality.

Part of Freeborn Lake's "fix" was to replace an aging, failing dam with a modern water-control structure. The new structure enables the DNR to manage lake levels. Adding or removing boards can replicate the natural flooding and drying of the shallow lake. *Photos courtesy of Ducks Unlimited*

elated to see the progress last weekend.

"Freeborn Lake back in the 1970s was a wonderful staging area for mallards, but it was on a steady decline and the water quality only got worse," Jenzen said. "It was so rewarding this weekend to take my children out here, show them the new vegetation, and to see how clean the water has become."

The project was engineered and constructed by Ducks Unlimited in collaboration with the Minnesota DNR and Freeborn County.

"The DNR is grateful for the partnership with Ducks Unlimited," said Dave Trauba, Minnesota DNR regional wildlife manager. "It's through

partnerships like this that help ensure healthy habitat, clean water, and abundant wildlife populations for generations to come."

More than 50 guests attended the unique open house dedication event, designed with COVID-19 safeguards in place. Guests dropped in over a four-hour period and maintained social distancing over a wide area as they toured the conservation project.

According to the DNR, the lake is an important migratory stop for waterfowl and other water birds. Coots and other waterfowl, including mallards and diving ducks, are common during spring and fall migration, but numbers are limited by the lack of food in the lake. At least 20 species of "greatest conservation need" use shallow-lake habitats throughout Minnesota.

The lake is crucial for people, too. Freeborn Lake has about 16 miles of shoreline with a mixture of residential areas, farmland, park and conservation lands, forests, wetlands, public rights of way, and a golf course. The lake has a strong hunting heritage, but one that has suffered throughout the years as water

quality decreased.

The project was funded in large part through a 2014 appropriation from Minnesota's Outdoor Heritage Fund as recommended by the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council. Also funding the project are Freeborn County and a grant recently recommended by

the North American Wetlands Conservation Council.

Freeborn Lake is one of several recent DU wetlands success stories in Minnesota. Historically DU has invested more than \$4.5 million to protect, enhance, or restore more than 227,000 acres of habitat across the state. DU's Living Lakes Initiative conserves managed shallow lakes and wetlands from central Iowa through northern Minnesota.



Egan Mattson (l-r), Aaron Eberhart, and Bill Aldinger prepare to tour a restored Freeborn Lake on June 27.

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