

Mike Cullins shows one of his framed Federal Duck Stamp collections that will be auctioned off at a CWA dinner.

BACKSTORY

SOME OF THOSE DUCK STAMP COLLECTIONS YOU SEE AT CWA EVENTS? THEY'RE PART OF THIS MAN'S PERSONAL COLLECTION.

Story and photos by **WAYNE TILCOCK**, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Mike Cullins remembers the day he decided to start his duck stamp collection.

It was the late 1940s and his grandmother had been trying to help him learn geography by starting a global stamp collection. Seven-year-old Mike, however, wasn't into it.

Noticing his lack of enthusiasm, his grandma asked what it was that he would like to collect. His reply was swift.

"Duck stamps," he said.

"Duck stamps?" came the bewildered reply from his grandma.

"Federal Duck Stamps," Mike clarified.

And there began a hobby that would continue for more than 70 years.

With his grandmother's help, he soon had binders filled several inches thick with stamps.

East Grasslands Duck Club Membership

Modesto Properties, Inc./Modesto Gun Club/East Grasslands Waterfowl Habitat Association

Founded in 1923

24 unique shooting ponds

1,852 acres adjacent to San Luis and Snow Bird refuges
(1,783 acres USFWS perpetual easement
53 acres almonds, 5 acre compound)

39 blinds, 28 members
8 wells with 5-year contract to sell to San Luis Water District

*Clubhouse with full kitchen/bar/bathroom
On-site working managers, Meals served, Trap shooting
Internet access, Satellite TV, Equipment barn
In addition to ducks also shoot early season dove and geese*

Membership includes:

*700+/- sf fully-furnished cabin (1bed/1bath, full kitchen, dining/living room)
Garage/shop w/gun cleaning station
2004 Yamaha Rhino 600cc
Hunting privileges for children, grandchildren, siblings*

\$150,000 (Reasonable offers considered)

**Contact Mike Bowhay (831) 236-8485
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2018-19 Assesment: \$8,500 EGWHA (tax deductible), \$1,500 MGC (food, beverages, utilities)

Mike's enthusiasm for that collectible piece of hunting life wasn't surprising considering how much he was obsessed with the sport.



Mike Cullins looks through one of his binders of old duck stamps.

He grew up hunting with his dad, Bill, back before Marin County was so urbanized. As a young man he was so eager to live the duck life that he tried get a job with the Department of Fish and Game. But a friend who worked in the Solano County DFG unit told Mike that he liked duck hunting too much to work there. Disheartened, he embarked on a different career path.

After serving with the Marine Corps in the early 1960s Mike entered a 30-year career in the fire service. No matter what he did, though, he couldn't shake his passion for ducks.

Hunting with his dad alongside former CWA President Ray Lewis convinced him to join the organization in the 1960s. He eventually served on the CWA Board of Directors (and is now a Life Benefactor and a member of CWA's Pintail Legacy Society). After retirement from life as a fire captain, he served on California's District IV Fish and Wildlife Commission. And, of course, he passed on the hunting lifestyle to his kids and grandkids.

All the while, his hunting collection grew, adding more unique items like blocks of stamps with their plate numbers, framed stamps signed by the artists and even a hand-written note from then-Secretary of the Interior Fred Seaton that accompanied a 1959 stamp (the only one to feature a dog).



Some of Mike Cullins's bands, including one from Russia.

Old decoys, duck calls, pins, goose collars, mounts and more filled his den. And, like any other devoted hunter, he filled his lanyard with bands from birds he shot, including one from Russia.

It was the duck stamps, though, that Mike was most proud of.



A vintage California hunting license.

There was just something about the quality of the artwork and the history behind them that kept his fascination. It was a delight that he wanted to share with others in the hunting community, so he decided to start creating framed stamp collections for CWA fundraising events.

Initially, he began with 30-stamp collections but they seemed to be missing something. After trying a few different ideas, Mike remembered how he had always admired the elaborate designs of early hunting licenses and thought they paired well with the stamps. He started pulling vintage licenses from his memorabilia collection and setting them into the center of a 66-stamp design to give the display a well-balanced look.

The choice of 66 stamps not only provides a symmetrical design around the license but also fits in every stamp of the 20th century, from the inaugural 1934-35 mallard stamp to the 1999-2000 greater scaup.

It's that length of time and the history associated with it that Mike hopes people will appreciate when they see the collections.

"I want to share this with people who have the same passion that I do," Cullins said. "I want to help preserve this rich history of what we enjoy because once it's gone, it's gone."

It's a rich history that Mike feels is already starting to fade away. As he pulls out one of his father's old hunting licenses, he laments the loss of artistry compared with the bland and technical ones hunters receive today. It's why he feels the stamps are now more important than ever for helping carry on the tradition of hunting that has been passed down for generations.

He also wants the vintage duck stamps, like those in his collection, to continue to serve their original purpose of supporting wetlands and waterfowl. He knows auctioning them off at CWA events will raise money that supports efforts to keep duck hunting alive and well in California. He's even willing to part with seven-plus decades of work to make it happen.

"I'm going to continue this until I use my last stamps," he said. "When they're out, they're out." 🦆