

FRIENDS OF BLACKWATER N.W.R. ANNUAL REPORT FOR FY 2023

The Board of Directors of the Friends of Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, Inc. is pleased to report that our 36th year supporting the Blackwater NWR has been very successful. The relationship between the Refuge staff, the volunteers, and the Friends of Blackwater has remained very close and has resulted in many accomplishments in support of the Refuge. All funds raised by the Friends and all activities provided are used to support the needs and goals of Blackwater NWR and the Chesapeake Marshlands National Wildlife Refuge Complex. Following are Friends activities over the past fiscal year – October 1, 2022 through September 30, 2023:

- The Bookstore, managed by Sue Fischer and Linda Chandlee, continued to be the major source of funds for Refuge projects and programs. IT support is provided by Bob Quinn. This year, Sue attended the Wild Bird Expo in Mexico, MO. It's always a great source for finding new items for the bookstore. A first for FOB, Sue was also able to attend the Public Lands Alliance Convention and Trade Show held in Portland, OR February 26 – March 2.
- From time to time, FOB receives bequests and significant donations to help in our Refuge support. This year a bequest was received from the Estate of Cheryl Lee Cadwell. Upon the loss of their loved ones, the family of Michael Antus and the family of Bill Giese asked that donations be made to FOB in lieu of flowers. In addition, Ms. Kate Murphy made a sizeable donation in memory of her husband Arnold Simon and in honor of Harry Armistead who, as many know, retired from doing his many years of birding tours at Blackwater. FOB cannot express our appreciation and gratitude enough for the thoughtfulness of these donors.
- Lisa Mayo and Ellie Ludvigsen attended the Friends Moving Forward Training at the National Conservation Training Center in West Virginia.
- FOB provided written testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies concerning Fiscal Year 2024 appropriations for the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
- FOB approved funding for weekly cleaning of the common areas of the Visitor Center and the Headquarters Building by 20/20 Cleaning Services through FY24.
- FOB continued supporting the Chronolog Citizen Scientist Project. Using a camera mount placed out on the elevated observation platform, visitors can take a picture from the mount and upload it to help create a long-term time lapse of the ecosystem. Active since 2021, 751 contributors have submitted 900 photos.
- Merrill Schuetz, our FOB Secretary, led our first Walk for the Wild campaign with help from Lisa Mayo. We hope to continue this fundraising event and get more people walking a 5K and learning about Blackwater NWR in the future! Thank you, Merrill and Lisa!
- Our Wild Goose Chase Women's Bicycle Ride was held on October 7-8. There were 253 enthusiastic women signed up for the event. Thank you to all the volunteers who made this ride possible! The net income from this event goes into the Refuge Contributed Funds Account which is used for educational purposes.

- FOB supported the Dorchester County Board of Education Teacher of the Year Awards Program.
- With the growing popularity of the Milky Way Photography Workshops organized by Robert Sullivan, Robert wanted to try doing multiple events this year. Unfortunately, Mother Nature had other plans forcing multiple cancellations. Clear skies finally prevailed on October 13. Yes, that was a Friday the 13th – our lucky day! Thank you to Robert and his crew of instructors and to all the participants who hung in there for a great night! One hundred percent of the net funds go to the Refuge Contributed Funds Account to support educational programs.
- FOB supported the Refuge’s 21st Annual Eagle Festival held as a full in-person event for the first time since the Covid pandemic. Approximately 700 people attended. FOB gained 22 new members at our membership drive during this event. Each was provided with the URL to our popular eBook on “Eagles at Blackwater” produced by Lisa Mayo. To help continue this most popular Refuge event of the year, FOB was awarded a Heart of Chesapeake Country Heritage Area mini-grant of \$2500 for the upcoming FY24 Eagle Festival. Thank you Janet Kerr for the great application!
- For the eighth year, the Friends supported the Federal Junior Duck Stamp Competition for Maryland held at Blackwater NWR in February. Organized by Ranger Tom Miller, volunteer judges selected a Maryland winner for this national competition. Thank you judges and other volunteers who assisted!
- FOB provided funding for maintenance of the Visitor Center’s Beneficial Insect and Butterfly Garden. FOB has the easy part. Volunteer Coordinator Michele Whitbeck and all the volunteers have the hard part. Thank you all for your weekly endeavors keeping the garden looking fantastic!
- FOB continued funding the cost of the water sample testing by the Horn Point Environmental Laboratory. Refuge volunteers, led by Ron Ketter, do the water sampling at 4 different sites around the Refuge.
- Ellie Ludvigsen, our Environmental Education Committee Chair, reported that 237 4th graders and 308 6th graders, totaling 545 students, attended our Environmental Education Program this year. Since 2007, 9885 Dorchester County Public School students have visited the Refuge as part of this program. FOB provides all bus transportation and any materials and equipment needed. Thanks to the army of volunteers and Refuge staff who make this program so successful!
- Working with Visitor Services Manager Ray Pattera, Ellie Ludvigsen and Lisa Mayo developed a new Friends Roving Ambassador Program to assist and educate visitors out on Wildlife Drive. Started in April 2023, four “Rovers” (Ellie, Lisa, Scott Warner, and Royce Ball) provided 259 volunteer hours and engaged 545 adults and 92 children this year. They gave out 79 Junior Refuge Manager booklets and 2 FOB brochures (after just recently being updated). In addition, rules/regulations were provided to 11 visitors (to help keep them out of trouble and to protect our wildlife). Thank you all for a great job! The program has been a major success and we look forward to finding a few more volunteer Rovers!
- The FOB Board decided to discontinue our Scholarship Program in favor of expanding our Intern support putting students to work right here at Blackwater NWR. Our third Blackwater Visitor Services Internship through a contract with the Student Conservation Association was filled by Faith Waaramaa. Faith was a recent graduate

of Washington College earning her B.S. in Environmental Science in 2022. She assisted the visitor services team with outreach, interpretation, and educational projects. Thank you, Faith!

- The 20th Annual Youth Fishing Fun Day was enjoyed by 48 kids (plus their accompanying adults) in June. FOB supplied giveaway items, T-shirts, bait, and lunch. Leftover items were sent to Eastern Neck NWR for a co-sponsored fishing event by the Friends of Eastern Neck NWR and Kent County Parks & Recreation.
- The Friends website continues to be maintained by Webmaster Lisa Mayo. In addition to links to the Refuge website, our FOB website also has links for Harriet Tubman information. Our social media accounts are also managed by Lisa. We now have 27,633 Facebook followers, 1,320 Instagram followers, and 563 YouTube followers. That's a 41% increase in Facebook followers! There are 3,436 newsletter subscribers (FOB members and others) being kept informed through our e-newsletters. These communications avenues have played a key part in keeping the public informed on what's currently happening at Blackwater NWR. Our cams are providing some great footage for Lisa's YouTube creations. Thank you, Lisa!
- Our wildlife cameras are operated daily (and nightly) by our IT expert, Bob Quinn. Bob actually controls the movement of the cams right from his home and sets the cam displays base on wildlife activity. The Cam Team handled several maintenance issues throughout the year. A new transformer and microphone were installed at the River Cam electrical box. We all enjoyed watching three osprey chicks grow up and fledge from the River Cam nest. Lisa Mayo did a fantastic YouTube video diary of their progress. Our Point-Tilt-Zoom (PTZ) Eagle Cam above the eagle nest was repaired with help from Andy Dawson of Xtreme Tree Service. Rick, Harry, and Bob provided ground support while Andy did the climb. Fortunately, the problem was just some corroded wires. We did get a little great horned owl action at the nest, but they were apparently just teasing us -- again. The Waterfowl Cam was upgraded with a Dahua PTZ camera, identical to the one on the River Cam, providing night vision of Pool 3. The extra power draw caused problems during a string of cloudy days. Harry is planning to install another solar panel and more batteries at the Waterfowl Cam before the birds arrive this fall. Rick and Harry also completed our usual annual weed whacking maintenance around the cam posts and solar panels. Harry created signs with QR codes and installed them along Wildlife Drive at the River Cam and Osprey Cam so visitors can see the cams online while out on WLD. Thank you Cam Team members -- Harry Heckathorn, Bob Quinn, and Lisa Mayo -- and a big thank you to Andy for his help with the Eagle Cam!
- The osprey nesting basket in the Blackwater River near Wildlife Drive sign post #11 was replaced with a new one built by Harry Heckathorn. Harry, Rick, Ray Paterra, and Nate Carle loaded the new nest basket and all the tools in the airboat and enjoyed the day on the river. The osprey pair seemed to really enjoy using the new perches on the nest basket.
- The Friends 2nd Photography Contest fundraiser is in progress and being managed by volunteer Lindsey Mountcastle. Winning photos will be shared on our social media and many of them will be put on display in the Visitor Center all year. Look for them at the next Eagle Festival! A few of our expert photographer FOB Board members will serve as judges. Thank you, Lindsey, for helping us keep this contest going!

- FOB funded the sandblasting and painting of the metalwork on the Marsh Edge Trail pavilion by E&D Sandblasting and Painting. It looks great. President Reagan, who visited this pavilion on July 10, 1984, would be proud!
- Volunteers are the backbone of our organization and the Refuge. This year, the Refuge again held its Volunteer Awards Banquet supported by FOB at the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad State Park pavilion. Michele Whitbeck reported that in 2022 there were 8454 hours contributed by 109 volunteers, the equivalent of four full time employees! Rick Abend received the 2022 Volunteer of the Year award.
- A major storm caused the cancellation of our 8th FOB Annual Volunteer Appreciation Crab Feast. Let's hope for better luck next year when we'll get to appreciate you – and the crabs – twice as much!
- Vicki Zobel, our Membership Committee Chair, reported a year-end total of 426 current memberships, including 66 life memberships, in the Friends of Blackwater.
- While it's taken a couple of years with many trials and tribulations, our Night Sky Tours educational program has been moving forward in leaps and bounds. Harry Heckathorn and Bob Quinn started regular monthly programs out at the telescope in April. In June, the local mosquito population reinforced our desire to move indoors! By July, Bob and Harry had achieved the capability of controlling the telescope from within the Visitor Center and the public got its first indoor program in the VC lobby viewing live captures of the stars on a 75" flatscreen TV. During FY23, a total of 182 people attended one of six Night Sky Tour events. Thank you, Harry and Bob for your persistence!
- To boost publicity of our Cam Program and our Night Sky Tours Program, Harry Heckathorn has given several speaking engagements: at our FOB Annual Meeting, at Old Trinity Church, at the Cambridge Yacht Club and at an interview for our local radio station WHCP. He has also enlisted the help of Debra Messick, a local reporter. The publicity is certainly paying off!
- FOB sponsored our second Maryland Master Naturalist course with Sue Fischer as our leader. This University of Maryland Extension Service program will run from September 7 through December 7. In addition to getting a great environmental education, our 24 students will be increasing the volunteer hours at the Refuge.
- After holding a Strategic Planning Meeting in September of 2022 moderated by Cathy Allen, a plan was approved by the FOB Board on February 23, 2023. A Structure Committee (Martha Foulon, Ellie Ludvigsen, Sue Fischer, and Rick Abend) started work on the plan implementation which necessitated changes to our Articles of Incorporation and our By-Laws. These changes were reviewed by Attorney Lynn Diamond, approved by the FOB Board on April 21, 2023, and approved at a Special Membership Meeting on June 3, 2023. Among the coming changes, the Board will now elect the FOB Officers annually from among the Board members. A contract bookkeeper will be hired to provide assistance with our finances. The number of Board members will be expanded to provide further governance of the organization. To attract more Board members, Board meetings will become hybrid internet/in-person meetings. Much remains to be done. Most pressing is the need to find a new Treasurer. Martha Foulon is retiring from the Board. Anyone interested in service on the FOB Board should contact Ellie Ludvigsen or Sue Fischer.

As FOB moves into its 37th year, we want to continue our successful relationship between the Refuge and the Friends. We also want to thank all who have worked with us over the years for their contribution of skills, time and donations enabling the completion of so many projects and we highly encourage all of our members to volunteer. We need you now more than ever! Stay safe and healthy.

An overall summary of the income and expenditures for FY 2023 prepared by Treasurer Martha Foulon is available upon request. All funds and activities provided by the Friends are used in cooperation with and direct support of the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. Overall, the financial position of the Friends of Blackwater is quite strong.

Sincerely,

Rick Abend
President, Friends of Blackwater