FRIENDS OF BLACKWATER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, INC.
ANNUAL REPORT FOR FY 2026

The Board of Directors of the Friends of Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, Inc. (FOB) is pleased to report that our 39th 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, 2025, through September 30, 2026:

- Eagle's Nest Nature Store
    - To begin this report, we should all thank Sue Fischer for more than ten years of considerable effort making our store a success. The task of learning the many aspects of store management began when Sue suggested that Sherry Morgan and I attend an Expo at the Gold Crest distribution center in Missouri at the end of September 2025. Many of the products in our store come from Gold Crest. Sue has coached us regarding the Clover point-of-sale system and many other store management tasks. I suspect Sue's advice will continue. Sherry has taken on the job of selecting new items for the store and has developed relationships with many company representatives. This is a large task since we use more than two dozen vendors. Both of us work on keeping accurate stock counts. We have well over 600 items in the store.

    - At this point, Sherry and I have taken over the management of the Nature Store. There has been a steep learning curve regarding all aspects of running the store, but we are making progress and volunteers have expressed their appreciation and willingness to help if they can. Phyllis Como has been a great help as her years of retail experience give our Nature Store a fresh look on a regular basis. Phyllis makes sure the racks and shelves are stocked. My role as one of the store managers includes handling money matters, liaison with the board, data entry into our Clover point-of-sale system, dealing with credit card and debit card security. As you can see, this is a team effort. Volunteers also help by placing price tags, restocking and performing various tasks when they're experiencing low traffic in the Visitor's Center.

    - The name of our store has been changed to Eagle's Nest Nature Store. We believe this name better reflects the range of products offered to our guests. In addition, the agreement between the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Friends of Blackwater refers several times to what we do as a Nature Store. An important goal is to make Clover and the store easier to use for volunteers. Almost all items are now tagged. Clothing sizes are marked on the hangers making it easier to restock.

- We now have sale items. Some items will be on sale until the stock for that item is no longer available. In order to reduce inventory, several items including Henschel hats and the coffee table book Chesapeake Bay of Light are on sale. The sale of closeouts began with the volunteer update on August 24th and continued for about three weeks. Our goal of clearing out old stock has been successful and will be ongoing. One particularly successful sale day took place during our annual Eagle Festival in March 2026. We were excited to end the day with over $6,600 in sales! Finally, as we move forward, our nature store will continue to offer visitors a pleasing selection of items relating to animals and birds found here at Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. All items, including night sky information, are intended to enhance the visitors' experience for both young and old.

- We would like to thank the volunteers, the Board and the Staff for helping us make this transition and look forward to taking the Nature Store into the future as we do our best to represent the beauty of Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge.

- Wild Goose Chase

  The bicycle ride through the refuge and surrounding areas of Dorchester County provided a unique, women focused cycling event to raise awareness of the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. The WGC team, led by Sherry Murray, planned an amazing weekend-long event that provided workshops, and interpretative events in the Refuge and culminated with 18-, 31-, and 63-mile rides on Sunday. This year there were 224 registered riders. Sunday was a windy and rainy day and 110 intrepid riders checked in for the ride! The event generated net proceeds of nearly $13,000.

- Photo Contest

  For the 2026 Friends of Blackwater Photo Contest, it was a very successful year! We had 41 participants and 171 submissions of which 169 were accepted. The Wildlife category garnered the majority of submissions at 128, followed by Landscape at 27, Flora/Macro at 11, and Nightsky at 3 . The contest raised $1000. With permission of the photographers, the winning prints are displayed in the Visitor Center gallery.

- Membership and Donations

  FOB ended FY2025 with 348 members. The Membership Working Group was very active this year identifying opportunities to grow our membership. Maureen Long and Jenn Evans managed the member database and continued to expand their use of the CRM software tool for managing information. Additionally, Marybeth Daniels developed her acumen to use Donor Snap for event management. This has been a stand out year for Donations. We exceeded our projected donation amounts with two notable donations. We received a $10,000 donation from Fire Research Alliance, a business expanding in Cambridge, MD. Additionally, we received a generous donation from the

estate of Janet Shields, a long time volunteer at Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge.

- Bird Strike Window Treatment

  Phase I of the Bird Strike project was completed. Due to the diligence of Steve Funderburk, all of the windows at the Visitors' Center have been completed. The treatment involves applying film on the windows of the VC that interrupt reflections, create visual barriers, and prevent bird strikes.

- Chronolog

  FOB continued supporting the Chronolog Citizen Scientist Project with 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, 1293 contributors submitted 1721 photos. This project is documenting the slow but steady impact of sea level rise on Blackwater NWR habitat.

- Environmental Education

  Funding for the Refuge's Environmental Education Program for 4th and 6th grade Dorchester County students continued. We had 370 4th graders and 268 6th graders attend in April and May of 2026, plus 80 4th graders to start the rotation in September 2026, for a total of 638 students. Since 2007, 11,850 students have visited the Refuge as part of this program. FOB provides all bus transportation and materials and equipment needed for their activities. Thanks to the army of volunteers and Refuge staff who make this program so successful! A special thank you to the Refuge staff that worked hard to reschedule the 4th graders into the Spring of 2026 due to the Government shutdown in the Fall of 2025.

- Eagle and Osprey Cameras
  - This year, our two Dahua PTZ wildlife cameras were replaced with more capable Axis PTZ cameras. The Waterfowl Camera was struck by lightning in early August 2025, destroying the camera, microphone, and associated electronics and communication equipment. A few months later, the River Camera experienced an irreparable electronic failure and was taken out of service and removed. Both cameras and their supporting electronic systems were replaced this year – in time for viewing migratory waterfowl in impoundment ponds and for the return of the osprey in March.

  - The two new Axis cameras require AC power, so inverters were included in the replacement electronics while the ethernet switches remain under DC power. We also added two additional solar panels at the River Camera location.

  - The River Camera recorded activity from the arrival of the male osprey in mid-March through his departure in the fall. In April, three hatched osprey chicks were viewed and two survived to fledge.

- The original Osprey Camera, installed in 2018, also failed in early spring. We plan to replace this camera in the Fall of 2026 to avoid disturbing the birds in the summer. We replaced the five 12-volt storage batteries and upgraded the power system to heavier-gauge wire. The Osprey Camera location is a critical node in the microwave communication system that links all five wildlife cameras and the astronomical telescope with the control room in the Visitor Center. Consequently, upgrading and renovating the power system at this location was particularly important.

- For the Eagle Camera the ethernet cable connecting the electronics box to the microwave communication device on Key Wallace Drive was replaced. The cameras and microphones remain functional, and so, we intend to monitor activity at the nest from the FOB office and from home.

- In mid-summer, we detected interference with the microwave communication system, With the permission and support of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service personnel, the interfering vegetation was trimmed to open the communication paths. This helped, but it was decided to replace the wide field microwave transceiver and ethernet cable. When we did, the optically degraded 8-year-old osprey camera came to life. Current plans include replacing this camera in early FY27.

- Bob Quinn, Harry Heckathorn and Steve Levin continued to provide outstanding support of our communications systems, the cameras and data collection and storage. FOB appreciates the talent, dedication, and expertise of this team!

- Communication

  Social media is the primary means of sharing FOB news and Refuge wildlife activity captured by the Refuge cameras and by visiting photographers. Lisa Mayo, our social media manager and accomplished photographer, kept camera followers updated about nest action on the FOB's Facebook, Instagram and YouTube accounts as well as through the FOB's email newsletter. The live video with audio, posted on the Friends of Blackwater website, is very popular and is enjoyed worldwide.

- Eagle Fest 2026

  The Eagle Fest returned to the Refuge in 2026 following last year's cancellation due to the HPAI virus. The festival focuses on bald eagles and other birds of prey with educational programs and exhibits featuring live birds and reptiles, hands-on activities and refuge tours. The FOB provides significant financial support to this very popular event. This year's event was well attended with over 1500 attendees. This community outreach event is popular with enthusiasts of all ages. The children's tent offers educational crafts, the bird tours are always fully subscribed and the presentations, bird house building and Nature Store sales are well subscribed.

- Exhibit Renovation – Second Floor

  The FOB continues to commit to, and support the much-needed renovation of the second floor. The Refuge staff continued to work towards completion of the new roof to be followed by the interior restoration and then exhibit installation. We are excited to see the work begin this fiscal year.

- Youth Fishing Fun Day

  The 22st Annual Youth Fishing Fun Day was enjoyed in June. FOB supplied giveaway items, T-shirts, bait, and lunch. This event continues to be one of our best family fun days of the year! Thank you, volunteers!

- Visitor Center/ Headquarters Building Cleaning

  FOB continued funding the weekly cleaning of the common areas in the VC and Headquarters Building by 20/20 Cleaning Services.

- Volunteer Support and Awards Banquet

  Volunteers are the backbone of our FOB organization and the Refuge. This year, the Refuge's Volunteer Awards Banquet supported by FOB was again held at the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad State Park pavilion. While we have never counted the thousands of hours contributed directly toward FOB activities, the Refuge has always tracked volunteer hours for Refuge activities. Michele Whitbeck reported that in 2025 there were 7634 hours contributed to the Refuge by 143 volunteers. The award for Volunteer of the Year went to Karl McGovern.

- Staff Support

  FOB provided funding for a summer intern to support Blackwater VC staff.

- Butterfly Pollination Garden

  FOB supported maintenance of the VC's Beneficial Insect and Butterfly Garden. The Garden is a popular opportunity for our guests to learn about native plants as well as experience many native fauna, such as toads, tree frogs, and a multitude of insects and birds that frequent this space. Our volunteers keep it in tip-top shape!

- Junior Duck Stamp Competition

  For the eleventh year, FOB supported the Federal Junior Duck Stamp Competition. Organized by Ranger Tom Miller, volunteer judges selected a Maryland winner for this national competition. Some of the talent we see is just amazing. Thank you judges and other volunteers who assisted!

- Litter Pick-up

  Another litter pick-up day was scheduled for BWR in 2026, and it was a success again removing litter and blown-in debris from the Refuge.

- Night Sky Tour

- The FOB Night Sky Tours, conducted by Harry Heckathorn and Bob Quinn, have been very popular. Seven Blackwater Night Sky Tours took place during FY2026. Four tours could not be held due to cloudy weather, and one tour was canceled due to the government shutdown. Attendance this fiscal year was 296 making for a total attendance of 1172 since the first tour in April 2023.

- The first significant equipment failure occurred during Tour #41 on the night of 14 July when the telescope would not track properly. The 33 attendees were treated to a 90-minute slide show instead of live images from the telescope. In subsequent days, the equatorially mounted telescope was removed from the concrete pier and transported to MeadeMods in Delta PA for a complete overhaul and several beneficial upgrades. After refurbishment, the telescope was remounted on its concrete pier, aligned to the north celestial pole, and tested (mechanically and optically) prior to the next scheduled Sky Tour.

- Volunteer Update Lunch

  Lunch was provided by FOB for the Refuge's annual Volunteer Update held in August. This event is always well attended and not only provides our volunteers with the latest information but also seeks to attract new volunteers for the Refuge and FOB.

- Water Sample – Horns Point Lab

  FOB continued funding the cost of the water sample testing by the Horn Point Environmental Laboratory. Refuge volunteers, led by Ron Ketter, performed water sampling at 4 different sites around the Refuge.

- Distinguished Lecturer Series (DLS)

  - The Distinguished Speaker Series (DSS) began in 2025 and has evolved since the first presentation. In 2026, the DSS hosted two lectures, both held at the Intergenerational Center in Cambridge, MD. The February presentation was given by Matt Whitbeck and Ron Ketter on Marsh Birds of Blackwater and had over 60 guests in attendance. In April, Reenie Rice spoke to our guests about landscaping at your home, focusing on native plants.

  - The Working Group continues to gather a list of potential speakers that will be exceptional at highlighting topics to our Eastern Shore community and growing the impact of Blackwater Refuge and FOB as leaders in conservation.

- Refuge Advocacy

  The FOB Advocacy Committee, spearheaded by Lisa Mayo, continued to provide a web page for the FOB website outlining how U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service budget and staff reductions dramatically impacted the refuge. The FOB used the web page and newsletter updates to keep supporters informed on recent federal government actions and how citizens could show support for the refuge.

As FOB moves into its 40th year, we want to continue our successful relationship between the Refuge and the Friends. We also want to thank all who 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 our members to volunteer. We need you now more than ever!

An overall summary of the income and expenditures for FY 2026 prepared by Treasurer Jill Levin 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 FOB continues to be robust and our commitment has never been stronger.

Sincerely,

Cindy Burns

Cindy Burns
President
Friends of Blackwater