

**FRIENDS OF BLACKWATER N.W.R.
ANNUAL REPORT FOR FY 2024**

The Board of Directors of the Friends of Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, Inc. is pleased to report that our 37th 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, 2023 through September 30, 2024:

- The Bookstore, managed by Sue Fischer and Linda Chandlee, continued to be the major source of funds for Refuge projects and programs. Sue has enlisted Phyllis Como to help manage the continuous shelf stocking. Thanks to all of our volunteers who help make this one of the most successful gift shops in the National Wildlife Refuge System!
- In October 2023, current Board members agreed to remain in place while we took strides to complete some strategic plan goals which included expanding our Board membership. In January, Martha Foulon-Tonat, our Treasurer, resigned as Jill Levin (recruited by Harry Heckathorn) took over that position. Barbara Marshall, owner of Complete Bookkeeping Services, LLC, has been contracted to assist Jill with our finances. Our financial recordkeeping is changing from Excel to Quickbooks. Ellie Ludvigsen led the search for more Board members. We're happy to announce Cindy Burns, Steve Funderburk, and Suzanne Slear as our newest recruits. Merrill Schuetz resigned at the end of her latest term after serving six fantastic years as FOB Secretary. Lisa Mayo has resigned from the Board, but is continuing in her same capacity as FOB webmaster and social media guru. After 10 years as FOB President, Rick Abend stepped down from that position but is continuing on the Board as a member of the Governance Committee. Harry Heckathorn has stepped down as FOB Vice-President. Harry is continuing on the Board and also with his Wildlife Camera and Blackwater Night Sky Tour work. The Board will be holding its election of officers for FY25 in October, 2024. Officer elections will be done annually. In addition to our Officers, other Board members will be part of our Governance, Finance, and/or Programs Committees. Many Working Groups (which may not necessarily include a Board member) will align under one of these three Board committees. We hope spreading the workload will make our jobs easier.
- The Board purchased a Logitech System (approved by U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service) to allow for hybrid virtual/in-person Board meetings. We will use the Zoom platform. A new meeting schedule will be developed.
- Our Friends Partnership Agreement and Supplemental Agreement for operation of the Bookstore were renewed with the Refuge in May 2024. The renewal is good for five years.
- FOB provided written testimony to both the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate Subcommittees for Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies concerning

FY2025 appropriations for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. We requested an allocation of \$602.3 million for National Wildlife Refuge System Operations and Maintenance.

- Robert Sullivan was able to hold two Milky Way Photography Workshop fundraisers. The first, delayed from last year, was held in October 2023 and the second was held in September of 2024. After struggling with cloudy and smokey skies, these workshops provided over \$3500 for the Refuge Contributed Funds Account to be used for educational and outreach programs. Robert has stepped down from doing these workshops, but has enlisted Cheryl Kerr, who has assisted him for several years, to take over. Thank you, Robert and Cheryl, and all those attendees who never gave up on the weather!
- With continued federal budget cuts, the FOB Board agreed to continue funding for weekly cleaning of the common areas of the Visitor Center and the Headquarters Building by 20/20 Cleaning Services.
- The second Friends sponsored Maryland Master Naturalist class was completed in December. Sue Fischer coordinated this University of Maryland program with 24 students in attendance. The cadre of instructors were simply outstanding! Thank you, Sue!
- 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, 966 contributors have submitted 1189 photos. This project is documenting the slow but steady impact of sea level rise on Blackwater NWR habitat.
- After demolition of the building at the Wildlife Drive entrance was completed for expansion of the parking area for fishing, FOB approved funding to restore electric to the Wildlife Drive gate.
- With the extensive drought last summer, getting the impoundments filled with water for the migrating waterfowl looked dismal. FOB funded the repair of one of the Refuge wells at a cost of over \$6000. We were able to get the ground saturated before a couple nice storms got us back on track. Waterfowl Cam watchers (and the Refuge managers) were elated to be able to watch all the waterfowl in Pools 3A and 3B!
- Due to timing of our fiscal year, two Wild Goose Chase Women's Bicycle Rides took place. The first was held October 7-8, 2023 and netted over \$10,900 for the Contributed Funds Account. To avoid the possibility of having to deal with a government shutdown on October 1, the second event was held right at the end of the fiscal year on Sep 28-29. While the final figures are not in, we think the net will be over \$12,000 for the CFA. With over 250 women registered, only about half actually showed up due to weather and logistical changes. Due to extremely high tides, only two of the three rest stops were able to open. Two of the routes were canceled and the other two were modified. Fortunately, the unopened packaged rest stop food was able to be returned – unlike the catered food. The logistics nightmare, the weather, and constant battle with high tides flooding our county roads may have made this the last year of the official Wild Goose Chase. Thank you to Sue Fischer and ALL the volunteers who have kept this event alive over the years! It has provided much needed support to the Refuge since 2008.

- FOB supported the Refuge's 22nd Annual Eagle Festival in March. The Refuge estimated an attendance of over 2100 visitors, the largest ever! To help with the rising costs, FOB received a \$2500 grant from the Heart of Chesapeake Country Heritage Area. Thank you Janet Kerr for another successful grant application and thank you HCCHA! Janet has since stepped down as our grant writer. New Board member Steve Funderburk is taking over this important task.
- FOB received its first matching funds donation through the Benevity Causes donation platform. Over 200 corporations use this platform. FOB was nominated by life member Maria Freire. If your employer will match your charitable donation, have them contact Benevity Causes to see how they can double your donation to FOB!
- For the ninth 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. Some of the talent we see is just amazing. Thank you judges and other volunteers who assisted!
- FOB provided funding for maintenance of the Visitor Center's Beneficial Insect and Butterfly Garden. Our volunteers keep it in tip-top shape!
- 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.
- 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.
- Funding for the Refuge's Environmental Education Program for 4th and 6th grade Dorchester County students continued. Ellie Ludvigsen, our Environmental Education Committee Chair reported that 347 4th graders attended in October and 320 6th graders attended in April, for a total of 667 students. Since 2007, 10,552 students have visited the Refuge as part of this program. FOB provides all bus transportation and any materials and equipment needed for their activities. Thanks to the army of volunteers and Refuge staff who make this program so successful!
- Our Friends Roving Ambassador Program continued in its second year. Our Rovers, Lisa Mayo, Ellie Ludvigsen, Scott Warner, and Royce Ball spent a total of 493 hours assisting and educating visitors (1516 adults & 120 children) on the Wildlife Drive. A total of 90 violations were noted. This education opportunity is SO important for the protection of our wildlife! Through a discussion with one of our frequent handicapped visitors, another positive impact was that the Refuge added some hard pack fill to level the area leading to the photo blind entrance along Wildlife Drive providing easier wheelchair access. Thank you, Rovers!
- FOB supported our fourth Blackwater Visitor Services Internship through a \$15,000+ contract with the Student Conservation Association. Our intern, Andrew Ellestad, was able to provide some much needed support for the Visitor Center.
- The 21st Annual Youth Fishing Fun Day was enjoyed by 70 kids in June. FOB supplied giveaway items, T-shirts, bait, and lunch. One of the best family fun days of the year! Thank you volunteers!
- 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

29,654 Facebook followers, 1,384 Instagram followers, and 842 YouTube followers. There are 2,961 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 Cam Team stayed busy. Bob Quinn continued his support of our communications systems out at the cams in the field, in the Visitor Center, and with our internet service provider. He also controls the cameras, usually from home, and is responsible for archiving the audio-video information used by Lisa Mayo to provide clips for our social media pages. We watched two osprey chicks grow up and fledge from the River Cam nest. Harry upgraded the Waterfowl Cam with a third solar panel and five more batteries, now totaling ten, to provide more stable power. This was the first year that we didn't lose power during winter months at the W-Cam. This is super important since the R-Cam microwave communication also links through the W-Cam. Losing power at the W-Cam effectively shuts down two cameras. Thank you, Harry, for your persistence! We were excited when the Osprey Cam nest up on the telephone pole had its first successful nest in many years. Unfortunately, the newbie parents failed to take care of the chicks and they didn't make it. It was a nature story we did not expect. Perhaps the most exciting news is that a pair of great horned owls successfully nested in our Eagle Cam nest. One of two eggs hatched and we enjoyed seeing how fast the owlet grew. Then the day came when it was branching and fell off the limb – not uncommon in the owl world. Though we didn't see it on the cam any longer, the parents were right there to continue taking care of it. We also completed our usual weed whacking maintenance around the cam posts and solar panels and the path to the Eagle Cam (Owl) tree. This year, Steve Levin joined Harry and I for that task. Steve is joining the Cam Team as Harry's protégé learning all about cam maintenance. Welcome, Steve! He and Harry will be checking the batteries on the solar powered cams, including the W-Cam when we get permission to go out on the newly refurbished dike along Pools 3A and 3B. FOB is truly blessed to have the talent, dedication, and expertise of Lisa, Bob, Harry and Steve! Thank you!
- The first osprey nesting basket on the left when crossing the causeway on Wildlife Drive was replaced. Harry Heckathorn built the new nest and he and new volunteer Steve Levin assisted Refuge staff Ray Paterra and Matt Whitbeck with the replacement. Our osprey basket nests had great success this year!
- The Friends 2nd Annual Photography Contest fundraiser was managed by Lindsey Mountcastle. We received 195 entries. Judges included Lisa Mayo, Ellie Ludvigsen, and Wayne Zussman. All the winning photos were shared on our social media and some of them have been on display in the Visitor Center all year. Congratulations to our winners and thank you Lindsey and the whole photo contest team! The upcoming contest will be managed by Martha Foulon and judges will include Wayne Zussman, Steve Funderburk, and Jeffrey Snyder.
- 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 2023 there were 9,219 hours contributed to the Refuge by 145 volunteers. That's the equivalent of over 4 ½ full time employees! Ellie Ludvigsen was named Volunteer of the Year. A special Life Membership to the Friends of Blackwater was awarded to Robert Sullivan.

- After managing our memberships and donations since October 2019, Vicki Zobel stepped down as our Membership Committee Chair in June. This task has been taken over by Maureen Long. To aid with membership and donations, a working group, headed by Cindy Burns, researched several Customer Relations Management tools and the FOB Board voted to use Donor Snap for this purpose. Maureen reported a year-end total of 491 current FOB memberships, including 69 life memberships.
- Presentations of our Night Sky Tours educational program by Harry Heckathorn and Bob Quinn have been ongoing and very popular. Seven programs drew a total of 243 attendees. Weeks-long cloudy weather during the spring and summer blocked five other planned events. Currently, invitations are sent to 598 individual email addresses. Typically, attendance requests for an event now outnumber available seats by about 50%. Always looking to boost publicity, Harry also did a talk about the program for the Cambridge Woman's Club, Inc.
- The FOB Board voted to have Bay Country Communications do a WIFI equipment upgrade in the Visitor Center. Maintenance of the current equipment which was installed in 2017 is no longer supported. This will be completed in FY25.
- FOB provided lunch in support of a public Non-lead Ammo Partnership Workshop held at the Visitor Center in September. The program was very educational for hunters and non-hunters alike. Over the next couple of years, the Refuge will be transitioning to a requirement for lead-free hunting and fishing gear. This will be a win-win for both wildlife and humans.
- FOB also funded \$3000 to help with gate repair or replacement on 10 Refuge hunt areas. Gary Middleton is leading this project for the Refuge.

As FOB moves into its 38th 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!

An overall summary of the income and expenditures for FY 2024 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 Friends of Blackwater is quite strong.

Sincerely,

Rick Abend
President, Friends of Blackwater