
Fostering Friends: Building Citizen Support For National Wildlife Refuges

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ABSTRACT

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages 545 national wildlife refuges throughout the country. There are currently 245 community support, or Friends, groups providing much-needed funding, advocacy, and volunteer staffing for these precious places.

In partnership with the National Wildlife Refuge Association, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and the National Audubon Society, the Service offers a broad range of resources for these invaluable organizations. Publications, communications, training, grants, mentoring, workshops, and awards provide a resource framework for groups at all stages of development.

Even with this support system, the success or failure of individual Friends groups often is determined by their interactions with the refuge manager and staff. A healthy relationship between a group and its refuge is based on open and consistent communication, trust, respect, and creativity. The manager's role is to coach and work with the group to develop and maintain a shared vision and to provide the group with the information it needs to accomplish its goals. Refuge staff contribute by representing the refuge well in the community and forming positive relationships with volunteers and Friends.

In the eight-state Midwest Region of the Refuge System, 31 Friends groups support 34 refuges, including four in Illinois. Their activities include sponsoring special events, enhancing visitor facilities, operating sales outlets, advocating for visitor centers, and funding internships, habitat restoration, and wildlife monitoring. One group even prevented construction of a 20,000-seat outdoor amphitheater adjacent to a refuge!

INTRODUCTION

The National Wildlife Refuge System Friends Program has been in place for nearly 10 years. In that time, the number of Friends groups nationally has more than tripled, and funding for the Refuge System has increased. The program's success is due to both strong national support and dedicated local staffs. Employees at all levels of the Refuge System play a role in building and maintaining the program.

BACKGROUND

The National Wildlife Refuge System consists of 545 refuges and more than 3,000 waterfowl production areas covering 96 million acres throughout the U.S. It is the only federal network of lands dedicated specifically to

wildlife conservation. Approximately 40 million people visit refuges each year to enjoy wildlife-dependent activities such as hunting, fishing, wildlife photography and observation, interpretation, and environmental education.

The Midwest Region of the Service covers eight states in the heart of America – Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio. The region has 53 national wildlife refuges and 12 wetland management districts, which oversee waterfowl production areas. Thirty-one Friends groups support their local Service stations, including four in Illinois.

The Service defines a Friends group as a private, nonprofit organization that focuses its efforts on one or more stations and supports the mission and purposes of the station(s).

Friends groups are involved with almost every aspect of refuge management. They assist both physically and financially with outreach to the local community, educational programs, wildlife and habitat management, and special events.

Friends groups are especially valuable for the things they can do that Service employees cannot – advocacy and fundraising. Groups garner political support for stations and the Refuge System as a whole by working closely with their elected officials. They secure additional funds through on-site sales outlets, grants, and Congressional appropriations.

Recognizing the priceless contributions of Friends groups, in 1996, the Service joined with the National Wildlife Refuge Association, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and the National Audubon Society to establish the Refuge System Friends Initiative. The program sought to encourage and organize community involvement in the activities of the Refuge System; increase visibility and support for the System; and increase the number and effectiveness of Friends groups nationally.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer and Community Partnership Act of 1998 augmented the Refuge Friends Program. It authorized funding for expanding the program and streamlined the process through which refuges form partnerships and accept donations from outside sources.

NATIONAL RESOURCES

The Refuge Friends Program has evolved into a comprehensive support system for Friends organizations. Publications, communications, training, grants, mentoring, workshops, and awards provide resources for all groups - new and old, large and small.

Two publications were produced through the Friends Initiative: *Taking Flight: An Introduction to Building Refuge Friends Organizations* and *Building Your Nest Egg: An Introduction to Raising Funds for Refuge Friends Groups*. These guides were made available to all Friends groups and can now be downloaded from the Refuge Association's web site.

The Friends program includes multiple communication vehicles for Friends members. The Service, the Refuge Association, and the Fish and Wildlife Foundation maintain web sites with information about grants and other resources available to Friends. The Association's site is particularly helpful. The Association manages the Friends listserv, which allows members to discuss issues and exchange advice electronically. The Service and the Association each publish quarterly newsletters that inform Friends and other partners about current events in the Refuge System.

Friends members are eligible to attend courses at the Service's National Conservation Training Center, in Shep-

herdstown, WV. Both Friends and staff may attend “Developing and Working with Friends Groups” and “Sales Outlets: Beyond Bookstores.” Friends members are also encouraged to sign up for focused trainings on subjects such as environmental education, advocacy, and habitat restoration. The Friends of the National Conservation Training Center provides grants for tuition, lodging, and meals for refuge Friends members.

The Fish and Wildlife Foundation offers numerous grants for refuge Friends organizations. Competitive seed grants of \$1,500 - 5,000 are available in three categories: Start-Up, Capacity-Building, and Project-Specific, with two grant cycles occurring each year. The Service provides “The Nature of Learning” grants, which encourage the use of national wildlife refuges as outdoor classrooms and seek to promote a greater understanding of conservation issues while enhancing student academic achievement. First-year grants are \$5,000, and second- and third-year grants are \$3,000.

The Service administers the Friends Mentoring Program. Two-person teams consisting of a refuge manager and a Friends member visit refuges who are forming Friends groups or need assistance with existing groups. The mentor team is trained by the Service to work with refuge staff and Friends members to establish new groups and to nurture and advise groups that are beyond the earliest stage of development.

National and regional workshops sponsored by the Service and the Refuge Association offer Friends opportunities for networking, information exchange, and training. National workshops are held every other year in Washington, DC, and include visits by Friends members to Capitol Hill to meet with their elected representatives. The workshops are timed to follow the delivery of the President’s budget to Congress. Regional workshops are held during the alternate years and provide the chance for more Friends members and staff to attend.

It is important to publicly recognize outstanding groups and individuals. The Refuge Association and Fish and Wildlife Foundation present Friends Group of the Year and Volunteer of the Year awards annually. Honorees receive a commemorative plaque, a monetary award (\$2,000 for Friends Group, \$1,000 for Volunteer), and paid travel expenses to the award presentation.

ROLES OF REFUGE STAFF

Even with a comprehensive support system, the success or failure of individual Friends groups is often determined by interactions with the refuge manager and staff. Managers should serve as mentors to their groups, helping develop and maintain a shared vision for the refuge. Refuges with healthy, productive Friends groups usually have managers who:

- Are actively involved and supportive;
- Serve as coaches, providing information about the agency and the site and helping the groups achieve their goals;
- Maintain optimism and an open mind, buffering their groups from outside forces that would derail enthusiasm, and welcoming new points of view;
- Keep communication channels open and do not make assumptions;
- Build an atmosphere of trust between group members and refuge staff;
- Empower and encourage their groups to be creative and innovative and seek more challenges;
- Identify refuge needs and potential projects for their groups;
- Reward and recognize their groups and give credit for success to the groups whenever possible

While the manager should be the main contact for the group, the rest of the staff plays a vital role. All employees, especially those in uniform, represent the agency or organization in the public’s eye and contribute to its image. The public does not stop to consider job responsibilities when they have questions. They ask whomever

they meet, which is often a field biologist or maintenance person. Those employees should be courteous, helpful, and aware of current agency issues.

All employees who work with volunteers should treat them as important members of the staff. Many Friends groups have been formed by enthusiastic volunteers who want to do more for their refuges. Often, there is much overlap between the refuge volunteer corps and the Friends group. Refuge staff can show their support by attending Friends' functions. It's a small way to show appreciation for the group's work.

FRIENDS ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Since the inception of the Refuge Friends Program in 1996, the number of Friends groups supporting Service stations has grown from 74 to more than 245. There are 40,000 Friends members nationally. Millions of dollars have been raised for the Refuge System, and significantly more habitat has been restored and protected. The number of volunteers and volunteer hours has increased, as has the public visibility of the Refuge System. There has been a record number of Congressional funding requests and increases to support refuges.

During Fiscal Year 2004, Friends groups in the Midwest supported their stations by organizing and sponsoring special events; operating book stores; funding internships; raising money to build visitor facilities, from boardwalks trails, and kiosks, to visitor centers; assisting with wildlife and habitat management; and fighting outside threats such as development and pollution.

In a particularly notable case, the Friends of the Minnesota Valley were instrumental in protecting Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge from a proposed outdoor amphitheater on land adjacent to the refuge. The group was the first to take legal action against the proposal and established a legal defense fund to pay for litigation expenses. They also worked with the Refuge Association and National Audubon Society to generate several hundred comments opposing the project, which was eventually voted down by local officials.

CONCLUSION

Refuge Friends groups provide much-needed funding, advocacy, and volunteer staffing for the stations they support. The National Wildlife Refuge System is stronger and safer, thanks to their efforts.

While there is no magic formula for creating and sustaining Friends groups, successful groups within the Refuge System have benefited from the extensive resources available nationally; enthusiastic, involved station managers; and supportive staff. Employees at all levels of an organization can influence one or more of these elements and lay the groundwork for a supportive, productive Friends group.

Useful web sites:

Friends.fws.gov

National Wildlife Refuge System Friends

www.refugenet.org National Wildlife Refuge Association (includes copies of Taking Flight: An Introduction to Building Refuge Friends Organizations and Building Your Nest Egg: An Introduction to Raising Funds for Refuge Friends Groups for downloading)

www.nfwf.org National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (includes information on Friends grant program)
