



Key Element 4

Understand FWS Systems & Nonprofit Management



Flicker / JO ANNA GHABBAN

Purple martins at
Parker River NWR,
Massachusetts



It is critical to understand each other's system in order to create a sustainable Friends/Refuge collaboration. Without this understanding, misconceptions and misunderstanding will easily develop. The preceding chapter provides useful information about nonprofit management—this chapter will focus on the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, a diverse federal agency with numerous programs and several layers of administration, manages the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Service operates under and administers more than 140 laws, as well as many regulations and Executive Orders. Explaining in detail how the FWS functions is beyond the scope of this guide. Friends members are encouraged to spend time discussing issues with their Refuge Managers. The Fish and Wildlife Service and National Wildlife Refuge Association also provide a variety of training courses, workshops and conferences that Friends members will find helpful in understanding the NWRS.

At the most basic level, Friends members must understand that Refuge Managers are the legal guardians of the refuge—they make the final management decisions. When Kelby Ouchley, Manager, Black Bayou Lake NWR, entered into the Friends/Refuge collaboration, he told the Friends board: “There will be times I will say ‘no’ to an idea. I am legally responsible to abide by certain rules.” And FWS Mentor and Refuge Manager, Glenn Carowan, speaks to a “51 percent Refuge/49 percent Friends relationship,” suggesting while there is equity in the relationship, the partners are not *equal*—the “buck” stops with the manager.

It's up to the Friends board to learn everything possible about their local refuge and the System overall. And it's up to the Refuge Manager and staff to provide the education Friends members need to become effective partners.

For a place to begin, FWS Mentor, Molly Krival, offers the following:

- Friends need to upgrade their understanding of the refuge system, FWS including Regional Offices, and the regulations governing how their local staff works.
- Friends need to upgrade their understanding of the ecosystem and wildlife locally and regionally. Master Naturalist training should be encouraged.
- Friends need to learn how to intervene on behalf of refuge funding and regulations, and to become acquainted with their congressional representatives and the federal budget processes that matter to the refuges.



To begin the learning process, Friends members can start with their manager by asking about her/his job and the challenges facing the refuge. For one example, see the profile included in this section: *A Day in the Life of a Refuge Manager*. Another step is to use the example of the Tennessee NWR collaboration where the Friends Board has made education a priority: the partners attend each other's meetings and part of every Friends board meeting is dedicated to learning something about the refuge (See Profile, p. 45).

The Refuge Manager's Job is a Balancing Act

Understanding what it takes to manage a refuge is an important educational step for members of a Friends Board. As nonprofit managers, leaders of Friends organizations are able to act quickly. When partnering with a federal agency, however, they have to recognize that different ground rules apply to agency staff. And as board members, they must be willing and able to temper enthusiasm with considerable patience.

The management challenges and issues affecting each refuge are unique, but one constant across all refuges is that the manager's job is a balancing act. To become better partners, it is vital for Friends organizations to learn as much as they can about their refuge manager, the staff and the job that each performs. Without this understanding Friends members may develop unrealistic expectations or question the decisions being made, which can erode the relationship.

The refuge manager bears overall responsibility for refuge operations and is usually the formal liaison with the Friends Board. As a result, mentors recommend that Friends members talk with their managers to gain insight about the issues affecting the refuge and develop a better understanding of the support role their organization can play.

Frank Drausewski, Acting Manager at Parker River NWR, shared a perspective that helps to illustrate what it's like to manage a very busy northeastern refuge.



FUCKR / CHEMIST

Deer at Quivira NWR



PARKER RIVER NWR

Managing a Refuge

Parker River NWR consists of 4,662 acres of diverse upland and wetland habitats including sandy beach and dunes, shrub/thicket, bog, swamp, freshwater marsh, salt marsh and associated creek, river, mud flats and salt panne. These refuge habitats support varied and abundant populations of resident and migratory wildlife including more than 300 species of birds, and many species of mammals, reptiles, amphibians, insects and plants.

The refuge is adjacent to Newburyport (population 17,000), an historic seaport and active tourist destination in northeastern Massachusetts. It is within 40 miles of Boston, and serves a metropolitan population of nearly 2.5 million people

The Refuge records approximately 250,000 visits per year. Primary public uses include wildlife observation and photography, hunting, fishing, shell fishing, environmental education and interpretation. A newly constructed visitor center is helping to make environmental education the primary public use focus for the refuge.

Management Challenges at Parker River NWR

Parker River NWR is relatively small and has diverse habitats, high visitation and proximity to a densely populated area. Because of these factors, the staff and managers at Parker River NWR have a special challenge relative to the management mandates for compatible wildlife-dependent public uses. Management activities are intensely scrutinized by an involved and vocal citizenry—many of whom are only recently gaining an understanding of the purposes and goals of the refuge. There are several special interest groups locally, and many have a positive relationship with the refuge. Nonetheless, each group has publicly disagreed with management at one time or another on specific resource issues. Indeed, one of the pressing management challenges

is balancing the interests and defusing the conflicts that exist between various visitor groups.

Parker River NWR has been the center of a number of protests around management decisions:

- Beach closures—to protect nesting piping plovers
- Deer hunting—to protect habitat destruction by overpopulations of deer
- Spraying mosquitoes—Biological control product use to reduce populations of mosquitoes and their risk of transmitting potentially life-threatening diseases to humans (i.e., Eastern Equine Encephalitis, West Nile Virus)
- Herbicide use—to control invasive species
- Swan and predator controls—to control populations and protect threatened species

In addition, conflicts have occurred between various groups of people vying for access to limited resources: beach users conflicting with surf fishermen (an historic public use) who drive vehicles to access the beach, or bird watchers conflicting with hunters.

Management practices change as scientific data is collected and wildlife patterns and management philosophies change. This has led to disagreements with segments of the public who prefer current practices and with state wildlife agencies that have goals and perspectives that differ from those of the FWS.

The manager is at the center of all these issues, overseeing compatibility assessments and making decisions based on best practices and refuge mandates. The manager must continually maintain contact with visitor groups and the public at large, striving to educate, communicate, and work together to address potential problems. At Parker River this balancing act requires vigilant and ongoing effort.

At the same time, the manager is also responsible for overseeing refuge conservation and restoration activities. This is no small task when resources (staff and money) are limited and invasive species issues are on the rise. This translates to less discretionary funds for maintenance, biology, law enforcement and equipment.

Refuge managers often try to do it all— spreading resources thinly in an effort to meet these broad demands. Today, some managers are even being challenged to select just a *handful* of things that can be accomplished well on their refuges. Many find it difficult indeed to reconcile this challenge with the many pressing needs at their site.

A Week in the Life of a Parker River NWR's Manager

Acting Manager Frank Drausewski offered the following list of things in which he had been engaged in during the few days before the interview:

- Handle personnel issues: the bigger the staff, the more issues there are to deal with
- Provide a program to the elderly
- Visit six area high school guidance offices to provide information on the Youth Conservation Corps Program
- Attend/offer mandatory training
- Work with information technology person to correct some computer problems
- Continue to work off checklist of corrections needed for the new Visitor Center
- Get estimates for correcting electrical problems in the new Visitor Center

- Develop budget proposals for the Regional Office
- Phone conference to determine how to repair the Visitor Center's heating system
- Staff meetings, new employee orientation
- E-mails : these seem never ending. We're driven by e-mail, getting assignments that need immediate responses
- Prepare a report for the state
- Sign off on acquisitions requests; general budget management

Drausewski also oversees a variety of resource management activities on the refuge, including such things as piping plover conservation, invasive species eradication, wetlands reconstruction, deer population surveys, bird surveys, proscribed burns, mowing, water management and a variety of research activities. Managing and educating visitors is another major undertaking and includes law enforcement, outreach programs, environmental education, interpretation and maintenance of visitor facilities.

The interview with Drausewski illustrates well how a refuge manager's job is indeed a "balancing act." The challenges facing refuge managers and staff are often daunting and budget shortfalls make accomplishing goals a difficult task. Becoming well educated about refuge management issues will help Friends leaders become sympathetic to refuge challenges and learn ways to become better and more effective partners. □