



Focus on "Friends"

Southeast Region

Friends Group News

Note from the Regional Director

We live in an ever-changing world, one that requires us to constantly adapt to new situations. In fact, it could be said that rapid change is a hallmark of 21st century life. Given that reality, it's nice to know that some things we do remain the same, even over time. Among them is the pride our Friends Groups can take in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's great history.

These days, we have major cause for celebration of that history, here in the Southeast Region and across the nation. Recently, we recognized the 100th anniversary of Orangeburg, South Carolina, National Fish Hatchery, established in 1911 and still going strong. Willie Booker, hatchery manager for the last 20 years, welcomed representatives of the city, State, and a U.S. Congressional office and members of the Orangeburg community to help us rededicate the hatchery and join in the festivities. Students from Mellichamp Elementary School planted a pollinator garden on hatchery grounds to commemorate the station's historic operational milestone. It was particularly gratifying to see a new generation appreciating the importance of conserving our fisheries heritage and learning about the mission of the hatchery over the last century.

And what a history it has been. The hatchery came into existence three years before the start of World War I. From the beginning, it played a critically important role in the life and economy of the local community and beyond. In its earliest days, it provided subsistence fish for citizens and for stocking farm ponds, with Orangeburg-produced fish also carried by railcar across the nation. Today, it is helping to recover endangered shortnose sturgeon and freshwater mussels, while also being a major producer of fish for recreational fishing. In fact, Orangeburg's recreational fish production has resulted



Otter Lake Boardwalk Ribbon Cutting Ceremony at Waccamaw NWR was attended by over 150 participants. Credit: USFWS

in millions of dollars in economic impacts that have provided jobs for citizens in many industries. The hatchery attracts 20,000 visitors per year who enjoy the outdoor classrooms, a nature-explore playground, trails, bird-watching, a 100-acre lake and a visitor center with an aquarium.

Reconnecting people with nature also lies at the heart of our celebration of National Wildlife Refuge Week, October 9-15. From a single island refuge established for pelicans and other water birds in Florida in 1903, the National Wildlife Refuge System now spans 150 million acres across the United States and its territories. From wetlands to tropical environments, from prairies to seashores, our Refuge System ensures that America's treasure-trove of wild animals and wild places remain available to benefit and be enjoyed by both present and future generations. Our 553 refuges and 38 wetland management districts protect against flooding, improve soil and water quality, and help us to address climate change through carbon sequestration. They also fuel our economy, protecting sensitive fisheries spawning grounds and important

migratory bird habitat and generating billions of dollars in revenues for outdoor recreation industries. Our National Wildlife Refuges draw in millions of visitors to local communities each year. Our citizens can exercise their bodies and feed their souls as they connect with our nation's Refuge System lands and waters in a wide array

of mission-compatible outdoor pursuits. National Wildlife Refuge Week was a perfect time for all of us and our families to "go wild"—to get out and enjoy America's great outdoors and take part in the special events planned at refuges across the Southeast. Guaranteed, there is always something for everyone.

Behind these celebratory events is something else that remains unchanged in our world—the vision, courage and tenacity exercised by conservation-minded people since earliest times. At Orangeburg and at Pelican Island, people who understood and appreciated the intrinsic, aesthetic, social and economic value of fish and wildlife put their hearts and minds into creating a means of ensuring a sustainable future for these resources. They saw what others around them were failing to see, and then surmounted incredible odds to make their vision become a reality. These individuals led the way in conserving fish and wildlife resources and their essential habitats, first in their local communities and ultimately, across the nation.

(continued on page 2)

Note from Rick Huffines- Deputy Regional Refuge Chief

The first order of business when addressing the Friends and Volunteers of the Southeast Region is to say THANK YOU! The Refuge System, quite simply, cannot exist without you and that my Friends... is a very big statement. The time you give, the passion you add and the voice you are able to provide on behalf of our refuges in the Southeast is immeasurable and we thank you with the utmost sincerity.

Twenty-five years ago I started my government service as a Park Ranger providing visitor services to the volumes of people who flock to see these places of wonder. Through those years I have served as a Law Enforcement Officer, a Public Use Manager, a Refuge Manager, Regional Chief of Law Enforcement and now the Deputy Regional Chief of the Refuge System. While serving in all of these positions, the one thing that has been clear to me is that we will always need a helping hand. Our mission is large, our need is complex and our budgets are small, and our good work can only continue with your support.

All of this became very clear to me in January of 1991 when I arrived at the J. N. "Ding" Darling NWR with the responsibility of managing 750,000+ visitors with a public use staff of three, including myself – or so I thought. What I didn't know, was the refuge already had a 200+ corps of volunteers who were doing a very good job of managing the visitors, and that I was about to be a part of something very big that would shape the future of refuges across the country.

This group of volunteers was already working collectively to go beyond just greeting visitors and providing interpretation and educational services. They already saw the potential to do more, to be more, and be a voice that the Service could not be. They had assembled a small group of conservation minded individuals who were establishing themselves as a non-profit and raising funds through the sale of books, field guides, T-shirts and postcards in the Visitor Center. It was the J. N. "Ding" Darling Wildlife Society. The success of this group, through their unwavering efforts, grew quickly and through our collaborative work with our Washington Office we were able to establish a template agreement for what is now known as "Friends Groups".

For the next three years it was an honor to work with and be a part of this esteemed group and watch them grow and become the catalyst they have been for the Service. I saw the great benefit they provided to the station and to the resource. I learned that the relationship was much like a marriage, both parties had to work at it to make it great, but in the end the efforts paid unimaginable dividends for the refuge as well as those donating their time.

I loved the idea so much I worked within the communities at my next two stations to establish Friends Groups at those refuges – Wheeler NWR and Clarks River NWR. I am proud to say that these legacies still exist today promoting local conservation and support.

In serving as the Deputy Regional Chief, I see almost daily the benefits of our Friends and Volunteers, picking up where we are not able and speaking up for the resource in venues we cannot. You all are truly remarkable and our gratitude cannot be expressed sufficiently. So again I say *THANK YOU!* and please keep up the good work especially in the next few years as we work through difficult times. Our cause is a common one. Let's work together in the name of conservation no matter the circumstances and together we will preserve and protect the things that we love.

- Rick

Note from the Regional Director

(continued)

I see that same spirit alive in our Southeast Region Friends Groups, who are equally committed to assisting us in protecting and recovering fish and wildlife and habitats in the face of daunting 21st century challenges—among them, habitat destruction, problems with water quality and quantity, invasive species, wildfires, and impacts of climate change. I watch in amazement as you support our field stations by showing creativity, dedication, and passion to conserve the resources we all cherish. You help make it possible for us to lead the way, by opening doors to your communities, creating local partnerships, and organizing special events that help connect the American people to the great outdoors.

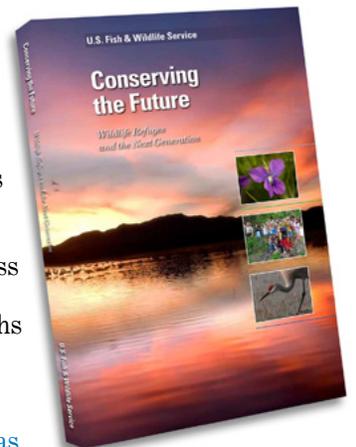
The Southeast Region is 51 Friends Groups strong and each and everyone one of our Friends Groups' courage and commitment inspire me every day. And that's one more thing that will never change.

-Cindy

Check It Out

New Vision for the National Wildlife Refuge System

The Service made public a renewed vision for the growth and management of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The vision — entitled *Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation* — articulates a 10-year blueprint for the Refuge System. The final version of the document was developed with extensive input from stakeholders through a transparent public process during the last 18 months and is now available online at www.americaswildlife.org.



Refuge News

Longleaf and Lunch

*By Lyne Askins, Refuge Manager,
Carolina Sandhills NWR*

On October 8, 2011, the Friends of Carolina Sandhills National Wildlife Refuge supported a landowner demonstration day focused on establishment and management of longleaf pine. As a “Land Management, Research and Demonstration Refuge,” the refuge is charged with providing opportunities for private landowners to learn about managing and restoring this imperiled ecosystem.

The Friends are one of the partner organizations that include Federal and state agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and private landowners who strive to maintain, improve and establish the longleaf pine ecosystem in Chesterfield County and northwestern Darlington County, SC. Collectively, this effort is known as the Sandhills Longleaf Pine Conservation Partnership. This partnership supports a larger effort known as America’s Longleaf Restoration Initiative, whose goal is to restore the longleaf pine ecosystem across its historic range in the Southeast. Wildlife Biologist Jason Ayers, Charleston Ecological Services Field Office and Refuge Manager Lyne Askins, Carolina Sandhills National Wildlife Refuge serve as co-chairs for the partnership organization.

Specific goals of the Partnership are to promote the conservation of the longleaf pine ecosystem, improve wildlife habitat, and provide for traditional land uses and recreational amenities (such as farm conservation and hunting). The Partnership desires to sustain compatible land uses that buffer public lands and connect fragmented blocks of longleaf pine habitat through a variety of voluntary programs including conservation easements.

The longleaf pine and wiregrass ecosystem once covered approximately 90 million acres in the Southeastern United States. This unique ecosystem has declined 97% and now contains fewer than three million acres. Today, only scattered patches of the longleaf pine and wiregrass ecosystem occur, primarily in the coastal plains of the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas. The longleaf pine ecosystem hosts a wealth of plant and



Participants get up close to longleaf pines. Credit: USFWS

animal diversity and provides financial and aesthetic values, as well. Unlike other southeastern pine species, longleaf pine is well suited to the dry, sandy conditions, which dominate the area. Public lands in the focus area contain more than 100,000 acres of the longleaf pine ecosystem. With the participation of private landowners, the Partnership has the potential to recover this ecosystem and create a landscape that provides outstanding wildlife habitats, recreational opportunities and economic benefits.

Cost-share funds to help private landowners enhance longleaf pine habitat on their property are available on a limited, competitive basis. Typically, projects take two years to implement; and landowners agree to maintain the practices for 15 years. Sample management actions include planting seedlings, removal of competitive species, prescribed fire, mechanical midstory removal, planting native warm season grasses, and controlling exotic species. Many activities are eligible for Cost-share reimbursement based on an established price list. For landowners with existing stands of longleaf pine, technical assistance is available for topics such as timber/wildlife management, the Safe Harbor program, conservation options, and other opportunities available through this partnership.

The Friends of Carolina Sandhills NWR is a group of citizens dedicated to supporting the role of the refuge in protecting and preserving the longleaf pine-wiregrass ecosystem; promoting the enjoyment and responsible use

of the refuge by the public; and engaging in educational and civic activities to promote the refuge and wise stewardship of its resources. For more information about the Friends of Carolina Sandhills NWR, please e-mail: friendsofcarolinasandhills@yahoo.com.

Calendar of Events

November 11-13 *Fee-Free Days*

The Department of the Interior is waiving admission fees at national parks, all 553 national wildlife refuges, and the 245 million acres of land managed by the Bureau of Land Management for the weekend of Veterans Day.

November 15 *Refuge System Award Nominations Due*

The National Wildlife Refuge Association is accepting nominations for the 2012 National Wildlife Refuge System Awards. The awards – co-sponsored by NWRA and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation – honor the refuge manager of the year, employee of the year, volunteer of the year and Friends Group of the year. More information about the award and how to apply is available on the [Refuge Association Web site](#).

January 9 – 13 *Social Media and Digital Content Development, NCTC*
Contact: Linda Lufkin, 304/876 7484, linda_lufkin@fws.gov

March 13 – 16 *Connecting People with Nature through Birds, St. Marks NWR, Florida*
Contact: Michelle Donlan, 304/876 7685, Michelle_Donlan@fws.gov

Refuge News

J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge iNature Trail Debuts

By Chelle Koster Walton, Publicity Representative, “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society

If you have a camera-equipped smartphone or tablet with Internet access, you’re ready to hit J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge’s latest innovation, which officials unveiled on June 28, 2011, on Sanibel Island, Florida.

Designed to appeal to the next generation’s techie side and get them outside, the Refuge iNature Trail along Wildlife Drive has two components – one for kids and one for adults. The iNature Trail uses a set of QR (Quick Response) codes that smartphone-users can scan with free downloadable apps such as NeoReader or QR Scan.



The first sign on the iNature Trail along Wildlife Drive instructs smart phone-owners on how to take advantage of their technology at the refuge.

Similar in appearance to common bar codes, QR codes can be generated for free at <http://qrcode.kaywa.com>. The codes typically send scanners to Web sites for more information.

“Ding” Darling’s iNature trail goes a step further and incorporates short, engaging YouTube videos, making it more interactive. Users experience a free tour unique from any other current refuge offering.

This QR Code will take you to a short video on birds. You can use a QR scanner on your smartphone or double click on the icon to view the video.



For instance, the first of the 22 QR codes along the iNature Trail takes you to a YouTube video of Refuge Manager Paul Tritaik welcoming guests to the refuge, while another shows families how to “become” a mangrove tree using their bodies.

“To make your own video-linked QR code, you first need to make a video, which is then uploaded to You Tube,” explained Birgie Vertesch, executive director of the “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society-Friends of the Refuge (DDWS). “With that link, you go to one of the websites to generate a free QR code.” The iNature signs are easily recognizable along the Trail and can be accessed while walking, biking, or driving along Wildlife Drive.

“This is the first such interactive trail in the National Wildlife Refuge System,” said Supervisory Refuge Ranger Toni Westland.

“We also believe this to be the first interactive QR wildlife trail in the nation, but now we’re seeing more and more.” Westland, with assistance from DDWS, implemented the trail after a former Sanibel Island student proposed it as his Master’s degree project in early 2011.

“Luckily we were able to tap into the energy and expertise of volunteers for the knowledge of QR technology, professional film and editing skills, and ‘acting,’” said Vertesch, adding that she used local Sanibel School students to play roles. “The only true cost was the signage, coming to a total of less than \$1,100.”

“Talk about leading the way!” said Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau Deputy Director Woody Peek at opening ceremonies. “There’s no better way than to be first. It speaks highly of the vision of this group, and we congratulate that.”

“I think it’s a great credit to the refuge — not being reactionary, but being a leader, as always,” said City of Sanibel Manager Judie Zimomra.

“Currently nearly 40 percent of U.S. adults own a smart phone, and it is estimated that there will be more online visits from mobile devices than from PCs by 2014,” said Westland. “Our refuge is moving into the mobile world to educate

thousands of people about wildlife and its protection in a whole new way.”

“The iNature Trail is a significant advancement in nature interpretation,” said Paul Tritaik, refuge manager. “It not only takes advantage of the latest improvements in communication technology, but it is environmentally responsible because it allows us to reduce paper waste from brochures. We’re grateful to the Wildlife Society for bringing this groundbreaking project to the table.”

Check It Out

Connecting People with Nature: Let’s Go Outside Website has a New Look

The Service has launched a new Web site, Connecting People with Nature: Let’s Go Outside (fws.gov/letsgooutside), aimed at engaging young kids in outdoor activities, and educating them about nature, helping to implement the Department of the Interior’s Youth in the Great Outdoors initiative (Youthgo.gov).

In addition, the Neighborhood Explorers online activity has been revamped to include a section on conservation careers (fws.gov/neighborhoodexplorers/).

Update: National Wildlife Refuge Friends Grant Program

As a result of the fiscal year 2011 continuing resolution that persisted beyond expectations in 2011, FWS budgets were delayed. As an indirect result, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation was not able to offer the Fall 2011 National Wildlife Refuge Friends Grant Program.

However, the Spring 2012 grant cycle will run uninterrupted. Solicitation for spring proposals will be announced in February 2012 and they will be seeking proposals that focus on projects assisting with organizational start-up and capacity building. For more information on the Friends Group Grant Program, visit <http://www.nfwf.org>.

Fisheries News

Wolf Creek National Fish Hatchery Continues Catching Smiles and Reaching for Rainbows with Fall Fishing Derbies

By Amanda Patrick, USFWS

With plenty of smiling faces and blue skies abounding, Wolf Creek National Fish Hatchery staff and volunteers enjoyed two great days of fishing fun as the team organized the 4th Annual Catch a Smile Senior Fishing Derby and the 4th Annual Reaching for Rainbows Special Kids Fishing Derby.

Held on Tuesday and Wednesday, September 27th and 28th, 2011 respectively, the events provided two days of trout-tastic fishing fun for those 62 and older, along with students from local Russell and Clinton County School Districts with permanent mental and/or physical disabilities. Crew members from

Wolf Creek, with support and help from the Friends of Wolf Creek National Fish Hatchery, Inc. and several community businesses/organizations and volunteers, worked to plan and organize the two days of fall fishing fun.

With a well-stocked creek full of jumping trout, all in attendance had a chance to try their hand at catching their limit. For both the seniors and students, all attendees were also treated to lunch. After lunch, all seniors on hand enjoyed a chance at winning one of many door prizes generously provided by community sponsors while those students participating were awarded medallions and t-shirts.



A Catch a Smile participant is truly all smiles as she proudly displays her catch of the day!
Credit: USFWS



With perfect early fall temperatures and a stream full of jumping trout, children lined the hatchery stream, eager to try their hand at catching a few rainbows. Credit: USFWS

Overall, 140 seniors attended the Catch a Smile Senior Fishing Derby and an estimated 90 students were a part of the Reaching for Rainbows Special Kids Fishing Derby. In addition to these smiling faces, 47 staff and volunteers helped to make both days true successes!

Without the gracious support of over 38 sponsors donating an estimated \$4,466.82 (either cash or items), neither event would have been possible, thus making these two fall fishing events proud examples of the benefits of partnering together to make a difference in the lives of those in the community. Through such teamwork and an overall spirit of volunteerism and partnership, the events occurred with little or no cost to any one agency as well.

Tip of the Quarter

Benefits of Direct Mailings

By Birgie Vertesch, Executive Director, "Ding" Darling Wildlife Society

Without good information in a database, it is very difficult to raise money through the various means of fundraising and development, which can include personal visits, phone calls, emails, invitations to special events, and direct mail solicitation. In last quarter's newsletter, we discussed how to build your database with names. From acquiring church directories, neighborhood lists and private club lists, to asking volunteers and board members to give names.

When people are asked why they haven't made a gift, the number one reason: They weren't asked.

If you don't ask – you don't get. If you believe in the mission of your refuge or hatchery and Friends Group, you are asking for the mission of conservation, wildlife protection and education. You are NOT asking for yourself, you are asking for the mission ... Never be embarrassed to ask for support of the wonderful work taking place at the refuge or hatchery. Be proud to ask for support, whether it's in a personal conversation or in a letter. Their gifts are making a difference and it's a true investment in conservation and in the community.

While the most effective means of gaining financial support is the face-to-face meeting, this article is going to focus on the solicitation letter.

What works for some, may not work for others. In reading the research on direct mail, they suggest that letters should be no more than one page in a normal size font. It should be attention grabbing (we usually include a colorful photo of a bird or some type of wildlife).

Always include a return envelope with information they complete, such as the basic information. We also include asking for their email and phone number (not everyone completes this information, but for those who do, it is another way to build your relationship with them). In addition, we have two areas for people to ask about volunteer opportunities and how to leave the refuge in their will. Some organizations include additional material, but it has been our experience that too much information can lose the interest of



Refuge Ranger Toni Westland welcomes the Blue Goose, T.R. Bear, and Bagzilla to Ding Darling Days. Credit: USFWS

the reader. You want to make it easy and simple for them to read the appeal and make a gift. If at all possible, the letters should be personalized to the addressee and NOT "Dear Friend of Wildlife".

Some researchers say it's important to always include a P.S. reminding the reader about the importance of support. We have found this to be effective.

Our attitude for a successful mailing is to cover your costs. The goal is to make much more than that, but if you cover your costs, you have educated the recipients about your Friends Group, and you have new or additional gifts from the mailing. On average, our mailings have received a 20 to 50% response rate. Research has shown that when you begin a mail campaign and have a new list, the average response rate is considerably lower.

In addition to membership renewal letters, we send a solicitation letter a minimum of two times a year. One as a year-end solicitation and that goes out early in November before Thanksgiving. Others wait until early December, but we

have found that other organizations do the same and people are overwhelmed with solicitations. We always like to have a small story or example of the work happening on the refuge and then a reminder in the P.S.

You need to first work on the mailing list and once you have that in place, try sending out a letter. Again, what works for some may not work for others, but unless you try, you will never know.

Once a gift is received, it is key to let the donor know that it was received and appreciated. A thank you letter should go out no later than a week after receipt of the gift.

Once you have supporters in your database, your Friends Group now has the opportunity to thank and cultivate those relationships even further. Stewardship is just as important as getting the gift and the article in next quarter's *Focus on Friends* will highlight this area of development.

(For a sample direct mailing letter, contact Birgie Vertesch at director@dingdarlingsociety.org.)