



Prairie Wind

Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge
PO Box 114, Prairie City, IA 50228 • 515-994-3400 • www.tallgrass.org • buffalo@tallgrass.org

VOLUME 27 - NUMBER 4

WWW.TALLGRASS.ORG

WINTER 2021

NWRA Virtual Refuge Awards - Friends Group of 2020

By Joan Van Gorp, Friends President



Though it would have been fantastic to have attended the awards ceremony in person in D.C., the National Wildlife Refuge Association created an exceptional virtual ceremony that was especially unique. A positive aspect of doing it virtually was, anyone could tune in to watch it.



Geoffrey Haskett, president of the NWRA welcomed everyone and we enjoyed images of many National Wildlife Refuges from Ian Shive, Ansel Adams Award-winning photographer, and a beautiful rendition of *God Bless America*. The National Fish & Wildlife Foundation and the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, both partners with the NWRA, were also profiled.

In addition to our award as Friends Group of the Year, awards were given for Refuge Manager-Greg Austin, Refuge Manager at Klamath Basin National Wildlife Refuge Complex, Refuge Employee-Victor Doig, fire management officer for the Lower Suwannee and Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuges and Volunteer of the Year-Jan Crocker, Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge. We also received congratulations from Shaun Sanchez, Acting Chief of the National Wildlife Refuge System, Aurelia Skipworth, Director of the USFWS and Rob Wallace, Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

The evening was filled with the accomplishments of so many individuals and organizations – all working to protect and preserve the many National Wildlife Refuges across the nation. An amazing variety of wildlife, landscapes and ecosystems was evident throughout the event. Chat rooms were open after the ceremony and it was so great to talk to many friends, volunteers and staff.

Our Friends organization also won the NWRA's contest, for the most registrants for the Virtual Wildlife Refuge Awards. We will receive one hour of advocacy consulting and one hour of fundraising consulting from the NWRA and they will make a video highlighting our Friends group and the refuge! We are looking forward to working with them in 2021.

A big "Thank You" to everyone at the National Wildlife Refuge Association, their staff and board members for making this a very special event for us. I know the situation in the country this year created a lot of extra planning and work for all of you and please know it is greatly appreciated.

If you were not able to watch the ceremony, a recording is available to watch on the NWRA website: www.refugeassociation.org/refuge-awards-2020

Lastly, just as you generously support our Refuge and the Friends with your memberships – would you consider supporting the NWRA with a membership in their organization? Their work is critical to the success of the Refuge System and they are a tireless advocate for all the Refuges and Friends organizations.

Manager's Corner

By Scott Gilje

A year of success – well not what you would think with everything that is going on in the world. But at Neal Smith NWR, we had a very successful year. Let me recap a few highlights from the last 11 months.

In January, the Refuge and Iowa Private Lands Office received the Partner of the Year Award from Pheasants Forever. The award recognized all the work that the two programs have done to support Pheasants Forever and the conservation work the organizations have accomplished by putting habitat on the ground.

In March, I had to make the difficult decision on closing the Visitor Center and placed everyone on a telework (work-from-home) schedule. Even though the staff was not physically working at the office, they continued their stellar work from home. In all actuality, this “break” from the office allowed staff to work on projects that had been on the back burner quite some time. Karen, Refuge biologist, was able to complete the Habitat Management Plan (HMP) and will start the Inventory and Monitoring Plan (IMP) in



Participants and partners of the mentored pheasant hunt

January 2021. Our Visitor Services team were presented the Silos and Smokestacks National Heritage Area Environmental Education Partner Site of the Year award. Kudos to all the staff for doing such great work in trying conditions.

The Refuge continued our long-standing partnership with the Iowa DNR, Pheasants Forever, Outdoor Mentors and the Scholastic Clay Target Program by offering mentored pheasant hunts on the Refuge. The partnership is part of the national R3 (recruit, retain, reactivate) program designed to get new hunters out hunting, retain current hunters and reactivate hunters who lapse in buying hunting licenses.

All in all, I miss seeing the staff here on a daily basis, but I know great work is being done in the name of conservation. I hope everyone has a safe and enjoyable holiday season.

NWRA Young Ambassador Program

By Joan Van Gorp, Friends President

The Young Ambassador program is a new venture by the National Wildlife Refuge Association to reach a younger audience for the NWRA. The goals of this programs are:

- Expand awareness of the NWRA
- Interest this younger audience in supporting wildlife and its habitat
- Raise funding to support the Refuge Association and the Young Ambassador program
- Bring awareness to refuges nationwide and expand the awareness of the NWRA within the refuges

The initial program was an Instagram Live event, held November 28, focusing on the manatees at Crystal River NWR. Elaine Meier, a member of the NWRA Board of Directors contacted the Friends to see if the Refuge and the Friends would be interested in hosting such an event about bison in January or February of 2021.

The Refuge staff and Friends that participate will be under the age of 35, as the Young Ambassadors program is focused on this next generation of environmental stewards. At the time of publication for this issue of Prairie Wind, only one planning meeting had been held, so more information will be forthcoming.

Watch Facebook, Instagram and our website for further details on the scheduling of the bison program.

The Friends are excited about this opportunity – we look forward to working with the NWRA. This event will gain nationwide attention to the Refuge. A big “thank you” to the Refuge staff for agreeing to be part of this program.

2020 - A Year Like No Other

By Joan Van Gorp, Friends President

The year started like most others with the Friends planning & scheduling events, volunteering and doing outreach. Then we came to the month of March and everything came to a sudden stop!

It was so disappointing to cancel Volunteer Open Houses and other volunteer activities and cancel the Concert on the Prairie. But then to also have the Visitor Center closed for the remainder of the year, that is something we did not imagine. We couldn't operate the Nature Store and so missed greeting the many visitors to the refuge.

But...we still were able to accomplish many things and are looking forward to when we can be more actively involved at the refuge.

- Lunch for Christmas Bird Count volunteers in January
- Friends Annual Meeting – Winter Gathering on February 22
- Environmental Lobby Day at the State Capitol, March 11
- Notified in February we were named the NWRA's Friends Group of 2020
- Awarded the Friends Scholarship to PCM Senior, Owen Hugen
- Purchased three memorial benches from the Lovett, Nelson and Stephenson families. These benches will be installed once we can volunteer again at the refuge.
- Regularly attended calls, webinars and Zoom meetings with Megan Wandag from the Regional office and the National Wildlife Refuge Association
- Zoom meeting organized by board member Sue Tew-Warming and Refuge staff. Was so great to see so many of the volunteers!
- Again purchased a billboard that is on display in the Des Moines metro area
- Changed the annual Photo Contest to a digitally format. A HUGE thanks to Sydney Algreen-Hunter for championing that! And for Christian Photo being a sponsor.
- A new shirt design was available to purchase, thanks to an online store developed by A Team Apparel of Prairie City
- Jim Johnson, Friends Grant Coordinator remained busy all year looking for and writing grants for various projects. We received grants from Silos and Smokestacks that helped pay for expenses of the vault toilet, from Wells Fargo for seed and from the Jasper Community Foundation for improvements to the Savanna Trailhead.
- The Spurs & Tails contest was held October 31. Fortunately, since it was entirely outdoors and only a very few volunteers were needed, we did not have to cancel this event.
- Our Friends membership has continued to grow and is now at 267 active members. We have 18 new members this year. Normally, this number is higher but with the Visitor Center being closed that has limited the new members we normally get from individuals visiting.
- Facebook followers continue to increase and presently are at 6815.

We are just being patient and hoping for the best in 2021. The safety of our members, volunteers and Refuge staff is of utmost importance and we know it will take time before we can resume our normal activities. There are opportunities for help serving on the Friends Board and we would welcome any interest. Presently, all our monthly meetings are done virtually.

The Friends want to wish you and your families the best as we all weather this incredibly challenging year and we look forward in hope to a little more "normal" 2021!

New Overlook Trail Kiosk Signs

By Patrick Bryant, Park Ranger

If you've walked along the Overlook or Tallgrass Trails, you may have noticed the wooden kiosk at the top of the hill. Between the confusing map and empty panel, it wasn't our favorite. We are excited to announce the addition of an updated map and four new interpretive signs! The signs focus on four topics: pollinators, prairie birds, monarchs and volunteers. We hope they'll give visitors a chance to learn about the prairie while the visitor center remains closed, and long after it reopens. Check them out the next time you visit!



Reaching Out Virtually to Our Volunteers

By Nancy Corona, Visitor Services Manager

We miss our volunteers! Since mid-March 2020, the Refuge Visitor Center has been closed due to COVID-19 safety precautions, limiting our communication with volunteers. Now, thanks to Sue Tew-Warming, volunteer coordinator for the Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge (NSNWR), we are hosting virtual volunteer meetings using the Friends of NSNWR's Zoom account.

During the first online session in October, Sue Tew-Warming facilitated the meeting and refuge staff and Joan Van Gorp, President of Friends of NSNWR, provided updates. Additionally, a question and answer period was filled with great discussions. It was wonderful to see and speak to our volunteers and to find out how they were doing.

Going forward, the Refuge staff and board members of the Friends of NSNWR will host monthly meetings. The agenda will include Refuge updates, a conversation about bison, an in-depth presentation on one refuge topic, followed by a question and answer period. Aside from the December meeting, topics are still being assigned. The meeting dates and times are listed below:

- Thursday, January 14 from 6:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.
- Friday, February 12 from 3:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.
- Thursday, March 11 from 6:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.
- Friday, April 9 from 3:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.
- Thursday, May 13 from 6:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

If you volunteer and are not on the email contact list, or if you are interested in learning more about volunteering and would like to participate on these monthly meetings, please contact Nancy Corona at Nancy_Corona@fws.gov. We look forward to the time when we can be together again in person. However, until then, we are excited to meet with our volunteers virtually.



Photo by Doreen Van Ryswyk

Refuge Honored by Silos and Smokestacks

By Nancy Corona, Visitor Services Manager



*Where the Story
of American Agriculture
Comes to Life.*

Annually, Silos and Smokestacks National Heritage Area (SSNHA) hosts the Golden Silo Barn Party and presents several awards to their outstanding partners. This year, Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge (NSNWR) was selected as "Outstanding Partner of 2020". This award is given to a partner site

that demonstrates excellence in interpreting the story of American agriculture.

On November 12, the 16th Annual Golden Silo Barn Party went virtual and included an awards ceremony, a video containing Refuge staff interviews and Refuge footage, and a live concert. In addition, the Refuge received a beautiful award and a gift bag full of goodies, including delicious frosted cookies! This partnership is a two-way street and SSNHA supports the Refuge in a variety of ways. For example, in partnership with the Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge, they provided funding for visitor services and outreach internships and interpretive sign production for a kiosk located at Prairie City's Entry Park.

SSNHA is one of 49 designated National Heritage Areas and it is affiliated with the National Park Service. The purpose of SSNHA is to preserve and tell the story of American agriculture and its global significance utilizing partnerships to share this story.

The story of agriculture and tallgrass prairie in Iowa are intertwined. The tallgrass prairie in part, created the rich soil that supports one of the greatest agricultural production areas in the world. NSNWR's role is conserving the tallgrass prairie, connecting people to their natural heritage, and educating them about its benefits.

Visitors have an opportunity to encounter an Iowa landscape that is similar to the one Native Americans and early European Settlers experienced prior to the mid-1800's. Additionally, conserving prairie has many benefits for people, wildlife, and the environment. For example, it prevents soil erosion, filters nutrients to improve water quality, and provides habitat for wildlife, and recreational opportunities for people.

Working together, we can continue to conserve the tallgrass prairie, tell the story of how prairie is part of Iowa's agriculture, while providing visitors with hands-on opportunities to explore their natural heritage. For more information on SSNA visit: <https://www.silosandsmokestacks.org>.

2020 Virtual Photo Contest

By Sydney Algreen-Hunter, Friends Board

This year, the photo contest moved entirely virtual. From submissions to displaying the photos, everything was done online. The contest was still a huge success with over 100 entries in seven categories including Bison, Elk, Birds, Other Wildlife, Landscapes, Plants, and People in Nature. Visit the Friends of Neal Smith Facebook page to see all the winners and other entries.



*BIRDS - Short Ear Flight
By Eric Williamson*



*OTHER WILDLIFE -
Eastern Tiger Swallowtail
By Warren Terpstra*



*PLANTS - Dewy Flower
By Denise Keys*



*BEST in SHOW
Bison - Staring at You
By Sack Pephirom*



*LANDSCAPE - Amber Waves
By Tom Moss*



*ELK - Crossing Guard
By Dale Bales*



*BISON - Baby Bison Born during Spring Snow Storm
By Sack Pephirom*

The U.S. Secretary of the Interior Visits the Refuge

By Nancy Corona, Visitor Services Supervisor

The U.S. Secretary of the Interior, David L. Bernhardt, visited Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge (NSNWR) on October 28, 2020. During his visit, Secretary Bernhardt signed a Secretarial Order that waives entrance fees for 5th grade students and their families to national wildlife refuges, national parks, and other public lands and waters managed by the Department of the Interior. A voucher provides free entrance **through August 31, 2021**. To learn more about the voucher and how to acquire it visit: www.nps.gov/kids/fifthgrade.htm.

In addition to signing the order, Secretary Bernhardt toured the refuge and hosted a roundtable discussion with local conservation organizations. Representatives from the Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge, National Wild Turkey Federation, Pheasants Forever, and the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation attended the meeting. A variety of conservation topics were discussed including The Land and Water Conservation Fund, a federal program that supports the protection of federal public lands and waters.



From left to right, Neil Baalman, NSNWR Wildlife Refuge Specialist, David Bernhardt, U.S. Secretary of the Interior, Andrew DiAllesandro, Iowa Private Lands State Coordinator, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Carla Dykstra, NSNWR Administrative Officer, and Scott Gilje, NSNWR Refuge Manager. Photo by Joan Van Gorp.

Time to renew your Friends Membership?

Our Friends members are our greatest asset in providing funding for the refuge and the many events and programs offered to the public. We value each and every donation no matter the amount. If you haven't renewed your membership, an easy way is online through our secure website. This takes just a couple minutes and is so vital for the Friends to continue our goals to promote awareness, support, education and appreciation for the natural ecosystems of the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge. Can we count on your donation? Go to www.tallgrass.org / Click on "Get Involved" / "Become a Member"

You Can Make a Difference!

The power of a Friends group is its members. Please support this all volunteer, non-profit organization with your tax-deductible gift and be a part of the learning, growing and discovery happening at the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge every day. Thank you!

____ \$25 -- Big Bluestem Friend ____ \$50 -- Bison Buddy
____ \$100 -- Savanna Saver ____ \$250 -- Prairie Patron
____ Other -- \$ _____

Be sure to find out if your company will match contributions.

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Phone _____ Date _____
E-mail _____

You may make your donation online and choose to make that gift recur monthly, quarterly or annually. Or you may make a one-time gift!

Please make checks payable to Friends of Neal Smith NWR, PO Box 114, Prairie City, IA 50228

Prairie Grasses: Worth the Hike this Winter

By Sydney Algreen-Hunter, Friends Board

Several years ago as an intern at the Refuge I would lead hikes for field trip groups. Just outside the main doors of the Refuge, I could readily find three of the most iconic tallgrass prairie plants: *Andropogon gerardii* (big bluestem), *Elymus canadensis* (Canada wild rye) and *Sorghastrum nutans* (Indian grass). Most of us think of fall as a time to enjoy these species, but winter is when they can be truly appreciated, not just for their beauty but also for their greater ecological role.



Big bluestem in winter by Sydney Algreen-Small

Big bluestem is one of the most emblematic grasses of the prairie. Reaching heights of eight feet, there are many accounts of early travelers riding across the prairie on horseback and bending the grass over their saddle. It is recognizable for the three-prong, turkey foot bloom and purple, green, to bronze foliage. Of course in winter, you primarily see the tan clumps standing high against the blue-grey horizon.

While big bluestem will often drop its seeds earlier, Canada wild rye seems to hold on to them longer, making winter my favorite time to search it out. The seed spikes look similar to wheat, or as second graders like to characterize it, like a bushy squirrel tail. Removing the seeds provides a good lesson in seed dispersal by animal fur as well.

What Canada wild rye lacks in color interest, Indian grass more than makes up for. This grass has a wonderful blue-green foliage that slowly turns to a yellow-orange. Most striking are the feathery, auburn-colored inflorescences with contrasting bright yellow stamens. By late fall, these soft-to-the-touch brown seeds are popular with overwintering birds, too.

I'm also a fan of *Schizachyrium scoparium* (little bluestem) which is much shorter than the aforementioned grasses, but beautiful enough to grace your personal garden. *Panicum virgatum* (switchgrass) is also another common prairie grass and again, adds textural interest all winter long.

While each of these grasses has a high-season for beauty and texture, more importantly they each provide a place of refuge for insects in the winter. The stems and foliage on the ground can serve as little cozy homes for overwintering insects. Many of these species are also host plants to a variety of pollinators, primarily butterflies.

If you really want to enjoy these grasses this winter, plan your visit when the skies are blue and the grasses are tan. The contrast in colors and textures is worth a chilly hike and if you look closely, you could find some of the Refuge's smallest inhabitants finding their own refuge amongst the grasses.

Spurs and Tails - A Windy Success

By Jim Johnson, Friends Board

October 31, 2020, a full moon, a blue moon and the opening day of Iowa's pheasant hunting season brought an estimated 125 hunters to the Neal Smith NWR. Some 75 vehicles were in the parking areas and along the roads at the 8 a.m. opening.

Spurs and Tails, a longest feather and spur contest, was an effort by the Friends and the Refuge to recognize hunters and their contributions to conservation, the environment and, in particular, to the Neal Smith NWR and the surrounding communities. The Friends received a grant from the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation to support Spurs and Tails and monies received from the grant will also result in improvements including an informational kiosk at the Savanna Trailhead. The grant came from a special effort by NFWF to support R3 activities (*Recruit, Retain and Reactivate*) for hunters, fishermen and those participating in outdoor activities such as hiking, trail walking and birding.

Spurs and Tails was conceived before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, but it became a real opportunity for the Friends to serve the public and support the Refuge, especially with the increased use of trails and the auto tour route. The Friends and Refuge staff were comfortable with this activity and with encouragement from



Measuring pheasants by Nancy Corona

FWS, we chose to go ahead, because volunteers were to be masked and could maintain social distancing through the appropriate spacing of tables.

The day began with sun, temps in the 40s and a gentle wind that soon became a gale with gusts over 40 mph! Seven Friends members and three Refuge staff manned the measuring station and Friends booth outside the Visitor Center and kept things from blowing away! Hot coffee and cocoa (from Magg Family Catering) and doughnuts were provided to the hunters and visitors.

The categories were: Youth-to age 16, Expert-16 to 40, Master-40 to 64 and Sage-64 and beyond. The winners were:

- Michael Jenkins (Youth and Overall winner) with a rooster with a 22 3/4 inch tail feather and a spur of 1 3/16".
- Brad Becker (Expert) and Scott Vannoy (Master) both with feather lengths of about 19 inches and spur lengths of less than one inch.
- There were no registrations in the Sage category.
- The shortest tail measured was just 7 inches but the hunter said his dog pulled out the longer feathers.
- Winners received a \$50 Bass Pro Shops card and 2nd place winners, a \$25 certificate to Goldie's Restaurant in Prairie City.

Despite the conditions, the Friends believe the contest was a positive event and hunter recognition is a valuable component in the support of the National Wildlife Refuge system.



Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge
PO Box 114, Prairie City, IA 50228 • 515-994-3400 • www.tallgrass.org • buffalo@tallgrass.org

NON PROFIT
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
DES MOINES, IA
PERMIT NO. 4333

Address Service Requested

Do You Know a Graduating High School Senior Planning to Study Environmental Studies or Conservation?

That student may be eligible for the Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge Scholarship. The Friends of NSNWR encourage students to consider a career in environmental studies or conservation by annually granting a scholarship to a graduating senior who will be working towards a degree in those career paths. The scholarship is \$1000 per year for up to four years of post-secondary education for an associate or bachelors degree.

Students graduating from these area high schools are eligible:

- Bondurant-Farrar
- Colfax-Mingo
- Newton
- PCM (Prairie City Monroe)
- Pella
- Pella Christian
- Southeast Polk

The scholarship application will be posted on the Friends website: www.tallgrass.org by January 1, 2021. Scholarship applications must be received by April 23, 2021.

Prairie Wind

is published by

**Friends of
Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge**

Board of Directors

Joan Van Gorp, President and
Community Coordinator

Mark Lyle, Treasurer

Sharon Tinker, Secretary and
Governmental Liaison

Sydney Algreen-Hunter, Biology/
Environmental Education

Kristie Burns, Social Media/Technology

Daryl Howell, Nature Store Liaison

James Johnson, Grant Development

Jordan Oster, Public Relations

Rachel Ruden, Public Relations

Sue Tew-Warming, Volunteer Coordinator

Doreen Van Ryswyk, Editor

Prairie Wind is a newsletter about the activities of Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge and the Refuge. To subscribe, send your name and address to Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge, P.O. Box 114, Prairie City, Iowa 50228.