The Board of Directors of the Friends of Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, Inc. is pleased to report that our 32nd year supporting the Blackwater NWR has been another very successful one. The relationship between the Refuge staff, the volunteers, and the Friends of Blackwater has remained very close and has resulted in many significant contributions 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. Many projects have been completed and many are in progress. Following are Friends activities over the past fiscal year – October 1, 2018 through September 30, 2019:

- The Cooperative Environmental Education Program with the Dorchester County Public School’s fourth and sixth grades continued in its 12th year. Ellie Ludvigsen joined the Board in January as our new Environmental Education Committee Chair. She coordinated the activities led by Refuge staff and volunteers. This year, a total of 731 students visited Blackwater NWR as part of this program. The FOB is providing annual funding for transportation, and this year also purchased a mixture of 1250 plants for the 6th grade to plant. Additional equipment and supplies were also purchased. Since it began in 2007, a total of 8440 students have participated in this program! Ellie also implemented a new pilot community service project for 7th graders providing adult education opportunities at the Refuge. The first classes were held during the Wild Goose Chase with good reviews and we’re looking forward to expanding this program! In addition, FOB also installed new gutters and downspouts on the Environmental Education Building.

- The Eagle’s Nest Bookstore, managed by Sue Fischer, continued to be the major source of funds for Refuge projects and programs, providing over a third of our available funds. Our December and January sales were heavily impacted by the 35 day government shutdown. Government tariffs have also impacted the availability of some bookstore products.

- The Woods Trail Extension was completed with help from FOB volunteers (Rick Abend, Joe Soares, Kathy Abend, Janet Kerr, and Ron Ketter), Refuge staff, the Youth Conservation Corp, and staff from PRS Guitars. Rick Abend, the Project Committee Chair, engineered four bridges installed along the trail extension that crosses old farm ditches in the now mature forest and add another ½ mile to the trail. Thank you to all who made this happen!

- Kit Bradshaw, our Events Fundraising Committee Chair, provided a scaled back Wild Goose Chase Women’s Bicycle Ride. The venue location was moved from Sailwinds Park to the Blackwater NWR Environmental Education Building, along with two large tents. About 200 women registered for the September ride. Thanks to all the volunteers who made this a success! Net proceeds are going into the Refuge Contributed Funds Account to be used for educational purposes.

- FOB held a Night Photography Workshop led by Nightscapers to photograph the Milky Way. Janet Kerr coordinated the event for FOB. The program was limited to
25 people and net proceeds went into the Refuge Contributed Funds Account. It was deemed a big success and we hope to plan more events in the future.

- Due to the government shutdown, work backlog, ongoing work at the Visitor Center, and other issues, we were all saddened to hear that the Refuge’s 19th Annual Eagle Festival had to be cancelled. We’re looking forward to a bigger and better event in 2020.

- For the fourth year, the Friends supported the Federal Junior Duck Stamp Competition for Maryland held at Blackwater NWR in March. Organized by Ranger Tom Miller, volunteer judges selected a Maryland winner for this national competition. Thank you judges and other volunteers who made the day go smoothly! FOB also supported the Awards Presentation held at Patuxent Research Refuge in Laurel, MD in May.

- In April, the Friends supported the Refuge Volunteer Recognition Dinner held at the Elk’s Lodge. In 2018, 280 volunteers donated 11,588 hours. That’s true volunteer power!

- Our Scholarship Committee is chaired by Harry Heckathorn. The committee reviewed six applications this year. Four scholarships totaling $7000.00 were awarded to deserving students pursuing degrees in environmental sciences. Henry Ulrich of Leonardtown, MD, a Rice University student majoring in Civil and Environmental Engineering, was awarded a $3000 scholarship. Emma Dodsworth of Port Republic, MD, a Washington College student majoring in Environmental Science, Biology and Chesapeake Regional Studies, was awarded a $2000 scholarship. Tyler Walston of Salisbury, MD, a Virginia Tech student working on an Executive Master of Natural Resources degree, received a $1000 scholarship. Olivia Butler of Sykesville, MD, a student at Washington College majoring in Environmental Science, Biology and Chesapeake Regional Studies, received a $1000 scholarship. The total money awarded through our Scholarship Program since 2012 is now $40,000. We were glad to be able to meet Olivia and her family at our crab feast! Our Board voted to modify our scholarship program next year and will be awarding three $3000 scholarships!

- For the first time, the FOB Board voted to hire a summer intern through the Student Conservation Association at a cost of $9,000 to support Blackwater’s Visitor Services. Jacob Carroll of Western Kentucky University was the successful applicant and the Refuge Staff and FOB couldn’t be more pleased with the work he accomplished. We plan to continue with this support.

- Supporting the Refuge Biological Program, FOB provided funding for two Salisbury University students studying bats at the Refuge.

- The Friends supported the 17th Annual Youth Fishing Fun Day in June by supplying giveaway items (rod holders), T-shirts, bait, lunch, and other supplies. A total of 60 kids and their families attended this popular event. The Refuge partnered with the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad State Park and used their pavilion and parking area. The big story of the day were the number of snakeheads caught. We stopped counting at 70! FOB is no longer stocking the pond. Any excess supplies were used at the Eastern Neck NWR Fishing Event the following week.

- The Friends continued support of the Refuge Hunt Program. We bid farewell to Allen Johnston who retired as the Refuge Hunt Coordinator. The Refuge has moved to an on-line hunter registration program. Thank you, Allen, for so many years of awesome service!
The Friends purchased and paid for the installation of a new RomTec Model 1001 Waterless Restroom near the Wildlife Drive entrance. This restroom is available from dawn to dusk. Installation was done by Frank Elburn and overseen by Rick Abend. The project was delayed due to the very wet spring while we waited for the water table to drop, but was finally completed in September just in time for the Wild Goose Chase. The original RomTec restroom located at the Marsh Edge Trail parking lot is not available most of the year due to closure for nesting bald eagles and herons. The rented port-a-pot at the Woods Trail parking lot has been removed.

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. Lisa also continues to manage our social media accounts. We now have 10,688 Facebook fans, 1,035 Twitter followers, 719 Instagram followers, and 274 YouTube followers. There are 2,768 newsletter subscribers (FOB members and others) being kept informed through our e-newsletters. The website was updated with new FOB membership benefits providing discounts at Theodore’s at Madison Bay and also at Madison Nature Getaway B&B.

The eagle, osprey, and waterfowl cameras, available on-line and on monitors in the Visitor Center, are overseen by Lisa Mayo, Harry Heckathorn, and Bob Quinn. While the ospreys chose not to nest on our platform this year, the variety of activity both on and under the nest has been fantastic. To maintain power reliability during extended periods of cloudy weather, an additional solar panel and storage battery was added at the osprey nesting platform along with weed control fabric and stone. Bob Quinn was also able to get an audio signal up to the TV monitors in the 2nd floor observatory at the Visitor Center.

Our “Waterfowl Cam” has been a major success story. It was funded with help from a $2900 Heart of Chesapeake Country Heritage Area mini-grant. Thank you HCCHA Board! The camera is located between Pools 3A and 3B southeast of the Visitor Center and has pan, tilt, and zoom capabilities along with the audio. Designed and engineered by Harry Heckathorn, the installation was completed with support from Choptank Electric Cooperative, Refuge Staff and FOB volunteers (Harry, Heckathorn, Gary Middleton, Rick Abend, Ron Ketter, & Bob Quinn). Streaming video is provided by HDOnTap. This summer, an additional solar panel and battery storage capacity was added along with weed control fabric and stone. To promote the Waterfowl Cam, Harry Heckathorn, Lisa Mayo, and Bob Quinn were interviewed on WHCP Radio in Cambridge by Merrill Schuetz, who also serves as our FOB Secretary.

The bald eagles apparently gave up the “cam nest” they have been using since 2004. We got very lucky and have found a nearby nest that fledged two eaglets this year! We are pursuing a NEW “Eagle Cam” operation and Janet Kerr, our grant writer, was successful at getting a $4487 HCCHA mini-grant to help finance the installation. Harry Heckathorn, Bob Quinn, and Lisa Mayo are working out the technical issues and hope to have the cam operational for the upcoming nesting season.

Annual expenses for the Butterfly and Beneficial Insect Garden were covered by the Friends. This included purchase of new plants and mulch.

FOB purchased a Hoverball Archery Set this year that kids can use indoors. It was available as a summer activity in the Visitor Center on weekends.
• FOB purchased an Agents For Discovery loadable phone app geared toward children’s activities outdoors.
• With continuing Refuge Staff personnel shortages, FOB contracted with Britt-Bright Cleaning Services for weekly cleaning of the Visitor Center and bi-weekly cleaning of the Headquarters building.
• Also, with the loss of the last full time employee at Eastern Neck NWR, FOB assisted with funding of a mowing contract to get through the mowing season this year.
• A new Dell computer was purchased to maintain our membership records. Former Board member Cathy Beise has been assisting with the transition to the new computer.
• A “Photo-Op Gate” installed on the east side of the Visitor Center is now receiving lots of visitor use. The construction plan for this project was done by Harry Heckathorn last year and installation was started in October. Holes for the concrete piers were bored by Choptank Electric Cooperative and the steel support posts were made by Patriot Steel Fabrication. The concrete piers were poured by Harry, Rick Abend, and Pat DiDomizio. Harry, Rick, Gary Middleton, and Refuge Staff completed the installation. Harry is planning some finishing woodwork touches to match the Visitor Center façade and we also hope to add some hardscaping for better wheelchair access in the coming year.
• Letters and emails were submitted by the Friends to our political representatives advocating Refuge System support, support of full funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, concern over negative consequences of the government shutdown, and support of funding for Eastern Neck NWR. As part of the Chesapeake Marshlands NWR Complex, we hope our sister refuges can always depend on FOB support.
• Janet Shields, our Vice-President and Membership/Donations Committee Chair, is retiring at the end of her term. Vicki Zobel will be joining the Board in October as the new Committee Chair. Harry Heckathorn will be filling the role of Vice-President.
• Ron Ketter, our FOB Treasurer, is stepping down at the end of his term. Martha Foulon will be joining the Board in October as our new Treasurer.
• A Directors and Officers Liability Insurance Policy was purchased to protect FOB Board members.
• Our volunteers are the backbone of our organization. In October, FOB held our 4th Annual Volunteer Appreciation Crab Feast at the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad State Park Pavilion for FOB volunteers and Refuge Service Volunteers, FOB Life Members, FOB Scholarship Recipients as well as Refuge Staff, Harriet Tubman State Park Staff and Eastern Neck NWR volunteers. Over 70 people attended. Thank you all – and also those who could not attend!
• While we started out the fiscal year with a total of 836 memberships, Janet Shields, our Vice-President and Membership Committee Chair, reports a year-end total of .998 memberships, including 63 life memberships, in the Friends of Blackwater. Our membership has increased for the seventh consecutive year! Thank you all!

We want to continue our successful relationship between the Refuge and the Friends in the coming years. 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 2019 prepared by Treasurer Ron Ketter 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