Given the COVID-19 Pandemic, the Board of Directors of the Friends of Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, Inc. is pleased to report that our 33rd year supporting the Blackwater NWR has been a somewhat successful one. The relationship between the Refuge staff, the volunteers, and the Friends of Blackwater has remained very close and has resulted in several accomplishments in support of the Refuge prior to the COVID-19 shutdown. All funds raised by the Friends and all activities provided are used to support the needs and goals of Blackwater NWR and the Chesapeake Marshlands National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

Following are Friends activities over the past fiscal year – October 1, 2019 through September 30, 2020:

- The Cooperative Environmental Education Program with the Dorchester County Public School’s fourth and sixth grades continued in its 13th year. In October, Ellie Ludvigsen, our Environmental Education Committee Chair, coordinated the activities led by Refuge staff and volunteers. This year, a total of 350 students visited Blackwater NWR as part of this program. The 6th grade program was canceled due to COVID-19. The FOB is providing annual funding for transportation. Since it began in 2007, a total of 8790 students have participated in this program! The expansion of our community service projects for 7th graders was delayed as the Eagle Festival and Wild Goose Chase were canceled.
- Through March, the Eagle’s Nest Bookstore, managed by Sue Fischer, continued to be the major source of funds for Refuge projects and programs. Since COVID-19 restrictions, we’ve estimated a loss of over $50,000 in sales due to closure of the Visitor Center. We are investigating an on-line sales program for selected gift shop items.
- In March, FOB completed the hardscaping to the Photo-Op Gate. Designed by Harry Heckathorn, a concrete walkway now allows better access for our handicapped visitors. The Photo-Op Gate has been very popular!
- FOB also funded a new walkway to the Refuge law enforcement office located on the east end of the Visitor Center.
- FOB received Refuge approval to place a small storage shed at the east end of the Refuge Visitor Center. It was purchased in March and is identical to the Refuge storage shed located there. Refuge Staff assisted Harry Heckathorn and Rick Abend with getting the shed set up.
- Due to State COVID-19 restrictions, our Refuge Supervisory Wildlife Biologist requested and received FOB support to hire a local Smith Island waterman to retrieve wave energy sensors off Martin National Wildlife Refuge.
- As previously said, we had to cancel our Wild Goose Chase Women’s Bicycle Ride due to COVID-19 causing us to take another big financial hit. Kit Bradshaw, our Events Fundraising Committee Chair, stepped down at the end of her term in September. We want to thank her for making the Wild Goose Chase a truly Refuge event. We are currently searching for Kit’s replacement and we must succeed if we are to continue the Wild Goose Chase Women’s Bicycle Ride! Net proceeds from the
WGC go into the Refuge Contributed Funds Account to be used for educational purposes.

- FOB coordinated with the Maryland Photography Alliance for them to hold a Night Photography Workshop along Wildlife Drive in September. Net proceeds went into the Refuge Contributed Funds Account. This was the second night photography workshop at the Refuge and we hope to plan more events in the future.
- We were all saddened once again to hear that the Refuge’s 19th Annual Eagle Festival had to be cancelled, this time due to COVID-19. We’re keeping our fingers crossed that this event can be held in 2021. FOB holds a major membership drive during the Eagle Festival. There has not been an Eagle Festival since March of 2018!
- For the fifth year, the Friends supported the Federal 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!
- Our Scholarship Committee is chaired by Harry Heckathorn. Ron Ketter and Marty O’Connor stepped down as committee members and were replaced by Martha Foulon and Rich Chirumbole. Three scholarships totaling $9000.00 were awarded to deserving students pursuing degrees in environmental sciences. Caroline Jackson of Annapolis, MD and attending Washington College was awarded $3000. Emma Dodsworth of Port Republic, MD and attending Washington College was awarded $3000. Allison Williams of Frostburg, MD and attending Frostburg State University received $3000. The total money awarded through our Scholarship Program since 2012 is now $49,000.
- Our second Blackwater Visitor Services Internship through a contract with the Student Conservation Association was canceled due to COVID-19. We plan to continue with this support and FOB was able to extend the contract to 2021.
- The 18th Annual Youth Fishing Fun Day was canceled due to COVID-19. FOB supplies giveaway items, T-shirts, bait, lunch, and other supplies and hope to continue this in 2021.
- 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. Our social media accounts, also managed by Lisa, are very popular and continue to grow. We now have 13,114 Facebook followers, 1,040 Twitter followers, 990 Instagram followers, and 340 YouTube followers. There are 3,000 newsletter subscribers (FOB members and others) being kept informed through our e-newsletters. These communications avenues have played a key part in keeping the public informed on what’s currently happening at Blackwater NWR. Thank you, Lisa!
- 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, with occasional help from Rick Abend. While the ospreys chose not to nest on our platform this year, the variety of activity both on and under the nesting platform has been fantastic. With the help of Travers Electric Co. and their bucket truck, we were able to complete some much needed maintenance -- cleaning the camera lens, installing a predator guard on the pole, and installing new wire mesh in the nesting platform. After a raccoon was seen taking a nap up on the nesting platform one night, we decided on a predator guard to block access from the ground.
• Our “Waterfowl Cam” has been a major success story. It has continued to provide some fantastic waterfowl views in the winter in addition to other wildlife views, like eagles and deer, throughout the year. We even captured an awesome lightning strike and a shooting star!

• The new Eagle Cam (actually a two camera system) became operational last December. Unfortunately, the eagle pair that used the nest the previous year decided to change nests. We were excited when a pair of great horned owls seemed to be taking over the nest, but we lost that possibility during a horrendous storm in February. Other eagles have been seen visiting the nest throughout the year, so we are hopeful for a pair of eagles nesting there in the coming season. Harry did do some additional work on the predator guard after a snake was seen in the nest.

• With the popularity of our cams all over the world, the Refuge approved a new FOB proposal for a “River Cam”. This cam will focus on the Blackwater River side of Wildlife Drive in general and on one of the basket osprey nests in particular that has had successful osprey hatches for many years. Can’t wait to see those babies! Installation is in progress and the River Cam should be on-line before the ospreys arrive next March. Stay tuned…

• Letters and emails were submitted by the Friends to our political representatives advocating Refuge System support and support of full funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund. After many years, we’ve finally seen some success with passage of the Great American Outdoors Act providing permanent funding for the LWCF in addition to some funding for backlogged maintenance projects.

• There were a few personnel changes on the FOB Board. Last October, Harry Heckathorn (in addition to his scholarship committee and cam maintenance duties) became FOB Vice-President. Martha Foulon joined the Board as our new Treasurer. Vicki Zobel joined the Board as our new Membership Committee Chair. Thank you all for stepping up to the plate!

• Our volunteers are the backbone of our organization. We were unable to have the Refuge Volunteer Awards Banquet at the Elk’s Lodge this year. We were also unable to have our usual Annual Volunteer Appreciation Crab Feast at the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad State Park Pavilion. However, the FOB Board approved having our 5th Annual Volunteer Appreciation Crab Feast as a Drive-Thru event 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. Fifty-eight invitees made the trip to the Refuge to receive one dozen #1 steamed crabs from Lindy’s Seafood, two ears of corn on the cob from Emily’s Produce, and two cupcakes from Kathy’s Cakes. Thank you all – and also those who could not attend!

• Vicki Zobel, our Membership Committee Chair, revamped our membership accounting procedures and reports a year-end total of 539 current memberships, including 63 life memberships, in the Friends of Blackwater.

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 as soon as the COVID-19 situation allows. We need you now more than ever! Stay safe and healthy.

An overall summary of the income and expenditures for FY 2020 prepared by Treasurer Martha Foulon 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