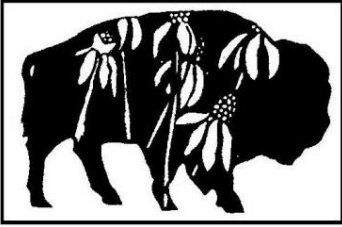


Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge 2022 Annual Report



**2022 Photography Contest Best in Show
“Bison in the Snow”
by Jamie Johnson Lawson**



Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge

PO Box 114, Prairie City, IA 50228 • 515-994-2918 • www.tallgrass.org • buffalo@tallgrass.org

Message from the President – Joan Van Gorp

We have come to the end of another year with many accomplishments and challenges. Thank you to all our Friends members, all the volunteers, our Friends board members and especially the Refuge staff and interns. We all worked together to make 2022 an incredible year!

Everyone was glad the Refuge and the Friends were able to offer more events and programs as COVID restrictions were reduced. The Friends volunteered and interacted with visitors at Migratory Bird Day, Bison Day, Walk for the Wild and Spurs & Tails. We also hosted informational booths at several events in the metro area, including Blank Park Zoo and Des Moines Botanical Gardens.

Each year when we do our Annual Report, I try to bring awareness of the problems caused by reduced funding for the Refuge System. The situation is getting worse and there is a serious threat to Refuges across the country. The lack of funding for even basic needs continues to grow and most dramatically is seen in essential Refuge staff positions not being filled. Positions vacated either by retirement or individuals moving to other jobs are not allowed to be filled. Neal Smith NWR has never experienced something like this and later in 2023 will only have three staff members as the Refuge biologist is retiring.

This reduction in staff results in events and programs being cancelled and field work not getting done. Years of hard work has gone into reconstructing the tallgrass prairie, but now invasive species are overtaking the land. Additionally, many visitors to the Refuge are often disappointed when they find the Visitor Center closed.

Our organization provides countless volunteer hours and funding whenever possible, but that is not enough in the current environment. The Friends and some of our Friends members have contacted our elected officials, though we have not received very positive, if any response. We will continue in these efforts and have partnerships with the National Wildlife Refuge Association and the Coalition of Refuge Friends – both important organizations that are strong advocates for the Refuge System.

We do need your help with this and welcome any questions on how to correspond with elected officials to try and turn this around. Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge is “your” Refuge and your participation will truly make a difference.

On a more positive note, the Friends are planning many projects and activities. We are increasing volunteer recruitment and will be helping with volunteer recognition and volunteer events. More volunteer open houses will be held and whatever your background, talents and interests – know there is a place for you to help the Friends and the Refuge.

More photography workshops and photo walks are being planned and I want to thank Mike Cox of the Red Rock Camera Club for his willingness and enthusiasm in organizing these activities. There are so many unique aspects of the Refuge, and these are creative opportunities to make people more aware of this special place. With a few changes, we are planning to have Concert on the Prairie in June and will be hosting Walk for the Wild and Spurs and Tails again this fall.

The Friends are also initiating several large projects: a redesign of our website, a capital campaign to raise funds for new exhibits in the Visitor Center, an outdoor nature playscape, our volunteer recruitment program and developing partnerships with other organizations. For these projects to succeed we are looking for more individuals to become directly involved with the Friends to assist in these efforts, be it as volunteers, board members, work group participants.

As you can tell, there is much to be done and with our Friends members, volunteers and Refuge staff all working together, we will address the challenges and welcome the opportunities that come our way in 2023.

Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge 2022 Annual Report



The mission of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge is to actively protect, restore, reconstruct and manage the diverse native ecosystems of tallgrass prairie, oak savanna, and sedge meadow.

Source: www.fws.gov/refuge/Neal_Smith/about.html

Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) Facts

- Authorized as the Walnut Creek NWR by the U.S. Congress in 1990
- First native plant seeds planted to recreate the tallgrass prairie in 1992
- Bison reintroduced in 1996 and elk reintroduced in 1998 in 800-acre enclosure
- Opened Prairie Learning Center/Visitor Center in 1997
- Renamed Neal Smith NWR in 1998 to honor Congressman Neal Smith
- ~ 6000 acres of tallgrass prairie and oak savanna remnants and reconstruction
- One of the largest tallgrass prairie reconstructions in the world
- Home to more than 100 native-plant species, dozens of pollinators, 200 bird, 35 mammal, 10 amphibian, and six reptile species
- Authorized to expand to ~ 12,000 acres in the Walnut Creek watershed



“Sparring Practice” by Matt Brotherton



“Road Block” by Greg Punelli

Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge

2022 Annual Report

2022 at the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge

PEOPLE

- Visitor Center hours increased in May as COVID protocols were relaxed but were reduced in December due to staff reductions.
- 251,244* site visitors with 17,127* stopping at the Visitor Center
- 1,288* environmental education visits
- 930* participants in seven special events at the Refuge
- 2,675* hunting visitors and sponsored mentored turkey and pheasant hunts
- 3,286* people contacted through outreach programming at community events: Greater Des Moines Botanical Garden Earth Day, Des Moines Farmers Market, Blank Park Zoo's Monarch Festival, Science Iowa at Raccoon River Park in West Des Moines, and Global Green Farmer's Market
- 246* volunteers contributed 2,600* hours
- Organized volunteer events included:
 - Christmas Bird Count on January 4th
 - Scattering of donated prairie violet seeds during a frigid cold snap in January
 - Cleaning of the seed lab in February
 - Girdling unwanted trees in the Oak Savanna in March
 - Removing invasive trumpet vine and multiflora rose from the Tallgrass Trail in August
 - Staffing Bison Day Festival tables in August
 - Collecting prairie plant seeds during National Public Lands Day on September 24th and National Wildlife Refuge Week on October 8th
- Provided biology internships for Kara Grady, Nick Hall, Anna Iverson, Robert Goss, Annah Bender, and Shami Morse
- Ayden Reyes served as Refuge Outreach Intern, a one-year position created by a partnership between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Environment for the Americas and funded by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.
- Hayley J. Lindsey filled the position of Visitor Services seasonal park ranger for six months.
- Patrick Bryant and Neil Baalman transferred to USFWS positions at other locations.
- Carla Dykstra, Administrative Officer, retired after 31 years at NSNWR.
- Renamed and updated signs for the former Auto Tour as the Prairie Wildlife Drive
- Conducted virtual Volunteer Connections meetings over Zoom to keep volunteers engaged.

* during October 2021 to September 2022 Fiscal Year

Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge 2022 Annual Report

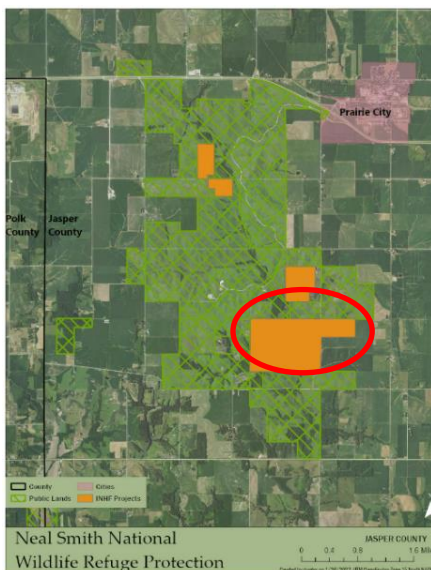
2022 at the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge (cont.)

- Hosted the Inaugural Iowa Interagency Fire Workshop with participants from USFWS, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, The Nature Conservancy, and county and city fire departments.
- Hosted Iowa State University Extension’s Wildlife Habitat Education Program (WHEP) competition for middle school students on May 21st.
- Hosted “School for the Wild” with Dallas County Conservation for Perry Elementary 4th graders from October 3rd to 7th.
- Continued urban outreach by participation in the Greater Des Moines Urban Wildlife Conservation Partnership with the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, Polk County Conservation, and Des Moines Park and Recreation Department.

BIOLOGY

- ~1000 acres of prairie burned in the spring
- 13 bison calves born
- Drought conditions caused low water levels in Walnut Creek and required supplemental water in the bison and elk enclosure
- Collected showy orchid seeds
- Girdled invasive trees in the Oak Savanna as part of restoration.

Addition of 565-Acre Land Parcel to Refuge Completed



The last section of a 565-acre land purchase has been transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for expansion of the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge (NSNWR). The Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation and Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge purchased the 565-acre farmland property, an inholding within the permissible boundaries of NSNWR, from the Rothinghouse Trust in 2008. The organizations planted the property with native tallgrass prairie plants and held the property until federal funding could be found to purchase the property for the refuge. The USFWS purchased 100 acres in 2016, 231 acres in 2017, and 82 acres in 2020. The final 152-acre section had been enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program to generate income for the Friends and was sold to the USFWS in 2022.

Map from Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation website www.inhf.org

Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge 2022 Annual Report

Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge

VISION – We envision a partnership that promotes awareness, support, education, and appreciation for the natural ecosystems of the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge.

MISSION STATEMENT - Our mission is to bring together the public and a thriving refuge valued by all.

FRIENDS TIMELINE

- 1993 - Formed as Friends of Walnut Creek National Wildlife Refuge/ Prairie Learning Center
- 1997 - Opened bookstore in new Prairie Learning Center
- 1999 - Developed Prairie Builders Intern Program with three interns
- 2002 - Developed “People of the Prairie” Exhibit
- 2008 - Purchased 840 acres with the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation for future Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge expansion
- 2009 - Established PCM (Prairie City-Monroe) High School Scholarship
- 2012 - Changed name to Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge
- 2013 - Hosted first “Concert on the Prairie”
- 2015 - Hosted first “Annual Winter Gathering” for Friends members
- 2020 – National Wildlife Refuge Association’s “Friends Group of the Year” Award
- 2022 – Received “Public Lands Partner Award“ from the Public Lands Alliance



“Prairie Sunset” by Sarah Becker



“Angry Birds” by Greg Punelli

Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge 2022 Annual Report

Friends Accomplishments in 2022

The Friends' activities focus on funding and recruiting volunteers to directly support the refuge's mission and maintain a healthy Friends community. Our accomplishments during 2022 were:

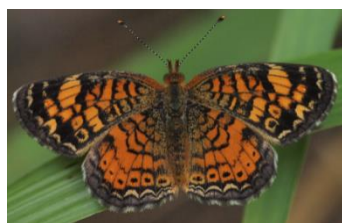
- Hosted a Spring Fling Open House for Friends members to allow social distancing by participants on March 26th with tabletop displays and sticky note inputs.
- Received a "Public Lands Partner Award" from the Public Lands Alliance in March.
- Participated in NSNWR virtual Volunteer Connections update meetings.
- Began scheduling art and photography exhibits in the Visitor Center's Ding Darling Gallery as Visitor Center hours were expanded.
- Hosted our first "Walk for the Wild" event during National Refuge Week.
- Sponsored the third annual Spurs 'n Tails Contest on opening day of Pheasant Hunting Season on October 29th.
- Organized a Volunteer Open House to invite new volunteers to support the Refuge and Friends on November 12th.
- Sponsored an annual Photography Contest and hosted a reception for the photographers on November 19th.
- Provided funding for:
 - six biology intern stipends
 - purchase of 25 binoculars for use by visitors and school field trips
 - purchase of 18 trail cameras for the Greater Des Moines Urban Wildlife Partnership's participation in the Urban Wildlife Information Network (UWIN) Monitoring Program
 - lunches for volunteers during the Christmas Bird Count in January, Iowa State University Wildlife Habitat Education Program Competition in May, and National Wildlife Refuge Week seed collection and cleaning in October
 - high school graduate scholarships to pursue a degree in conservation
 - internet service at the Visitor Center
 - OnCell app platform subscription for the Prairie Wildlife Drive narration
- Received a National Park Trust "Every Kid Outdoors" Grant of \$5,000 to fund bus transportation for school field trips.
- Completed installation of an information kiosk at the Oak Savanna Trail parking lot funded by a National Fish and Wildlife Fund "Spurs 'n Tails" grant.
- Completed sale of 152-acre CRP property owned by the Friends and Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for Refuge expansion.
- 299 Friends members at the end of 2022
- 7,317 followers on Facebook

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West Hill Brewing Company Donates Profits from Butterfly Beer

Doug Gaumer, owner of West Hill Brewing Company in Indianola, and Aswati Subramanina and Ethan Madden, biology professor and research assistant at Simpson College in Indianola collaborated to produce a beer made with yeast from butterflies. Seven butterfly species were netted and their mouth and leg areas gently swabbed to harvest brewer's yeast. The butterfly species included Tiger Swallowtail, Monarch, and Pearl Crescent. The yeast was then cultured and used to brew "Pearl Crescent" IPA.

Proceeds from the sale of "Pearl Crescent" IPA provided \$1,300 that was donated to the Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge to support butterfly conservation through internships and research on native butterfly species.



Pearl Crescent Butterfly

photos from www.butterflyidentification.com



Tiger Swallowtail Butterfly



Monarch Butterfly

Inaugural "Walk for the Wild" Event

The Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge (NSNWR) partnered with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services (USFWS) and the Public Lands Alliance (PLA) to host their first "Walk for the Wild" event with the intent to get people walking in nature and raise money for Friends' projects. The event was scheduled for October 15th during National Wildlife Refuge Week. Team Tallgrass represented the Friends of NSNWR as one of 32 teams in the nationwide event.

Fifty-five people registered on-line or signed in at the registration table during the event. Team Tallgrass earned more than \$2,700 from donations and the PLA Amplifier Fund and was the sixth largest fundraiser on the online platform. In addition to enjoying the prairie on a beautiful fall day, participants received stickers and a 10% discount at the Prairie Point Nature Store.

Rachel Ruden, Friends of NSNWR Board Member, and Ayden Reyes, Refuge Outreach Intern, lead walkers on a 4-mile guided walk during the inaugural "Walk for the Wild" event.

Photo by Nancy Corona/USFWS



Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge 2022 Annual Report

Annual Photography Contest

The Friends have sponsored an annual photography contest for photos taken at the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge since 2016. Thirty-five photographers submitted 122 photographs in 2022. The 2022 category winners were:

- Bison – “Bison in the Snow” by Jamie Johnson Lawson
- Elk – “Sparring Practice” by Matt Brotherton
- Birds – “Angry Birds” by Greg Punelli
- Other Wildlife – “Out on a Limb” by Matt Brotherton
- Landscapes – “Prairie Sunset” by Sarah Becker
- Plants – “Prairie Phlox” by Greg Punelli
- People Enjoying the Refuge – “Road Block” by Greg Punelli

Jamie Johnson Lawson’s “Bison in the Snow” was selected as Best in Show and is on the cover of the 2022 Annual Report. Other winning photos are featured throughout the 2022 Annual Report. The photograph selected for Youth Best in Show was “Road Block” by Sophia Juhler.



**“Out on a Limb”
by Matt Brotherton**

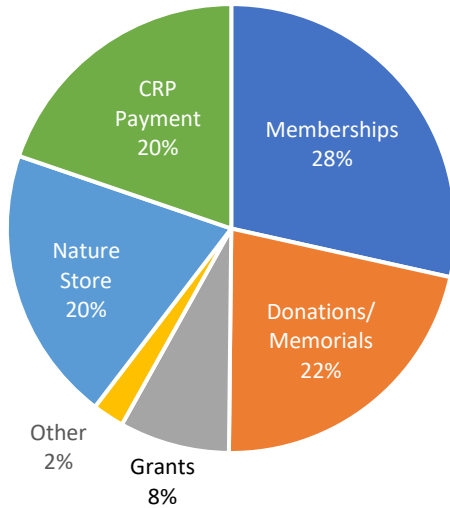


**“Prairie Phlox”
by Greg Punelli**

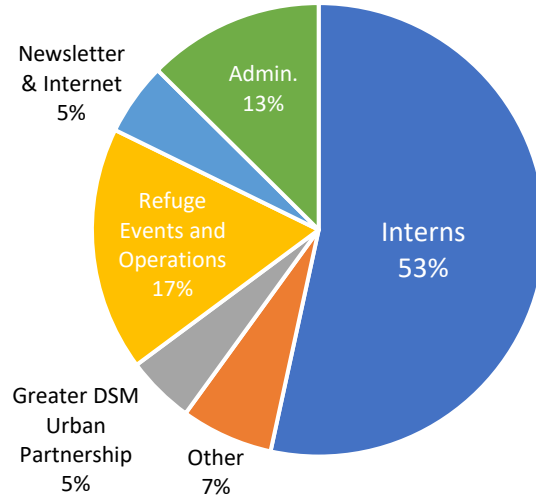
Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge 2022 Annual Report

Friends Financial Summary

2022 Income - \$118,979 ¹



2022 Expenditures - \$116,374



Income:

- Total regular income in 2022 was \$118,979, a 41% increase from 2021. Membership income increased 20% from 2021 and donation income increased 61% from 2021.
- Income from nature store sales increased more than 250% with the increased Visitor Center hours as COVID restrictions were relaxed.
- The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Payment was received for land jointly owned by the Friends and Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation seeded in native plants. 2022 will be the last year of CRP payment income since the land was sold to the Refuge in late 2022.

Expenditures:

- Total regular expenditures in 2022 were \$116,374, a 90% increase from 2021.
- The largest increase in expenditures was intern costs for a full staff of six interns during 2022. Intern costs increased from 33% of expenditures in 2021 to 53% of expenditures in 2022.
- Refuge Events and Operations Support includes purchase of prairie seed and greenhouse equipment, registration and supply costs for onsite and community outreach events, and lunches for volunteer events at the refuge.
- A new expenditure in 2022 was funding to support the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge's participation in the Greater Des Moines Urban Wildlife Partnership as part of the effort to become an urban refuge.
- Administration costs include postage, Board and Nature Store insurance, organization membership fees, property taxes, and accounting charges. Administration costs dropped from 21% of expenditures in 2021 to 13% in 2022.

¹ Income of \$795,000 from land sale to the USFWS for Refuge expansion is not included in the 2022 Income pie chart.

Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge 2022 Annual Report

Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge Board of Directors



Joan Van Gorp joined the Friends Board in 2007 and is President and Community Coordinator.



Mark Lyle rejoined the Friends Board in 2018 and is Treasurer.



Sharon Tinker joined the Friends Board in 2016 and is Secretary and Government Liaison.



Jim Johnson joined the Friends Board in 2016 and fills the Grant Development niche position.



Daryl Howell joined the Friends Board in 2016 and is Nature Store Liaison.



Sydney Algreen-Hunter rejoined the Friends Board in 2018 and fills the Environmental Education/Biology Support niche position.



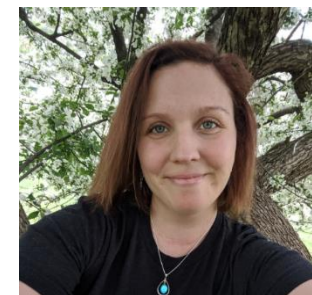
Jordan Oster joined the Friends Board in 2018 and fills the Public Relation niche position.



Sue Tew-Warming joined the Friends Board in 2018 and fills the Volunteer Coordinator niche position.



Rachel Ruden joined the Friends Board in 2019 and fills the Public Relations niche position.



Amanda Yancy joined the Friends Board in 2021 and fills the Membership niche position.

Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge 2022 Annual Report

2023 Friends Events

March 25th – Friends’ Spring Fling Members Meeting

June 9th - Concert on the Prairie

October 14th - Friends’ “Walk for the Wild” Event

Check the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge website and Facebook pages for Refuge events as they are scheduled in 2023.

Photography Contest Youth Best of Show “Road Block” by Sophia Juhler



Communication and Social Media

Refuge

- Website – www.fws.gov/refuge/Neal_Smith
- Facebook – www.facebook.com/NealSmithNWR
- Twitter - #NealSmithNaWR

Friends

- *Prairie Wind* Newsletter – mailed quarterly
- Website – www.tallgrass.org
- YouTube channel – Friends of Neal Smith NWR
- E-mail – buffalo@tallgrass.org
- Facebook – www.facebook.com/friendsofnealSmith
- Twitter - #NSNWR FRIENDS
- Instagram - friendsnsnr