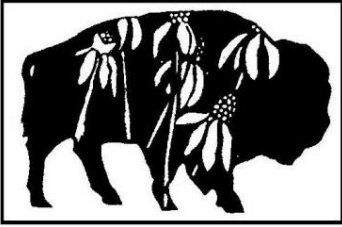


Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge 2023 Annual Report



**2023 Photography Contest Best in Show
“Red-Bellied Woodpecker”
by Scott Olson**



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 – Sue Tew-Warming

Greetings from the prairie! Spring is starting to arrive and before long the Refuge brown vistas will be green again. Our bison herd will grow as bison calves (also known as ‘red dogs’ because of the orange/red color at birth) will begin to arrive in March and April.

Former Board Member Jim Johnson wrote a description of 2023 highlights and I would like to add it here. He said it better than I could. ”It has been a busy year. Volunteers have invested physical labor in removing brush, scoring trees, harvesting seeds, cleaning seeds, searching for native and non-native species, planting in new and old areas, offering classes, conducting nature walks, interacting with other nature groups and partners, and supporting Friends and refuge events. Many Friends members contributed remarkable financial support to the refuge programs and goals. It is with profound gratitude that we thank our volunteers and Friends members for their unwavering commitment to the mission, vision and goals of the refuge and the Friends. It is only with their love, caring, and support that the refuge can bring the love of nature and an understanding of her needs to the more than 300,000 visitors each year.”

The Friends Board of Directors went through several changes and transitions in 2023.

- Joan Van Gorp retired as President and Community Liaison after 16 years.
- Mark Lyle retired as Treasurer after 12 years.
- Jim Johnson retired as Grant Coordinator and Special Projects after 7 years (this time.)
- Daryl Howell retired as Nature Store Liaison and Research Projects after 7 years.
- Sydney Algreen-Hunter retired as Events Liaison after 5 years.

I, and the current Board, want to express our gratitude for the years of service, amazing ideas, ongoing commitment, and passion that each of these individuals shared during their tenure on the Friends of Neal Smith NWR Board of Directors. Thank you.

2024 will be a year of reviewing where we have been, investigating what’s happening, and looking to the future of where we want to be. We need individuals who value and enjoy this place as much as we do. Areas that we need your support include:

- New Board Members who will provide leadership in 2024 and beyond,
- Volunteers who have time, gifts, and skills that they would be willing to share, and
- Individuals who enjoy brainstorming opportunities as we explore ways to increase numbers for both visitors and revenue to support the Refuge.

If you haven’t been out for a visit lately, take the time to step away from your daily routine, and pause to enjoy the beauty that we have at the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge! Be sure to stop in the Visitor Center and say Hi! If you have questions, ideas, and/or want to be more involved, please contact me at Sue@heartlandwellbeinginstitute.org. Peace to all.

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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



“Winter on the Prairie” by Greg Punelli



“Masked Bandits” by Matt Brotherton

Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge

2023 Annual Report

2023 at the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge

- 206,064* site visitors with 18,655* stopping at the Visitor Center.
- 2,574* environmental education visits with 2,424* on-site attendees and 55* programs presented.
- 1,817* participants in 80* interpretive programs with 1,600* participants in 71* on-site programs.
- 1,415* participants in 9* events at the refuge and 2,320* participants in 8* community events off the refuge.
- 2,775* hunt visitors and 3* mentored pheasant hunts.
- 383* volunteers contributed 4,587* hours including Polk County Conservation Youth Corps, Forest Avenue Outreach Youth Conservation Crew, Central College Students, Bayer employees, Des Moines Founders Club members, and Blank Park Zoo Crew.
- Organized visitor and volunteer events included:
 - Earth Day on April 22nd with ~200 visitors.
 - Taping of Iowa Public Radio's "Talk of Iowa" on April 22nd.
 - Migratory Bird Day on May 6th.
 - Bison Day on August 5th.
 - Monarch Madness on September 16th with 70 volunteers.
 - "Meet the Author" with Neil Hamilton on September 16th.
 - National Public Lands Day on September 23rd with 30 volunteers collecting seeds.
 - Iowa Public Broadcasting System (PBS) early screening of the Ken Burns' documentary. *The American Buffalo* on October 14th.
- Staffed one Visitor Services and six biology internships funded by the Friends and a Visitor Services internship in partnership with Environment for the Americas.
- Hosted "School for the Wild" with Dallas County Conservation for 240 Perry Elementary 4th graders from October 3rd to 7th.
- Continued urban outreach by participation in the Greater Des Moines Urban Wildlife Conservation Partnership.
- Biologist Karen Viste-Sparkman retired and the position was not backfilled.
- Burned 1,850 acres of prairie in the spring but none in the fall.
- 12 bison calves and 4 elk calves were born.
- Seeded native species and removed fencing in the 122-acre Curry tract in the spring as the property was added to the refuge.
- Worked with the Monarch Joint Venture to conduct drone surveys of milkweed populations.
- Conducted acoustic bat monitoring in June and July.
- Drought conditions caused low water levels in Walnut Creek and required supplemental water in the bison and elk enclosure.
- Purchased the 74-acre Van Ryswyk North tract on 88th Avenue for addition to the refuge.

* during October 2022 to September 2023 Fiscal Year

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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 – Received National Wildlife Refuge Association’s “Friends Group of the Year” Award
- 2022 – Received a “Public Lands Partner Award“ from the Public Lands Alliance

Communication and Social Media

Refuge

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



“Mama and Baby”
by Barb McGraw



“Wandflower”
by Janie Lawson

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Friends Accomplishments in 2023

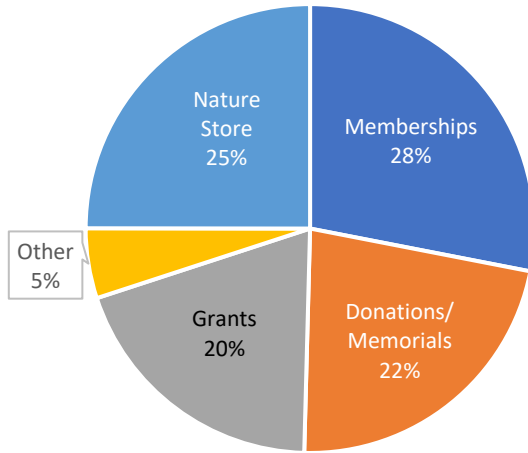
The Friends' activities focus on funding and recruiting volunteers to directly support the refuge's mission and maintain a healthy Friends community. Accomplishments during 2023 were:

- Hosted an Annual Spring Fling soup luncheon for 34 Friends members and guests on March 25th with Dr. Tom Rosburg from Drake University as the keynote speaker.
- Began the scheduling of art and photography exhibits in the Visitor Center's Ding Darling Gallery.
- Organized the return of Concert on the Prairie in the more informal Tallgrass Tunes format with Jonny Lipford playing his Native American flutes on June 9th with 124 guests and 24 volunteers joining the fun.
- Sponsored and staffed a table during the North American Prairie Conference in Altoona from June 25th to 29th.
- Sponsored our second "Walk for the Wild" event in partnership with the Public Lands Alliance on October 7th during National Refuge Week.
- Sponsored the fourth annual Spurs 'n Tails Contest on opening day of Pheasant Hunting Season on October 28th to encourage hunters to visit the refuge.
- Sponsored an annual Photography Contest and hosted a reception for the photographers on November 18th.
- Provided funding for:
 - six biology and one Visitor Services intern stipends
 - four new intern laptop workstations
 - sponsorship of the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge participation in the "Great American Roadtrip" for Marion, Mahaska, and Jasper Counties
 - lunches for volunteers during the Christmas Bird Count in January and National Public Land Days in September
 - 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
- Updated the Friends website (tallgrass.org) and moved it to a new host platform.
- Procured Prairie Meadows Community Betterment and Van Meter Advised Fund grants to purchase an Action Trackchair® for disabled visitor access to the refuge trails.
- Completed sale of 74-acre Van Ryswyk North property owned by the Friends and Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for Refuge expansion.
- Loren Lown and Austin Steinkamp joined the Friends Board while Mark Lyle, Daryl Howell, Jim Johnson, Joan Van Gorp, and Sydney Algreen-Hunter resigned from the Board after many years of service.
- 359 Friends members at the end of 2023
- 8,200 followers on Facebook

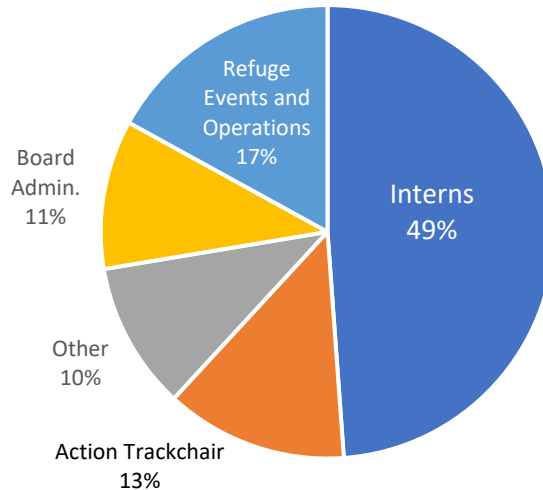
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Friends Financial Summary

2023 Income - \$95,083 ¹



2023 Expenditures - \$159,507



Income:

- Total regular income in 2023 was \$95,083, a 20% decrease from 2022. Membership income decreased 21% from 2022 and donation income was unchanged from 2022.
- Income from nature store sales was unchanged from 2022.
- Income from Conservation Reserve Payments from property owned by the Friends was down more than \$20,000 after the property was sold to the refuge for expansion.
- Other Income was \$4,794 and includes the \$1,335 profit from the Concert on the Prairie Tallgrass Tunes event, \$578 from the Walk for the Wild event, \$2,512 in Conservation Reserve Payments on property sold to the refuge before the end of the year, and \$368 from the Penny Press machine.

Expenditures:

- Total regular expenditures in 2023 were \$159,507, a 37% increase from 2022.
- Intern costs increased 25% from 2022 to 2023 due to longer intern assignments. Intern costs dropped from 53% of 2022 expenditures to 49% of 2023 expenditures.
- Refuge Events and Operations Support includes purchase of prairie seed, registration and supply costs for onsite and community outreach events, and lunches for volunteer events at the refuge.
- A large expenditure was the purchase of an Action Trackchair® for handicapped visitor access to refuge trails. Sixty percent of the cost was funded by grants.
- Other includes costs for the Prairie Wind newsletter, Visitor Center internet, high school scholarships, and reimbursed school trip transportation.
- Board administration costs include postage, Board and Nature Store insurance, organization membership fees, property taxes, and accounting charges. Administration costs dropped from 13% of expenditures in 2022 to 11% in 2023.

¹ Income of \$504,255 from land sale to the USFWS for Refuge expansion is not included in the 2023 Income pie chart.

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Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge Board of Directors



Sue Tew-Warming joined the Friends Board in 2018 and is President and Volunteer Coordinator.

Austin Steinkamp joined the Friends Board in 2023 and is Treasurer.



Sharon Tinker joined the Friends Board in 2016 and is Vice-President, Secretary, and Membership Coordinator.

Jim Johnson joined the Friends Board in 2016 and coordinates Grant Development.



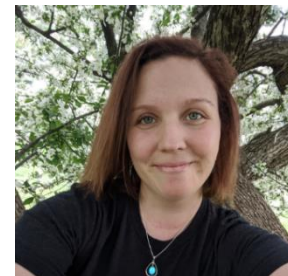
Jordan Oster joined the Friends Board in 2018 and coordinates Communications and Public Relations.

Sydney Algreen-Hunter rejoined the Friends Board in 2018 and supports Environmental Education and Biology efforts.



Rachel Ruden joined the Friends Board in 2019 and coordinates Special Projects including Ding Darling Gallery scheduling and Walk for the Wild.

Amanda Yancy joined the Friends Board in 2021 and is Liaison with Refuge Events.



Loren Lown joined the Friends Board in 2023 and coordinates Special Projects including land acquisition and Greater Des Moines Urban Conservation Partnership.