

[From Spring 2004]

## **CNHA Takes National Prize**

A volunteer often feels that his or her service is its own reward. Nonetheless, getting recognized with a thanks for work well done instills pleasure and pride and infuses one's commitment with renewed enthusiasm. Everyone likes a pat on the back now and then, so when we were notified by Evan Hirsche, President of the National Wildlife Refuge Association, that the Chincoteague Natural History Association was chosen the 2004 Friends Group of the Year - it felt great!

We have been singled out for impressive accomplishments the group has amassed in support of Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge and the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge. CNHA members have donated thousands of hours and helped secure hundreds of thousands of dollars to provide high quality interpretive and educational opportunities for refuge visitors as well as biological programs to protect and enhance wildlife habitat.

The prize carries a \$2,000 award and is a truly great honor. We were nominated by both our refuge managers and a few others, which is a wonderful tribute to our efforts and for which we thank everyone involved.

CNHA has truly come a long way since 1986 when Charlie Holbrook, Supervisory Outdoor Recreation Planner and- a handful of volunteers met with then refuge manager, Dennis Holland, and the CNHA was initiated. None were new to the refuges; most had been volunteering informally for a long time at that point; many dated their service back to 1969. In fact, the first CNHA President was John Bucalew, the first manager of the Chincoteague refuge. From that small beginning, we now have an international membership of over 300 people.

The charter members deliberated carefully to determine a realistic mission and laid it all out for those of us who would follow. Together they had worked on creating a Mission Statement that defined the things they felt were important and potentially beneficial to the refuge and it still is our operating philosophy today.

For anyone unfamiliar with it, the current statement reads:

The Chincoteague Natural History Association is a cooperating non-profit association established in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The purpose of the CNHA is to promote a better understanding and appreciation of the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, the Eastern Shore of Virginia Wildlife Refuge, and the natural history and environment of Virginia Eastern Shore. The CNHA produces and provides interpretive and educational material activities, and experiences for refuge visitors.

Those dedicated pioneers immediately saw their mission philosophy translated into an action policy when the group's first action was to become incorporated and obtain a tax-exempt status to begin raising modest amounts of money. Several years later, CNHA took the Eastern Shore Refuge under its wing and began supporting both of the beautiful, local refuges. Each year our work and our revenues have increased.

This past season though has been a truly remarkable one. It seemed it couldn't get any better when we celebrated the grand opening of the Herbert H. Bateman Educational and Administrative Visitor Center (for which CNHA had donated the first \$5,000) and thereby ushered in a whole new experience for visitors in the 21st century. For anyone who has not yet seen this amazing place, I urge you to come and immerse yourself in history, current information and a variety of exhibits unparalleled in the system.

With the construction of the new visitor center, we have been able to expand our gift shop and make our pilot refuge tour initiative a permanent addition to our enterprise. This is all primarily staffed by volunteers who are dedicated environmentalists and long-time helpers, and who show care and concern for the wildlife while offering friendly assistance to our visitors as well. For people who enjoy volunteering, it is a unique opportunity: engaging, fun and diverse.

Whether folks want to serve as gift shop workers, interpreters for tours, work on grants and other fund raising, or help with special events, there is something to do for everyone -- and we can use you.

Currently, the two Eastern Shore refuges host almost two million visitors annually and, in order to provide a quality experience to all, costs are high. Even as we celebrate this noteworthy recognition, we can't lose sight of needing to increase our efforts. We want to continue assisting our refuges for as long as they need us, and hope that many more people will join our ranks and lend their gifts to this worthwhile effort.

Joyce Maher  
CNHA President

