

[From Spring 2005]

Volunteers: Value and Training

The National Wildlife Refuge System mission is to protect fish, wildlife, plants and their habitat for American generations to come. However, without the support of the general public, refuges would become endangered themselves. Because of their vast size and the complexity of managing both the habitat and public educational and recreational use activities, refuge staff is often inadequate to support both objectives.

This is where volunteers play a vital part in the success of refuges across the nation. As an example of how volunteers contribute their time and effort, in fiscal year 2003, Region 5 alone had 5,200 dedicated volunteers donate their time on national wildlife refuges. Combined volunteer time totaled 208,600 hours -- the equivalent of 100 full time positions.

Chincoteague Refuge staff appreciates all the time and hard work our volunteers spent on refuge projects such as construction and maintenance projects, staffing the visitor center, serving as interpreters, and conducting biological surveys. Volunteers have also been innovative in starting new projects to benefit wildlife, habitat, and visitors.

Volunteers proudly represent the National Wildlife Refuge System when they staff the visitor center, the lighthouse and serve as interpreters for the wildlife tours. Since volunteers have direct contact with the public, proper training is essential to ensure a quality experience for visitors. The refuge staff believes that the time invested in training volunteers is small in comparison to what is given back to the refuge.

Eight training sessions are being scheduled primarily for volunteers who are wildlife tour interpreters. However, volunteers who work in the education center are also being strongly encouraged to attend, as are other volunteers interested in gaining greater knowledge of this great refuge. Sessions will be from 9:00 am to 12:00 pm in the environmental education classroom on the following dates: December 16, January 20, February 17, March 17, April 21, and May 19.

Some of the topics will include biological management of wildlife and habitat, and history of the lighthouse, Assateague Village and land acquisition. Topics for the monthly sessions will be posted in the monthly volunteer newsletter. The sessions will be informative and interesting to enhance the volunteers' knowledge.

Volunteers realize the importance of conserving the few remaining places where wildlife and a healthy ecosystem continue to flourish and grow. Volunteers give not only of their time but of their hearts which shows in their work. There is no "Thank You" that could possibly encompass the specialness or the worth of a volunteer. The volunteers' contribution to the refuge system is a priceless gift which will live on forever in providing places for future generations to explore and enjoy.

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