

[from Spring '09]

More than 200 Nonprofit Groups Work on Behalf of National Wildlife Refuges

Record Turnout for National Friends Conference

The Washington, DC, hotel's halls and rooms were brimming with stories of success as a record number of Friends and staff of national wildlife refuge came together February 21-23 for the largest National Friends Conference held in the history of the Refuge Friends movement. There are more than 200 nonprofit Refuge Friends organizations that work across the country on behalf of national wildlife refuges in their communities.

Nearly 300 Refuge Friends joined about 150 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff to discuss such central issues as the impact of climate change on national wildlife refuges, the vitality of citizen science programs, and how the nonprofit organizations can grow. Refuge Friends organizations now boast more than 50,000 members nationwide, working on behalf of the National Wildlife Refuge System - the world's most extensive network of public lands devoted to wildlife habitat and wildlife conservation.

The conference was sponsored by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Wildlife Refuge Association. It featured nearly two dozen training sessions and special forums in three tracks: Refuge System resource challenges; tools, programs and strategies for success; and Friends capacity building.

About 230 national wildlife refuges were represented by the 160plus Friends groups that sent delegates to the conference, which carried the theme "Friends Unite!" Forty-nine states were represented at the 2009 National Friends Conference.

"More than numbers, what was important was the enthusiasm," said Service Assistant Director, National Wildlife Refuge System, Greg Siekaniec. "The 'Friends Unite!' theme was selected because it is the strength of a unified and informed Refuge Friends movement that will help ensure a future in which the National Wildlife Refuge System and the wildlife it protects will thrive."

"Throughout the conference, Friends representatives showed not only an understanding of the Refuge System as it exists today, but also a vision for what it will become in the decades ahead," said National Wildlife Refuge Association President Evan Hirsche. "National wildlife refuges face some of their greatest challenges today, from climate change to water quality and availability, to the impacts of local land use decisions on wildlife habitat. Fortunately, Friends have always risen to the occasion during hard times."

"What I always like best about conferences like these is the networking possibility," observed Nancy Menasco, president of Friends of Red River NWR in Louisiana and one of the conference delegates. "You come away with ideas from people throughout the Refuge System and from other Friends groups. You get a sense of being part of something much larger than your organization."