

[From Fall 2001]

The Volunteers Did It!

At a recent CNHA Board meeting, it was decided we should form closer ties with the informal organization of volunteers that supports refuge activities. We asked if the volunteers would contribute a column to the CNHA newsletter. This is the first article, in what we plan to be a regular feature, and describes the group's history and activities.

Volunteers have always helped out on the Chincoteague Refuge. Indeed, in the oft-voiced opinion of John Schroer, Refuge Manager, without the help of volunteers, many tasks would not be accomplished half as well by refuge staff working alone, and some would not be accomplished at all. So who are the Chincoteague Refuge Volunteers?

Alison McGuire (among her many other jobs) serves as Refuge Volunteer Coordinator. She has a mailing list of 76 volunteers, some singles, but mostly married couples. Most are retirees who chose to come to the Eastern Shore because they simply like the place and its easy-going, rural lifestyle. They like the waterfowl and animals and enjoy walking the refuge trails and the seashore beach.

Each volunteer brings his or her particular background, talents, and interests to the work. Some are knowledgeable about bird life and can conduct birding tours and bird counts. Some are knowledgeable in astronomy and can conduct nighttime star watches on the beach. Others have carpentry skills, and can assist service Elder Hostels in repairing buildings, boardwalks, and viewing platforms. Some like meeting the public, and staff the information counter at the visitor center, answering questions.

In 1997, the volunteers got together for their first meeting as a group. The impetus came from several of the most active volunteers who felt that if they formed a group, they could better frame project ideas and present them to refuge management. Similarly, the refuge could better present their ideas for projects they would like to see accomplished. The group first called itself the "Chincoteague Refuge Friends." However, they were not actually a "friends" group organized under nonprofit laws, and they did not want to formalize their organization with officers, directors, dues and bylaws. So, they became the "Chincoteague Refuge Volunteers" with a volunteer liaison person, Nancy Schmidt, to interface with the refuge staff (currently, Alison). Volunteer meetings are held quarterly.

Over the years, many volunteers have contributed their time and effort to activities that lie somewhat outside the refuge's day-to-day programs. For example, volunteers meet with town and county officials, Fish & Wildlife and Park Service officials, and local business people to discuss matters of mutual interest. Volunteers also meet with ACT (Assateague Coastal Trust -formerly The Committee to Preserve Assateague) which has begun to hold periodic meetings on Chincoteague regarding bay and channel water quality.

The refuge is generous in its appreciation of the work of the volunteers. It hosts an annual awards banquet for them. Besides good food, dozens of awards are made in recognition of their hours of service and special efforts. (Ed. note -This banquet and the awards are funded by the CNHA.) In 2000, our local "Volunteers of the Year," Paul and Ann Smith, were also named "National Volunteers of the Year" by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and volunteer service totaled more than 15,000 hours - the equivalent of nine additional fulltime staff.

If you would like more information or want to join the ranks of these volunteers, contact Alison McGuire at 336-6122, Nancy Schmidt at 336-5524, or me at 336-6136.

Ted Thomas Chincoteague Refuge Volunteers

Ed. Note - Ted is editor of the volunteer's newsletter and is also a CNHA member.