

[From Winter 2008-2009]

## **Thanksgiving on the Refuge**

By Barbara Thackray

This year I got caught up in the need for volunteers on the Refuge to fill in for others who were away. Of course, there are always many different things going on, from carpentry work to Trash Tromping, Christmas Parade float to archives. But, for me, this Thanksgiving has been beautiful.

On Friday I spent 6 hours at the top of the lighthouse, with bright sun streaming in the window-wall around the lights, and a steady stream of visitors climbing up the 198 steps to take in the view. With clear air, sunshine, snow geese by the thousands and marvelous 22 mile range from 153 ft above the gently breaking sea along the shore, we have our own treasure.

The history of this building is truly interesting, from the early need of a beacon on the hurricane-swept sand-dunes of 1833, which already covered the La Galga wreck of 1750, through the Union-Confederate conflicts of the Civil War years (Chincoteague was North, the rest of Virginia was South), the design and brickwork of the 1867 building, the history of the Keepers and the Village through to 1933, when the village was moved across to Chincoteague and now to the need for this 'old lady' to be repaired from the effects of wind, rain, salt and time.

Our visitors are frequently interested to hear about the last 350 years of Assateague, from early cattle penning, early 1900's sheep penning to recent Pony Penning. We have many families coming with children of all ages, even in late November, and, as usual, more from Pennsylvania than from any other State. I wonder why this is.

I then spent 4 hours of a sunny, warm, Saturday afternoon standing within sight and sound of those several thousand snow geese, at the entrance to the Service Road, off the Wildlife Loop. Around 1 pm there was a great arrival of geese that had been off Assateague to feed, and as I looked into the distance it was not unlike Dulles or any other busy airport at rush hour. Wave upon wave of them first appeared as black specks in the southern sunshine and flew in to land. Occasionally the assembly on the water took off and flew round in their own 'caucus race' (see Alice in Wonderland for the analogy) calling loudly to each other and anyone else around. This went on for over an hour, while many visitors stopped by the pond to photograph them.

A good number of those visitors then turned in and drove up the Service Road to explore the upper reaches of the Refuge and look for the ponies up there. My unofficial count was around 250 cars between 12 and 3 pm. However, several stopped on their way back to tell me that the ponies were not showing themselves that day, and there were not many birds either. The geese and the beautiful cloud formations were the real sights to be seen.

On the other hand, visitors in the Visitor Center were telling us of the range of ducks they had found in the different ponds.

It seems as though more people are discovering the beauty, clear air, peaceful walks and joy of varied wildlife that Assateague has to offer at all times of year. Of course, the rain on Sunday ended a delightful holiday here for our visitors, but I expect the geese are happy to have a fresh supply of clean water. 15,000 geese can make quite a mess!

