

2023

*Annual*  
*Report*



National  
Wildlife Refuge  
Association

[refugeassociation.org](http://refugeassociation.org)

# Letter From Chair & President

In the intricate tapestry of nature, where wildlife and people depend on national wildlife refuges, can refuges, in turn, depend on us?

We pose this question not just as a reflection but as a call to action that resonates with hope and purpose. It is with this spirit that we are excited to share the National Wildlife Refuge Association's 2023 Annual Report with you. This report is not just a collection of achievements; it is a celebration of our collective effort, a testament to the power of a community rallying behind the conservation of our natural world encompassed by the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Your support has been the driving force behind every accomplishment detailed in this report. It echoes in the halls of Congress, where we advocate tirelessly for the National Wildlife Refuge System, currently facing a funding and staffing crisis. We have taken significant strides to address these challenges, standing firm in our commitment to secure the future of refuges. Our advocacy and government affairs work has been pivotal, highlighting the urgency of adequate funding and staffing and reinvigorating the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement to engage Congressional awareness and support.

A crucial chapter of this collective effort is our work with Refuge Friends groups (Refuge Friends). These local champions are the heartbeat of our grassroots advocacy network, diligently working to protect and enhance refuges on the ground in their own communities. The Refuge

Association has been proud to empower these local organizations, providing the foundation for a nationwide movement advocating

for the vitality of our national wildlife refuges.

In the hustle and bustle of urban life, our Urban Wildlife Refuge Program has been a beacon, reaching new audiences and connecting them with the wonders of wildlife and refuges. The Urban Program continues to break down barriers and invites diverse communities to join the movement in fostering a deep appreciation for the natural world.

As we navigate the challenges and triumphs documented in this report, we extend an enormous thank you to you—our supporters, take-action participants, Refuge Friends, partner organizations, and donors. Your dedication has fueled our progress and strengthened our resolve.

Your unwavering support has been a source of inspiration that propels us forward. We celebrate what we've achieved and the promise of what lies ahead. As a community, we shall endeavor to safeguard our national wildlife refuges, ensuring that they continue to serve as sanctuaries for wildlife and tranquil havens for all those seeking solace amidst nature's beauty.

Sincerely,

Geoffrey L. Haskett, President  
E. Gray Payne, Board Chair



## Who We Are



A non-profit conservation organization founded in 1975 by retired U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service refuge managers, the National Wildlife Refuge Association is solely dedicated to protecting, promoting, and enhancing the National Wildlife Refuge System, the world's largest system of lands and waters set aside for wildlife conservation. The Refuge Association works in partnership with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Refuge Friends organizations, sportsmen and women, farmers and ranchers, students, urban constituencies, and other conservation organizations.

**Our mission** is to conserve America's wildlife heritage for future generations through strategic programs that protect, promote, and enhance the National Wildlife Refuge System and the landscapes beyond its boundaries.





Northern Leopard Frog | Courtney Celley, USFWS

# Protecting

## THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

### *Increased Funding & Staffing*

#### FOR THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

The highest priority of the National Wildlife Refuge Association (Refuge Association) is addressing the critically underfunded National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System). Without significant increases in federal funding, national wildlife refuges will continue to lose valuable staff who take care of these national treasures, including refuge managers, biologists, visitor services staff, and law enforcement. The understaffing leads to a catastrophic crisis, leaving staff stressed and overworked. No refuges are fully staffed, and more than half of all refuges have zero employees on site. Many refuges are closed to the public, unstaffed, and left without resource management. Because of this, the Refuge Association launched a campaign in January of 2023 to focus exclusively on the staffing issues around the Refuge System.

Our national campaign aims to increase annual appropriations for the Refuge System to \$1.5 billion or more. Current federal funding for the Refuge System is \$541 million. This is only \$38 million more than fiscal year 2010. With inflation since then, this is an actual loss of approximately \$160 million, resulting in over 800 permanent positions left unfilled. What has resulted is an enormous 16% loss in capacity. Several needed positions are eliminated

yearly as congressional appropriations lag behind inflation and actual funding needs. This situation is unsustainable as the Refuge System continues to grow and experience increased visitation and its health becomes even more essential in this age of worsening biodiversity and climate crises.

Our staffing campaign utilizes several short and long-term tactics and strategies to achieve this goal. We have increased engagement with Refuge Friends and other grassroots supporters to equip them with the tools to effectively educate their Members of Congress about the staffing crisis and advocate for the funding needs of the Refuge System. We have also coordinated our national and local partners behind our congressional advocacy strategy. Since the launch of the campaign, we have earned local media stories on the staffing issue, increased coordination with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) staff and leadership, arranged several meetings with congressional members and the Biden Administration, hosted briefings for congressional staff on the funding issues in partnership with USFWS and congressional leaders, and developed fact sheets, talking points, and other advocacy resources.

## PROTECTION OF CRITICAL LANDSCAPES

The Refuge Association continued its extensive efforts to safeguard the Refuge System against ongoing and emerging threats, culminating in several wins for refuges in 2023.

Notably, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland rescinded a 2019 proposed land exchange in the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge that authorized a road to be constructed through the heart of this pristine Alaskan landscape. Construction of a road would have devastating impacts on more than half a million Pacific brant, emperor geese, swans, and other wildlife, resulting in habitat fragmentation, disturbance, and pollution. The Refuge Association has worked for decades to protect the Izembek NWR from this threat, and this withdrawal is an essential step towards safeguarding America's most ecologically significant national wildlife refuge. However, the Department of the Interior has renewed the process to review other proposals for a land exchange. In response, the Refuge Association organized a letter to the Secretary from 22 former public officials, including former Interior Secretaries Sally Jewell and Bruce Babbitt, urging the Department to pursue alternative, non-road options to accommodate the needs of local communities. We will continue to work towards permanent protection of the refuge.

September 2023 brought a pivotable development in efforts to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge when the Biden administration canceled all remaining oil and gas leases in the Arctic Refuge. This marked a substantial triumph for global climate and biodiversity goals. Even so, additional action must be taken to ensure long-term protection of the iconic wildlife of America's Arctic, including the implementation of essential safeguards that prevent the issuance of additional leases. Through our partnerships within the Arctic Defense Campaign, we will continue working to defeat any proposals in Congress that aim to undermine the sanctity of the Refuge System's protection of Alaska's wilderness.



## Virtual Hill Days

The Refuge Association organized a virtual congressional advocacy week to provide an opportunity for Friends to establish or strengthen relationships with their congressional representatives and to raise awareness about their Friends group and their refuge as part of the Refuge System. Virtual Hill Days began with a training webinar for Friends to learn more about the funding and staffing challenges of the Refuge System overall, as well as best practices for conducting effective meetings with congressional offices, whether virtually on the Hill or in person at district offices in their state.

Approximately 35 Refuge Friends members representing 30 Refuge Friends groups participated, meeting with 14 key congressional offices. We primarily targeted members of Congress who sit on the House and Senate Interior Appropriations Committees to shore up their support for increased Refuge System funding in their respective appropriations bills. These efforts resulted in refuge visits by several key congressional staff with local Refuge Friends in the following months, such as a tour of Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge by the staff from Senator Jeff Merkley's (D-OR) office, who chairs the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies.





Congressman Gabe Vasquez speaking at Refuge Expo | Refuge Association

## COOPERATIVE ALLIANCE FOR REFUGE ENHANCEMENT

The Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), chaired by the Refuge Association, is a coalition of nonprofits that seeks to ensure that the Refuge System has the funding needed to meet its conservation objectives. This was a busy year for CARE that included launching its new website, organizing a CEO-level meeting with then-Deputy Secretary of the Interior Tommy Beaudreau and other top agency officials, hosting multiple events with Congress, and adding its first new member in several years — Backcountry Hunters & Anglers.

CARE's new website, [www.fundwildliferefuges.com](http://www.fundwildliferefuges.com), provides information about the coalition, the Refuge System, and the funding challenges the Refuge System faces. It also aims to raise CARE's credibility and public profile to help increase its influence in Congress. In the future, we expect the website to include news updates on CARE's timely activities and projects.

CARE also diligently worked towards the reconstitution of the Congressional Wildlife Refuge Caucus in the U.S. House of Representatives. The Caucus was first established in 2006. Its mission is to fortify, protect, and preserve the Refuge System by supporting adequate funding, working for the strategic growth of the Refuge System through easements and targeted land acquisition, and promoting legislation to improve the Refuge System. The Caucus uses

briefings and other forms of outreach to educate members of Congress about the increasing number of challenges facing the Refuge System. At the end of 2023, the Caucus was reconstituted with seven bipartisan co-chairs and 39 members. The Refuge Association expects membership to grow as CARE, Refuge Friends, and other supporters continue to urge their congressional members to join.



The Caucus also sponsors the annual National Wildlife Refuge Expo (Refuge Expo) on Capitol Hill, an event for congressional staff hosted and organized by CARE to highlight the crucial role the Refuge System fills in protecting wildlife and habitat. This November, approximately 150 congressional staff attended the first Refuge Expo since the pandemic. Caucus co-chairs Representatives Mike Thompson (D-CA), Rob Wittman (R-VA), and Gabe Vasquez (D-NM) came to speak at the event, along with USFWS Director Martha Williams, Refuge Chief Cynthia Martinez, and Refuge Association President Geoff Haskett. The Refuge Expo featured informational tables staffed by a diverse range of CARE organizations, a multitude of USFWS personnel, the Coalition of Refuge Friends and Advocates, and other Refuge Friends. A highlight of the event was local falconer and raptor specialist Rodney Stotts and his Harris's Hawk, Agnes. Interacting with Rodney and live wildlife helped provide attendees with a lasting, memorable experience.



Monarch in hand | Lisa Hupp, USFWS

# Promoting

## THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

### Refuge Friends

In collaboration with the Coalition of Refuge Friends and Advocates, the Refuge Association conducted a series of twelve impactful webinars tailored for Refuge Friends. These sessions aimed to strengthen connections among Friends, foster a vibrant community of shared knowledge and passion, and covered advocacy, event planning, social media, justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Our commitment extended beyond webinars. Each year, the Refuge Association honors exceptional dedication with the

O'Brien Prize, exemplified by the 2023 winner, Friends of Haystack Rock National Wildlife Refuge, for their *Midtown Interpretive Kiosk* project. Additionally, we were the proud nonprofit partner of the National Friends Workshop, a three-day workshop held at the National Conservation Training Center, West Virginia, for Friends Board of Directors and members, USFWS liaisons, project leaders, and regional employees. We were happy to work alongside USFWS to contribute a collaborative space for Friends groups to share best practices and shape the future of refuge advocacy.

### REFUGE WEEK

National Wildlife Refuge Week (Refuge Week), observed the second full week of October each year, celebrates the incredible network of lands and waters that conserve and protect America's precious wildlife heritage. Beginning in 2022, the Refuge Association has prepared and broadly distributed a social media toolkit to help supporters and congressional offices uplift the Refuge System during Refuge Week and raise awareness about its fundamental values and benefits. The toolkit contains guidance such as sample social media posts, hashtags, and multiple infographics, each highlighting a different value of the Refuge System. It also includes additional information on specific actions supporters and congressional members can take to support Refuge Week and the Refuge System overall.

In 2023, the Refuge Association revamped the toolkit to help celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Endangered Species Act by featuring an endangered species supported by the Refuge System on nearly every infographic, with additional infographics created to amplify the role refuges have in recovering those species. Overall, we saw extensive usage of our toolkit on social media during Refuge Week from diverse national organizations, bipartisan congressional offices, Refuge Friends, and many other entities in 2023.



Bobcat | Gary Kramer, USFWS

# URBAN WILDLIFE REFUGE PROGRAM

Since 2017, the Urban Wildlife Refuge Program has grown to include three full-time staff members working in Southern California, South Florida, and New Jersey to deliver community-based programs beyond wildlife refuge borders. Partnership specialists work closely with refuge staff, Friends, and other stakeholders to identify priorities and develop and expand projects and events to engage people of all ages in nature and conservation.

In South Florida, accessible environmental stewardship and education took a big step forward. The Pocket Wildlife Refuge project has expanded and will add six new locations around Palm Beach County in 2024. Staff also obtained a \$50,000 grant to pilot a summer camp to introduce students to hands-on experiences at Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge and inspire them to consider conservation careers. Participants will meet working professionals, gain skills in outdoor recreation, and visit additional coastal ecosystems like Hobe Sound National Wildlife Refuge.

Up north, our newest specialist began work at Lenape National Wildlife Refuge Complex and dove in to help urban partners launch Monarch Pledge programs in Elizabeth, NJ, and Phillipsburg, NJ, obtaining commitments to preserve vital monarch butterfly habitat. Community conservation programs took place throughout the year, including habitat improvement along the Elizabeth River Trail, various outdoor recreation programs, including archery and kayaking, and installing a rain garden at Phil Rizzuto Public Park. Across the state line, Refuge Association staff also took part in planning the planting of 350 trees in Dobbs Ferry, NY, and delivering archery lessons while sharing information about the importance of wildlife refuges and conservation.

2023 was an exciting and busy year for the program, but there is a lot of potential for further growth. We look forward to expanding to additional regions around the country to facilitate better community connections with urban national wildlife refuges in 2024.



A community planting at one of the Pocket Refuges in South Florida | Liz Figueroa, Refuge Association



Red Wolf mural, North Carolina | USFWS

## Red Wolf Mural

The Refuge Association is proud to have funded the Red Wolf Mural Project, a stunning work of art that celebrates the beauty and importance of the red wolf, one of the most endangered species in the world. In addition to funding, we were excited to create a video documenting the mural's progress and its space in the community to advocate for Red Wolf protection. The video, expertly capturing the mural's creation, became a

testament to the profound connection between the red wolf and the pivotal role Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, in North Carolina, plays in the conservation of the species.

This collaborative endeavor, featuring Weiler Woods for Wildlife, Matt Willey (The Good of The Hive — muralist), and numerous partners and volunteers, significantly raised awareness about the endangered red wolf and fostered meaningful community engagement.



Spotted seal | Peter Pearshall, USFWS

# Enhancing

## THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

### FLORIDA

The National Wildlife Refuge Association dedicated its efforts throughout 2023 to comprehensive planning, outreach, and land protection in the Greater Everglades and Southwest Florida. A key initiative was the establishment of the Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area. Collaborating with the Florida Conservation Group (FCG) and the University of Florida Center for Landscape Conservation Planning, we provided scientific foundations, led stakeholder and outreach efforts, and secured funding. This groundbreaking project identifies a 4-million-acre region in Southwest and South-Central Florida, aiming to protect threatened natural communities, wildlife species, and working landscapes. The proposed conservation area addresses challenges of rapid population growth, land use intensification, and climate change in Southwest Florida. Our advocacy and outreach efforts engaged various stakeholders and communities, facilitating large stakeholder meetings and presenting land protection projects totaling over 60,000 acres.



Florida Grasshopper Sparrow | Karen Parker, FWC

This year, seven land protection projects in the Myakka, Peace River, and Lake Okeechobee Watersheds were approved, totaling over 12,000 acres. Under the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program and the Florida Forever Program, these projects ensure the permanent protection of crucial natural and working lands in Southern Florida. Notable projects include Flint Properties, Four 'L's Ranch, Keen Ranch, Charlie Creek, Doyle Carlton III River Property, Ryals Citrus and Cattle, and Big Slough and J Bar C Ranches. These efforts contribute significantly to Florida's land and water conservation goals, safeguarding the region's ecological treasures for future generations.

### Puerto Rico

In Puerto Rico, we were on a mission to safeguard leatherback turtles and their critical nesting beaches. We identified three beaches as crucial havens and proposed them as protected spaces. In our efforts to protect these special beaches, we worked on restoring them after the damage caused by Hurricane Fiona and other disruptions. The restoration included fixing the damaged signs and barricades and ensuring these beaches remain vibrant and safe for all visitors.

In the community, we successfully switched 128 beachfront

properties to turtle-friendly lights, and we showcased this work at an international sea turtle event in Colombia. In addition, we transformed regular lighting on Vieques Island and Ponce beaches, creating clear paths for turtles after laying eggs. Teaming up with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, we removed feral dogs and cats from nesting beaches, a big step in keeping the turtles' homes secure. And with friends in Yabucoa, we restored Guayanés beach, highlighting the crucial teamwork between municipalities and federal agencies to ensure these turtles and their homes thrived in Puerto Rico.





# 2023 Wildlife Refuge AWARDS

This year, on September 26th, the National Wildlife Refuge Association hosted the 2023 Wildlife Refuge Awards ceremony and celebration, which was held both in-person and virtually to celebrate the outstanding conservation management skills and volunteer leadership found throughout the National Wildlife Refuge System. The awardees and their accomplishments are an inspiration to all refuge supporters. The event honored the following award recipients:

## Awards Event Sponsors

- Alaska Wilderness League
- Association of Zoos and Aquariums
- Audubon
- Carl & Kathy Woodward
- Defenders of Wildlife
- Ducks Unlimited
- James F. McClelland III
- Rebecca Rubin - Nature First, LLC
- Richard Remmer
- Janice Erich & Rob Morgan
- The Conservation Fund
- The Nature Conservancy
- The Wilderness Society
- Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service— National Wildlife Refuge System
- Wilmer Hale

### REBEKAH P. MARTIN

**Paul Kroegel Award – Refuge Manager of the Year**, Coastal North Carolina National Wildlife Refuge Complex, North Carolina

### BRAD PENDLEY

**Refuge Employee of the Year**, Mingo National Wildlife Refuge, Missouri

### MARK ACKERMAN & JOYCE ATKINSON

**Refuge Volunteers of the Year**, Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado; Desert National Wildlife Refuge Complex, Nevada; and Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, Oregon

### FRIENDS OF OTTAWA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

**Molly Krival – Refuge Friends Group of the Year**, Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge, Ohio

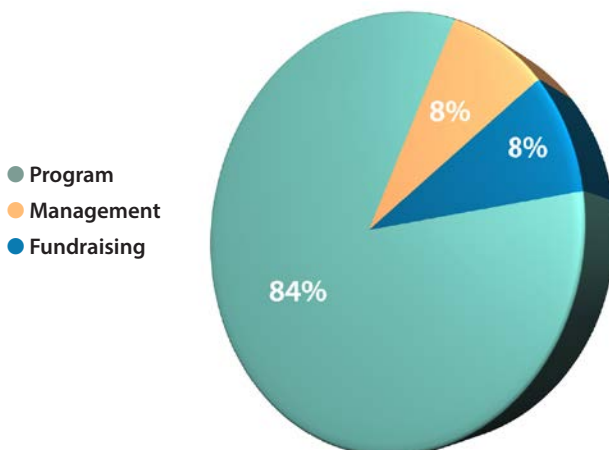


A Very Special Thank You To Our Polar Bear Sponsor

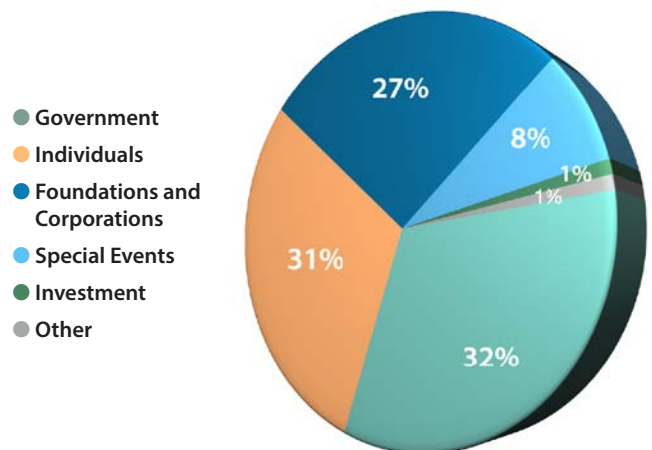


## National Wildlife Refuge Association FY2023\*

Expenses: \$2,213,504\*\*



Revenue: \$2,135,000



\* July 1, 2022–June 30, 2023 FY2023

\*\* Other means of cash used to meet expenses

# Thank You

To All Who Supported the National Wildlife  
Refuge Association's Mission in FY2023



Mottled Laysan Albatross chick at Midway Atoll NWR | USFWS

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Friends of Prime Hook NWR  
Friends of the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee NWR  
Friends of the Wildlife Corridor

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Friends of the Tualatin River NWRC  
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