



## FRIENDS OF BRAZORIA WILDLIFE REFUGES

### Minutes of the Meeting of the General Membership

Friday, January 8, 2021

Virtual via MS Teams

**Members in Attendance:** Oron Atkins, Ed Barrios, Ron Bisbee, Marty Cornell, Mickey Dufilho, Jerry Eppner, David Heinicke, Phil Huxford, Al Kinback, Georgia Monnerat, Herb Myers, Jo Myers, Lisa Myers, Larry Peterson, Kim Richardson, Dick Schaffhausen, Mary Schwartz, Ravi Singhanian, Regina Tippet, Ron Weeks, Jeanne Welsch

**Refuge Staff in Attendance:** Jennifer Sanchez, Tom Schneider

**Guest in Attendance:** Mike Lange

The meeting was called to order at 1:01 pm.

President Lisa Myers reminded the membership to contact Dick Schaffhausen to pay **annual dues** to renew membership.

Ed Barrios delivered a photo memory of long-time member **Barbara Burkhardt** who passed away on December 4<sup>th</sup>. Barbara became a member of the Cradle of Texas Chapter of Texas Master Naturalists in its formative stage, where she served in leadership positions over the next several years. She was an active member of the FOBWR, an avid birder, and known expert on native gardens. She is missed.

President Lisa Myers presented **nominations of members to serve on the 2021 Board of Directors:** Oron Atkins, Ed Barrios, Marty Cornell, Mickey Dufilho, Phil Huxford, Ruby Lewis, Herb Myers, Lisa Myers, Kim Richardson, Dick Schaffhausen, Mary Schwartz, and Regina Tippet.

Ravi Singhanian moved to close nominations to the board; the motion passed and was approved by all present, with one abstention.

Oron Atkins moved to approve the nomination slate to be members of the FOBWR board for 2021; this motion was seconded by Ed Barrios. The subsequent vote unanimously approved the motion.

#### **Treasurer's Report**

Dick Schaffhausen presented the December 31, 2020, financial statement, highlighting:

- \$150,000 from Houston Endowment's fifth grant to FOBWR has been received. This grant supports pre-purchase discovery of land tracts of interest to US Fish and Wildlife.
- Mrs. Katherine McGovern has, for the 12<sup>th</sup> year in a row, donated to FOBWR. Like the last several years, this year's donation directs \$25,000 to the Brazoria NWR and \$10,000 to the San Bernard NWR.
- The Bobcat Woods Loop Trail project is complete and an application has been made to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department for the \$8,000 accounts receivable remaining in our grant.
- Phillips 66 has once again donated \$10,000 for our Birds of Prey programs.
- Our Migration Celebration funds have a balance of \$19,000.
- The Cannan Bend project has \$77,000 remaining after the restroom module purchase. The restrooms should be delivered this month.

- The board has decided to take an administration fee from our grants to cover costs of operation, which vary between \$5,000 and \$20,000 per year with the major expenses being an annual audit, liability insurance, and web site maintenance. Houston Endowment allows 10% for an administration fee, the board decided to take a 7% fee from this source.

Regina Tippett, upon board approval, will become the next treasurer of the FOBWR.

President Lisa Myers gave special acknowledgement for outstanding performance during the past year, in spite of COVID-19 virus restrictions:

- The refuge staff, who did not “skip a beat” on refuge productivity
- Oron Atkins and his core team who completed the Bobcat Woods Trail project
- Phil Huxford who kept chipping away for the birds-of-prey program.

Mike Lange reviewed his FOBWR-sponsored activities to acquire more land for the Texas Mid-coast NWR Complex:

### **Land Acquisition Accomplishments for 2020**

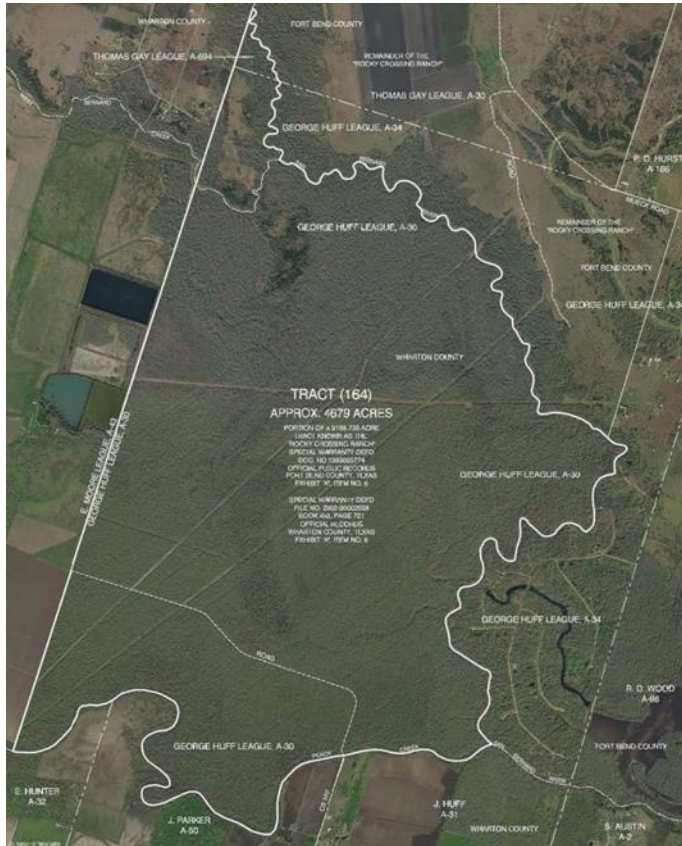
The Friends group supports land acquisition for the Texas Mid-coast NWR Complex by administering grants from Houston Endowment Inc. and from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Coastal Program. Through these grants, the Friends have been able to support the work of Tom Smith, Land Consultant with the National Fish and Wildlife Service, and also Mike Lange, Land Consultant with Texas Conservation Partners. The work includes biological evaluation of property, negotiations with land owners, grant writing and other fund raising, and coordination with county, federal and state agencies. The grants also pay for due-diligence work to prepare projects for acquisition including appraisals, title work, and other preacquisition costs. This support by the Friends helps the refuge complex compete for both federal and private funds to facilitate land conservation and has resulted in many more additional acres protected as part of the refuge complex over the years.

Sadly, Tom Smith passed away on April 5, 2020 at the age of 89 after over 60 years of service and dedication to conservation. He worked on refuge conservation until the very end of his life. He was one of the great leaders in conservation of the National Wildlife Refuge System. He will be greatly missed by the conservation community and all his friends and family. After the COVID-19 19 pandemic is over, the Friends and the Service and his family plan to honor him for his conservation accomplishments with a fitting celebration event.

During the calendar year of 2020 there were several very significant accomplishments which stand out as a result of the Friends’ commitment to land acquisition. The most significant has been the work to initiate the acquisition of the Peach Creek Forest tract, also known as the McNeill tract. This tract will be the largest single bottomland forest tract purchased by the Service in the Columbia Bottomlands. It consists of 4,679 acres of mature wetland forest on the San Bernard River and Peach Creek in Wharton County. It has been a priority for acquisition by the Service for 25 years, since 1995, when the land owner was first contacted by Mike Lange. Finally, the McNeill Trust that now owns the property has agreed to sell the tract. The Trust has signed a purchase agreement with the Service. After much negotiation and due diligence, including a complicated appraisal process, the tract was approved for acquisition by the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission in May of 2020. The purchase price approved by the Commission is \$13,570,000. Most of the funding will be provided by the Migratory Bird

Conservation Fund. However, \$1,357,000 will be provided from a grant from the Knobloch Family Foundation and another \$663,500 will come from a matching source which has not yet been secured. The Knobloch Family Foundation requires this additional match from a second private source. The project must be completed by January 1, 2022.

**Peach Creek Forest Tract (McNeill) 4,679 acres**



Another important project this past year has been the effort to acquire the Spears Tract as an addition to the refuge. The Spears family donated a conservation easement on this tract of 250 acres to the refuge in 2005. That easement however allowed development on a portion of the land. Now the Spears Family wants to sell the remaining interest to the Service. This would allow the land to be managed by the refuge staff and fully protected as part of the refuge. This would fully prevent development in perpetuity. The land could also be used for public use at some future time. This would allow for better management and the potential to use the land for wildlife research, environmental education and other refuge programs. A contract for the full fee purchase of the tract was secured, and now Mike Lange and the refuge staff are working on finding funding for this purchase.

**Spears Tract -250 Acres Proposed Fee Acquisition**



Another project which has moved forward is the acquisition of a conservation easement on the Flo Hannah Prairie. To date 114 acres have been purchased in partnership with Galveston Bay Foundation. The Foundation holds title. Mike is working with the Galveston Bay Foundation and the Service to purchase the remaining 10 acres of this prairie. The Galveston Bay Foundation then will donate a

conservation easement of the entire 124 acres to the Service. This easement will permanently protect

the prairie as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System. It will also make it possible for the Service to partner with the Foundation to help study and manage the prairie.

There are many other potential tracts and partnerships which have been identified and are in the pipeline in the next two years. Mike Lange and the Friends are working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, to bring additional funding to the Columbia Bottomlands through a partnership grant. This application is under the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). The application was completed in November. If approved, it would bring significant funding for additional conservation work in the Columbia Bottomlands and provide funds to the Friends to administer the program.

### **Project Leader Report**

Jennifer Sanchez noted that the Black Rail has been designated as a threatened species. We are fortunate that we have a healthy population of Black Rails on our refuges, and the work of Jennifer Wilson has resulted in our knowing a lot about this bird on our complex. The threatened designation imposes restrictions on how the lands within the Texas Mid-coast NWR Complex can be managed, for example the burn program was shut down on November 9<sup>th</sup>, pending a biological assessment by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The service will be introducing a new design for signs, featuring 4'X8' entrance signs having a dark blue background.

### **Membership**

Currently, FOBWR has about 60 members on our books. Membership Chair Mickey Dufilho reported that her committee has initiated a program to boost active membership. To do this, the committee proposes:

- Conducting members-only refuge walks
- Organizing trail and garden maintenance work parties
- Involvement in citizen science projects
- Holding open houses staffed by member docents
- Sponsoring guest speakers (this used to be a quarterly event)
- Publishing a quarterly newsletter.

Mickey requested that members provide feedback on these initiatives or on other ideas.

The General Membership Meeting was adjourned at 2:12 pm

Marty Cornell, Secretary

Friends of Brazoria Wildlife Refuges