

. Members' Handbook



friends of
Balcones Canyonlands
National Wildlife Refuge
keeping the Hill Country wild



- **Friends Members Handbook Table of Contents**
- **1. the Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge What is it and Why is it important?**
 - 1.1 What is the Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge?
 - 1.2 Why is the Refuge important to the Hill Country?
 - 1.3 Other Important Roles of Refuge
 - 1.4 Role of Conservation Easements in preserving Wildlife and Habitat in Catchment Area
 - 1.5. 2020 Covid Impact on the Refuge and on Friends.
- **2. What do we want Visitors to take away from their visit to the Refuge?**
- **3. Friends of Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge, Achievements and Roles**
 - 3.1 History and lasting Contributions
 - 3.2 What are the roles of Friends in support of the Refuge?
 - 3.2.1 Guiding Document
 - 3.2.2 Support of Refuge Activities
 - 3.2.3 Friends initiated Activities
 - 3.3 Fundraising key to many Friend's Projects
 - 3.4 Our Future: Friends Strategic Plan 2020-2024
- **4. Some things you need to know and do now you are a Friend**
 - 4.1 When are you acting as Refuge Volunteer and not as a Friend?
 - 4.2 Importance of Recording your Volunteer Hours
 - 4.3 How can you contribute?
 - 4.4 Activities you can participate in.
 - 4.5 Resources for Continued Learning and Personal Growth
 - 4.6 Friends Social Media to Engage, Support, and Enjoy
- **5. Your Feedback to Help us improve**

1. The Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge What is it and Why is it important?

1.1 What is the Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge?

The Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge was set up to provide a refuge for two endangered songbird species, the Golden Cheeked Warbler and the Black Capped Vireo. The Golden Cheeked Warbler nests exclusively in the Texas Hill Country whose backbone is the Balcones Canyonlands. The breeding range of the Black Capped Vireo extends from Central Texas to Southern Oklahoma. The Refuge is either home to or on the migration path of 215 birds and 92 butterflies.

In addition, the following species call the refuge home. 55 mammals, 8 bats, 16 snakes, 15 reptiles, and 56 dragonflies. To get complete list and view photos use link to Refuge Website: www.fws.gov/refuge/balcones_canyonlands

1.2 Why is The Refuge important to the Hill Country?

Urban development is happening rapidly in the Hill Country and every year thousands of acres of breeding grounds for birds, butterflies, animals, snakes, lizards, insects and other bugs are being irrevocably lost. Robbing us and our children of the joy of experiencing the diversity of wild things. The Refuge helps ensure that there are areas where we will be able to go to experience and enjoy Nature as it was meant to be.

1.3 Other Important Roles of Refuge

Fire Management

As well as performing controlled burns on the Refuge for Habitat Management, the Refuge Fire Department performs controlled burns, when requested for landowners with properties adjacent to Refuge. In addition, the Fire Department is a resource for training other Fire Departments on Controlled Burns and will respond to support suppression of Wildfire when needed. Each year a team from the Fire Department responds to the need to help control the large wildfires in Texas and the Western USA.

Habitat management Instruction

Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge is one of only 14 designated refuges where professionals, such as land managers, go to learn about cutting-edge habitat management techniques and technology.

1.4 Role of Conservation Easements in preserving Wildlife and Habitat in the Catchment Area

The Refuge Catchment area includes ranches and estates with suitable habitat whose owners want to preserve in their family. Such Landowners who love their land and see it as part of their legacy can convert part of their land to a conservation easement which preserves that land in its natural state in perpetuity. This enables a more contiguous habitat for the endangered songbirds.

1.5. 2020 COVID-19 Impact on the Refuge and on Friends.

With the HQ being closed to protect Refuge Workers, the biggest impact has been on Visitors. The HQ is a source of information with live Informed Volunteer Greeters, a Display of Refuge Wildlife and Habitat, a free library of information, access to a Hiking Trail, a Bird Blind and a Butterfly Garden..

The trails at Doeskin and Warbler Vista are still open and have seen an increase in the number of visitors over last year. To better accommodate the increase the Refuge created new car parks and new information signs at both sites.

How long the shutdown lasts is currently unknown but the 1st half of 2021 will still see restrictions on Visitor Events

2. What do we want Visitors to take away from their visit to the Refuge?

Beyond the exercise and country air, we want them to gain knowledge of the Refuge, its Wildlife and their Habitats.

Friends have a role to play! We can fund the creation of Interpretive Signs, Video Equipment and Videos. Provide Leaders for tours, make presentations and organize education sessions.

These are just a few of the roles Friends have in support of the Refuge; a more comprehensive list is in the next section.

3. Friends of Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge, Achievements and Roles

3.1 History and lasting Contributions

Friends of Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge was inaugurated in 2002 to support the Refuge which was founded in 1992.

In 2017 Friends of Balcones National Wildlife Refuge was voted the best Regional Friends organization supporting a National Wildlife Refuge.

Recognizing that being the Best was not enough for us to reach the goals of the Refuge and of the Friends, the Board embarked on a journey to make us even better. We have to do more, quicker to match the increased growth in population, a more diverse community and the rapidly decreasing amount of rural land within the Refuge Catchment Area. The result of this journey is a comprehensive Strategic Plan which was shared with members at Members meeting in October 2020.

In 2016 we supported The Trust for Public Land to secure the 520-acre Peaceful Springs Tract for the Refuge. Friends raised \$2M of the \$3.45 required. The Trust for Public Land has played a key role in several previous tract acquisitions for the Refuge and it is always a pleasure to work together with them.

Friends have provided more than 100,000 volunteer hours in support of the Refuge and helped build over 10 hiking trails on the Refuge. Maps of trails can be accessed at www.fws.gov/refuge/balcones_canyonlands.

Other lasting Contributions include creating and running the Songbird Festival, the Sparrow Fest, and building a Bird Blind at the Refuge HQ and the Covered Pavilion at Doeskin Ranch.

3.2 What are the roles of Friends in support of the Refuge?

3.2.1 Guiding Document

Friends have an agreed Memorandum of Understanding with the Refuge based on the roles identified by the Fish and Wildlife Department for Friends Groups

3.2.2 Support of Refuge Activities

Supporting Refuge Staff with projects that enhance and maintain the habitat and the protection of the endangered species the Refuge was formed to protect. Before being able to work on Refuge Activity, members must be interviewed by the Refuge Service Liaison.

Refuge Activities include support for:

Hunt coordination and the cull of Cow Birds.

Support Refuge-run events like Refuge Week

Becoming trained to provide environment education roles and staffing various stations during an Environmental Education Class for School Children at the Refuge

Supporting Refuge Staff with Maintenance of Refuge Boundaries and other Maintenance Projects

With Refuge Staff, identify and construct new hiking trails so as to open a new window to visitors to Refuge habitat and to avoid potentially damaging important existing habitat. To develop interpretive signs for these trails to increase enjoyment for visitors. Maintain existing trails as needed.

Lead interpretive hikes on Refuge trails for members and visitors

Support Visitor Center and Public Units with Visitor Greeting, Office Support and Gardening,

3.2.3 Friends initiated Activities

Develop Outreach Campaigns to the Community and other Organizations, particularly in areas that The Refuge Staff are not permitted to engage in

Planned to be in time with the returning Songbirds, Friends created and runs the Songbird Festival which receives National and local attention from Birders. It also attracts visits from local community families interested in the environment. The Songbird Committee meets year-round to ensure that there is an excellent agenda, a planned promotion program, appropriate staffing at event and analysis of the results before beginning the planning of the next year's event. Due to pandemic there was no Songbird Festival in 2020 and there have been no plans for this event in 2021

A more specialized Friends run event is the Sparrow Fest in February. With more limited attendance, it attracts Birders from across the Nation as the Refuge and the Hill Country are one of the few places you can see the 18 of the wintering species of Sparrows. Due to the pandemic, there have been no plans for an in-person event in 2021.

Carry out Fundraising and Grant Acquisitions activities to raise funds that can be used to assist land acquisition or facilitate the creation of Conservation Easements. Also, funds for projects that can enhance the visitor experience, as expanded in the section 3.3.

Coordinate with other organizations which become involved in projects to enhance the Refuge to ensure there is a coordinated plan.

Create and manage Social Media to create awareness of and preference for the Friends and the Refuge.

Deliver Presentations and Workshops to outside organizations to promote the Refuge and the Friends

3.3 Fundraising key to many Friend's Projects

While many projects can be completed by volunteer "sweat" equity, acquired knowledge and passion, there are others that require funds for us to implement.

A recent example would be the covered pavilion at Doeskin Ranch. One of the many Friends projects which enhance the experience at the Refuge for visitors and for which the Refuge management did not have funding.

To implement the covered pavilion required funds for design, material, and specialized labor. These funds came from Friends Bank Accounts using monies raised during special Fund-Raising Events

There are many other projects identified, in the Friend's Strategic Plan, for which funds must be raised for us to implement. These projects are not only in physical structures but also environmental education and public outreach. Your participation in fundraising events will help us reach more of our goals.

Use the Link -fund@friendsofbalcones.org to be connected to Fundraising Committee

3.4 Our Future: Strategic Plan 2020-2024

The Friends Board has developed a Strategic Plan for the evolution of the Friends into an even better organization to meet future ambitious plans to support the Refuge and one that more fully reflects our Community. It can be accessed at the Friends Web page.

Dates and Agendas of Board Meetings are advertised and if you want, as a Friend, you are free to attend. Minutes of Board Meetings can be accessed at the Friends Web page

4. Some things you need to know and do now you are a Friend

Benefits of being a Friend. These benefits vary by Member Level and are currently being updated. When available this handbook will be updated

Understand things you can and cannot do as a Friend

Fill in the Refuge Volunteer Form. This must be done annually.

Complete the driver's education course so you can drive Refuge Vehicles if needed

Select an Activities or Outreach Group to join and introduce yourself.

If training is needed before participating in an activity be sure to ask for it

Take part in Team Building Activities

Raise Awareness in Your Community

Raise Awareness and Preference for Refuge in other organizations you belong to.

Never claim to represent Refuge when you see an incident of wrongdoing. Report it to Refuge Staff, do not take action yourself, as you might put yourself in danger.

4.1 When are you acting as Refuge Volunteer and not as a Friend?

When working on activities on Refuge you are acting as Refuge Volunteer and not as a Friend because:

1. You must be covered by Refuge in case you are in an accident or cause one, that is why you have to sign the Refuge Volunteer Form every year.
2. The hours you work count towards Refuge Activities.

4.2 Importance of Recording your Volunteer Hours

The Refuge must report the total volunteer hours invested in support of Refuge Activities. These total hours can be converted into an equivalent to the number of Refuge Staff needed to perform the same tasks. The more equivalent staff the Refuge attracts the better it is seen as doing by their management.

To ensure all your hours are counted, first you must get registered as a volunteer by following the process on our website. You can then access the database and enter your hours against the activity performed. Activities that count are identified in the next section.

Hours spent on Friends Activities also need to be recorded but do not count towards Refuge Volunteers Hours. Capturing hours on Friends Activities enable us to understand the time being spent to achieve various Friends Activities.

4.3 How can you contribute?

Volunteer for one of the activities that match your interest and skill set. Access the appropriate committee through the Friends Web page by logging on

1. Wildlife Management and Habitat Projects supporting Refuge Biologist
2. Work with Refuge Biologists to make the more of the Refuge unseen world visible to visitors and Friends through use of remote cameras recording Wildlife.
3. Join one of the committees planning, organizing and running the two premier events created by the Friends. Namely the Songbird Festival and the Sparrow Fest
4. Environmental Education for School Children and Community.
5. Refuge Maintenance
6. Trails Maintenance and new trail construction
7. Hike leader, train to be leader of interpretive hikes
8. Public Outreach including Membership, Marketing and PR
9. Fundraising, so we are ready for the next opportunity or project that requires funding.
10. Speakers Bureau, part of the Outreach Program
11. Public Unit and Visitor Center Greeter
12. Gardening around HQ
13. Office Support for Refuge HQ
14. Work on activities that help the Friends evolve and grow into an even more vibrant and meaningful organization, including the best use of Social Media.

4.4 Activities you can participate in.

Hikes, Special Events, Workshops and Social Events. These will all be advertised on the Friends Webpage.

4.4 Resources for Continued Learning and Personal Growth

Training before participating in Activities, some provided by Refuge Staff and some by Friends Team Leaders.

a Mentor Program, with specific a Friend to help guide you to your goals

Library of Interactive Courses on Wildlife and Habitats, content of past activities and links to other sites where more in depth information can be accessed.

4.5 Friends Social Media to Engage, Support, and Enjoy

Website, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Meet Up and whatever new social media which will enable Friends to interest and attract visitors to the Refuge, be a source of new Friends, and keep Friends informed.

If you have the skills necessary to create content for Social Media, join our Outreach team. Please contact support@friendsofbalcones.org

5. Your Feedback to Help us improve

Do you have questions we have not answered?

Are your goals for joining Friends not being met?

Do you have ideas on additional activities that would help the Refuge and/or the Friends?

Have you had any special experiences on the Refuge you can share with us? We can use these as a method of interesting the larger public through our Social Media

Enter your questions and ideas at membership@friendsofbalcones.org