

Friends of Rogers Wildlife Refuge
Annual Meeting, 2019

April 13 2019, 2:00 - 4:00

Lee and Melinda Varian, Gordon Way, Princeton

In Attendance:

Lee Varian (Chair) and Melinda Varian, Winnie Hughes Spar, Clark Lennen, Tom Southerland, Margot Southerland, David Padulo and Steve Hiltner; Laurie Larson, recording.

Lee opened the meeting at 2:15, with a tribute to Fred Spar whose passing was a shock and great loss. Fred spearheaded the formation of the Friends of Rogers Refuge in 2005 and worked tirelessly to improve the preserve. Melinda has been going through his archives and discovering the scope of his correspondence, grant writing, management, recruitment, and hands-on hard work.

Upcoming events honoring Fred:

--Monday, April 29, Watershed Institute: Annual Meeting, including presentation of Edmund W. Stiles Award for Environmental Stewardship to Frederic J. Spar (posthumously)

--Saturday, May 11, WCAS Birdathon; Winnie and Mary Penney will lead the Refuge/Institute Woods group.

--Saturday, May 18, WCAS Field trip at the Refuge and Institute Woods, led by Brad Merritt.

If giving directions to the events at the Refuge, be sure to include the detours on Alexander St.

Physical planning and facilities:

To provide a permanent physical memorial, Lee suggested a new kiosk to replace the crumbling one by the parking area. It was an Eagle Scout project but has become wobbly over the years. Winnie proposed that we build a trail through the LOWER marsh; this was an idea Fred always liked and they had scouted possible routes. Steve studied the area in 2007 and created a report which Fred used as a guide. It included a useful aerial map which could help to route a lower marsh trail.

The discussion turned to resources for construction and maintenance of physical facilities. In the past we had help from the Township public works department which helped with clearing and maintenance of trails; we need to re-establish our contact with them. Kaiser has retired and Chris Torres is the contact now. Clark has found the Princeton public works department to be helpful at Mountain Lakes but their budget is tighter post-Consolidation. Arborist Greg O'Neil retired; the new arborist's name is Taylor. Dan Van Matter (?) is head of public works. We need to establish a relationship with them for the pump and other repairs. They apparently replaced the electrical panel and wiring for the pump recently. Clark says when an actual public hazard is involved they will respond promptly, so be sure to call on them.

Steve and Clark noted that there is an open space tax that generates almost a million dollars each year. Much of it is used to pay the salaries of the public works staff. FOPOS has questioned that over the years, believing at least some of it should be used for acquiring and maintaining open spaces. This might be a good time to get all the conservation groups together and make a combined effort for dedicated funding.

FOPOS might be able to share some volunteers depending on the project and Clark will keep in touch with Lee about this. Tom pointed out that Eagle Scouts have been involved since early days. Melinda has spoken with a Girl Scout troop that is interested in bluebirds. A potential problem with Scouts is that there's no provision for maintenance after the project is done.

The NJ American Water company has been helpful in the past. They own the property, with a conservation easement to the township, and we should always make arrangements with them before making major changes. They also pay for the power that runs the pump; the township pays for repairs and maintenance. Fred's water company contact was named Joe (last name?).

Hydrology, invasives, and the pump:

Lee has discussed the pump with Chris Torres of Princeton public works. The pump was started this spring but leaks were discovered in the hoses. After repair, water will reach both marshes; there will be a method to allow flow to be regulated as needed. A new power panel was installed near the pump shed but the shed itself is in poor condition.

Another need is repair of the "causeway" boardwalk across a seasonal wet area on the north side of the marsh, where a connecting trail completes the marsh loop on the Institute side. Clark offered to bring in the "Gator" and help reposition the boardwalk.

Returning to Steve's report, Lee asked him for his thoughts about the current status and needs of the refuge. Steve mentioned issues with hydrology and invasive plants, as well as the pump.

The problem of outflow at the ditch or stream in back of marsh has been with us as long as there has been a pump. Margot recalled that water management was originally begun in the 1950s when the water company was owned by Princeton Township; it was discovered that impervious rock beneath the marsh does not allow water to penetrate to the aquifer below, and it instead runs back into the Stony Brook near the Swinging Bridge. (This was the point at which Charles Rogers and the Southerlands became involved, advocating for the marsh because it was so good for birds). However, silting in of the marsh has made it difficult to maintain as wetland habitat. The outflow stream has become deeper and the water runs off too fast. Steve continues to recommend closing off that outflow, and the members of the group were all in agreement.

Proposals included sandbags, a dam, or some type of wood barrier. Clark suggested using Scouts to do a temporary sandbag project, to give time to plan a more permanent project to follow. He recalled that permits have

stymied several projects, including a vernal pool proposal at Mt Lakes. Stony Brook is a class I stream. Since we are presently taking the water out of Stony Brook and pumping it back in, would sandbagging the ditch equate to "altering the flow" of the Stony Brook? In the long run the real solution for the problems of hydrology and invasives is dredging, but that costs thousands just for studies and permits before work starts. No final decision was reached on the subject of permits.

Solitude Lake Management company will be back again this year for phragmites control, Lee announced. Like the water level issues, invasives are an ongoing problem, and they're linked. Variable water levels in the marsh only encourage Phragmites to spread, so managing the reeds is probably going to be a permanent need. The size of the patch was greatly reduced, but then increased quickly when effort was relaxed. Re-started two (?) years ago, much progress has again been made. Clark said that Mountain Lakes also uses Solitude Lake for spraying wetland-friendly glyphosate.

Steve mentioned other invasive plants as well; we have Porcelainberry growing high and Celandine (fake Marsh marigold) low. Chocolate vine is right at the parking lot and is moving out quickly. These should be put on the list for the contractor. There was a suggestion that garden clubs or scout troops might assist with replanting with natives after defoliation. D&R Greenway and NJAS both have native plant sales. Tom asked about restoration of water plants that have died down after dry seasons, and it was noted that now the lower marsh is wetter and has more cattails (and woodcocks).

Business report:

By unanimous vote of those present, Officers for the coming year will be Lee (Chair) and Steve (Vice Chair). It is hoped that we can recruit more volunteers and eventually pass the torch to younger members.

For finances, FOPOS is our parent for 501.C.3 and takes care of the paperwork and filings - we greatly appreciate this help. A financial report was attached to the meeting agenda (copies of both should be included with the official minutes).

Interpretation, education and signage:

Providing information to interpret and educate is an essential function of a refuge, but it becomes a constant fight against vandalism. Clark emphasized that the Princeton Police should be called, and they will respond, for any problem at any Princeton refuge or open space.

A three-ring binder is kept at the kiosk by the observation tower, for people to log bird and nature observations. Melinda asked for help keeping it up and replacing it when it "falls into the marsh." Winnie will keep a copy in her car to back up the copy in Melinda's car.

Lee is doing most of the trail work himself. David and Clark offered to help with trails. Lee and Melinda have replaced all the blaze markers along the blue trail at least three times, most recently within just a few days of installation. It appears this is not just random vandalism. Someone does not think trail markers should be there. However, people get lost along the Stony Brook without any trail blazes and we feel they are important. It was suggested that a Scout project could create painted blazes that can't be removed.

Media: Laurie still has a domain registration and materials for a web site, and hopes to soon be able to work on it. Dave is a Facebook user and volunteered to work with Melinda, who has been trying to reclaim a Facebook account created by an unknown person which prevents us from "owning" the name.

Action items:

-Lee and Steve will be meeting soon with Solitude Lake. Winnie will come if she's in town.

-Work on getting a volunteer to build a new Kiosk. (Who was the carpenter who built the tower?)

-Work on a route for the Lower Marsh trail.

-A mailing list is being/has been assembled which can be used to ask for volunteers. Manual work projects on invasive species will be scheduled and Lee will send out email. Help will be needed for bluebird and martin box cleaning for next year (high water made it impossible this year). Other projects such as planting, trail building, etc. need volunteers as well.

-After the work on the Alexander Rd. bridges is completed, we can discuss the signage at Alexander and West Drive.

-Work on web site and Facebook.

Nature reports:

Winnie talked about recent observations. 6-8 pairs of Martins nested last year in the gourds, but have not yet arrived this year. Bluebirds are nesting. Tree swallows are in. Water company has put caps on the RW Swallow nest pipes (and if Lee can figure out who the contact is there, he will ask why). Spice bush has recovered due to deer cull. Apparently the plants don't have the deer-repellent spicebush flavor/smell until they are mature. The Blue trail area is recovering its understory now, and birds seem to be pleased.

The meeting adjourned at about 4 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Laurie Larson