

Friends of Rogers Refuge (FoRR) Annual Meeting, 2021

April 24, 2021, 2:00 - 3:15

Rogers Refuge Red Trail adjacent to the Fred Spar memorial

In Attendance

Lee Varian (Chair), Winnie Hughes Spar, Tom Southerland, Margot Southerland, and David Padulo; Melinda Varian, recording.

Memorials

Lee began the meeting with a few words in remembrance of birders and leaders the refuge has lost recently:

Tom Poole was one of the last remaining founders of what is now the Rogers Refuge (along with Tom Southerland, of course). Even after retiring to Arizona, Tom returned to Princeton most years to bird again at the Refuge and to attend Reunions at his beloved University of Pennsylvania.

Jim Williams was an avid birder, frequently birding with Laurie Larson at the Refuge and elsewhere in the state. After suffering a devastating stroke in middle age, he moved to Maine to be near his sister, Anne, who has given a generous gift to the Refuge in his memory.

We're privileged to be meeting near Fred Spar's Memorial on the new trail he and Winnie had many times talked of building through the Lower Marsh. Fred devoted enormous energies to preserve this important place and to nurture our Friends of Rogers Refuge group.

Current Birding Scene at the Refuge

Lee pointed out that it had been a wonderful week for marsh birds in the Refuge, the best showing since 2011, with a Bittern both heard and occasionally seen, as well as at least two Sora heard frequently and very occasionally seen, and as of Tuesday a Virginia Rail beginning to be heard. And our resident Wood Ducks are being seen regularly in the Upper Marsh area in unusual numbers.

[Late-breaking news: David saw a Snipe from the Blue Trail the following day, not far from the refuge's pump.]

Winnie added that the first Green Heron of the year had just been seen and that it was, oddly, being harassed by a Crow. As many as four male Purple Martins have been seen inspecting the new 24-gourd house. The area along the Red Trail seen from the new memorial benches has been very productive recently of warblers, including Pine, Palm, and Myrtle, as well as Rusty Blackbirds and a Great-crested Flycatcher. There are nesting Pileated Woodpeckers in that area, and just beyond it a pair of Red-shouldered Hawks are nesting.

Treasurer's Report

Tuck Bigelow, Friends of Princeton Open Space (FOPOS) Treasurer formally acts as our FoRR Treasurer but could not be present. Lee presented the Treasurer's Report. At our last meeting two years ago, the bank balance was \$5800; it is now \$13,000, but \$3000 of that is earmarked for a study of the feasibility of dredging or otherwise remediating the Upper Marsh, which is silting up.

Our main expenditures during these two years have been using the Holden Grant funds from Washington Crossing Audubon Society (WCAS) for control of invasive species, primarily in the Upper Marsh. Recently a portion of the Holden Grant and other private donations were spent to acquire the new Purple Martin tower. Some of our funds were also spent for the stone and plaque commemorating Fred Spar, but FOPOS contributed about half the cost of that. Another expenditure was for the purchase of the two memorial benches for Jim Williams, the cost of which had been donated by his sister.

Election of Officers

Lee Varian was re-elected Chair and David Padulo was elected Vice-chair, the hope being that David will be the lead in a new generation's assuming responsibility for the refuge.

FoRR Activities Since Our Last Meeting Two Years Ago

Lee reviewed the group's activities at the refuge over the past two years:

1. Annual, professional Phragmites and Porcelain Berry treatment was done both years. We are seeing less and less Phragmites every year. Porcelain Berry is being treated within the immediate area of the platform and is somewhat controlled, though there is much along the drive into the refuge. Work on Chocolate Vine and Japanese Knotweed has been being done manually by Steve Hiltner and Lee; both of these invasives seem not to be spreading but they keep coming back each year. Lesser Celandine has taken over much of the refuge, in particular the Lower Marsh area, and there seems to be

no way to control it without killing all the native plants, too.

2. The parking area at the main platform was expanded by about 2.5 slots. This proved beneficial when the lockdown greatly increased the refuge's footfall. (The greater use of the refuge's trails when state parks were closed resulted in some damage to habitat which needs remediation; where walkers made an alternate path to avoid mud, one path should be returned to the forest.)
3. The new Red Trail was laid out and built in the Lower Marsh in honor of Fred Spar, and a memorial stone for Fred was installed along the trail. We still need to add two wooden bridges along the eastern edge of the Red Trail along the Stony Brook; it is hoped that this can be accomplished soon with some volunteer help from the FOPOS trail committee and FoRR volunteers. Lee has also ordered three sections of cedar walkway to evaluate for use on perpetually muddy areas of the trail.
4. The kiosk near the main platform was refurbished, a new refuge map was created to include the Red Trail, and other new signs were installed. This work had to be performed twice, as the kiosk was heavily vandalized just a few days after the work was first done.
5. A very generous memorial gift was received from Anne Williams in honor of her late brother Jim Williams. Two teak benches honoring Jim's memory have been placed along the Red Trail overlooking a particularly lovely section of the Stony Brook. The gift further included \$3,000 as seed funding for possible dredging work to open up the lake in the center of the Upper Marsh and preserve the health of the marsh.
6. A new refuge web page has been prepared by Laurie Larson and is ready for feedback. Its temporary URL is:

<http://foxglovesystems.com/Prototypes/Rogers/>

Laurie is asking for contributions of text and images dealing with the refuge and its history.

Melinda mentioned that as the result of her having sent the link for this new webpage to the listserv list during the morning, a member of the staff of the Princeton University Library Digital Imaging Studio, Jennifer Cabral-Pierce, had sent a link to a wonderful new website called *Capturing Feathers*, which displays the newly-digitized notebooks of Charles Rogers, 10,000 pages of them:

https://dpul.princeton.edu/capturing_feathers

This came as a delightful surprise to members of FoRR, who had not known that Rogers's documents were being digitized.

Once the new refuge webpage is finalized, it will be moved to this URL:

<https://rogersrefuge.org/>

7. A new 24-gourd Purple Martin tower was installed by a group of volunteers (including Joe Melton, David, and Lee) in time for the arrival of the first scout birds this year. As many as five male Martins have been seen at one time recently and the first female has just arrived.

(It is comforting to note that most of the action items that came out of our last meeting two years ago have been accomplished, e.g., the new trail through the Lower Marsh, the new web page, the listserv list, and the refurbishment of the kiosk.)

Other recent developments

Lee mentioned some other recent developments concerning the refuge:

1. FoRR sent a letter to the Princeton Council in support of the creation and funding of the position of Open Space Manager for Princeton. This position has been approved, and we hope it will provide a focus for FoRR's interactions with the town. "It would be wonderful to know that a town Open Space Manager would be available to consult or enlist for help, if the need should arise."
2. Professor Christie Riehl's request possibly to have two of her graduate students do research on Carolina Wrens within the refuge was approved. If these two graduate students can't travel to Panama for their research work, their fieldwork here would involve locating Carolina Wren nests, capturing adults in mist nets, and banding and taking small blood samples from adults and nestlings.
3. The Princeton Bird Society, a group of undergraduate and graduate students, is now active on campus and at the refuge, greatly increasing the refuge's appearances on eBird (and, thus, bringing additional birders to the refuge). It's great to have them participating.

Meeting attendees were particularly pleased to learn of the work the PBS is doing to address window strikes on some of the campus buildings, such as the faculty dining room.

Laurie has recently discovered (and placed on the new web page) a report

from a student birding club at the university from 1901. The dates for first sightings from that era were much later than now, and one of the species listed as an irregular transient visitant was Passenger Pigeon.

4. The really aggressive vandalism we've seen against FoRR actions over the past several years (e.g., the damage to the kiosk, the repeated removal of trail markers, the cutting of steel sign posts, etc.) seems to have let up recently, although there is still the occasional adolescent silliness.

Consideration of the Future of the Upper Marsh

Lee raised some questions and concerns about the state of the Upper Marsh and its future: Is it reasonable to try to get approvals from the DEP to dredge the main Upper Marsh lake? Lee plans to talk with former mayor Liz Lempert (who is now a fellow member of the FOPOS board) about how tough that might be.

Also, could we find a good consultant for a possible project? Someone at the Watershed Institute or possibly Michael De Vos of Indigenous Ingenuities who spoke about his restoration of riparian areas at the recent FOPOS annual meeting might be a possibility. (His talk is available on the FOPOS webpage.)

Winnie reminded us that discussions that Fred and Lee had in 2018 with a representative of Princeton Hydro suggested that it might cost as much as \$15,000 just to get permits to dredge the pond and at least \$30,000 for the entire project. Looking at photos from 10-15 years ago makes clear how much less water the marsh has now (and the spread of lily pads indicates how much more shallow the water has become).

The group considered the question of whether it might be useful in the meantime to experiment with using hay bales to attempt to temporarily limit the outflow channel from the Upper Marsh to the south. This could at least clarify the drainage patterns from the marsh to the north. (This project awaits volunteers to undertake it.)

It was noted that part of the reason for the loss of water in the marsh was a change the Institute made to its drainage that resulted in water not flowing from there into the marsh.

Winnie suggested that it might be helpful to ask Steve Hiltner to make an assessment of the results of installing the splice in the hose that now feeds water to the Lower Marsh, e.g., whether that has accomplished the goals he had in mind when he made the recommendation in his 2007 report *Charles H. Rogers Wildlife Refuge: An Ecological Assessment and Preliminary Recommendations* (which is available on the new refuge webpage). We have seen the spread of cattails in that area and the use of the area by displaying Woodcocks since

the change was made about twelve years ago.

When the Southerlands moved to Princeton in 1962, the water of the marsh came right up to the road, and in the Spring the singing of Red-wings was so loud people couldn't hear one another talk. Then, however, the university began using the area as a dump for construction debris, which filled it in a great deal. Fortunately, Charles Rogers and others (including Tom Southerland) were able to put a stop to that.

We agreed to wait until the question of dredging can be discussed with the new open space manager for the town before taking any action, as the town will have to be heavily involved, especially as it holds the environmental easement for the refuge.

Consideration of the Future of the Friends of Rogers Refuge

Lee raised the question of whether we need to get formal recognition from the town as stewards of the Refuge to firm up our traditional role. He plans to ask Liz Lempert for advice on this issue. The consensus of the meeting seemed to be that it might be better to continue as we have been, given that we get good cooperation from the town and the water company as things are. But it would be good to have the town doing more of the work of maintaining the refuge, such as removing huge fallen trees, given that it is a town park.

Fortunately, David has had experience with moving a volunteer group to 501(c)(3) status, if it should turn out that we need to do that rather than continuing under the umbrella of FOPOS.

Lee also raised the subject of our need to recruit some more, younger members, both to lead the group and to work on the trails. How do we do that? And how do we raise the funds for the dredging project?

Invasive Species Update from Steve Hiltner

Steve was delayed in returning from a trip and was not able to attend the meeting, but he is still actively watching over the refuge and helping with invasive species removal. He has also been involved in trying to prevent the digging up of our native plants, such as ramps. Lee is planning again to cut back the Japanese Knotweed by the Boy Scout bridge and then use a chemical treatment to kill the roots. We need to keep after the Chocolate Vine in the area of the platform.

Volunteers?

Lee mentioned the need for volunteers to help with trail maintenance (including possibly building bridges on the Red Trail), to meet with the Solitude Lake Management folks this summer to plan our invasives control program for September/October, to do manual invasives control, and to do bird box cleaning next spring.

Other Concerns

The question was raised as to whether it is wise to report our rarer birds on eBird, the concern being that such reports may attract crowds that could disturb the birds. Though it seems unlikely that there is any way to prevent such reports, it was agreed that we might discuss this concern on the refuge mailing list. (There is an eBird convention that sightings reported more than a week after they occur are not sent out in alerts, thus allowing critical data to be collected without fear of disturbing the birds.) It was agreed that Winnie would speak to Sharyn Magee (of WCAS) about suitable wording for a request of this type, should the consensus of the members be that we wish to make such a request.

Adjournment

The meeting ended with shout-outs to the Friends of Princeton Open Space and the Washington Crossing Audubon Society, both of which have been extremely supportive of our small operation.

The meeting was adjourned at about 3:15 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Melinda Varian