

## **Friends of Rogers Refuge (FoRR)**

Annual Meeting, 2022

June 11, 2022, 2:00 - 3:30

Rogers Refuge Red Trail adjacent to the Fred Spar memorial

### **In Attendance**

Lee Varian (Chair), David Padulo, Joe Melton, Winnie Spar, John Vidulich, and Cindy Taylor (Open Space Manager, Municipality of Princeton); Melinda Varian, recording.

### **Memorial and Thanks**

Lee began the meeting with a minute of silence honoring the memory of Fred Spar and his contributions to preserving Rogers Refuge.

Lee also expressed the group's thanks to Mike from the water company who had specially mowed the meeting area and has been very helpful in many other ways.

He also mentioned his regret that Tom and Margot Southerland and Laurie Larson, who have all made such important contributions to the refuge for many years, had been unable to join us for this meeting.

### **Introduction of Cindy Taylor**

Lee introduced Princeton's new Open Space Manager, Cindy Taylor, who has already shown herself to be hands-on at the refuge, spotting and helping to retrieve one of our errant benches along the Blue Trail following a flood. (On another of her visits to the refuge, she photographed a Muskrat and a River Otter interacting along the Red Trail). Most importantly, she has answered one of the questions we had at last year's meeting, which is what exactly is the refuge's relationship to the municipality? A municipal webpage now lists the refuge as an official park and says that "Friends of Rogers Refuge and the Municipality of Princeton manage public recreation and habitat." She defined her job as involving "anything to do with vegetation," with the Recreation Department still taking care of amenities such as playgrounds.

### **Current Problems at the Refuge**

There seems to be a kink in the hose feeding water to the lower marsh. The problem has been reported but Chris Torres has said that so far there is too much water for his people in Public Works to investigate it. He has said that the kink is not preventing water from flowing. Joe recently manipulated the hose and seems to have improved the situation.

Winnie and Joe reported that West Drive has been opened up to through traffic yet again. Cindy said she would investigate.

Joe raised the problem of the mass of vegetation (mostly water lilies) in the water of the lake in the upper marsh. There is no open water in the marsh now, which prevents several kinds of birds from using it, including most ducks other than the Wood Ducks.

The trails have been muddier than ever this year as the result of the increase in rainfall and flooding. We can expect this problem to worsen with climate change. During the past year, we did an experiment using cedar-slat pads in some of the muddy places along the Red Trail. One remains in place, the others having washed away, so we're going to need something more substantial that we can really "nail" down, both walkways and bridges, which will need to handle floods going in both directions (to and from the Stony Brook). The increased flooding also means that we will need to do trail relocations more frequently as the floods of the Stony Brook wash away trees that had been holding the bank. This problem is exacerbated by the deaths of the refuge's many Ash trees due to the invasive Emerald Ash Borer. With more trees down, our flood plain will undoubtedly become less stable. (The town's deer management program has been very successful in allowing the refuge's understory plants to rebound, which helps the birds greatly and should help stabilize our trails some).

There is a place on the Blue Trail close to the bend in the river that will likely fall into the water this year, so that needs to be relocated soon.

### **Current Birding Scene at the Refuge**

Winnie reported on this Spring's migration, which was very spotty due to the persistent northerly winds. There was one day (May 2) when the winds died and they had 14 species of warblers. Fortunately, most of the usual breeding birds have arrived, though some were very late.

There are a few new breeding birds, too. Virginia Rails have been being heard since early May and are still being heard. There appear to be at least two of them calling to each other. This can be attributed to the Washington Crossing Audubon Society Holden Grants that have allowed us to remediate the invasive Phragmites from the upper marsh. (It has been about forty years since Virginia Rails last nested at the refuge). The upper marsh also hosted Bitterns and Soras that were passing through this Spring.

We have multiple singing male Yellow Warblers this year, in comparison with the past three Summers during which Winnie has been doing a breeding bird survey and has had difficulty finding any Yellow Warblers. There now seem to be 6-8 pairs around the marsh.

We have far more Purple Martins than ever before. When David and Winnie cleaned out the new (24-unit) house over the Winter, it appeared that only two of the gourds had been used last year, but this year it seems to be fully occupied.

We have several pairs of nesting Bluebirds, including one pair in a natural cavity (as opposed to our birdhouses). She began seeing fledglings out of the boxes about a week ago, and it appears that some of the Bluebirds may be preparing for a second nesting.

We continue to have Red-shouldered Hawks nesting within the refuge, and there may be more than one pair now. She recently saw three circling around “engaged in some sort of negotiation”.

She mentioned three nests near the meeting place, Baltimore Oriole, Warbling Vireo, and Cedar Waxwing. The Orioles are already feeding young. She has also seen Orchard Orioles and Kingbirds and Cuckoos singing.

Winnie also talked about the increased use of the refuge by birding groups now that people feel safer getting out, including several recent walks sponsored by the Washington Crossing Audubon Society. There was a group at the refuge for the Birdathon. The Princeton Environmental Commission and the Princeton Public Library sponsored a Science Day at the refuge on May 1, which was well attended (including many children). There is now discussion of holding the Science Days four times a year. She led a birding tour for 66 people from the University’s Reunion visitors. (She mentioned that one of these alumni had studied with Charles H. Rogers). Thus, the refuge is an important resource for the whole town, including the graduate students who have been doing research on Carolina Wrens there.

Winnie added that she has recently joined the board of the Washington Crossing Audubon Society and has become their liaison with the bird-friendly glass initiative started by the students in the Princeton Birding Society. Cindy advised “getting in the ear” of a council member if their initiative wishes to try to get an ordinance passed.

### **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. We began the year with \$13,928 in the bank account. Lee spent \$282 on the trial of cedar-slat pads. \$2400 was paid to Solitude Lake Management for their invasive species remediation. We received \$3000 in a Holden Grant from the Washington Crossing Audubon Society and \$2000 in a donation. Thus, the current balance is \$16,246. Of that, \$6000 is earmarked for two projects, \$3000 for harden our trails against climate change and \$3000 for studying what will be needed to restore the lake in the upper marsh.

### **Election of Officers**

David Padulo was elected Chair and Joe Melton was elected Vice-chair, with Lee Varian taking on the office of Treasurer.

### **Approval of Friends of Rogers Refuge Mission Statement**

The following mission statement for the Friends was approved:

### **Mission Statement**

The Friends of the Rogers Refuge (FORR) acts as an advocate and steward for the Charles H. Rogers Wildlife Refuge, aiming to preserve and enhance habitat for birds and other wildlife while promoting accessibility to the Refuge for current and future generations.

### **Mission Priorities**

- Manage hydrology, support nesting sites and remediate invasive vegetation.
- Maintain and improve trails, viewing platforms and other visitor accommodations.
- Promote community engagement and education.
- Sustain a strong working partnership with the municipality of Princeton and the New Jersey American Water Company.
- Evaluate the success of the group's continuing efforts to serve the Refuge.

The group thanked David for drafting the statement and Winnie, Joe, and Joe's wife Cathy for working with David on it.

### **FoRR Activities Since Our Last Meeting**

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

1. The annual Phragmites and Porcelain Berry treatments were done. We may not need to spray for Phragmites in the future but need to keep an eye out for a reappearance.
2. The annual cutting and treatment of the Japanese Knotweed infestation near the Boy Scout Bridge has been done once this year and will possibly need doing again later in the year.
3. We have done some minor trail reroutings to avoid muddy spots and big tree-falls (as well as clearing many tree-falls).
4. Our new website prepared by Laurie Larson has been up for more than a year now and is frequently updated: <https://rogersrefuge.org>
5. Two of Professor Christie Riehl's graduate students have been observing and tagging Carolina Wrens at the refuge (and other green spaces in the area).
6. The Princeton Bird Society has been very active at the refuge. We were pleased to see that they won the World Series of Birding this year. And we were delighted when Claire Wayner, of the PBS, spoke in her Pyne Prize acceptance speech of how important the refuge had been to her through her undergraduate years.

### **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? Will we also need approval from the D&R Canal Commission?

The lake is smaller than it used to be and clearly more shallow. We no longer have visits from flocks of ducks. (We used to have visits from Green-winged Teal every March and have even had Buffleheads in the past). We also no longer have herons and egrets. All of this is obviously the result of having no open water.

Lee mentioned that he believed Cindy's boss had been involved with the major (\$4 million) project at Mountain Lakes to dredge the lake and replace the dams. Cindy said she would ask her about the process for that. Fred Spar and Winnie and Lee met with Princeton Hydro in 2018 and were given a ball-park figure of \$30,000 for restoring our lake. At least half the cost is for permitting.

Lee suggested that we ought to talk to somebody at the Watershed Institute or to Michael De Vos of Indigenous Ingenuities (who spoke to last year's FOPOS annual meeting about restoration of riparian areas) to get a better idea of what would be involved. Winnie volunteered to find the right person to talk to at the Watershed Institute. Joe raised the question of getting the water company involved, too, but we aren't expecting an impediment there. Lee mentioned that Solitude Lake Management also does this sort of work. We will also need to consider where the dredged material will go. Cindy raised the question of whether this work would increase our carbon sequestration, which is unclear. Cindy suggested that \$30,000 would not be a lot for the municipality to cover within the open-space budget. We need to get some documents together on why it is needed and what depth it should be. We should chat with the water company and bring in somebody like Princeton Hydro to get an idea of what would be involved. It would be good to try to get into the 2023 budget or at least into 2024's.

### **Consideration of the Future of the Refuge in the Face of Climate Change**

Lee opened a discussion of how we should deal with the impact of climate change on the refuge, both as to where we want to be ten years from now and as to how best to spend our \$3,000 grant from Washington Crossing Audubon. Clark Lennon and the other members of the FOPOS trails committee, who often provide assistance to the refuge, are tied up with work to remediate the water damage at Mountain Lakes, so are not likely to be able to help us much. Clark and Tuck Bigelow had done some design work for a bridge and boardwalks on our Red Trail, but it seems unlikely that their volunteers will be able to do that work. Clark's causeway along the Blue Trail got washed out of position (and draped over a log) by Hurricane Ida. Alan Hershey thinks we can lift that off, but it will take several people working together to move it without breaking it. And we would have to come up with a better way of mooring it down than in the past.

Cindy said that it is cumbersome for her to hire vendors to do such work, but she should be able to buy wood for these projects and let us use our grant to pay a contractor to use the wood to build the bridge and boardwalks we have in mind. (The Department of Public Works also buys lumber for FOPOS to use in maintaining their trails). Cindy said that in her experience using "tree cookies" on muddy trails, rather than boardwalks, leads to easier maintenance, but the consensus of the group was that the amount of water we have sloshing back and forth across our trails would result in the tree cookies washing away.

Winnie gave David a shout-out for his recent repair of “the bridge with scary steps” (near the Swinging Bridge).

One essential project for this Summer (when we hope things will be a bit drier) is to fasten the three benches securely, as all three have been displaced by flood waters in the past couple of years.

Cindy said that she is thinking of putting out a proposal for trail maintenance for all municipal trails. She asked what help we would need in that area. We agreed that having our trails walked through and cut back and weed-whacked once or twice a year would be an immense help (and would cut way down on the ticks). She is also looking into the possibility of a general contract for portable toilets for the town’s green spaces (including on-going maintenance), which could include the refuge. She also suggested we consider transitioning to painted trail markers, in which case she could provide the paint.

### **Volunteers?**

Lee raised the question of how we go about getting more volunteers involved with the refuge. Even if we use contractors for the larger construction projects, there are many other needs. For example, the bird boxes must be cleaned each year. This year we will likely need to treat a few individual Phragmites plants in the marsh. We could use somebody to take over the IT work that Melinda does. The University is planning to phase out the Listserv service our mailing list uses. If we want to switch our communications to Facebook, we will likely lose some subscribers. We also so far have not been able to convince Facebook that we are responsible for the refuge. David has found a lawyer who may be willing to volunteer to help us get a more official status, which should resolve a number of problems. Winnie suggested looking into FOPOS’s successful approach to getting volunteers. Joe pointed out that there are e-bird postings from the refuge almost every day and that we might be able to glean more volunteers by contacting some of those people. There was discussion of using visualizations from e-bird data to show the importance of the refuge as a Central Jersey hotspot. Cindy pointed out that as a Millennial she focuses on Instagram to find sites of interest to her when she moves to a new area. David will look into an Instagram presence for the refuge since he takes many photos of its birds.

### **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 3:30 PM.

Respectfully submitted,  
Melinda Varian

*This document was revised 16 Aug 2022 with the correct version of the Mission Statement.*