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Reese Lukei, center, is seen with Katie Webb, the coordinator of the annual Winter Wildlife Festival, and the journalist Mary Reid Barrow, for who the award presented to Lukei in late January is named. [Courtesy]

Ed. — From the Sunday, Feb. 27, print edition.

VIRGINIA BEACH — Forty-eight years and still counting.

That's how long Reese Lukei has been volunteering at Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge in southern Virginia Beach, and much of that time has been spent observing, trapping, banding and photographing raptors, including osprey and peregrine falcons.

It's that dedication that won him the 2022 Mary Reid Barrow Wildlife Advocate Award, which was presented to him in late January, as part of this year's Winter Wildlife Festival.

In presenting the award, festival coordinator Katie Webb described Lukei as a wildlife observer, rescuer and promoter. He is also a mentor to others who want to work with wildlife or who are interested in promoting it.

Over the years, Lukei has volunteered at False Cape and First Landing state parks in addition to the refuge at Back Bay.

He's banded more than 12,000 birds, helped cut trails and served as a research associate for the Center for Conservation Biology at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg.

"I had no idea that I was going to get it," Lukei said about the award. "It came as a complete surprise."

Lukei fell in love with Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge in 1974 when, as a Boy Scout leader, he was looking for natural areas where he could take scouts on outdoor excursions. He began volunteering at Back Bay and, later, False Cape State Park, and he has helped construct osprey platforms, build trails and conduct tours through the wildlife refuge.

Of all his outdoor activities, Lukei found that observing and working with birds was particularly rewarding.

"I've always been fascinated by birds," he said, adding that he grew up as a Boy Scout and always loved the outdoors.

Lukei began trapping and banding birds. One of his earlier efforts involved trapping and banding migrating peregrine falcons, which were almost eradicated on the East Coast in the

mid-20th century because of pesticide poisoning.

They've since rebounded, and Lukei was instrumental in tracking their survival rate and migration patterns.

Raptor research also fascinated Lukei, and, in the 1990s, he began working as lead hawk trapper with the Center for Conservation Biology at their Wise Point Trapping Station on the Eastern Shore.

He is also very interested in educating others about the importance of wildlife preservation, and his volunteer work has included leading tour groups through Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

Lukei also helped to form the Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge Society, and a portion of the trails leading through Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge, False Cape State Park, and several other natural areas have been named the Reese F. Lukei Jr. Raptor Trail in his honor. He's also worked in coordinating the American Discovery Trail, a 6,800-mile system of trails that extends from Delaware to California.

Lukei remains an active volunteer and, among his other activities, he works with about 20 other volunteers to monitor bald eagle nests in South Hampton Roads.

They recently discovered one at First Landing State Park in Virginia Beach, which brings the total number of nests to 50 locally. In 1989, there was one known bald eagle nest, he said.

Seeing the bald eagle return has been one of the rewards that he's experienced, but he said that he best remembers working with people. He's still interested in recruiting volunteers and pointed to the volunteer opportunities available at Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge, the Virginia Aquarium and Marine Science Center and other wildlife-oriented organizations.

"We're always looking for people willing to learn," he said.

The annual Mary Reid Barrow Wildlife Advocate Award, which celebrates the work and passion of the journalist for which it is named, is presented each year as part of the Winter Wildlife Festival. Learn more about the festival online via www.vbgov.com/winterwildlife.
