



COMMUNITY

# ‘It Gets Its Hooks in You’

Wetlands Park enthusiasts launched a friends group during the pandemic — and it paid off

BY *Heidi Kyser*

**"WE'RE MEETING** face-to-face for only our second time in over a year," says Wetlands Park Friends President Christie Leavitt, with the enthusiasm common among Las Vegans currently venturing back into society. "This weekend, we're going back to our little conference table at the (Clark County Wetlands Park) Nature Center, where we normally used to meet."

In Leavitt and Wetlands Park Friends' case, that normalcy was brief anyway. The nonprofit group got its 501(c)3 status in October 2019 and unveiled itself to the public in January 2020, just two months before the COVID-19 pandemic shut down almost everything in Las Vegas, including the park.

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"Almost as soon as we launched, the place we operate from closed down," Leavitt says. "We couldn't meet at the Nature Center. None of the programs where we would have tabled and done membership drives took place."

Not an ideal start, to be sure. But the organization's founders had the patience of those who've been around for a while and endured setbacks before.

Leavitt has been involved with Clark County Wetlands Park in one capacity or another since its inception. As education curator for Clark County Museum in the early 1990s, she was asked to participate in the planning of a new municipal park. An anthropologist by trade, Leavitt had previously worked at UNLV's Marjorie Barrick Museum — back when it was connected to the Desert Research Institute and housed scientific specimens, live animals, and archaeology exhibits.

"My boss told me, 'You have all that natural history museum experience. Why don't you sit on the planning committee for this wetlands park?'" she says. "And I was like, 'Wetlands? What?'"

But she was quickly hooked by the county's vision for the park, which included not just the practical aims of erosion control, managed environmental zones, and recreation opportunities, but also the aspirational goals of increasing wildlife populations, preserving archaeological assets, and educating the community.

Leavitt went from participating in the Wetlands Park's planning to manning its first temporary visitors center, a small building in a defunct driving range on Russell Road. When trail-building and site cleanup were completed on the park's grounds, Leavitt and the part-time volunteer coordinator she'd been working with took over a construction trailer as the first on-site information center. She retired more than seven years ago but has continued volunteering for the park.

"Once it gets its hooks into you, you're done," Leavitt says.

Several years ago, someone (neither Leavitt nor Wetlands Park Friends Vice President Linda Wiltberger, the park's longest-serving volunteer, could remember who, exactly) had the idea to form a friends group. They studied local examples, homing in on Friends of Red Rock and the Clark County Museum Guild as models. Friends groups generally come about when a group of people cherish a public space so much that they want to help out the government agencies overseeing them. The Wetlands Park enthusiasts liked how the County Museum and Red Rock groups provided complementary education, fundraising, and stewardship by collaborating with agency staff to fill in gaps.

But just as Leavitt and Wiltberger drew up a proposal and started the process to get it approved, both the county's parks and recreation director and the Wetlands Park's supervisor left their positions.

"So, nothing happened," Leavitt says. "And the next thing we knew, it had gotten to be late 2018, early 2019. We looked around and saw that the park was in a different place. Parks and Rec' had a stable staff. We thought, maybe it's time to run that idea up the flagpole again."

This time, it flew. By early 2020, Leavitt, Wiltberger, and their fellow volunteers' plans were coming to fruition. And then the pandemic hit.

Like many organizations, Wetlands Park Friends pivoted. The board met through phone conferences, then on Zoom. Rather than focus on membership-building, they turned their attention to fundraising — something they could do at home, regardless of the size of their volunteer base. In early 2020, they landed a \$5,500 REI grant, part of which was used to support the Wetlands Hands On (WHO) program and part of which went to building Wetlands Park Friends' website. Another recent REI grant, this one for \$15,000, will go toward developing an app to help park visitors identify plants and wildlife, and get information on events.

"So, we were able to be useful our first year of existence, despite not being able to do much in person," Leavitt says.

"They're adept at grant-writing," says Elizabeth Bickmore, the Wetlands Park's senior program administrator, a Clark County employee. "They've only been around a little more than a year, but they've already supplied funds for our ambassador program, provided resources for the native animals we've acquired, and provided funding for that program." (The new live animal exhibit features a kingsnake, gopher snake, scorpion, and tarantula.)

In some ways, the Friends' timing couldn't have been better. According to the county, visitation to the 2,900-acre Wetlands Park soared during the pandemic, increasing 99 percent from 2019, when nearly 275,000 people set foot on-site, to 2020, which saw nearly half a million people.

Wetlands Park Friends is looking forward to the new opportunities that in-person interaction will bring. They're moving what had been an online lecture series to the park starting in August, planning to sponsor a traveling exhibit, and spreading the word about their \$40 family membership, which gives visitors enhanced access to programs.

"I have a Wetlands Park Friends sticker on my car, and people will come up to me and say, 'This is a desert. There's a wetlands here?'" Leavitt says. "There are always more people to educate."