



# Newsletter

Winter 2024 [www.friendsofwhitfield.org](http://www.friendsofwhitfield.org)

## Winter at Whitfield

Story on page 3

“I please myself with the graces of the winter scenery,  
and believe that we are as much touched by it  
as by the genial influences of summer.”

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

# Letter from the President

Greetings Friends!

I'm not a big fan of winter having spent, at this point, most of my adult years in the great city of Chicago. But there is certainly something to be said about the fairly mild and beautiful winters in New Mexico.

And as the VSWCD's Environmental Education Manager Laura McCann points out in her feature article, there is beauty to be seen while Nature rests. I encourage you then to stop by and visit Whitfield and see it in it's winter splendor. And get a load of those Cranes! Move over Bosque Del Apache. Boy, do we have Cranes! Ms. McCann, in her companion article, speaks about the Sandhill Cranes that are seen frequently within our friendly confines.

The Friends made a lot happen in 2023. Please see the flyer highlighting our 2023 accomplishments later in this issue. Now, I don't like to use the word, "proud" because as Proverbs points out, "pride goeth before the fall." But I will emphatically say that, I'm pleased, tickled pink, and just plain happy about what we've done in 2023. We're a small working volunteer board of six, all at different stages in our life. And we come together to support the WWCA and keep it alive and thriving.

But there's one other person that helps to make that possible, and that's YOU. All of YOU! The members and the volunteers of the Friends of Whitfield!

A sincere thank you to all of you and give yourself a much deserved pat on the back.

Cheers!

Rob Raucci  
President  
Friends of Whitfield  
Board of Trustees



## Friends of Whitfield Board of Trustees

### Mission Statement:

*Friends of the Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Complex (FWWCC) is a non-profit volunteer organization dedicated to supporting the Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Complex by promoting habitat restoration, education and conservation.*

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robraucci@friendsofwhitfield.org

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#### Board Member

Frank Mazza  
frankmazza@friendsofwhitfield.org

#### Environmental Education Manager

Laura McCann  
lauramccann@valenciaswcd.org

#### Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area

is located at 2424 Hwy 47, Belen, NM  
<https://goo.gl/maps/AKxgnLJGgKD3za7t8>

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# Winter at Whitfield

by Laura McCann, VSWCD Environmental Education Manager

Many people think the winter landscape in New Mexico is rather boring. Everything is dormant, and there are no



Photo: Laura McCann

butterflies or blossoms in sight. I, however, think winter landscapes have a beauty all their own! Like us humans, nature needs time to rest. In the winter, trees show us their unique branching, usually hidden by leaves in the growing season. Other dormant plants show off winter colors in reds and yellows. The maroon of Yerba Mansa and the ever-reddening Coyote Willow stems are a beautiful contrast with yellow grasses against a cloudy winter sky. The not infrequent days with blue skies here in the desert are also a rewarding splash of color in the landscape

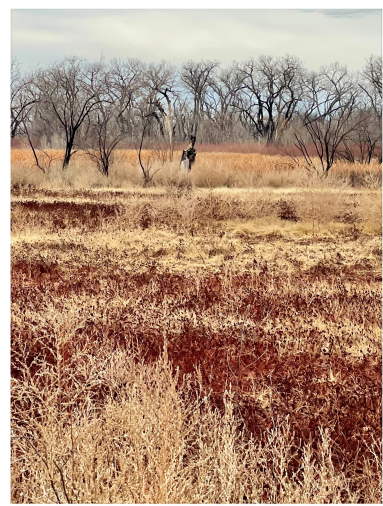


Photo: Laura McCann

December-February.

What about the animals? Although many mammals and reptiles are hibernating, others are still active. As you walk through Whitfield, you will notice

tracks and scat from coyotes, raccoons, and even an occasional skunk! The mice are still foraging in the winter fields. I haven't spotted them, but I am sure the hawks and owls know where they are! This brings me to the menagerie of different bird species that inhabit Whitfield in the wintertime. We currently have two Northern Harriers using Whitfield as their hunting grounds. I have also spotted owl pellets near the pond which are too large to be from any other bird but a Great Horned Owl. Frequently overhead, I see a couple of Red-tailed Hawks scanning their territory. One even gave several iconic screeches last week before landing in our oldest Cottonwood Tree on the south trail at Whitfield. Another raptor in residence is the American Kestrel. I have spotted both males and females in our trees and flying near the Visitor Center. On the pond, I have spotted Canada Geese, American Coots, Mallards, and even a Bufflehead! On the outskirts of the pond we

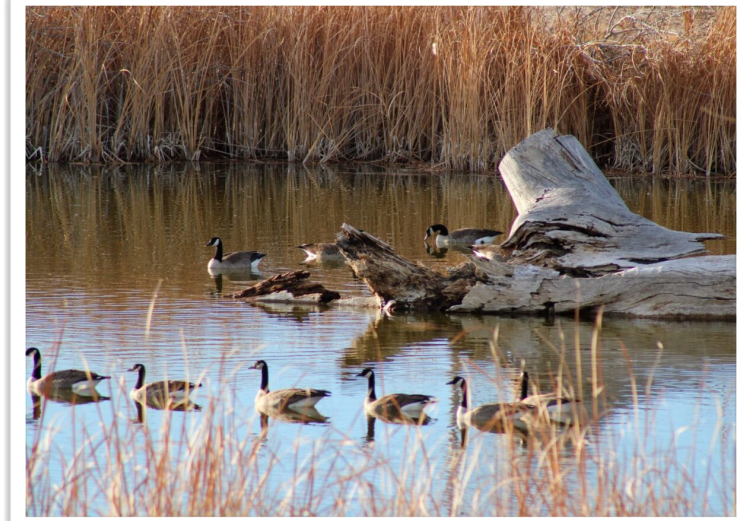


Photo: Johnny Chavez

are seeing and hearing more Red-wing Blackbirds every day. We also have a Great Blue Heron and a Belted Kingfisher that enjoy fishing at the Whitfield main pond.

I welcome you to stop by Whitfield soon to take a walk and explore our Winter Wonderland for yourself.

Hope to see you soon! 🐾

# Phenology - Nature's Calendar

by Dennis Prichard

One of the many topics studied by the Master Naturalist class at Whitfield is the timing of Nature's phenomena. When do the first hummingbirds show up at your feeder? When is the first bloom in your garden, and was this earlier than previous years? Recording the dates of various events and comparing them to previous years can give us insight into changing conditions and alert us to possible ramifications to our natural cycles.

This study is called Phenology (*feen-ol-o-gee*) and has taken on extra importance with climate change. In fact, it has shown us direct evidence that climate change is occurring, and more importantly, what effects it is having on natural cycles. Nature's cycles are intricately

woven from one species to the next. Thus the processes are more efficient and beneficial to survival. The return of

hummingbirds

corresponds with their food sources being available at that time, and if they are not in synch, one or the other could suffer. Plants might not get pollinated, and the birds might have to find another food source or disperse. This simplistic example is often used as it shows us in easily recognizable scenarios what MIGHT happen.

Over millions of years, plants and animals have melded their lifestyles together to be inextricably intertwined, so much so that one organism couldn't live without the other. Parasites are one example where the host provides all the habitat needs (food, water, shelter, and space) for that lifeform. Sometimes the parasite gives needed nourishment to the host as well. Our digestion could not function without certain bacteria present in our gut. If habitats change, even inside our bodies, even in minute ways, it could disrupt the living

conditions of one organism, and then the next to where whole ecosystems might change.

I say CHANGE. One should not assume the organisms would necessarily go extinct. No, Nature is more resilient than that. Species can adapt. Even Charles Darwin didn't say that "the fittest will survive." He stated that those who can adapt, will. But when conditions change more rapidly than a species can adapt, it places extra burdens on that species to survive. How do we know this is happening?

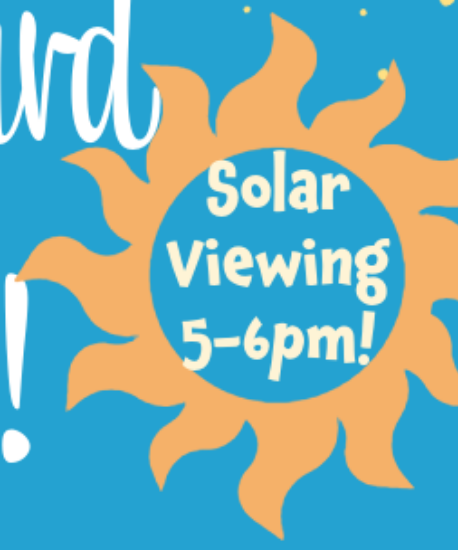
Citizen scientists are collecting data on all sorts of changes to the natural world. It takes an army of them to cover all the organisms and all the conditions of change. But it doesn't take a college degree to gather the data. Youngsters, oldsters, and in-betweens of all walks of life can help with the data collection. It only takes an interest and a little time to make a record. Continuing with the record-keeping can be the hard part, but a community called the National Phenology Network is making it easy to record and contribute to the growing bank of knowledge about Nature's changes.

The group has a program called Nature's Notebook wherein you make observations online and add them to thousands of other people's sightings. This compilation of data is then scrutinized and verified to make it as accurate as possible, and standardized. Then the real scientists utilize the data for their research and findings. All the graduate students and professors can't be in all places for all the myriad of events in nature. Therefore, the vast data set produced by citizen scientists magnify the importance of the scientist's conjectures.

So what? Does this make any real difference? You bet it does! Your observations may add to those that are very popular already (the hummingbird example above,) or you could be focused on a particular plant or animal that is in need of closer scrutiny than it has ever had in the past. I studied mud-dauber wasps in a college course and found very little research on these fascinating creatures. Surely others have observed them and now have a way to combine what we all



# Spring Forward Star Party!



Come along as we walk you through  
the sprawling wonder of the night sky.



**FREE EVENT**



**Night Sky Talk  
begins at dark!**



**Friday March 8  
5:00-9:00pm**

**Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area  
2424 Hwy 47, Belen, NM, 87002**

## Volunteer News - Winter 2024

by Frank Mazza, FOW Volunteer Coordinator

### “1846 Hours”

What’s the significance of 1846 hours? Perhaps you might think that it’s the amount of time it takes for a monarch butterfly to complete its life cycle (egg, larva or caterpillar stage, pupa or chrysalis phase, and adult). Good guess but researchers tell us it takes the monarch an average of 720 hours to complete their cycle. Keeping with the nature theme, you might suggest that 1846 hours is the amount of time it takes for a sandhill crane egg to hatch. Again, that’s a good try but we’re told the eggs hatch in approximately 732 hours. With frustration starting to bubble up, the idea of something having to do with a mammal comes to mind. A light bulb shines. It’s the minimum amount of time needed for a yearling elk to grow antlers. By the way, an elk was seen at Whitfield a little over a month ago! It didn’t have antlers and this is an excellent guess. It takes about 1920 hours for the yearling elk’s antlers to grow. It takes longer for a bull moose.

The answer to this puzzle is 1846 hours is the amount of time many of you volunteered with the Friends of Whitfield in 2023. If we divide that number by 8 hours, that would translate to 230 days. And if you multiply it by \$15, it equals \$27,690.00. This is a significant contribution by any measure and as the volunteer coordinator, I want to express my deepest thanks to everyone who believes in the mission of the Friends and supports it with their time and energy.

A brief recap of the past year saw many hours devoted to board and committee work; planning and implementing a successful online auction; the revival of the Ambassador program at the Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area visitor center; reorganizing the extensive nature library at the visitor center; community outreach where the Friends manned a booth and provided information about Whitfield, the Valencia Soil and Water Conservation District, and

the Friends; several workdays where we did garden and trail maintenance; and assisted the VSWCD at several events that included Earth Day celebrations, Whitfield Under the Stars, Desert Willow and Pollinator Festival.

If one of your New Year’s resolutions was to do something good for yourself and your community, I’m eager to talk to you about how volunteering with the Friends of Whitfield can help you with your resolution. It’s a known fact that volunteering keeps people moving and thinking, engaged, and feeling productive. It’s a win-win deal! Please give me a call or send me an email. 🍷

Frank Mazza, Friends of Whitfield Volunteer Coordinator [FrankMazza@friendsofwhitfield.org](mailto:FrankMazza@friendsofwhitfield.org) or 802-772-5068

(“Phenology,” continued from page 4)

learned into a meaningful understanding of this animal.

Compiling data is a big chore but not the end product. We must use the information to predict what the changes may bring and try to correct, or at least live better with, the changes we know are coming. As in most things in Nature, we must go from awareness to appreciation and then follow up with action. Phenology gives us all of that in one activity. 🍷

*Dennis Prichard is a charter member of the Advisory Board for the Master Naturalist Program at Whitfield. His years of experience as a Park Ranger and Wildlife Refuge Manager qualifies him as an instructor for the classes.*

### *Did You RENEW?*

As a member your support directly impacts the work we do for the Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area.

It’s easy to renew or become a new member by registering on our secure website at:

<https://friendsofwhitfield.org/become-a-member/>

# From the District Director's Corner

by Andrew Hautzinger, VSWCD District Director

As we approach the end of the New Year's first month please indulge me a review of recent visitations to Whitfield and a quick graphically-supported rear-view mirror look at 2023. An excellent highlight for the Whitfield Complex this month was the 1/5/2024 visit



From L to R: Senator Liz Stefanic, VSWCD Chair Abel Camarena, District Director Andrew Hautzinger and Congressman Gabe Vasquez

paid to Whitfield by Congressman Gabe Vasquez, who represents Congressional District 2 (within which falls much of the District's 1.4 million acres). Congressman Vasquez was elected to serve in Washington D.C. on November 8, 2022, after serving on the City Council of Las Cruces, where he made a name for himself as a strong advocate for science-focused management of natural resources, and support of innovative farming



to keep New Mexico's agricultural sector vital. With that alignment with VSWCD's mission, it came as little surprise that the Congressman was very complimentary



about the work our District does. He mentioned how a grassroots efforts like our partnering with NMDA on their Healthy Soil Program can have dramatic and positive impacts on citizens quality of life and career choices, as he remarked: "We need new next-generation

farmers with the right tools and knowledge to farm resiliently". During our walk, we spent the time strategizing how the Congressman can help the District with its conservation and education missions, as he pointed out how vital it is to find resilient solutions to our environmental and agricultural challenges. He expressed the opinion that education is the critical component for these solutions to get promoted, and he was impressed with the work Valencia SWCD does in that regard (as we strive to educate kids of all ages). Big thanks to Annie Quintana, the Field Representative for Vasquez's office. Annie promised a visit, and she delivered! The Congressman was unequivocal that, in him, we have an ally who wants to help (as VSWCD leadership ponders the right ask to make). Can't wait to see where this partnership goes!

Speaking of partnerships, VSWCD's Whitfield Complex was also recently paid a return visit from our longtime supporter State Senator Liz Stefanic, who dropped by to



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# Birding in Season: The Sandhill Crane

*(Antigone canadensis)*

by Laura McCann, VSWCD Environmental Education Manager  
All photos by Laura McCann

February is now underway, and we are starting to see the departure of Sandhill Cranes from Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area. Don't worry, there is still time to



take a stroll through Whitfield where you will see and hear these magnificent birds. Sandhill Cranes are distinctive with their gray feathers and red-capped heads. Their long, pointed beaks are longer than their heads and are used to forage in wetlands, farm fields, and prairies for seeds, roots, invertebrates, and small rodents or frogs. Thus, these large upland game birds, which can weigh 6-12 pounds, are omnivores. Another memorable feature of these birds is their call, which can be described as a rolling trumpeting sound. The sound is possible due to the long tracheas in the necks



of these graceful birds. Speaking of grace, Sandhill Cranes are also known for their unique mating dances

where they spread their 6-7 feet wingspan and jump in the air as they call. This ritual bonds the pair, and they will stay mates for life or until one of them dies. While Sandhill Cranes do not breed in New Mexico, they still prefer wetland habitats further north to build their nests on the ground using soft grasses near water's edge and twigs. They only have 1-3 eggs per clutch, and it is common for them to only have one chick survive to adulthood. I have never seen a Sandhill Crane chick in the wild. If you want to take me on a trip to a breeding ground in Canada or Alaska, stop by Whitfield and let me know!

Did you know there are two subspecies of Sandhill Crane? The Greater Sandhill Crane can stand about 4 feet tall, while the Lesser Sandhill Crane is closer to 3 feet tall. Lessers also have a shorter bulkier beak, but that is tough to distinguish at a distance! These subspecies can interbreed, but typically do not. When you are out birding, make sure not to mistake the shorter

Lesser Sandhill Crane subspecies for a younger or "baby" crane. As a reminder, once any bird is fully feathered and can fly it is the



same size as its parents- even though it is a "juvenile" which may not be ready to breed yet. Instead of size, one marker to identify a juvenile (also called an immature) Sandhill Crane is the lack of a red cap on the head. The crimson cap on adult birds is actually where there are no feathers, and you are seeing skin! I guess you could say the younger birds haven't gone bald yet!

Sandhill Cranes are the oldest known bird species to date. How do we know? Glad you asked! A fossil of a Sandhill Crane found in Florida was dated to be 2.5

(continued on page 9)





## HOW TO HELP AN INJURED BIRD

If you find an injured bird, carefully put it in an appropriate size cardboard box with a lid. (Don't give a small bird too much room, or a big bird not enough room). Next, place the box in a warm, dry, and quiet place inside. Do not poke holes in the box! The bird can see through these and become stressed. Don't worry; they can breathe through the cracks. Do NOT give the bird food or water. Birds often go into shock when injured, and their bodies are not ready to eat or drink.



Within 24 hours, get the bird to a licensed Wildlife Rehabilitator. If you do not know who is legally permitted to rehabilitate birds in your area, contact your state's wildlife authority. They should have a list of individuals or organizations with proper permits. In New Mexico, you can contact the New Mexico Department of Game & Fish:



[www.wildlife.state.nm.us](http://www.wildlife.state.nm.us)  
(505) 476-8000

If a bird has hit a window and is still alive, it may just need a little time to regain its senses, then may be able to fly away. Just keep cats, dogs, or humans away from the bird until it is safely on its way. Remember, it is **ILLEGAL** to rehabilitate wildlife without a permit. THANK YOU for doing your part to help rescue an injured bird and transport it to a Wildlife Rehabilitator!



(“Birding,” continued from page 8)

million years old, and the structure of the skeleton was the same as the birds we see today! There is also a fossil of a Crowned Crane, which is a relative of the Sandhill Crane, found in Nebraska that was 10 million years old. This indicates that this type of bird has been very successful indeed. Conserving wetland habitat is the best thing humans can do to protect this species for generations to come.

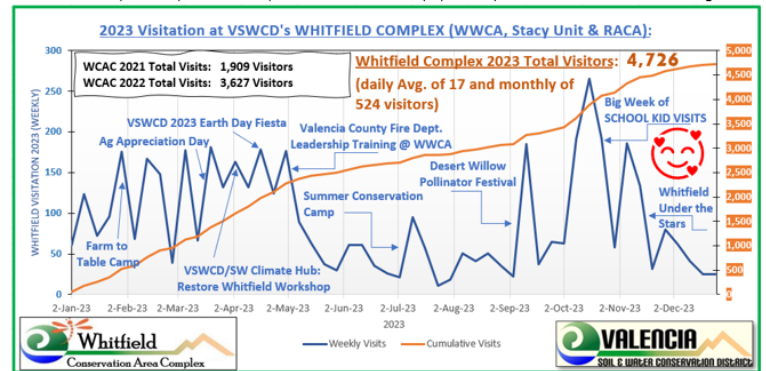
Despite being tough birds that have a lifespan of 20-40 years, Sandhill Cranes can suffer injuries like any other bird and need to be rescued. Our Conservation

Program Manager, Johnny Chavez, and I have been called out to rescue six Sandhill Cranes in Valencia County this season. If you do see an injured crane, please call us (505-864-8914) or NM Game & Fish (505-222-4700) to help rescue the bird. These birds are dangerous due to their size and sharp beaks. They will spread their wings to the full span of 6-7 feet when threatened and attempt to attack by kicking or using their beaks! 🦩

(“District Director,” continued from page 7)

take part in the placement of the new *Whitfield Pedestrian Bridge* that our partner MRGCD installed on Saturday, December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023. During her visit, Senator Stefanics also complimented the District on its conservation and education work, while reminding us to not miss the January 11<sup>th</sup> due date for funding requests (FYI: VSWCD has requested a work truck, a pedestrian vehicle and a utility trailer in our 3 Capital Outlay requests to the NM Legislature).

Finally, on behalf of the VSWCD Board of Supervisors and staff please let me offer my warmest thanks to the Friends of Whitfield for their countless contributions to the District and our diverse programs and activities. With reference to the graph showing the 2023 visitation



to the Whitfield Complex, the events held in 2023 are only one example of how the Friends make all the difference in the work we do and to the good things we are able to collectively bring to our many served communities. THANKS! 🦩

## Coming Events...

*Mark your calendar and join us in Spring 2024 for some special events!*

- March 8: Spring Forward Star Party**
- March 23: Agriculture Appreciation Day**
- April 20: Earth Day Fiesta**
- May 18: Lavender Workshop**

*Keep an eye on our website for more information closer to each event!*

2424 Hwy 47  
Belen, NM, 87002

www.valenciaswcd.org

Scan here!



# Friends of Whitfield 2023 Accomplishments

As a small working board, the Friends of Whitfield are pleased with the progress we made in supporting the education, restoration and conservation of the Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area

Here are highlights of things we accomplished. In 2023, we:

- ✓ raised over \$4000 during our online auction
- ✓ provided funding to create the Uplands Trail sign located near the WWCA front entrance
- ✓ paid for buses bringing over 1200 local students to Whitfield
- ✓ contributed to half the cost of a water filling station inside the WWCA visitors center drastically reducing single-use plastic water bottles
- ✓ purchased and installed large display cases on the outside of the visitor building providing important information about the area to visitors
- ✓ had Friends of Whitfield volunteers contributing over 1800 hours in service to the conservation area



The Friends of Whitfield funded buses bringing over 1200 students to Whitfield in 2023!

Please consider becoming a member of the Friends of the Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area. Your membership signals a commitment to environmental stewardship and sustainability. The conservation efforts not only safeguard natural resources but also create opportunities for education and community engagement. YOU would send a powerful message about personal responsibility, demonstrating a genuine commitment to the well-being of Valencia County, in turn fostering a sense of pride and unity among residents and businesses alike.

Scan the QR code to become a member.  
Or, for more information email us at:  
[info@friendsofwhitfield.org](mailto:info@friendsofwhitfield.org)





Your grocery purchases can help keep a local Valencia County treasure alive and thriving!



The Friends of Whitfield have teamed up with Smith's to provide an easy way for YOU to support the Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area.

Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area is the only conservation area in Valencia County. Nestled along the Rio Grande in Belen, this 97-acre tract of enhanced wetlands not only serves as a resting place and home to over 200 species of birds but also to hundreds of native plants, shrubs and trees

One of the ways you can help is through Smith's Inspiring Donations program. It makes donating to Friends of Whitfield easy based on the shopping you do every day. Once you link your Smith's Reward Card to Friends of Whitfield, all you have to do is shop at Smith's and swipe your Shopper's Card. Here's how it works:

### 1. Create a digital account.

A digital account is needed to participate in Smith's Inspiring Donations. If you already have a digital account, simply link your Shopper's Card to your account so that all transactions apply toward the organization you choose. If you don't have a digital account, click [HERE](#).

### 2. Link your Card to our organization.

Selecting the organization that you wish to support is as simple as updating the Smith's Inspiring Donations selection on your digital account.

1. Sign in to your digital account.
2. Search for your organization [here](#). The name to search for is: **Friends of Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area**
3. Enter the name or NPO number of the organization you wish to support. **Our NPO number is: US071**
4. Select the appropriate organization from the list and click "Save".

Friends of Whitfield will also display in the Smith's Inspiring Donations section of your account. If you need to review or revisit your organization, you can always do so under your Account details.

### 3. The Friends of Whitfield earns.

Any transactions moving forward using the Shopper's Card number associated with your digital account will be applied to the program, at no added cost to you. Smith's Inspiring Donations will donate 0.5% of all eligible spending to organizations that customers have linked to their Rewards Card.

If you have any questions, please contact Smith's [Customer Service Center](#).

