



Pat Stinson, Refuge Manager of the Red River NWR, works with Kevin Sirknight (center) and other student volunteers from Bossier Parish high schools. | Photo courtesy of Zac Burson

## Zac Burson and Students, Bossier Parish, Louisiana

For high school students Kevin Sirknight and Josh Blanks, of Bossier Parish, Louisiana, a youth volunteer program at the Red River National Wildlife Refuge has been a life-changing experience. Sirknight, a student at Airline High School, describes himself as “a trouble kid” before becoming involved with the refuge. Now, he gets good grades in school, stays out of trouble, and is a dedicated refuge volunteer who enjoys “being with other kids who want to do something with their lives and learn something.” Blanks, a senior at Parkway High School, says that “volunteering at Red River National Wildlife Refuge has helped me look at the world in a whole different way than before.”

Zac Burson, who coordinates the refuge-based volunteer program with teacher Cathey Carey of Airline High School, started the program three years ago with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff and the Friends of the Red River National Wildlife Refuge as a way to involve area youth in outdoor-based community service. “I never realized how much of the work that gets done on refuges is done by volunteers,” says Burson. In the last year, his students have helped remove invasive species, constructed trails, built an interpretative information booth, learned construction skills by helping to renovate refuge buildings, and helped the Friends group with community outreach events. Some program participants, says Burson, “are city kids who have never seen or experienced nature before. Now, they’re learning how to take care of the land and the plants and animals that live there.”