PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release
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Caption: The $5.3 million grant will enhance wetland habitat for roosting and nesting birds.

$5.3 million grant awarded 'Ding' toward Wulfert Bayous habitat restoration

The National Fish & Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) announced on Nov. 12 its award of $5,309,000 to J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island to further the refuge's plans for restoring the newly acquired, 68-acre Wulfert Bayous, which lies adjacent to it. The "Ding" Darling Wildlife Society-Friends of the Refuge (DDWS) partnered on the application for a Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund grant aimed at restoring bird populations affected by the catastrophic BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill in 2010.

The acquisition process for Wulfert Bayous, completed earlier this year, entailed $3 million in private funds raised by DDWS and $6.5 million contributed by the Lee County Conservation 20/20 program. The refuge will begin managing the parcel as part of its complex later this year.

The wetland and upland habitat serves as an important wildlife corridor between the refuge and other established conservation lands as well as a tool for improving local water quality. From the beginning of its acquisition campaign, "Ding" Darling envisioned restoring the property – which had been city-approved for a development of 29 homes – as wetland habitat for a colony of wading birds.

The refuge will improve 16 acres of functional mangrove habitat to attract species impacted by the oil spill, including roseate spoonbills, white ibises, brown pelicans, woodstorks, and a number of egret and heron species. Restoration will include mangrove bird-nesting islands and adjacent alligator basking areas intended to provide natural predation protection for nesting birds. The preserved land – in addition to avoiding the introduction of more nutrient pollution as a housing development – acts as a filter for waters running eventually into estuaries and the sea.

"Wulfert Bayous holds tremendous opportunity for wildlife and lovers of wildlife," said John McCabe, who leads the acquisition and restoration efforts for DDWS. "We were so fortunate for the generosity of

donors who made possible our $3 million contribution to the total $9.5 million purchase price, and so appreciative of the Lee County Commissioners' role. And now this grant for wetland restoration is icing on the cake. In the future, with refuge administration guidance, we will also be working with them on upland and low-impact public access improvements, which are not covered by this grant."

"This is a huge win for wildlife," said Acting Refuge Manager Kevin Godsea. "Thanks to the 'Ding' Darling Wildlife Society and Lee County, this land forever has been preserved to benefit bird populations that are dwindling. Now, with this grant, we can proactively move forward to restore and enhance the habitat for wading birds."

For its part in the collaborative acquisition effort, the refuge will be managing the new preservation property and its restoration.

The 'Ding' Darling Wildlife Society recognizes that, because of continued budget constraints at the refuge, we will be providing ongoing support of management expenses for the restoration, perhaps even biological staffing assistance," said Birgie Miller, DDWS executive director. "It takes many organizations working together – in this case, nonprofit, county, and federal factions – to make effective conservation strides, and we are proud to be a part of such a successful example of that truism in action."

ABOUT DDWS
As a non-profit 501(c)3 organization, DDWS works to support J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge's mission of conservation, wildlife and habitat protection, research, and public education through charitable donations and Refuge Nature Shop profits.

To support DDWS and the refuge with a tax-deductible gift, visit dingdarlingsociety.org or contact Birgie Miller at 239-472-1100 ext. 4 or director@dingdarlingsociety.org.

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