

# Patrick Carney

## Outgoing Environmental Education Intern

To the “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society:

Half a lifetime ago, I first visited the island of Sanibel and the J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge with my family. I was only 11 years old at the time, but I was already devoted to birding and nature photography, and the beauty of the Refuge had a big impact on me. Fast-forward to May 2020. I was about to graduate college, and I had just come across an awesome-sounding position at the J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge! I wasted no time applying, and the day before my graduation, I was offered the position. Moving to Sanibel to work at the Refuge that had once inspired me as a child was more exciting than I can put into words.

When I arrived, Conservation Educator Sara was wonderful and wasted no time in showing me around the Refuge and making me feel welcome, and the rest of the “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society (DDWS) and Refuge staff followed suit. After Sara left the Refuge for another opportunity, Ranger Toni Westland stepped up as my supervisor and made the transition incredibly smooth. Everyone here has been the best friends and coworkers I could have ever asked for – I always really loved just how much important work we got done at the Refuge, *and* that we always had a great time doing it too. The staff from the Refuge, the DDWS, and the other interns working alongside me were all instrumental in making this internship both fun and educational.

While COVID changed the face of environmental education, there was still no lack of opportunities for me at the Refuge. I created virtual native plant tours for four different Refuge properties and trails covering nearly 70 species, developed photography and videography resources for Refuge publications, and provided informal interpretation to visitors on the trails, the Wildlife Drive, and outside the Visitor & Education Center. There were also still opportunities to educate schoolchildren outdoors in a socially distant or virtual environment, and putting together these lessons was the highlight of the internship. One moment that stood out was a program I conducted on Florida wildlife for an afterschool program. Many of these students had limited exposure to the natural world, and their faces lit up when I arrived with a whole taxidermy Wood Stork, Alligator skull, and other specimens. Through this internship, I was able to hone my educational skills, learn about the important relationships between federal agencies and nonprofit organizations, and use my skills to give back to an incredible Refuge. The experience I gained was instrumental in obtaining a permanent environmental education position.

To all my coworkers and friends in the “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society and on the Refuge staff, I cannot thank you enough for how wonderful this internship was. I’m sad to be leaving the Refuge team, but I look forward to returning for many future visits.

All the best,  
Patrick Carney