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"Ding" Darling Wildlife Society - Friends of the Refuge

PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release

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Caption: DDWS president Sarah Ashton, Patty Sprankle, Jim Sprankle, John Schubert, and Donna Schubert celebrate the generosity of Jim Sprankle.

Refuge unveils Sprankle trail sign

Jim Sprankle has made his mark on Sanibel Island and beyond in ways uncountable. His generosity in creating stunning wildlife sculptures has benefited organizations from FISH and SCCF to SanCap Cares and Alliance for the Arts.

He has indicated often that the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge, however, is the cause closest to his heart, and has donated sculptures through the years valued at more than \$2 million to support the refuge.

"Jim's contributions to 'Ding' Darling are immeasurable," said Birgie Miller, executive director of the "Ding" Darling Wildlife Society-Friends of the Refuge (DDWS), the refuge's nonprofit arm. "He served as board president for many years, has volunteered since 1997, and has donated a number of sculptures and his famous Sprankle Feather Club pins for charity auction. In addition, a showcase full of his hand-carved duck decoys, each one of which sold for sponsorship dollars, and a whole flock of his bird sculptures decorate and educate at our 'Ding' Darling Visitor & Education Center."

Longtime islanders and friends of Sprankle, Donna and John Schubert decided it was time the refuge and island showed proper gratitude for all that Sprankle has done to support island charities. They have made it possible to name a forthcoming trail at the refuge's newest Lee Anne Tauck Conservation Tract in his honor, the Jim Sprankle Nature Trail.

On March 25, the Schuberts, with refuge and DDWS staff and board members, surprised Sprankle with the unveiling of a sign that dedicates the future trail in his honor. The sign is located at the 68-acre tract that DDWS, the refuge, and Lee County Conservation 20/20 worked together to acquire in 2017. DDWS raised \$3 million in private funding to complete the \$6.5 million Lee County contributed. For its part, the refuge will maintain and restore the wetlands and uplands habitat, home to myriad at-risk species.

The habitats serve as an important wildlife corridor between the refuge and other established conservation lands and 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 various species of wading birds and other wildlife.

“This was the second such partnership with Lee County 20/20,” said John McCabe, past DDWS president, who led the capital campaigns to purchase it and an earlier 6.56-acre parcel at Woodring Point in 2013. “Jim, with his incredible community engagement, was instrumental in helping us raise funds for both acquisitions to be preserved in perpetuity.”

“Now that we have accomplished our preservation goal at the Wulfert Bayous, renamed for major donor Lee Anne Tauck, the refuge will enter into its restoration phase,” said current DDWS president Sarah Ashton. “Our friends group paid for consultants, scientists, and a professional federal grant writer to assist the refuge in submitting and ultimately securing a \$5.3 million grant from the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation in 2019 to begin work on restoring the 16 acres of mangrove wetlands for a bird rookery.”

The grant came from the NFWF Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund aimed at restoring bird populations affected by the catastrophic BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill in 2010. The rookery will protect impacted species such as roseate spoonbills, white ibises, brown pelicans, wood storks, and a number of egrets and herons.

To support the planning for the first phase of restoration, DDWS is sharing with the refuge the cost of hiring a staff biology technician to assist with surveys and other studies in the wetlands as “Ding” Darling puts the project out to bid to engineering firms.

Refuge staff believes the wetlands restoration will take several years, after which it will begin work on the tract’s uplands habitat – home to gopher tortoises, bobcats, and other species. Part of that phase-two restoration will include the design and development of a limited public access trail, the Jim Sprinkle Nature Trail.

“We don’t yet know what that trail will look like, but we do know it’s a fitting tribute to Jim Sprinkle, who has done so much for conservation on Sanibel,” said Miller. “A big thanks to the Schuberts, who rightly saw that Jim deserves a permanent, visible reminder of his contributions and want to encourage others also to support conservation and habitat protection for future generations. The Sprinkle Trail will forever recognize a man who deeply loves the refuge.”

“Without philanthropic support, protection of this property would have never happened, and we would be looking at 29 homes and increased habitat degradation,” said Ashton. “Island residents, visitors, community leaders, and elected county officials understand the importance of protecting what land is left on Sanibel, Captiva, and around the world, and this is a perfect example of working together, leveraging support, and protecting vital and important habitat for our wildlife and our water quality.”

For more information on supporting the refuge and conservation through DDWS, contact Miller at 239-472-1100 ext. 232.

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.



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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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Any chance you can pull together a press release about the sprinkle trail sign? It will be tentatively installed next week Tuesday, but I don't even know if we can get Sprinkle **and the donors** there on that day, so we will also plan on having the sign COVERED until we can get this more organized.

Donna and John Schubert made naming possible just to recognize all the donations he's made to DDWS and others. Schuberts longtime islanders and friends of Sprankles – felt Jim needed more recognition and knew how much the refuge meant to him

We want to announce the sign/future trail, but give more information on the background and the status of the restoration etc. as a part of this. **The grant** was received and the necessary bid process has begun for initial engineering plans for the wetland restoration first and once that is close to completion plans will begin for the upland restoration and public access trail planning. We know there will be a Sprankle Trail, we just don't know what it will look like at this point until the wetland restoration plans are designed etc. The DDWS has helped the refuge with funding for a **bio tech position** for surveys etc. Let me know your thoughts and thanks,

First priority from DOTW to protect land from being built upon = first goal was raising the money and working with 2020 similar to Woodring – private phil support and fed support and lee co.

Society also worked to hire grant writers and professionals to work with refuge for NFWF – habitat for rookery

Timeline – trail will be future site of lot of moving parts in process
1st preserving now plan to restore habitat
Putting out to bid initial engineering once accepted many years
Wetlands – probably raise addl money to restore uplands
Planned after near completion of wetlands, plans limited public access and trail – upland trail, will b able to walk into wetlands hopefully

Viewing of rookery in safe manner

Recognition for jim and schuberts – now because of impact on comm
Society payed for Avery surveys to begin process

Thursday, March 25 at 10:30 a.m.

The National Fish & Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) announced on Nov. 12 (2019) 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.



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“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.”

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