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PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release

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Caption: The “Ding” Darling education team wrapped up a busy summer schedule with a hands-on art program at Quality Life Center in Fort Myers, led by artist in residence Jacqui Roch.

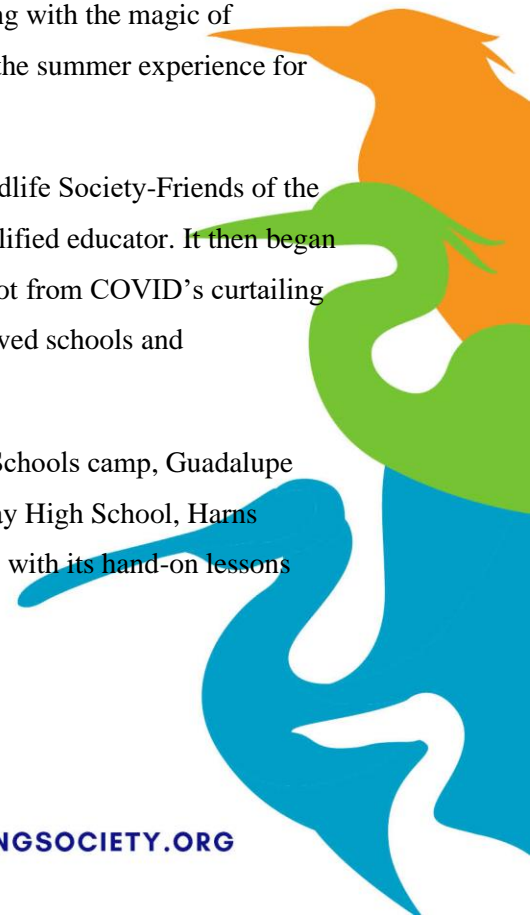
‘Ding’ Darling reaches more than 1,200 students over summer

This summer’s outreach programs through the J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island multiplied its conservation education programming reach to 15 times the number of students of that achieved through past traditional, on-site camp experiences. A total of 1,243 students throughout Lee and Collier counties benefited from refuge efforts.

“We did summer camp at the refuge for a couple of years, offering free weekly camps to Title 1-school students,” said Supervisory Refuge Ranger Toni Westland, who oversees refuge educational programming. “We could offer the experience to only about 80 students each summer. With our new WoW – Wildlife on Wheels mobile classroom -- and staff programming, along with the magic of collaboration and partnering, we were able to make a much larger impact on the summer experience for our local children.”

When the refuge lost funding to hire a staff educator, the “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society-Friends of the Refuge (DDWS), the refuge’s nonprofit support, stepped in and funded a qualified educator. It then began work with the refuge creating the WoW mobile classroom, just in time to pivot from COVID’s curtailing of on-site school visits. The WoW team’s mission has been to reach underserved schools and communities.

This summer, WoW visited five camps including Lovers Key’s Lee County Schools camp, Guadalupe Center at Eden Park Elementary, Sheriff Marceno’s Summer Camp at Gateway High School, Harns Marsh Elementary, and Quality Life Center. It reached a total of 715 students with its hand-on lessons created specifically to meet Florida standards for various levels of students.





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Independent of the WoW experience, refuge staff visited six off-site camps to add another 431 students impacted. They included Catholic Charities Bonita Springs Center, Sanibel Rec, Children’s Advocacy Center of Southwest Florida, Sanibel Community House, Tice Elementary, and Quality Life Center, where the team did a separate program with its artist in residence Jacqui Roch.

In addition, “Ding” Darling hosted STEM and Lee County Parks and Recreation camps – another 97 children – on-site at the refuge.

“We know that so many students struggle in school and need more targeted and experiential learning opportunities to succeed and get excited about learning,” said DDWS Executive Director Birgie Miller, “Summer programs and camps provide such opportunities to learn and grow, and that’s where DDWS and the Refuge worked hard to build the partnerships with area programs and collaborate in bringing programming to them and having groups visit the refuge.”

“It has been an amazingly rewarding summer,” said Urban Education Leader Melissa Maher. “It involved a lot of effort and sweating in the hot summer swelter, but the thank-yous and smiles from students and camp leaders, those ah-ha moments when the kids just ‘get’ nature, it’s all so worth it. That’s when we really feel what a difference we’re making to young lives.”

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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