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PRESS RELEASE

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Caption: The refuge observation tower reopens along with Wildlife Drive on April 4.

‘Ding’ Darling announces reopening milestones

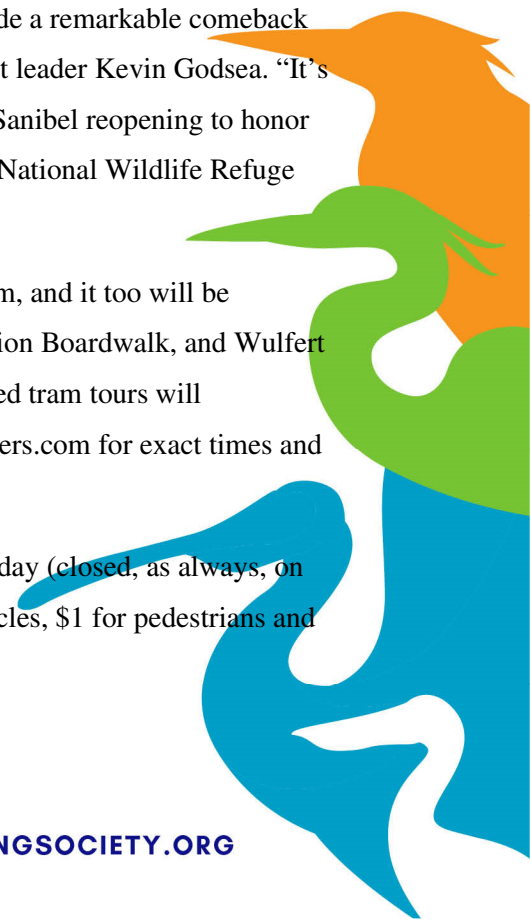
To celebrate the 120th anniversary of the National Wildlife Refuge System on March 14, the J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island announced the rollout of its post-hurricane reopenings.

On Sept. 28, Hurricane Ian, a near category-five storm, ravaged refuge habitat and facilities, triggering the closure of all its waters and land to public access. Feb. 1, “Ding” opened its Tarpon Bay Recreation Area, and on April 4, it will reopen the gate to Wildlife Drive to the public for the first time with a chamber of commerce ribbon-cutting ceremony. The “Ding” Darling Visitor & Education Center will also reopen that day.

“The ‘Ding’ team, with help from refuge crews around the U.S., has been working nonstop to get parts of the refuge open so the public can once again view the wildlife, which has made a remarkable comeback since Hurricane Ian, especially the birds,” said “Ding” refuge complex project leader Kevin Godsea. “It’s fitting that we make the auspicious, highly anticipated announcement of our Sanibel reopening to honor the occasion when, 120 years ago, President Theodore Roosevelt created the National Wildlife Refuge System right here in Florida, at Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge.”

The observation tower on Wildlife Drive suffered little damage from the storm, and it too will be accessible as of April 4, along with a section of Indigo Trail, Wildlife Education Boardwalk, and Wulfert Key Trail. Fishing and paddlecraft-launching spots will also open, and narrated tram tours will recommence, initially on Tuesday and Thursday only. (Visit tarponbayexplorers.com for exact times and reservations.)

Wildlife Drive hours will start out at 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday through Thursday (closed, as always, on Fridays). Entrance fees remain the same as pre-hurricane: \$10 for motor vehicles, \$1 for pedestrians and cyclists older than age 15.





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Along with the exhibit area in the Visitor & Education Center, the Refuge Nature Store will be open 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday through Thursday (also closed on Fridays for the time being). The center's auditoriums and classroom will remain closed until further notice.

Facilities also to remain closed include most of Indigo Trail (except for the segment between Wildlife Drive and Wildlife Education Boardwalk), Mangrove Overlook, Calusa Shell Mound Trail, and the trails of Bailey Tract. Staff continues cleanup efforts in these areas with the help of volunteers. No reopening dates have been set for these facilities.

At Tarpon Bay Recreation Area, the Tarpon Bay Explorers recreation concession offers limited facilities, rentals, tours, and hours. Current hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday (last rentals at 3 p.m.). Guided kayaking tours of Commodore Creek Trail are available every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 10 a.m.

“We could not have mitigated the severe damage we suffered this quickly without the incredible support of our wonderful friends group, the “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society, and all the help we received with cleanup from civic groups, condo associations, students, and just so many other volunteers,” said Godsea. “Thanks to everyone who brought us to this point. Cleanup will be ongoing for quite a while, so it’s tremendously gratifying to see and feel the love from friends and fans all over the U.S.”

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 239-292-0566 or director@dingdarlingsociety.org.

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