

Jessica Barry - Visitor Service Intern (November 2020 – May 2021)

Growing up, “Ding” and Sanibel Island were second homes for me. I vividly remember the endless sea of white pelicans and racing my sister up the observation tower to get a better look. Now, over a decade later, I had the opportunity to come back to the refuge as an intern. In the past six months I have learned so much about myself and about the visitor service sphere. This position allowed me to hone my strengths, express creativity daily, and make lifelong connections. The variability of tasks allowed for continuous learning opportunities and kept things fresh. I exit this internship as a more well-rounded, confident, and passionate young professional.

The daring leadership and commitment to greatness displayed by my supervisors, refuge rangers Toni Westland and Katy Hosokawa, is perhaps what I have learned most from. I was continuously surrounded with passion, empathy, and encouragement. My opinions and ideas were listened to and out-of-the-box thinking was encouraged. The best leaders lead by example and I feel grateful to have been led by Toni and Katy. They have the upmost respect for their team and truly allowed me to feel seen.

My background in psychology was embraced from the beginning. The highlight of my internship was the opportunity to create and lead “guided mindfulness hikes”. This opportunity has changed the trajectory of my future as I discovered my deep passion for mindfulness in nature as a holistic approach to wellness. The hike encouraged visitors to slow down their pace and explore the Bailey Tract with fresh eyes using their five senses. I am so grateful that the Refuge took a chance on something new and allowed me to implement this mindfulness hike, it was truly an experience I will never forget.

I would like to extend a huge thank you to the staff and donors of Ding Darling Wildlife Society for making this internship possible. Environmental education is essential for creating a more sustainable future and internships like this ensure that it will continue. “Ding’s” mission truly could not be brought to life without the help of these amazing individuals.

I began this internship with an open mind, and I leave with a full heart. I have learned so much more than I could have imagined about myself and what I would like to contribute to the world. The mission of the refuge will always be in my heart and I am so grateful for the opportunity to contribute as an intern. I cannot wait to see what the summer holds as I transition to WoW intern. “Ding” will forever be a part of me!