

PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release

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Caption:

Bird door wraps add new dimension to ‘Ding’ Learning Lavatories

Since its reveal last month, the new Learning Lavatories (#LearningLav) exhibit at the J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island, Fla., has gained national attention. This week, the refuge added a new dimension to enhance the exhibit’s educational value. It has wrapped restroom stall doors with photographic images of refuge birds.

The first of its kind among the 550-plus refuges in the National Refuge System, #LearningLav educates visitors about wildlife, mangroves, and responsible citizenship through art. Funded by a \$125,000 grant from the West Coast Inland Navigation District (WCIND) and contributions from private donors, the project has created educational imagery inside the center’s lavatories and on the outdoor wall leading to them.

The outdoor mural immerses visitors in a virtual underwater experience, where they come eye-to-eye with 3-D manatees and look up to see an alligator and other 3-D wildlife sculptures swimming overhead.

Inside, the lavatories were renovated to green standards and continue the interpretive underwater motif, featuring a tile mangroves mural printed from a photo taken by Rich Leighton, plus more wildlife sculptures.

Nature-art images by photographers of local and national renown -- including Terry Baldwin, Dick Fortune and Sara Lopez, Sylvia Guarino, Allen Hoffacker, Kent Jager, Lillian Stokes, and Michael Threlkeld -- wrap around the stall doors. They portray an anhinga, white pelican, roseate spoonbill, yellow-crowned night heron, green heron, reddish egret, and great blue heron. Inside the doors, facts about each species teach a “captive audience” about each bird.

“The refuge had identified a major missed opportunity for educating visitors,” said Birgie Miller, executive director of the “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society-Friends of the Refuge (DDWS), which facilitated the grant and project. “Whereas we see nearly a million visitors to the refuge each year, only about a quarter of those numbers enter the center. We were finding that many came to use the restrooms without ever stepping foot inside to see all of our wonderful hands-on exhibits.”

In months to come, the refuge will be adding more educational messaging and an activity sheet to accompany the indoor and outdoor murals, which showcase the work of two artists. Local artist Andrew Corke fashioned a mother and baby manatee out of recycled bike tires, while North Carolina artist David Williams sculpted other creatures out of foam and fiberglass.

“We are proud to say we now have the coolest bathrooms in the state of Florida and in the entire national wildlife refuge system,” said Miller.

For more information, pictures, and videos about #LearningLav, visit dingdarlingsociety.org/articles/project-bathroom.

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 proceeds.

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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