

PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release

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Caption: images available upon request

Ranger Westland receives state conservation educator award

Supervisory Refuge Ranger Toni Westland joined the staff of J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island, Fla., in 2002 as a conservation educator. She personally taught thousands of children and adults about the importance of protecting wildlife and habitat and about the refuge’s flora and fauna.

In her administrative position today, she oversees visitor services and continues to educate at an overarching level by implementing, with the support of the “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society-Friends of the Refuge, new programs and exhibits such as the first-of-its-kind Discover Ding smartphone app and the Learning Lavatories exhibit that debuted in October 2017.

These and an extensive list of other reasons led Erin Myers, Partners for Fish & Wildlife biologist at Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge east of Naples, and “Ding” Darling Refuge Manager Paul Tritaik to nominate Westland for the Florida chapter of The Wildlife Society’s (FLTWS) Outstanding Educator Award.

Westland recently learned that she won the award, which The Wildlife Society’s web site describes thusly: “The Outstanding Educator Award honors an individual who has developed and implemented educational tools relating to Florida’s native wildlife. Educational tools may include any items, techniques, or programs used for effective public outreach. Application of the tools should strengthen relationships between natural resource professionals and the citizens of Florida, partnerships necessary to accomplish the FLTWS resource management, conservation, and education mission. The intended audience of the educational tools may be any age, and award nominees may include any wildlife professional or wildlife conservation educator.”

The FLTWS will present the award to Westland at a special ceremony in Crystal River on April 12.

“I am so honored and surprised by this,” said Westland. “I love the work I do at ‘Ding’ Darling, and the pleasure I get from seeing kids of all ages discovering nature here is reward enough.”

“At a time when federal staffing cuts have meant the loss of the so-important refuge educator position, Toni has had to step up her education role by filling in on various programs and training a new conservation educator that the ‘Ding’ Darling Wildlife Society was able to hire through donor funding,” said DDWS executive director Birgie Miller.

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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