

PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release.

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Caption for VOLDAY: “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society’s Birgie Miller, left, and April Boehnen (decked out in an “all puffed up for volunteers” costume), hand out specially made facemasks to the volunteers.

Caption for dunhams: Ranger Adrienne Martin from Florida Panther NWR (left) and “Ding” Darling Supervisory Refuge Ranger Toni Westland present Charles and Lynda Dunham with their 10-year awards.

Refuge appreciates volunteers with drive-through awards event

Once again, this year, COVID-19 precautions meant a new way of appreciating volunteers for the J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge. Traditionally, staff presents awards at a luncheon gathering hosted by the refuge and “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society-Friends of the Refuge (DDWS). Last year they made one-on-one presentations.

“This year, Visitor Services Ranger Katy Hosokawa came up with a very creative solution,” said Supervisory Refuge Ranger Toni Westland. “We hosted a drive-through appreciation event on a Friday, when Wildlife Drive is closed to the public. We invited the volunteers to drive by 10 stations where they received gifts, awards, and lots of cheering and the enthusiastic gratitude they deserve.”

Refuge and DDWS staff and interns attended the stations. More than 80 volunteers participated with big smiles and compliments about the event.

“Of course, volunteer numbers were down this year because the Visitor & Education Center was closed for many months, and we didn’t want any volunteers risking their health and safety,” said Hosokawa. “But we are mighty proud of our volunteer numbers, regardless.”

She reported that in fiscal year 2020, 327 volunteers worked 23,654 hours at the refuge, representing a labor and benefits savings of more than \$640,000. (In fiscal year 2019, 311 volunteers worked 37,397 hours at the refuge, representing a labor and benefits savings of more than \$900,000.)

“As our volunteers are getting their vaccinations, they are coming back to ‘Ding’,” said Birgie Miller, executive director of DDWS. “They’ve been telling us how much they miss us and being at the refuge to help visitors appreciate this amazing island asset.”

DDWS formed in 1982 specifically to support a volunteer corps after the opening of the refuge’s first visitor center that year. More than 11,000 people visited in the first month after the center opened, overwhelming a staff unaccustomed to dealing with the inquisitive public.

“Volunteers stepped in then to fill in the gaps left by inadequate federal funding, and they continue to do so today as federal funding steadily declines,” said Miller.

Below is a list of volunteers who won awards for reaching hour and year achievement levels.

YEARS AWARDS

30 years: Carroll Branyon, Mary Jo Hobbs, Norm Honest

20 years: Jake Jacobson, Sue McIntyre, Kathy Mustachio, Tom Mustachio, Jeanne Tyrer

10 years: Pat Appino, Rudolph Chiti, Bonnie Dale, Charles Dunham, Lynda Dunham, Vic Enns, JoAnn Hilliard, William Lupfer, Dan Moeder, Jim Newes, Marvin Richards, Nancy Sebree, Sally Stranahan, Helen Taylor, Jack Wettstein, Patty Wettstein

HOURS AWARDS

9,500 hours: Doris Hardy

6,500 hours: Ed Combs, Jim Sprankle

6,000 hours: Jack Wettstein, Patty Wettstein

5,000 hours: John McCabe, Latham Morris

4,500 hours: Miriam Hursey

3,000 hours: Mike Baldwin

2,500 hours: Tom Edgar, Greg Scherer

2,000 hours: Jim Bennight

1,500 hours: Albert Douglas, Sally Stranahan

1,000 hours: JoAnn Hilliard

500 hours: Sarah Ashton, Katherine Britton, Bob Brooks, Patricia Healey, Lola Songer, Rush Songer, David Trout

250 hours: Katie Baker, Donald Breiter, John Brothwell, John Coleman, Bud Dansby, Brenda Epperson, Randy Epperson, Jane Giervic, Sam Huntington, Richard Jones, Sharon Jones, Lola Songer, Rush Songer, Nancy Stilwell, Vince Thomalla

150 hour: Kathryn Brintnall, David Craun, Gary Eertmoed, Robin Fidler, Richard Jones, Sharon Jones, Kenneth Lloyd, Gary Miller, Lola Songer, Rush Songer, Trish Sutherland, Gina Wagg

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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