

Wildlife on Wheels WoWs at Colonial Elementary School

By Sarah Anderson

A young girl places magnetic marine animals onto the board showing their preferred habitat with dedicated focus. A little boy squeals with delight as he unearths a plastic snake from its burrow. Another student raises his arms in triumph as he evades predators and plastic bags in the sea turtle skee-ball game.

Students at Colonial Elementary School in Fort Myers, Florida recently explored the fascinating creatures in the surrounding ecosystems through the WoW (Wildlife on Wheels) program. WoW brings the J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island, Florida to children in southwest Florida through a mobile trailer full of hands-on educational enrichment activities. Students learn about the wildlife refuge system, the species that populate the region’s ocean, coastline, estuaries and uplands and the impacts of pollution on the environment.

Over 15,000 people at schools, community events and summer camps have experienced WoW since it went on wheels in early 2021. The program targets Title 1 schools with low-income student populations that face economic and transportation barriers to visiting the refuge, says supervisory refuge ranger Toni Westland. “The goal is to reach the students who haven’t been involved in the conversation of conservation,” she says.

“We are doing our best to bring the refuge to them to get them excited to protect animals,” says urban education leader Melissa Maher.

Many of the students who participate in WoW haven’t visited the beach, let alone the refuge. “The majority of them would never get to experience something like this, so the fact that they can come here and see a part of the world that they’re not exposed to is a great benefit,” says Cassie Vasquez, a fifth grade science teacher at Colonial Elementary.

The program takes accessibility a step further by offering bilingual learning experiences. WoW education intern David Iglesias leads sessions in Spanish but translates key terms such as “manatee” to help students prepare for tests administered in English, he says. The activities help students learning English understand the vocabulary instead of just memorizing it, says Miriam Santiago, a fifth grade math and science teacher at Colonial Elementary.

This interactive approach reinforces standard science curriculum in an engaging way for all students. The WoW program challenges fifth graders to consider how different animals thrive in their environment, which compliments in-class content about adaptation, Vasquez says. “It’s awesome for them to get the hands-on experience to learn what we’ve been learning in the classroom in the real world,” she says.

The WoW program also presents an opportunity to make students aware of the conservation-oriented careers in the national wildlife refuge system and beyond, from biologists to rangers, Westland says.

This exposure is already making a difference. At the end of the WoW session, a boy approaches his teacher and proclaims: “I’m going to be a scientist!”



Wildlife on Wheels has brought the J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge to 18 schools—and counting.



Urban education leader Melissa Maher high-fives a first grade student who built their own bird. “There’s some creativity there, but they also have to tell me how the bird is going to survive,” she says.



WoW education intern David Iglesias explains how plastic pollution harms aquatic organisms.



Urban ranger Janet Sokolowski shows off the smalltooth sawfish and its funky feeder friends.



Janet Sokolowski offers tips for survival in the sea turtle skee-ball activity.