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PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release
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Caption: Jessica Barry has been visiting the refuge since childhood and working there for more than two years.

Caption: Tucker Phillips has put his degree in environmental science to practical use in refuge programming.

Refuge hires two new staff

Two former interns at the J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island recently accepted four-year staff terms with visitor services for the entire refuge complex, which also includes Florida Panther and Ten Thousand Island national wildlife refuges in south Florida. Jessica Barry and Tucker Phillips officially take their positions on July 31.

“Once I received the go-ahead from the federal government to hire two fulltime employees, I immediately offered the positions to Jess and Tucker, who have proven their dedication, strong work ethic, and impressive ability to design and implement education programs,” said Supervisory Refuge Ranger Toni Westland, who oversees visitor services at the refuge.

Barry began working at the refuge in 2020 as a visitor services intern, then moved to an education internship for the refuge WoW (Wildlife on Wheels) mobile outreach classroom team. In 2021, she accepted a staff position with the refuge’s nonprofit fundraising arm, the “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society-Friends of Refuge (DDWS), as a development and outreach assistant.

“During her progression with the ‘Ding’ team, Jess has effectively learned multiple facets of operations here at the refuge – both the government and nonprofit sides,” Westland added. “I give her credit for





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bringing to us the concept of mindfulness in nature and applying that to special guided walks and our new self-guided Mindfulness Trail at Bailey Tract.”

The refuge was able to bring Phillips aboard in 2021 as the Jim & Liz Birmingham 2022 Visitor Services Intern, thanks to a philanthropic donation to DDWS.

“The Birmingham’s, like so many other donors and especially ‘Ding’ staff, understand the invaluable role interns play in keeping the refuge afloat during spells where staffing numbers drop, as they had in the past few years,” said DDWS Executive Director Birgie Miller. “The addition of these two employees, although short-term, makes a huge difference in the struggles Ranger Toni experienced with budget cuts and pandemic staff attrition recently.”

“Oh, my gosh, Tucker just jumped in and took care of everything we’ve asked of him,” said Westland. “From getting covered with dirt and mulch for our area-wide Pocket Refuge school gardens program to wearing the heavy and hot Blue Goose mascot costume and implementing a new ambassadors program.”

Both Phillips and Barry will handle social media and websites for all three major refuges in the complex; staff the Visitor & Education Center, which opens free to the public daily; and continue their work strengthening the free education programming at the refuge and to the community at large.

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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