

Protect. Educate.  
Inspire.



# 2022-2023 ANNUAL REPORT

"DING" DARLING WILDLIFE SOCIETY

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Doris Hardy

Chip Lesch

John McCabe

Cindy Pierce

Jim Scott

Jim Sprinkle



Photo by 2022 Amateur Photo Contest 1st Place Winner,  
Frank Brinker

## MISSION STATEMENT

"Ding" Darling Wildlife Society, the non-profit Friends of the Refuge organization, supports the J. N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge Complex through the generation of independent funds to support conservation education, internships, biology research, informational literature, advocacy, land acquisition, and facility enhancements. Efforts may extend beyond the Complex's borders and involve partnerships with like-minded conservation organizations.





*Photo by Scott Becque*



*Photo by Paul Harmon*

thus the entire community stronger.

Philanthropic support from individuals, businesses, foundations, and corporations made the difference in getting us back on our feet and accomplishing our conservation goals. To those who supported us through gifts large and small, we thank you from the bottom of our heart. The J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge serves as a sanctuary for countless species, a living laboratory for research and a place of inspiration for all who visit. Your donations empowered us to continue protecting and preserving this natural treasure for generations to come.

Even with the recovery work, the "Ding" Darling Wildlife Society and the Refuge teams were able to accomplish a great deal this past year, some of which are highlighted in this annual report. It is important to celebrate these moments that made 2022/23 such a transformative year for us

## FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Friends,

As we reflect on the past year's challenges and successes, I am filled with gratitude for your unwavering support of the conservation work at the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge.

Your dedication has been a beacon of hope, especially during a challenging period of hurricane recovery and continued conservation efforts. This past year brought unprecedented adversity to our beloved refuge and entire area, but what I will remember most as president of the "Ding" Darling Wildlife Society is the unity and strength from the entire community, collaborative partners, "Ding" donors and volunteers in rebuilding our island and Refuge.

The immediate aftermath of Hurricane Ian was daunting, but your generosity provided the resources necessary to help the refuge respond more quickly and effectively. An outpouring of support from around the world brought us both comfort and the determination to move forward and rebuild our island jewel, continuing to protect and preserve this unique and fragile ecosystem for the wildlife and build upon the many other conservation efforts taking place at the refuge and beyond in preserving, educating, and inspiring.

Our conservation partnership with U.S. Fish & Wildlife is stronger than ever as we work together as a team to rebuild and strengthen the Refuge and its conservation work. It takes everyone working together to make a difference and the continued recovery of resilience planning and building makes the Refuge stronger and



all. As we do, please know that none of this would be possible without your support and belief in our mission. Thank you.

Your commitment to our mission is a testament to the enduring legacy of J.N. "Ding" Darling himself. His vision of a refuge that promotes conservation, education and appreciation of wildlife continues to guide us.

While the hurricane recovery remains an ongoing effort, your support in this next year will help fuel our broader conservation initiatives in helping the refuge accomplish its goals. Thank you for being a vital part of our conservation journey. Together, we are making a difference.

With a grateful heart,

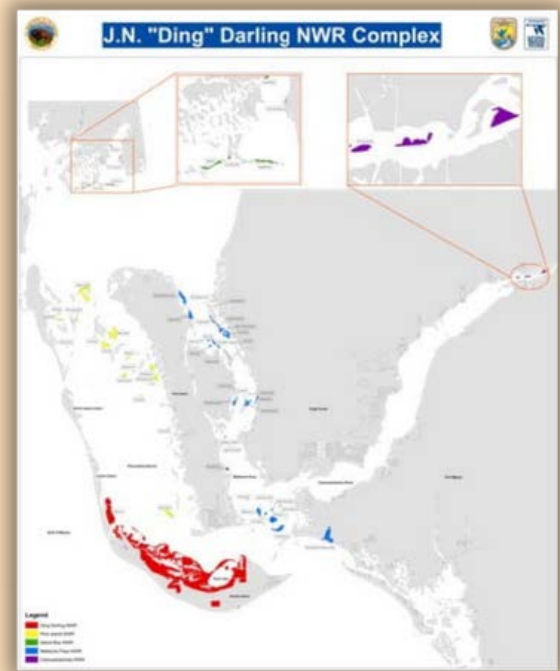
*Wendy Kindig*

Wendy Kindig  
President "Ding" Darling Wildlife Society



# J.N. "DING" DARLING NWR COMPLEX

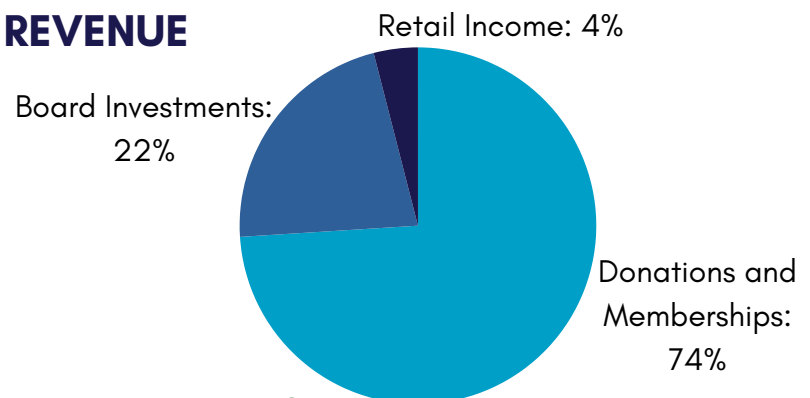
The J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge is managed as part of the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge Complex. A National Wildlife Refuge Complex is an administrative grouping of two or more refuges, wildlife management areas, or other refuge conservation areas managed from a central office. The J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge Complex also includes the Panther National Wildlife Refuge, 10,000 Islands National Wildlife Refuge, Caloosahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, Matlacha Pass National Wildlife Refuge, Pine Island National Wildlife Refuge, and Island Bay National Wildlife Refuge. These lands are primarily mangrove islands, many of which are nesting and roosting areas for wading birds and other water birds. The entire complex includes approximately 8,000 acres.



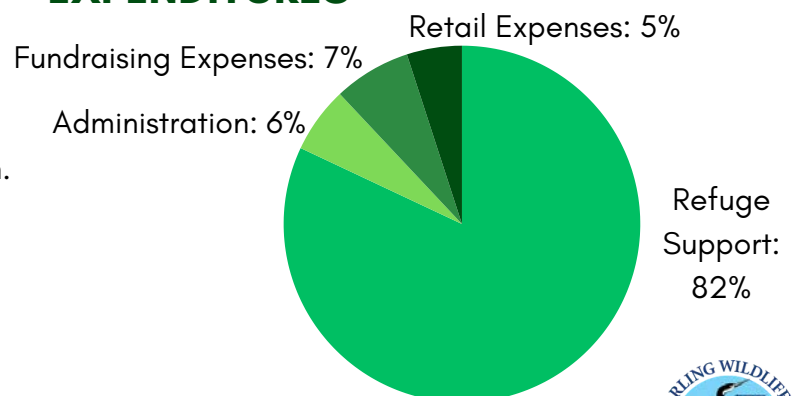
## 2022-2023 REVENUE & EXPENDITURES

Government funding does not cover all that is necessary to manage a refuge the size of the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge Complex. As a result, wildlife refuges depend on "Friends" groups such as the "Ding" Darling Wildlife Society (DDWS) to fill in the gaps, providing financial and volunteer support. In 2022-23, total philanthropic support and other income sources to the "Ding" Darling Wildlife Society totaled \$6,746,581.00.

### REVENUE



### EXPENDITURES



A total of 82% of DDWS expenditures went directly to helping the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge Complex in the areas of conservation, wildlife protection, research, education, and land acquisition and restoration. Refuge support also includes items such as exhibits, solar panels, student busing, equipment, interpretive signage, walkways, construction projects, internships, and water, wildlife, and biology research.

# PROTECT

## LAND ACQUISITION & RESTORATION UPDATE

On January 21, 2022, after more than six years in the making, the “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society acquired an 8.5-acre land which includes a home and a 6-acre lake which runs into Tarpon Bay.

Due to Hurricane Ian’s destruction of DDWS offices at the Refuge, Society staff was able to temporarily move their work space into the home during the 2022-23 fiscal year. The home will continue to be the temporary location of DDWS offices while the rebuilding of permanent offices at the Refuge is in progress.



## WILDLIFE & RESEARCH

Throughout the year, the DDWS supported various critical projects to benefit wildlife and research at the Refuge.

**Wildlife** – After Hurricane Ian, we are happy to report that some of the first species spotted by Refuge staff were bobcats and gopher tortoises. Wildlife gradually returned to the Refuge over the 2022-23 year. USFWS Biological Technician Avery Renshaw was able to help monitor this progress. In the 2022-23 fiscal year, DDWS continued supporting the salary for the role currently held by Avery Renshaw, thus furthering this important work.

**Water Quality Research** – Through philanthropic support, the Society purchased water quality monitoring equipment which allows the Refuge to continue to document changes in our waters.



Photo by Rebecca Clemens

# PROTECT

## 45/82

Estate planning is a thoughtful way to ensure that your philanthropic values endure beyond your lifetime. The 45/82 Legacy Society was established to assist with this procedure.

The 45/82 Legacy Society is made up of individuals like Doris Hardy who designate the “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society as a beneficiary in their estate plans. This past year the 45/82 Society gained several new members.

Some of the newest members of the 45/82 Legacy Society include Jean and Ralph Woodring, who have generously included “Ding” Darling in their estate planning so that their historic homestead would be preserved and protected for future generations.

## Woodring Homestead

The 6.57-acre Woodring Homestead, located on Woodring Point where Ralph and Jean currently live, has been a family home for the Woodrings since 1888. The current residence, which dates back to 1916, represents an excellent example of the “Florida Cracker” style of architecture- one of the last of its kind on the island.

Damage to the Woodring Homestead from Hurricane Ian was extensive. However, Ralph and Jean moved quickly to restore and repair their residence to its pre-storm glory. They have recently moved back into their home which was rebuilt to maintain its wonderful architecture and period details.

In an agreement that took place 10 years ago, DDWS worked with Lee County 20/20 and the Woodrings to preserve the homestead and surrounding land for decades to come. This important piece of property is one of the last undeveloped lands that is adjacent to the J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge. The property and its surrounding water bodies support many endangered species and their federally designated critical habitats. Protection of this unique property is critical.



## ENDOWED FUNDS

An endowment is an investment in the mission of the conservation efforts of protecting land and wildlife at the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge. A minimum gift of \$10,000 can establish an endowment that will leave a legacy and make future sustainability possible. Investing in establishing an endowment shows that you are dedicated to the long-term support of the Refuge. The following is a list of current endowed funds supporting conservation efforts at the Refuge:

### Established Endowed Funds

- The Betty Bishop Education Fund
- Marsha Camitta Conservation Education Fund
- John E. Carney Education Fund
- Louise Crumpacker Conservation Fund
- The Ann Darling & Lee Williams, Jr. Family Education Fund
- Carolyn & Donald DeCoster Conservation Fund
- Dr. H. Randall Deming Scholarship for Conservation & Environmental Studies
- Dr. David A. Drachman Education Fund
- Tom Edgar Volunteer Fund
- Gardner Family Fund
- Dr. Elizabeth "Betty" Gazda-Smith Fund
- Christine Glancy Education Fund
- Margaret Godsea Conservation Fund
- Harkey Development & Communication Internship
- Harkey Family Fund
- Frank & Joanne Hicks Memorial Fund
- Elaine Jacobson Education Fund
- Marilyn Kloosterman Education Fund
- Win and Marilyn Kloosterman Scholarship
- William & Helen Kronmueller Education Fund
- Dr. Robert G. Meeker Conservation Fund
- Stephen B. Oresman Intern Project Fund
- Dr. Louise Merrimon Perry Conservation Fund for Girls (LMP Fund for Girls)
- Harry and Betty Taif Conservation Fund
- Polly & Doug Talbott Conservation Fund
- Lee Anne Tauck School Bus Fund
- Sue Tray Memorial Visitor Service Internship
- Jane Werner Environmental Scholarship
- Wild for "Ding" Conservation Fund



## NATURE STORE

**Nature Store:** The Refuge Nature Store was closed for a short time while the Refuge was working on hurricane recovery. Luckily, the store was reopened in April 2023.

**Shopdingdarling.com:** After Hurricane Ian, online sales continued and staff were able to operate while recovery progress was happening at the physical store location. DDWS' online sales platform, Shopdingdarling.com, continued to be a huge success through 2022-23 fiscal year. Supporters from all over the world ordered and showed off their "Ding" merchandise.

**100% of Nature Store profits goes directly to supporting the Refuge.**



# UPDATES AT THE "DING" DARLING WILDLIFE SOCIETY

## **Ann-Marie Wildman to Executive Director**

The "Ding" Darling Wildlife Society promoted Ann-Marie Wildman to the position of Executive Director in 2023. She joined the board in 2017, accepted the position of the manager of the Refuge Nature Store in 2018, and most recently served as Associate Executive Director.



## **Birgie Miller to Senior Philanthropic Director**

In September of 2023, Birgie Miller, former Executive Director, transitioned into her new role as Senior Philanthropic Director. Birgie led DDWS for the past 12 years.



## **April Boehnen to Manager of Events, Communications, and Marketing**

April Boehnen accepted a promotion with DDWS from Events and Communication Coordinator to Manager of Events, Communications, and Marketing. April started with DDWS as a Development and Communications Intern in 2018.

## **"Ding" Darling Community Connector**

In October 2021, DDWS hired Maria Santiago, a Tice Elementary School Cultural Studies Teacher, as the Suzanne Dubuc Urban Outreach Coordinator. In this position, Maria continues her work in expanding the community partnerships with "Ding" Darling. As this is an annual position, DDWS was pleased to renew Maria Santiago in this role for the 2022-23 fiscal year.



## **Artist-in-Residence**

DDWS welcomed "Ding" Darling's third Artist in Residence, Miami artist Jacqui Roch. In the 2022-23 fiscal year, Jacqui led and participated in several art programs at the Refuge, around the island, and at community events. Jacqui will have an art exhibition in the Visitor & Education Center in March 2024.



# EDUCATE

## EDUCATION & OUTREACH

The DDWS and the Lee County School District worked effectively together during the 2022-23 fiscal year in bringing school kids by bus to the Refuge for onsite field trips.

While there were still hurdles to jump from Hurricane Ian for several months, these field trips were invaluable to instill the love of nature and passion for protecting our wild spaces with our young generation. This partnership truly shows the power of partnership and collaboration.

Our goal is to have 4000 students visit the Refuge each year. Due to closures from Hurricane Ian, the Refuge saw approximately 2500 students in the 2022-23 fiscal year. The on-site education partnership with Lee County School District prioritizes Title 1 Schools with a goal of four field trips from Lee Co schools each week.

## URBAN INITIATIVE

DDWS continued working within our off-island communities to bring the Refuge and conservation messaging to schools and communities unable to get to the island and Refuge easily.

Through the Wildlife on Wheels (WoW), we expanded our outreach efforts thanks to our partnership with Lee County Schools School District. When not spending a week or more at the various schools, WoW visited local churches, community centers, and the Refuge for community outreach.

DDWS Supported the Refuge's "Ding" Darling Day Conservation Carnival at Lakes Park in April 2023. The celebration furthered the Refuge's mission to reach and connect with underserved urban communities while celebrating Earth Day.





## VOLUNTEERS

With nearly 8,000 acres to manage in the Refuge Complex and approximately 1 million annual visitors (pre-Covid) from around the world, volunteers are vital to helping the Refuge staff achieve their conservation work. Volunteers help in many ways at "Ding," serving as front desk ambassadors, helping in the Refuge Nature Store, assisting administration and maintenance staff, running education programs, serving as rovers on Wildlife Drive, and so much more. The DDWS supports the volunteer program by helping to cover expenses for this crucial initiative. In 2022-23, many volunteers have helped the Refuge throughout the recovery process from clean ups to manual work to covering phones and everything in between. "Ding" is incredibly fortunate to have volunteers who remained helpful through the ups and downs of the past few years.

## INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

With a 50% decrease in Refuge staff, the DDWS continues each year in helping the Refuge with the shortages by hiring interns to assist Visitor Services, WoW (Wildlife on Wheels), Education, as well as in the non-profit sector.

In 2022-23, DDWS supported eight interns, at the cost of \$18,913 per intern. Three of the eight were underwritten by individual donors, including the Sue Tray Memorial Visitor Service Internship and the Harkey Development & Communications Internship. This support is even more critical as all of our intern housing was washed away due to Hurricane Ian and DDWS is covering additional rental costs until new housing is built. This opportunity allows Interns to gain invaluable skills and knowledge while working at the Refuge.

The internship program provides opportunities for recent college graduates to learn hands-on about the environment and Refuge operations, creating our next generation of conservation stewards.



*(From left to right) Maisie Peters, Carmen Wolfe, and Emily Sommerfeldt*

## ADVOCACY

Our advocacy committee continues to attend meetings, coalitions, and conferences as it works to inform the public and our elected officials on important issues. The DDWS also invests in advocacy software to strengthen our outreach to elected officials in Washington and beyond.



## SPECIAL PROJECTS & FUNDING

The following are just some of the many projects that were made possible by philanthropic funding in the 2022-23 fiscal year.

**The Roost:** On August 6, 2022, Refuge and DDWS representatives broke ground on the latest Refuge educational pavilion. The Roost, a \$1 million+ project, welcomes visitors to an outdoor flex space for a broad spectrum of educational purposes. Construction of The Roost was delayed due to Hurricane Ian but we were fortunate to unveil it on October 21, 2023.

**DDWS Environmental Scholarship Program:** DDWS recently awarded \$29,200 in conservation education scholarships to 13 students from the surrounding five-county area. During its 18-year history, the DDWS Environmental Scholarship Program has awarded a total of \$262,400 to deserving students. Eleven donors sponsored the 13 scholarships in 2022. There are currently three permanent endowed scholarships, Jane Werner Endowed Scholarship, Dr. H. Randall Deming Endowed Scholarship for Conservation & Environmental Studies, and Win & Marilyn Kloosterman Scholarship.

**Environmental Education Pocket Refuge Grant program:** We are proud to say that the Environmental Education Grant program continued supporting the eight 2021-22 “Pocket Refuges” at Lee County district schools to teach students about the importance of pollinators and the habitat that sustains them. Working with district Environmental Education Resource Susan Hassett, DDWS distributed funds to each of the schools to buy supplies for native pollinator gardens from a menu of native plants, birdhouses, trail cameras, solar-powered fountains, and other enhancements. Schools submitted proposals for creating and maintaining their gardens. These gardens not only enhance childrens’ formal education but provides them with a “hands-on” lesson on where their food comes from.

**Hurricane Recovery:** Hurricane Ian caused extensive devastation in our community as well as at the Refuge. In response to this crisis, DDWS assisted the Refuge with significant funding while the Refuge awaited federal monies to be available and in areas where there were large gaps. Both our intern housing and our DDWS offices were completely destroyed and nothing could be salvaged. Additionally, we lost our Nature Store on Periwinkle Way and all of its inventory. The losses were huge, and recovery could only be possible with the philanthropic support we are so grateful for.



# INSPIRE

## EVENTS

**Go Bully for “Ding”:** DDWS’ annual fundraiser in support of Refuge recovery and conservation education raised more than \$300,000 on March 6, 2023 at Broadway Palm theater in Fort Myers. The event was moved off-island while the island recovered. President Teddy Roosevelt reprisor Joe Wiegand charmed and entertained guests as they bid for four live auction items.

**Sounds of the Sand:** To support the habitat and infrastructure recovery efforts due to Hurricane Ian and conservation outreach at the Refuge, the “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society-Friends of the Refuge (DDWS), in partnership with Bell Tower and Two Lane Lager, hosted the first ever Sounds of the Sand music festival on March 25, 2023. The event included local bands, axe-throwing, lawn games, and other activities.

**11th annual “Ding” Darling & Doc Ford’s Tarpon Tournament:** Despite unprecedented obstacles, the 11th annual “Ding” Darling & Doc Ford’s Tarpon Tournament on May 29 netted about \$165,000 from tournament sponsorships and donations to support water-quality research and conservation at the J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge.





## WELLNESS IN NATURE

In the 2022-23 fiscal year, DDWS continued to support the “Ding” Darling Wellness in Nature initiative. Immediately after Hurricane Ian, the Wellness in Nature team began hosting wellness walks and programs to take place at local businesses and available wild spaces while the Refuge was closed. This post-storm program was implemented to help our community heal, de-stress, and begin moving forward. It has been an overwhelming success.

## DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

To continue DDWS' effort to be more inclusive and welcoming to all, DDWS has taken a number of steps to promote a greater sense of diversity within the “Ding” community.

Some of these actions include:

- The Wildlife on Wheels mobile classroom which travels to and provides environmental education within urban and underserved communities
- Support of Urban Community Engagement Fellow Leo Cabrera in alliance with the Hispanic Access Foundation
- In addition to increased accessibility, DDWS supported bilingual WoW interns who facilitate communication in outreach experiences.
- Regular Martes Mamífero (Mammal Tuesday) posts on social media
- Continued adherence to DDWS's goal of diversity and inclusion at the Refuge
- Expansion of USFWS urban initiative by partnering with Tice Elementary and the surrounding community
- DDWS assists and supports the annual “Ding” Darling Day which has moved off-island to Lakes Park in Fort Meyers. This allows the Refuge to reach a broader and more diverse population.



# THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT!

"Land, water and vegetation are just that dependent on one another. Without these three primary elements in natural balance, we can have neither fish nor game, wild flowers nor trees, labor nor capital, nor sustaining habitat for humans."

- Jay Norwood Darling



Photo by Janet Kirk



Photo by Thomas Brott

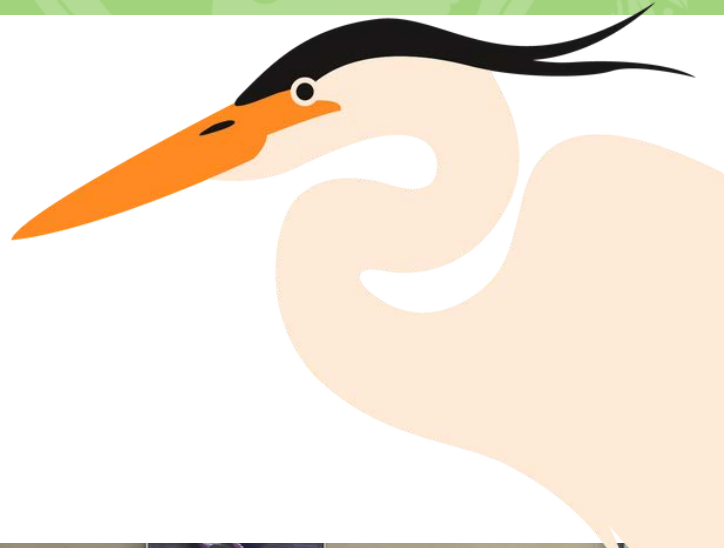


Photo by Rebecca Clemens

