Every year, the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge provides internships for college students whose courses of study encompass the natural world. Bren Ledbetter recently completed an internship at the Nature Center. The following personal account describes her adventures this summer.
The first time I visited the Fort Worth Nature Center, I cried. It was dusk in late summer, and I was heading to my first Master Naturalist class. As I turned onto Fossil Ridge Road, the way the sun hit the demo prairie made the little bluestem and gayfeather glow a hazy gold. It was like the view of that prairie hit me square in the chest, and I couldn’t breathe. Suddenly, I was crying. At the time, I was one of the youngest nurses in one of the busiest emergency departments in the country. It was a tense, chaotic, and, sometimes, violent job. I did not cry easily, so this sudden upwelling of emotion shocked me. Feeling foolish, I calmed down and headed in to class. This was maybe the first inkling that I needed a new profession. As the months passed and I dreaded going to work at the hospital more and more, I was drawn further into volunteering. It became the highlight of my week. Within a year, I was back in school studying biology.

I mention this because it reveals my huge bias when describing my experience as an intern this past summer. I love the Nature Center. In many ways, it has changed my life. So if my entire internship had been spent digging out privet with a spoon, I would have been happy. But that is not what happened. I became part of a team that wanted me to succeed and learn. They taught me so much – how to drive a tractor, ID plants, use a chainsaw, manage trails, band doves, collect seed, weld, bale hay, and set up game cameras. I organized classes to teach kids about macroinvertebrates and scientific research. I’ve taken hundreds of pictures of spiders and have battled in some fierce iNaturalist competitions (often with more enthusiasm than sportsmanship). I have walked all the trails and would do it again and again. This is a wonderful place not only because it is a refuge for wildlife but because it is a refuge for us – people who love, fear, and respect the natural world.

More than anything, I have learned that this career path is not for the faint of heart. It can be bloody. It requires patience and tact. We witness humanity’s best and worst qualities all at once in this work – ignorance and indifference but also curiosity and tenacity. It is more like nursing than I realized, and I am so thankful I could be part of it.

Bren Ledbetter, 2016 Nature Center Summer Intern