Summer Interns Tackle Refuge Projects

by Daniel Price, Natural Resource Manager

The Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge is an ever-evolving vision, and within every vision lies a project. In fact, multiple projects—including new infrastructure—that were tackled by our summer interns throughout the hot summer months.

Our summer internship program is unique. Every year, we get a new batch of college students or recent college graduates and are able to truly show them the way a park such as the Nature Center operates. Many summer internship programs view interns as cheap summer labor and use the opportunity to take care of some
undesirable tasks that have been postponed all winter. We approach things differently, wanting our interns to see the whole picture and expose them to all parts of our day-to-day operations.

Schyler Brown, a student studying at the University of North Texas, says this about his time at the Nature Center, “The skills, lessons, and knowledge I will take from the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge are critical to my future career and essential to my growth as an undergraduate student of ecology. I learned everything from technical skills such as welding, tool use, and light and heavy machinery operation to life skills such as developing a resume, making lifelong friendships, learning interpretation skills (which I consider to be a life rather than job skill) and, of course, acquiring ecological, wildlife, and other scientific abilities sprinkled throughout.”

We have shaped the internship program so that interns are able to split time between the education and natural resource sides of the operation. We challenge them to step outside their comfort zones and encourage them to take on leadership roles. Jennifer Matthews, a student attending Tarleton State University, talks about learning the education component of the Nature Center, “My time spent at the Hardwick Interpretive Center allowed me to learn many new skills such as writing and delivering an interpretive program, working closely with colleagues to achieve a goal, and interacting with the public in a professional manner.” Each of the interns spent three weeks at the Hardwicke Interpretative Center, where they shadowed the education naturalists and assisted them with summer classes, guided hikes, and outreach. During those three weeks, they transitioned from the shadows to leading the groups on the activity for the day.

On the refuge management side of the operation, each intern had the opportunity to spend a total of six weeks assisting, observing, and completing various projects outlined by Refuge management staff. It is important to our staff that we teach our interns skills that will help them throughout their careers and prepare them for future jobs. This is what Tiffany Klis, a recent graduate of Texas A&M University, reveals about working with Refuge staff, “I was able to learn different skills pertaining to maintenance, game cameras, and construction. Assisting with trail and roadside maintenance allowed me to use equipment such as a hedge trimmer, tractor, weed eater, and chainsaw, which I can and will continue to use in my career path.”
One of our larger projects consisted of finally completing the slough bridge. I have been mentioning this project for some time, and I think Schyler describes it best, “This bridge was not your typical small wooden walkway that covers a stream running through the forest but rather a massive goliath beast that took months to complete.” Little does he know, the bridge actually took years to complete. The slough bridge was deconstructed close to three years ago, but there were times when water levels were too high to continue with the project and other times when a higher-priority project took precedence. The bridge is approximately 195 feet long, with a nice viewing deck in the middle of the slough. Eventually, a bench will be added to the viewing deck, but for the time being, we are calling the project done.

Larger projects such as a bridge can not only teach construction skills but also teach teamwork. Learning the value of teamwork early in a career is an important skill that will help our interns go far. As Tiffany notes, “Building the slough bridge taught me the different techniques of squaring, decking, and welding.” Jennifer also observes, “I was fortunate enough to work alongside my fellow interns on the project and learned how to collaborate and discuss ideas.”

Another large project recently started and currently ongoing is our new greenhouse compound. Adjacent to the haybarn and bison-handling facility, the new compound will feature a 26-foot x 28-foot greenhouse, 30-foot X 30-foot shade structure, and 12-foot x 24-foot storage shed with an attached 12-foot x 24-foot covered area. Thanks to a $25,000 Anita Berry Martin Memorial Fund grant awarded to the Friends of the Nature Center, we had the funding to tackle such a project. Other than initial intradepartmental support from the Fort Worth Transportation and Public Works Department, which assisted by hauling clean fill to build up the site and providing a properly graded area for the structures, all construction has been performed by staff and volunteers. As many of you know, we have wonderful volunteers, and many of the projects completed on the Refuge were done in a timely manner due to the help of volunteers. As of this writing, the greenhouse is about 95 percent complete, the shade structure 100 percent complete, and the metal building about 60 percent complete.

This summer, we have had a great group of interns willing to ask questions and jump in to work, and their help has been very much appreciated. Nature Center staff takes pride in mentoring and helping our interns so they never forget the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge or the lessons learned here.