



By
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Photography by
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NATURE + RECREATION

MODEL

PARK

For 75 years, Sanibel's "Ding" Darling has thrived thanks to its effective partnerships in conservation.

Left: At J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge, herons and a willet wade on a glassy flat at sunset as a wood stork comes in for a landing.



Left: Roseate spoonbills wade at J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island.

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It's low tide on a recent sunny Thursday on Sanibel, and Toni Westland rolls down the window of her SUV as she stops beside a group of visitors at the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge. Everyone takes a moment to admire the birds that have gathered on the exposed mud flats. Up ahead, an osprey stands in ankle-deep water, fluffing its feathers and bathing in the salty current. A reddish egret hunts in the shallows, high stepping its long legs and spreading its wings to cast a shadow that drives the bait fish forward. An anhinga, its long curling neck and black body slick with water, sits on the mangrove branches and makes its clicking call like the spinning spokes on the "Wheel of Fortune."

Westland takes it all in, smiling.

The supervisory ranger continues on, winding her car down the four-mile driving trail until she stops in front of a corner lot with wooden 'For Sale' and 'No Trespassing' signs. She parks and surveys the parcel of undeveloped land, 68 acres overgrown with exotics—Australian pines and Brazilian peppers—along with plenty of native species. Shaggy-fronded cabbage palms stand still in the morning air. Elegantly asymmetrical gumbo limbo trees and sea grapes with leaves as big as dinner plates intertwine across the acreage.

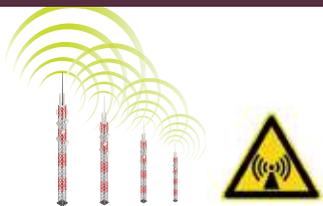
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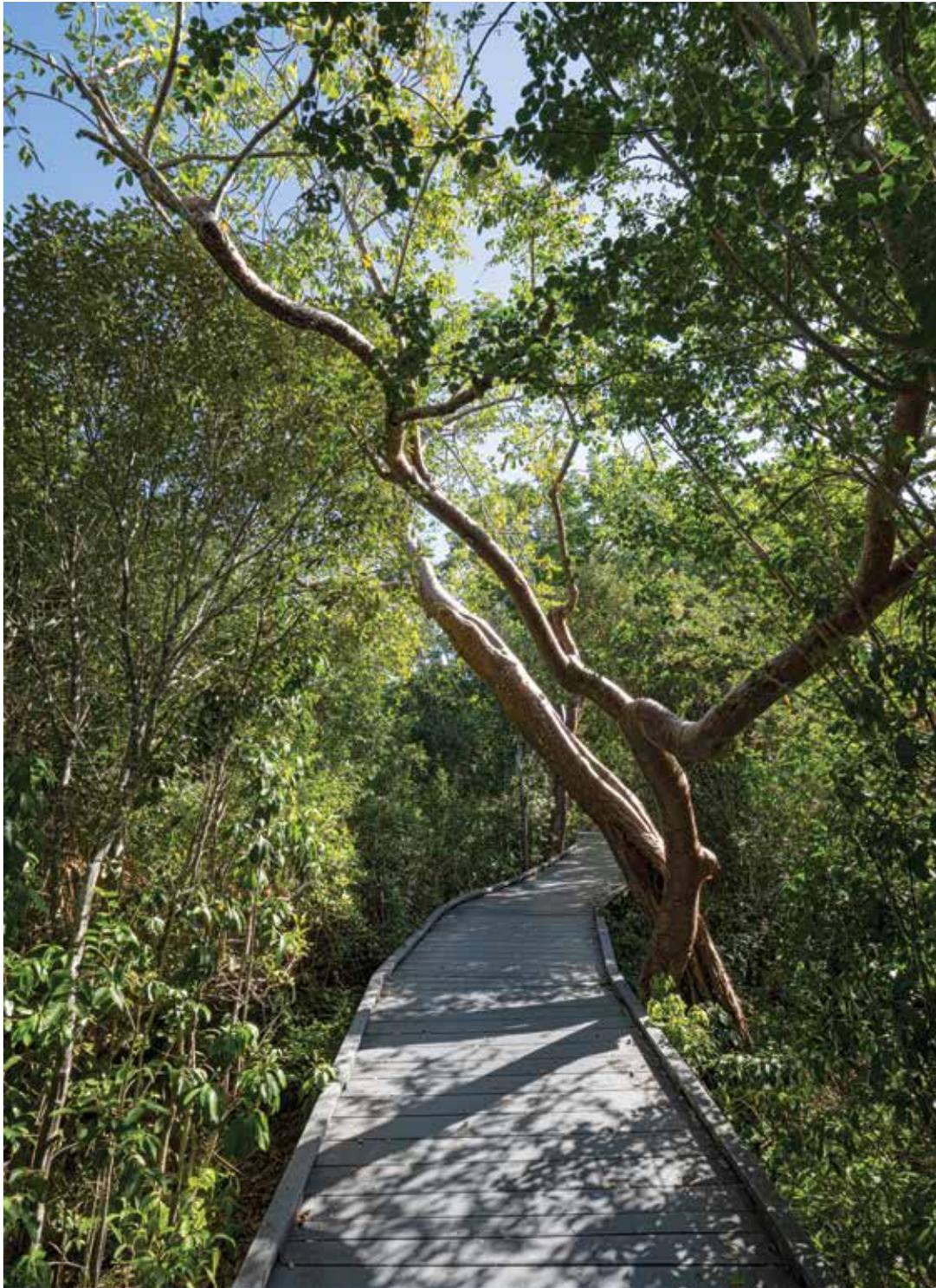
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Below: Aerial shot of the mangroves at J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge.
Opposite page: A great blue heron.







Above: Calusa Shell Mound Trail, the refuge's boardwalk, lined with vegetation.
Opposite page, from left: Egrets landing and perched with heron on Wildlife Drive in J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge; Refuge Ranger Toni Westland.



Below: Birgie Miller, executive director of "Ding" Darling Wildlife Society. Opposite page: dunlins, small brown waders, in the refuge.

All of this, Westland says, was slated to be bulldozed to build 29 homes. "But we all have a role to play."

Last year, the "Ding" Darling Wildlife Society-Friends of the Refuge (DDWS) stepped in to protect the property. It helped acquire the land from a Miami developer for \$9.5 million, a purchase made possible through the efforts of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Lee County's Conservation 20/20 and DDWS. As the refuge celebrates its 75th anniversary this year, it symbolizes how public and private groups can successfully leverage their contributions to protect the environment.



"Think of the loss of conservation habitat if this was turned into homes," Westland says as an orchestra of bird

calls fills the air. "The animals would have nowhere else to go. There would have been more traffic, fertilizer, problems for air quality and water quality."

The organization and the refuge are named for Jay Norwood "Ding" Darling, a cartoonist and two-time Pulitzer Prize winner famous for his conservation-minded drawings. In 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed him director of the U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey, which later became the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Darling had a winter home on Captiva, and he and other Sanibel and Captiva residents formed the Inter Island Conservation Association, which was behind



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Isaac Lidsky is an American corporate speaker, author and entrepreneur. As a child actor, he played Weasel on NBC's *Saved by the Bell: The New Class*. At age 12, he was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, a retinal degenerative disease that leads to blindness; and from ages 12 to 25 he slowly lost his sight. He finished high school early and graduated from Harvard at the age of 19.

In 1999, Lidsky founded an internet advertising technology startup originally named "ru4.com" (acquired in 2015 for \$230 million). Lidsky chose to return to Harvard, attending law school, and graduated magna cum laude in 2004.

After law school, Lidsky clerked for Judge Thomas L. Ambro at the United States Court of Appeal for the Third Circuit and then joined the Appellate Staff of the Civil Division of the Justice Department.

Lidsky argued more than twelve cases on behalf of the U.S. government in federal courts of appeal. In 2008 Lidsky served as a law clerk for U.S. Supreme Court Justices Sandra Day O'Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsburg; and is the only blind person to have served as a law clerk for the U.S. Supreme Court.

In 2011, Lidsky returned to his entrepreneurial roots and purchased a small struggling residential construction subcontractor in central Florida called ODC Construction, a firm with annual revenues in excess of \$250 million. He currently serves as its CEO. Lidsky is 39 years old, married to Dorothy, and is the father of four.



the initial acquisition of 2,296 acres for the refuge. In 1945, at the urging of Darling and his cohorts, President Harry S. Truman signed an executive order that created the Sanibel National Wildlife Refuge, turning the land into protected terrain. Five years after Darling's death in 1962, it was renamed the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge.

The refuge welcomes nearly a million visitors each year who come to admire the more than 245 bird species that either live in the refuge or stop in for a visit during their annual migrations. Endangered birds like the wood stork—tall and bald-headed, with black-tipped wings that extend an impressive five feet—are common sights. "We had a rare bird alert last week," Westland says. "It was the white morph of a great blue heron, called a great white heron. Everybody went crazy."

Though the refuge is best known as a bird sanctuary, it's home to other notable wildlife like manatees, dolphins and alligators. "Ding" Darling partners with other organizations to monitor the wildlife on its 6,400 acres. When the National Institute for Aviation Research sends biologists to monitor the elusive mangrove cuckoo, "Ding" Darling's staff and volunteers share their knowledge and lend a hand

where needed. "These are the kinds of partnerships that make things happen," Westland says. "When you're just one organization, you cannot do it all. They understand that out here."

Still, the refuge's struggles to protect the environment are ongoing, even with so many different groups dedicated to the cause. The recent red tide outbreaks are just one example. During the worst of the summer 2018 outbreak, windless days inside the refuge were unbearable from the stench of rotting fish. Dead sea turtles and birds washed into the mangroves. People started asking how they could protect the refuge. Bradley Cornell, the Southwest Florida Policy Associate for Audubon Florida and Audubon Western Everglades, has one answer: we need to protect everything.

"People see we have a refuge like 'Ding' Darling or the Everglades or the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge," he says, "and they think, 'Well, we've done our job. Everything's protected.' But we're starting to realize that we've got to conserve and protect all around these refuges. You've got to support the whole environment up and down the coast."

Among many vital tools in the conservation arsenal, one is particularly effective: protecting more land. About five years ago, John McCabe, who chairs the land acquisition and preservation committee of DDWS, reached out to the developer who owned the undeveloped land adjacent to the refuge. The developer held the land for years and putting up several communities nearby. But these acres were still untouched. DDWS wanted to purchase 8 acres that were connected to the refuge and would make a natural extension. DDWS, Lee County's Conservation 20/20 and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service came together to purchase the land.

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Above: Horseshoe crabs near the shoreline in "Ding" Darling.



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From left: Overhead view of the mangroves near J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge; a brown pelican.





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Meanwhile, the developer was drawing up plans for the 68 acres across the street from the refuge, an area known as Wulfert Bayous, the largest piece of undeveloped and unprotected land on the island. The city of Sanibel had already approved 29 homes to be built there. Then, a pair of bald eagles moved in and built a nest in one of the trees on the lot. At the time, bald eagles were still on the endangered list, and the nesting pair put a hold on the developer's permitting process and created a lot of hassle. Once the sale of the smaller eight-acre parcel went through, the developer—worn down by the eagles—told McCabe, “Why don't you take a look at these 68 acres?”

In 2019, after a series of intense negotiations, they agreed on a price: \$9.5 million. It was far below the developer's starting price of \$20 million, but it matched with Yellow Book appraisals (the appraising method for federal land acquisition). DDWS raised \$3 million in private donations. Lee County's Conservation 20/20 put up \$6.5 million. And the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which oversees “Ding” Darling, agreed to restore the property and manage it as part of the refuge.

The deal was unique. It's rare to see non-profit groups contribute money to a project that will remain in Lee County government's hands (the 68-acre parcel is owned by Lee County as part of Conservation 20/20), and it's also uncommon for the federal government to manage Conservation 20/20 land at no cost to the county.

“We had three groups working together to leverage each other's support,” says Birgie Miller, executive

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TODAY'S HIT'S AND YESTERDAY'S FAVORITES



director of the “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society. “Would we have been able to raise \$9.5 million in private philanthropic support? I doubt it. But we could raise \$3 million, and so we were able to make it more affordable for Lee County Conservation 20/20. And the fact that the refuge was able to manage it afterward—that was a huge cost savings for Lee County.”

“Ding” Darling Wildlife Society didn’t stop with acquiring the land. The organization also won a grant from the Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund, which aims to help bird populations affected by the BP Deepwater Horizon disaster. The grant will be used to restore part of the acreage to wetland habitat and create a rookery where birds can nest and raise their young. The project is scheduled to take up to two years, but for now, the 68 acres looks like a tangled stretch of untouched land—just as it has for roughly 6,000 years, since the seas around Florida retreated.

On this Thursday, the sky is a milky white. A light wind moves through the cabbage palms, rustling their fronds and brushing the Spanish moss draped from the branches of gumbo limbos. Westland stands with her hands on her hips. She’s talking about the refuge’s plans to install mangroves and the possibility of creating upland hiking trails, but then she stops and looks around at the undeveloped acreage.

She smiles.

“We win just by setting land aside for conservation,” she says. “Even if nothing were done to it, we win. It’s a success for everyone.” 📺



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