

Résumé Building

Daniel Price, Natural Resource Manager

The past few months have been anything but a summer vacation. Although the heat has been comparable to what you might find at the beach, we definitely haven't had our toes in the sand, nor have we had a frosty drink in hand. New Refuge technicians and a new set of interns mean one thing: we must tackle as many projects as possible to train everyone in what it takes to manage the Refuge, all while making great memories along the way.

Goals of the Intern Program

The goal of our internship program is simple: to prepare students and recent college graduates for the real world of natural resource management. Much about our training program is unique to the Nature Center. In many cases, interns are learning new skills for the first time. Mark Saenz, currently a senior at Texas A&M University, agrees, "From running a chainsaw to driving a skid steer, there were plenty of firsts for me this summer as I attempted to soak in all that I was learning." Mark, along with Jennifer Matthews and Madison Gover, were exposed to methods the Nature Center has fine-tuned over the years in response to the special mandate of its mission.

Hard Work = Fun Times

While traditional road crews use a slope mower attached to a tractor and essentially mow the trees to clear the edges of the road, we must be a little more delicate. Our goal is to trim the trees with a gentle hand for better tree health, effectively leaving the area in the same "untouched" state it was before. Although our technique may slow us down, it subjects staff to good land stewardship methods and gives them the opportunity to learn how to drive a truck while pulling a trailer; use a chainsaw, pole saw, and hedge trimmers; and operate a tractor while mowing with a shredder.

Clearing brush is a great opportunity to teach staff how to properly apply herbicide to help prevent undesirable trees and shrubs from resprouting. One tool we use, the skid steer with a brush shark attachment, is very efficient at this task. This was the first time all the new staff had used this tool, and they were able to reclaim the road cutting through the central bison pasture for easier access. Staff, along with the Natural Guard, also cleared the mesquites at the bison pullout in the east bison pasture.



Driving pipe on which to mount trail counters is a team project. FWNC&R Staff Photo.

It would be easy to assign our interns the job of clearing brush all summer, but that would be contrary to our goal. Currently a junior at Tarleton State University, Jennifer returned for a second year and was given the opportunity to take the lead on the ongoing game camera project. This project allows us to identify wildlife species that are utilizing the property, which could lead to future projects or more in-depth surveys. Wildlife surveys are a great way to recognize trends in wildlife populations, which helps us as land managers make the right decisions on how to manage habitat. By taking the lead, "this allowed me to develop better self-management skills and the ability to manage others while undertaking a project," she says. During the project, Jennifer was able to teach Madison, a recent graduate from Tarleton State University, and Mark how to use a GPS unit while showing them how to navigate through the woods as a naturalist.

Each summer, we conduct three spotlight surveys to continue monitoring our deer herd, and it is always a thrill to expose the interns to this process. Other than the wildlife profession, not too many jobs pay you to ride around shining a spotlight, counting everything you see. While we ride through the night, staff discusses other management practices implemented throughout the property and answers questions. More times than not, bison management and prescribed burning are examined, leading to lessons on rotational grazing and fire's important role in it. Throughout the summer, staff and interns also move the bison to different pastures as we implement rotational grazing.

As fun as it is moving the bison or conducting spotlight surveys, considerable work is required for custom fabrication and installation

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Enclosing the Greenlife Center porch area provides secure storage for kayak gear and teaches many lessons in construction. FWNC&R Staff Photo.

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of infrastructure that is needed for the Refuge to function smoothly. Sign kiosks are being built and installed throughout the property, and this summer, we installed a "Pollinator" sign on the Oak Motte Trail featuring Joann Karges, the author of our butterfly guide. This was an opportunity for staff to learn about geology as we needed to bust through a six-inch layer of rock to install the kiosk. Using a rock bar is no easy task, and several of us ended up with award-winning blisters. Once the sign was installed, the Nature Center honored Joann in a sign dedication ceremony.

Managing our trails and providing features such as interpretative sign kiosks and benches for our visitors to enjoy are only a couple of our major objectives. We are currently working on a project installing trail counters throughout the trail system to better understand trail use, which will help us prioritize our trail work and identify where to install additional features (see article elsewhere in this issue). This project has allowed staff to get some quality shop time designing and fabricating metal trail counter boxes. Welding is a specialty skill that not many have, but we take pride in the fact that we teach each of our interns the basics of welding. Even if they know how to weld, we can apply their skills. Mark says, "Even things I had done before, such as welding and woodworking, gained new meaning as I was able to do these things in a practical setting as opposed to the classroom." Another project we tackled was enclosing the Greenlife Center porch, which will now serve as a more accessible kayak storage area. Prior to the renovation, staff struggled with cramming kayaks into a small room; now, each kayak has its own shelf, and the aquatic program supplies are more organized.

Life Lessons

Our interns have had a summer full of life lessons. Hopefully, they were able to add many skills to their resume. I feel Jennifer defines



Intern Mark Saenz uses the tractor and brushhog to manage the east pasture. FWNC&R Staff Photo.

our program best, "From learning carpentry to using bison as a prairie management tool, I learned and expanded on skills and techniques I will use in my future career." Madison thanked us with a beautiful painting and an attached note saying, "Thank you so much for teaching me the valuable skills that I've learned and

being patient along the way!" As I have mentioned before, we not only hire people to do a job, we hire them to become part of our Refuge family and make a lasting memory. Mark summarizes, "This



Yes, digging a hole for a sign kiosk does take four people when you have to break through layers of rock. FWNC&R Staff Photo.

internship will always be something I look back on fondly and was an experience unlike any other I have had before." We all take pride in the work we do, and it allows us to provide a great natural area for our visitors to enjoy.