



Ranger Toni Westland points out the residents of the refuge's aquarium to a class in the Environmental Education Lab, and (below) teaches five-year-old Amy Taylor, from Ames, Iowa, and her six-year-old brother, Jason, about refuge birds on the cross-dike trail.

Teaching Wild

From dinosaurs and bubblegum feet to manatees made out of socks, Ranger Toni Westland works to make sure every child enjoys a wildlife experience

by Chelle Koster Walton

Toni Westland's face lit up when the five and six-year-old sister and brother told her they thought they had spotted a wood stork in the refuge that morning. She pulled out a laminated picture of the bird from her box of tricks and told them, "See, it has bright pink bubblegum feet. Is that what you saw?" When they and their mother confirmed the sighting, Ranger Westland explained in exclamations to the family, "Yep, that's a wood stork, and it's endangered! So you saw something special. It's been around since the dinosaurs."

Dinosaurs and bubblegum feet: What kid could resist? She had them. She had wardens of wildlife in the making, and that is her mission as environmental education (EE) specialist at J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge.

Since she moved here in 2002 from her position as environmental educator for the Corps of Engineers at the Lake Okeechobee Waterway, Westland and

her volunteers have educated some eighty-thousand children through refuge programs, school field trips, and outreach efforts at local libraries, day-care centers, and environmental events throughout the state.

In 2006, Westland received a U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Regional Director's Award for her curriculum design and proactive approach to resolving student transportation problems to the refuge. With the help of the "Ding" Darling Wildlife Society and contributions, she arranged private busing for the kids.

"Toni's innovative solution provides a model for other refuges and schools," said Director Sam Hamilton at the awards ceremony in Atlanta.

With her youthful exuberance and tireless energy, one might call her the Rachael Ray of wildlife. Westland, who inherited her love of the outdoors from her father in Wisconsin, has raised funds for a new EE lab at the refuge's

Education Center and has initiated programs such as the popular weekly Reading at the Refuge and Kids Fishing Day. She takes on everything from overseeing the Florida Junior Duck Stamp program and chairing "Ding" Darling Days, to making stuffed manatees out of nylon socks and designing native plant centerpieces for functions. She strives especially to bring underprivileged children into the world of nature's wonders.

"It's that they really appreciate the chance," the ranger says of the latter. "We see the wildlife and the habitat every day, but to them it's all new. The new experience, the surprise in their eyes is so special. It's what makes me know that the field I'm in is where I'm supposed to be." 🦋

Travel Editor Chelle Koster Walton is the author of Sarasota, Sanibel Island & Naples Book and The Adventure Guide to Tampa Bay & Florida's West Coast.

Sanibel Sea School

Bruce and Evelyn Neill nurture future stewards of the environment



by Deborah Burst

A petite eight-year-old girl peers into the bucket full of fish with the usual groans and reluctantly dips her manicured fingers into the murky water. A Northeast native, this is her first encounter with a live fish, and she squeals with laughter. By week's end she will be scouring Sanibel's beaches and backcountry in search of hidden wildlife, eager for another life-changing experience.

Working with the idea that the best contribution to conservation is to expose children to the joys of nature, Dr. Bruce Neill, a marine biology professor, and his wife, Evelyn, work hard to educate one child/adult at a time inside their nonprofit Sanibel Sea School. According to Neill, the school, which opened in September 2006, is the only one of its kind, with the exception of a similar concept in Monterey, California. It attracts students and families visiting from the north, south, and east coasts and is a dream come true for the Neills, an opportunity to share those special moments in nature.

Thirty years ago Evelyn Neill made that connection attending a marine science consortium on Dauphin Island, Alabama, just thirty miles south of Mobile. In a program for teens, she studied the intricate workings of the barrier island ecosystem, seining the waters, trawling the Gulf on a shrimp boat, and studying the life below. "For a number of years I couldn't think or talk about anything else," Evelyn says

with giddy energy. "I became an avid naturalist, working pro-bono, giving back using my creative side in advertising."

The main goal of Sanibel Sea School is experimental education, building a lifetime of discovery and a passion for stewardship. Children ages six to thirteen immerse themselves in Sanibel's unique barrier island ecology, an environmental haven that dedicates 65 percent of its land mass to non-developable wilderness habitat. It is an outdoor classroom inside one of the top three shelling beaches of the world, joined by twenty miles of prime sea turtle nesting habitat and nine miles of mangrove shoreline.



Students are introduced to ocean ecosystems and their inhabitants and learn about wildlife conservation. The core curriculum focuses on two- and three-day children's programs that begin in the morning introducing a variety of species and ecosystems, then move into the field for hands-on learning. After a break for lunch, the schedule is repeated in the afternoon. The school also offers Saturday classes for adults.

The field work follows the mangrove backcountry in "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge, hiking the Bailey Tract and Bowman's Beach, and exploring the lighthouse trail. Both



This is one school that kids enjoy as they become totally immersed in the local environment and its inhabitants.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SANIBEL SEA SCHOOL

Bruce and Evelyn enjoy having fun with the kids, which makes them feel like kids again themselves. It can be a gloomy day with no sunshine, but then the tide goes out exposing a mud plain of goeey silt. "The next thing you know someone gets their shoes stuck in the mud," Bruce says with a laugh. "And then we fall over and become these mud people, playing in the mud."

Evelyn admits that sometimes the passions of some students are blurred or nonexistent inside the classroom. But there's a bond that develops between nature and child. According to Bruce, any resistance in the classroom usually disappears in the field, where the child becomes the leader and the teacher takes a back seat as observer. The group kicks around shells and sieves the water. The discovery of a seahorse can cause an explosion of excitement, and finding a smelly fish on the beach will raise questions about what killed it.

Evelyn is amazed at how all the age groups and geographic backgrounds blend into one. Recently a ten-year-old local boy thought there was little for him to learn until he discovered a new world of research developing an abstract for recording shell species. A child from New York, able to navigate a maze of subways or order a king-size spread of sushi, may sit aloof in the back of the class, but is the first to volunteer in the field. "Everybody is engaged, all willing to carry buckets, nets and hike further out. They wake up, come alive when they go out. This is their moment," says Evelyn. The Sea School Web site blog presents a storyboard of discovery among the students and also some delightful creative prose educating readers on the critical ecosystems in Florida. Sanibel Island is part of an extensive estuary system that extends from Gasparilla Island to Sanibel Island eastward into the middle region of Florida.

The Neills consider the environmental cause more like a marathon; pacing actions and making the right choices. Whether counting shells or observing changes in wildlife patterns, they feel we are all stewards in the world around us, communicating our discoveries to leaders who we would

like to share the same passion.

Many of our most treasured childhood experiences occurred outdoors. Evelyn witnesses this firsthand every day as she watches lives literally change before her eyes. "In just one hour you can see something that truly influences you for the rest of your life. That's pretty extraordinary," she says.

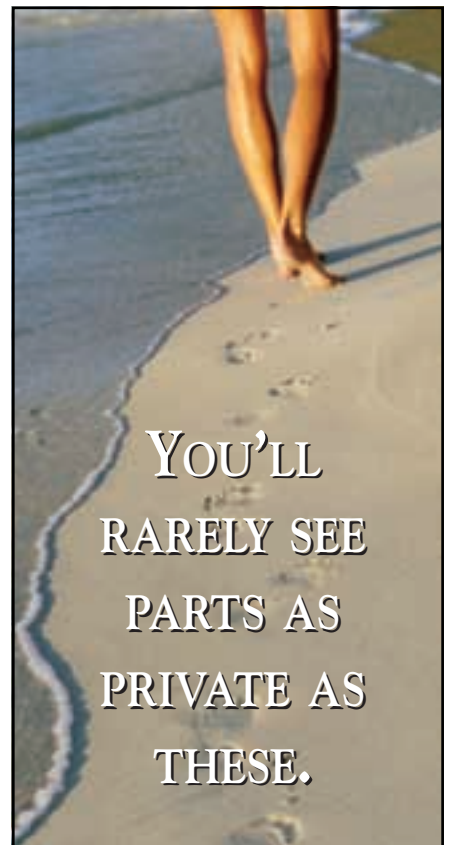
Often a child's experience can go directly to their heart and mind. "Sometimes you go out and it's cold and rainy. As adults we worry about the elements, but the kids will go out and will have a profound experience. Pretty powerful stuff," she says. "And for me as a mother and a teacher, I would rather those deep impressions happen in nature than anywhere else I can think of.

I know for a fact that I'm living proof that one person having had an extraordinary field experience can take it into their life for the rest of their life and make a difference," says Evelyn, reflecting back on her summer at Dauphin Island. "I believe I have, in many ways, not just here, but in other parts of my life, in different careers, I have totally acted with that history in my mind." 🌿

A New Orleans gal, Deb Burst now lives on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain, spending most of her vacation time along the shores of Sanibel Island.

To Learn More

Sanibel Sea School is a non-profit organization dedicated to marine conservation through education. Each week is dedicated to learning about a specific form of wildlife and its habitat: dolphins, tarpons, raccoons, gopher tortoises, and bald eagles, to name but a few. There are 11 sessions, May 28 through August 10, and a summer camp program is available. Phone 239-472-8585, Web site www.sanibelseaschool.org



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A Nose for Adventure and a Taste for the Exotic



Safari guide Mark Hamilton Quinn is equally comfortable with leopards in Tanzania (above) or brown pelicans in Matlacha (right).

Private safari guide Mark Hamilton Quinn uses humor and a personable manner to “edu-tain” people about wild animals

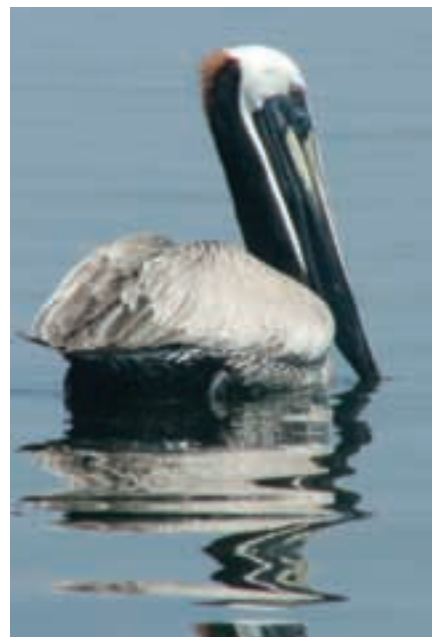
by Ann Marie O’Phelaln

With baby cliff swallows in his shirt pockets and astride his Appaloosa horse, Mark Hamilton Quinn would head off to his school in the hills outside San Juan Capistrano, California. Even then the school principal understood that Mark wasn’t like other kids. He was, after all, the son of renowned zoologist Pat Quinn, founder and president, and currently director emeritus, of the Pensacola Zoo.

Working with animals has always been in Mark’s blood. Even on a local kayak tour, you can quickly tell he still isn’t like

the other kids. Manatees suddenly appear out of nowhere as if he’s part of the group, pelicans begin to “bark” as if he’s part of the flock, and just about every animal in the area pokes its head up out of the water or flies overhead when he’s around. When pressed, Mark will say that he “just knows where the animals are.” However, take it from someone who went out on a local kayak tour with him, the animals actually seem to find him.

Although Mark spent many years in California working with animals in many capacities, such as training them for Sea



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ADVENTURE SAFARIS



Ballooning across the African plain provides a bird's-eye view of wildlife, including giraffes and elephants.



World in San Diego and for Dreamworks Productions in Hollywood, consulting on animal shows for several prestigious zoological parks, and even appearing on *The Tonight Show* along with Jim Fowler on behalf of Discovery Channel's *Animal Planet* program, he eventually made his way back to Florida, where he worked for a time for the Naples Zoo before becoming a private guide for safaris and adventures spanning from the Everglades to Africa.

"I smell adventure' is my motto," he claimed as he showed me a few snapshots from his latest trek witnessing the Great Migration in Tanzania, along with some of his other amazing safari photos. As I looked over images of lions, herds of elephants, and a pack of zebras running across the plains, a picture of Mark standing next to, and actually petting, a rhinoceros caught my eye. "Isn't that a black rhino?" I asked. "Yes, it's a wild one," Mark replied nonchalantly, as if it was his pet dog Taz he was petting instead.

Along with day trips through local waters and the Florida Everglades, Mark offers three regular overseas

safaris to Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa, where the excursions generally last ten days to several weeks, and the adventures are extraordinary. For instance, the South Africa Safari includes a trip to ever-so-cosmopolitan Cape Town, a stay in a luxury thatched chalet, along with the chance to experience the best big game viewing country in South Africa with animals like the white rhino, giraffe, hippo, and wildebeest in their natural habitats.

While Mark offers set tours throughout the year, he also creates special tours to other places throughout the world. He is currently arranging a safari in Italy, where the itinerary will include visits to historical sites in the Italian Alps, Milan, and Venice.

What's enjoyable about spending time on Mark's adventures isn't just having the opportunity to tap his wealth of knowledge about animals that he gladly shares. It's also the humorous, personable way he delivers the message. "I enjoy 'edu-taining' people," he said as he showed me a photo of a lion almost completely camouflaged by tall grass.

"I believe that animals teach us all about compassion. They're open, honest, and they enrich people's lives," he said. "My goal is to foster this awareness through education and wilderness encounters."

For those interested in a taste of the exotic, Mark has several safaris scheduled for 2008, or he can help you create your own adventure. 🦒

Ann Marie O'Phelan is a contributing writer for several publications in Southwest Florida, where she resides with her son.

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