

Peter Ahl

Back Bay NWR Internship Reflection

During the Spring semester of 2018, I had the great opportunity to be an intern at Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge. This was the first time an ODU student that minored in Conservation Leadership and majored in Parks, Recreation and Tourism, had a combined internship. The internship was 500 hours long and was split between a refuge project and a research project. Leading up to the Spring internship, the courses mitigation and adaptation and sustainability leadership really prepared me for conducting the research at Back Bay. Also, my time volunteering in the Parks and Recreation department helped mold my skills in leading events and working with the public.

The refuge project that would satisfy the Parks and Recreation internship was removing Asiatic sand sedge from the sand dunes that stretched 3 miles along the beach. I was excited and intimidated about the massive area that was to be considered. Working with Lauren was such a relief to my concerns. She was very understanding that I necessarily didn't have a really strong biology background and was willing to explain any questions that I had. The first day we went out to the north mile, which is a 1-mile stretch of beach between Little Island Park and Back Bay, and I really was taken back by how secluded it was. She helped identify the sand sedge that we would be pulling from the dunes and explained to me why they are pulling it. This gave me the motivation for leading volunteer groups. The few volunteer groups that came out were excited to help the refuge combat the invasive sand sedge species from the dunes. The groups that came to volunteer did a really great job in identifying the sand sedge and staying determined to pull as much of it as they could.

Another memorable activity that I was apart of at the refuge was doing the bird surveys 3 times a month. This allowed me to meet the refuge's volunteers that had a vast amount of knowledge about birds. I could never have imagined that I would know so much about birds in such a small amount of time. The refuge is a beautiful place that is littered with wildlife, which was very eye opening and humbling to experience.

Getting to research climate change and how it effects Back Bay gave me experience that I would have never of gotten any place else. Reading through tons of articles about waterfowl and temperature rise due to climate change aligned perfectly with what I was learning on the refuge, with the bird surveys, and my knowledge from the Conservation Leadership minor. Reminding me that we aren't the only species on this planet that are being affected by climate change, and that educating the public on this issue is so important.

The time I had at Back Bay was an experience that I will never forget. The staff were so welcoming from my first day to the last. Including me in every meeting and event made me feel at home. There were so many jobs that have to be done in order to maintain the refuge and the staff at Back Bay work together like clock work. The beauty and uniqueness that the refuge has will always keep me coming back, whether it's hiking through to False Cape State Park or satisfying my new love looking for birds. This internship exceeded my expectations and made a significant impact on me that I'll always cherish.

Thank you.