

Uvalde National Fish Hatchery

The Conservation Leadership minor at Old Dominion University has exposed me to opportunities I would not have normally had. One of those opportunities was a five week internship at Uvalde National Fish Hatchery in Uvalde, Texas with U.S. Fish and Wildlife this past summer. This was a very unique and exciting experience. Before my internship, I had never left the east coast or lived by myself. I was extremely nervous to be away for that amount of time by myself but once I arrived in Uvalde and saw how welcoming everyone was, I knew I was going to be just fine.

This internship showed me what hard work really was. Monday through Friday I was at work by seven and stayed until 3:30p.m. Most days I would work 10-12 hour days because there were so many different things going on and I wanted to be a part of all of it. The days were long but the experience I got from it was indescribable. I knew nothing about fish before going there but quickly realized that just because it's called a fish hatchery, doesn't mean they only handle fish. There were many different species on station at the hatchery including San Marcos salamanders, Texas wild-rice, Comal Spring riffle beetle, and fountain darters. Daily duties consisted of water quality checks on all the ponds and the indoor tanks, feeding the invertebrates, salamanders and fish, cleaning the Texas wild-rice raceways of algae, and many other things.

The first few weeks I was there I had to get into the catfish ponds daily to check for eggs since it was the end of their spawning season. On my second day of doing so, I slipped on some algae, fell in the pond, and completely filled my waders with water. It was so hard to get back up but it was hilarious and actually kind of refreshing. I was told that was my initiation into the hatchery life. I got to tour San Marcos Aquatic Research Center and go out with some of their staff and see the process of collecting wild Texas wild-rice from the San Marcos River. There are so many procedures and rules

that must be followed, on top of numerous data points that needed to be recorded. The highlight of my trip was going out on the Colorado River with BioWest, an environmental consulting firm, and being on my hands and knees in the muddy water digging for mussels. We had a contest to see who could find the most of them and the loser had to buy lunch. After bringing the mussels back to the station and putting them into their new tanks, I felt a sense of accomplishment.

Being able to help with USFWS with conservation efforts for these threatened and endangered species was an awakening experience. This internship allowed me to gain a new perspective on what I wanted from my life. I got to leave everything behind in Virginia and go on this new adventure in Texas. I see now that USFWS is the place I want to build my career at. They are the group of people I want to call my colleagues. Everything they stand for and what they want to accomplish in the future, is what I want for myself. I graduate in December and after the experiences I've had with USFWS, my goal is to continue building a partnership with them by gaining employment. I just want to say thank you to Dr. Plag, Dr. Lobova, and Dr. Hill for getting me out of my comfort zone this summer and helping me throughout this whole process.

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