

Mighty Youth Conservation Corps Breaks Records



Pictured left to right are Tristan Smith, Riverside HS, Peter Bariteau, Chiefland HS, Tucker Woodward, Buchholz HS, and Dalton Koonce, Chiefland HS trimmed the River Trail. *Photo courtesy of Ranger Pam Darty.*

Summer work begins early in the morning for the Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) students at the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge. Before the sun makes it over the long leaf pines in the

forest, the ice is already in the cooler. Equipment for the day's work is loaded into the truck along with other essentials, but nothing that would attract bats.

The second day of work, the quartet set out to mow and weed-eat around the giant bat house, holding about 60,000 Brazilian free-tailed bats and all the baby bats born in May and June. The bat house was dripping with humidity; some bats were hanging very low, fanning their wings to cool off the babies. As soon as the weed-eater started up, babies slipped from their hold and had to fly for the first time or hit the grass. Within minutes they were landing on the Youth Conservation Corps crew and climbing up their uniform t-shirts. Close encounters of the baby-bat-kind was enlightening.

"The thumb-sized, smooth-furred bats aren't anything like we expected. The baby bats were actually very peaceful and gentle," said

Tucker Woodward, 2014 YCC Youth Leader. Most of their work is for the benefit of Refuge visitors, but it also protects habitat for the native creatures seeking refuge.

The new

observation deck they fashioned at AtsenaOtie provides an area for humans as well as roosting area for shorebirds like skimmers, terns, and pelicans. They installed blue bird boxes in the



Pictured clockwise are Peter Bariteau, Tristan Smith, Zachary Hubbard (intern), Tucker Woodward, Dalton Koonce, and Crew Boss Jason Coates pause a moment after bridge building on Shired Island Trail. *Photo courtesy of Ranger Pam Darty.*

Lower Suwannee NWR that are already being used by not only blue birds, but woodpeckers and other cavity nesters. Soon, they'll be erecting two new bat houses and a large bridge over the new trail adjacent to Refuge Headquarters.

“No matter what project we set out to do, I never have to tell them how to do it”, reports Crew Boss Jason Coates. “If I do give them direction, it's to slow down in this summer heat and humidity. We're always concerned with their safety.”

...submitted by Ranger Pam Darty