

UCF Newsroom

ANIMAL REFUGE WORK IS REAL-WORLD PRACTICE

By Erika Finnimore

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As long as Samantha Hynes has a watermelon in hand, Koko, a rescued emu, will strut toward the fence intently.

On other days, Hynes lets a baby possum, mostly blind and in poor health, loose from his cage to play in the grass.

Hynes and six other University of Central Florida students are spending their summer as interns at Back to Nature Wildlife Refuge and Education Center in Bithlo. Hynes, who is from Orlando, will be a junior Psychology major at UCF this fall.

The students, who aspire to have careers working with animals, are caring for abandoned, injured and infant animals.

“For most people, the idea of working alongside raccoons, baby possums, birds, reptiles and other creatures is surreal,” said Hynes, who wants to be a zoologist. “For us, this is real-world practice.”

Dedicated to the rescue and rehabilitation of more than 2,000 injured and orphaned animals each year, Back to Nature is the largest nonprofit animal refuge in Central Florida. While most animals are rehabilitated and released back into the wild, some with permanent injuries cannot survive in the wild and stay at the facility. Through their stories, they help educate the public.

Back to Nature houses more than 50 permanent residents, including deer, goats, arctic foxes and a cougar.

Passionate about animals since the age of three, Alex Orfinger, a junior Biology major, began interning at Back to Nature after rescuing an injured baby bird on campus. The Ormond Beach native searched for a wildlife hospital and took the bird to Back to Nature to be healed.

Since beginning his internship, Orfinger has learned how to handle emergency medical situations with animals and even helped perform surgery on birds.

“Caring for the animals is such a great hands-on experience,” he said.

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The experience has reinforced Orfinger's desire to work in conservation and help preserve species of reptiles and amphibians.

After her internship ends, Hynes hopes to volunteer at Back to Nature and get involved in other opportunities, such as campus clubs and research, pertaining to helping injured and sick animals.

"It's very rewarding simply to feel that you are making a difference in the community and helping animals that otherwise would not make it," Hynes said.

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