

New FWC officers hit the woods and water

By Carol Pratt

They come from various backgrounds, but they all have one thing in common – the desire to protect the state’s natural resources. On Aug. 16, 34 diverse and determined recruits officially joined the ranks of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) to become conservation law enforcement officers.

FWC’s law enforcement commander, Col. Julie Jones, also praised the new officers.

“These officers are our new ambassadors,” Jones said. “They will help people, enforce Florida’s laws and educate those with whom they come in contact with about our great state and its natural resources.”

Ben Westrope, a squad leader at the academy, formerly worked in research at NOAA.

“I wanted to be outside with people and to continue to protect the resources,” Westrope said. “I’m ready to start working.”

Like Westrope, Naomii Tye is ready to start work. A former laboratory technician for the Florida Department of Agriculture, she was drawn to the FWC because of her love of the outdoors. She duck hunts and fishes for bass.

“As long as I can remember, I wanted to be a wildlife officer,” Tye said.

Sandra Blackburn formerly held a civilian position as hotel manager for the U.S. Army in Germany. A job with the FWC seemed like a good fit when she returned to the United States.

“I enjoy being outdoors,” Blackburn said. “I like educating and helping people.”

Hailing from Pensacola, William Suggs grew up hunting and fishing.

“I want to make sure my kids can enjoy the same things I did when I was a kid,” Suggs said.

In college, Suggs majored in criminology but realized he didn’t want to just drive around in a car on a regular beat. When he heard what FWC law enforcement had to offer, Suggs said, “That was it.”

After a year on the job, FWC Officer Doyle Cook returned to the academy as a counselor for this class. Cook, stationed in Southwest Florida, is glad he signed on with the FWC.

“I like the freedom of the job. I get to go to Big Cypress, the Everglades, patrol panther zones and go out on a boat in the Ten Thousand Islands,” Cook said. **FW**



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FWC Chairman Rodney Barreto (left), Lt. Gov. Jeff Kottkamp and Col. Julie Jones (right) present a diploma to Officer Chasen Yarborough, who also received the Achievement Award, named in memory of Officer Roy R. Burnsed Jr., who died in the line of duty in 2001.

Before earning that status, recruits had to complete 29 weeks of training, which included alligator handling, man-tracking, vessel operation, all-terrain vehicle driving, defensive tactics, boating safety enforcement and firearms.

FWC Commission Chairman Rodney Barreto praised the new officers.

“I’m extremely proud of this group of people,” Barreto said. “It’s not easy, but by successfully completing the academy, they have joined a professional organization dedicated to protecting the state’s precious natural resources.”

The elite group will be assigned to areas throughout Florida. As FWC officers, they will have the authority to enforce every law of the state, but enforcing fish and wildlife laws will be their primary function.

“Resource protection is what we do every day,” Jones said. “But these officers also are prepared to do their jobs in unexpected ways – whether it is helping people in hurricane-ravaged areas or assisting in search-and-rescue operations.”

The class started with 43 recruits, but nine dropped out. The recruits who made it are eager to get to work.

WARNING:

Do not try this at home!

One of the days most anticipated by FWC law enforcement recruits and trainers is the hands-on alligator capture and handling class.

Left: Benjamin Westrope discovers capturing even a small alligator with a catch pole can prove a challenge. **Right:** Sandra Blackburn practices subduing an alligator by holding its jaws shut. **Below:** Alligators can move extremely quickly and surprise the most experienced handlers, as instructor Ken Hensley kindly illustrates for the class.



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