



Summer student Sydney Cantu presenting info about Wagner Natural Area at Migratory Bird Day event, May 14, 2022

## Field work in a unique protected area solidifies student's passion for working in conservation

**S**YDNEY CANTU'S EDUCATION WAS enriched by her summer employment at the Wagner Natural Area Society (WNAS), where she was able to apply what she has learned in her university coursework to environmental conservation "up close and personal" in the field.

"I have learned a huge amount of environmental and personal knowledge that I could never have learned in a classroom or from a book," says Sydney, age 21, who is in the final year of her four-year Environmental Studies program at the University of Alberta in Edmonton.



WAGNER NATURAL AREA SOCIETY,  
ACHESON, ALBERTA

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Summer student Sydney Cantu taking a break during weeding at a naturalization ecosite on old hayfield at Wagner Natural Area, August 20, 2022

The non-profit WNAS is the Volunteer Steward of the Wagner Natural Area (WNA) – with a mission to ensure the preservation and the biological diversity of the area for educational, scientific and research purposes. The WNA is a protected wetland of boreal forest located in Parkland County near Edmonton. With a varied mix of trees, vegetation and ponds, it is home to amphibians, butterflies, birds, insects and even orchids. The WNAS celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2022.

“We like to look at ourselves as an environmental gem, a one-of-a-kind area that allows people to see boreal forest vegetation and wildlife up close,” says Dave Ealey, past president of the WNAS. “I refer to it as my place of spiritual nourishment, and that’s what we want to offer to the people who come here.”

The WNAS hired Sydney as a natural area specialist for the 2022 summer term with funding support from the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association (CPRA) Youth Employment Experience program, which provides young people with experience in the parks and recreation sector while helping organizations augment their capacity to provide services to their community.

“Nearing the end of my studies, I wanted to immerse myself in the work of a conservation non-profit, to learn on the ground what it takes to manage a protected natural area,” says Sydney.

She plunged into numerous field work assignments: planning and implementing a management strategy for invasive species, maintain the public trails and working on research projects such as auditory amphibian monitoring and a breeding bird survey. “It was amazing to get so close to



Summer student Sydney Cantu investigating unoccupied wildlife den on Wagner Natural Area, May 2022

the animals and plants that give the area its diversity – even the tiniest budding flowers. And I certainly learned that you have to get up very, very early to find the birds and do bird banding!”

Public education was her favourite part of the job. She spoke at six nature- and conservation-themed events at various locations around Edmonton including at parks and a day camp. “It was especially rewarding to interact with children – to see how they ate up all the knowledge I shared about everything from migratory birds to the importance of wetlands and how to protect them.”

The CPRA funding that allowed the WNAS to hire Sydney was extremely valuable, says Dave, who was Sydney’s supervisor and mentor for the summer. “We’re a small organisation, and we don’t have a foundation to help provide funding. This CPRA program allowed us to not only to build Sydney’s skills but to increase our connections to the broader community through her valuable work.”

“It’s really gratifying to be able to pass on the knowledge I’ve gained over the years in different careers to young environmental specialists like Sydney and to help them advance in their careers,” Dave adds. I think I may have actually convinced her better appreciate those early summer mornings!”

Working at the WNA has indeed helped Sydney crystallize her plans for the future.

“This experience has inspired me even further to work in some aspect of environmental conservation as I move forward with my career,” she says. 🍁