

Outside the Shell

Jennifer Terry

By Cynthia Robinson Photography by Mike Force Photography

With a previous internship at the Wetlands Institute in Stone Harbor, New Jersey, and a bachelor's degree in animal behavior under her belt, Jennifer Terry was looking for the next step in establishing a career. When she saw the diamondback terrapin husbandry AmeriCorps member opening at the Georgia Sea Turtle Center on Jekyll Island, she knew she found it.

"I've always felt connected to nature and animals and knew I wanted to pursue something in animal conservation," said Jennifer, who volunteered as an animal care intern at the Philadelphia Zoo as a teen. "When I saw the opening, I knew it was a great opportunity."

Although she had never been to our area, she has hit the ground running since arriving last September 1. Each member in an AmeriCorps position completes a term of service of either six months or a year—the diamondback terrapin husbandry position always lasts a year. "With all the work and lifting things all the time, including the tubs where the sea turtles are rehabbed, this job has literally made me a stronger person," she laughed. "As a student, I was used to being a couch potato. After a got here, I became a lot more active and also eat healthier now."

For her first six months, Jennifer has been learning the ins and outs of working at the Center. "I've learned daily upkeep—feeding, cleaning tubs, giving injections and how to safely grab the turtles. We are also trained to assist in surgeries, and I have learned how to ventilate the animals. I also take and process blood. Another big part is interacting with visitors and answering questions. I really enjoy that."

This month Jennifer will embark on her primary job of working with the diamondback terrapins, which begin nesting on the Island every April. Unlike sea turtles, the diamondbacks are aquatic turtles that live in the salt marsh. Their most significant threat on Jekyll comes from motor vehicle traffic on the causeway.

"Starting mid-April I'll spend five days a week, all day, on the causeway in the diamondback's primary nesting area. Nesting is our biggest concern. We will get information on the nesting turtles and ID ones that haven't already been identified. Then we will work to safely get them to either go back to the marsh or to one of the nesting boxes along the causeway. There are thousands of diamondbacks on Jekyll, and they can run away quickly!"

She said her favorite part of working at the Center is when she joins the staff in releasing former patients back into the wild. "When our patients first come here, they don't look so good – they look sad. Being a part of their rehab is truly amazing and seeing them swim or crawl away is a little bittersweet, but makes everything worthwhile."

While working at the Center consumes most of her time, when she's off, Jennifer loves exploring Jekyll and the surrounding area. "I love going for walks—it's great to pop in my earbuds and go to Driftwood Beach. I also just visited Horton Pond for the first time and got to see turtles and alligators sunning themselves. Tupelo Trail is also very nice—sometimes I bring a book out there. I love reading outside."

Being on Jekyll has also led to side trips to St. Simons, Amelia Island and Savannah, where one of her friends attends Savannah College of Art & Design. "I also got to go to the Florida Keys to a conference in Marathon. I met a lot of former AmeriCorps members at the conference – so many of them have gone on to do bigger things."

Jennifer said her quest for bigger things will probably involve a management or coordinator position enabling her "to make significant things happen for animals and the environment." Regardless of which path her career takes, teaching the importance of conservation will be at the forefront of whatever she does. "Everyone can make a difference—even if it's just putting trash and recycling in the correct containers."

After her term at the Sea Turtle Center ends, attending graduate school is probably Jennifer's next step. She feels her time at the Center will be a great way to prepare. "I've learned a lot and I'm still learning. I didn't know anyone here, and now I've made so many new friends. And the nature here is so amazing. I can't believe I get to step outside and experience this every day. This is really the first thing I've done on my own, and it's one of the best decisions I've ever made."



Up Close:

Hometown: Berlin, N.J., just outside Philadelphia

Education: Bachelor's degree with a minor in environmental studies from Bucknell University. "They have a non-invasive primate lab, as well as bat research and other options. The Red panda is my go-to animal, but I'm also really big into herpetology (reptiles and amphibians)."

What's Cooking: "I love, love to cook and like experimenting. I started out making soup with my mom and grandmother. I like a well-stocked fridge!"

Other Love: Jennifer sings and was member of her college's A Capella group, Beyond Unison.

AmeriCorps at the Georgia Sea Turtle Center: They've hosted 99 AmeriCorps members since 2009, 41 have completed multiple terms of service, they've come from 37 states and 34 attend or have finished graduate school.



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