

## What I Have Learned As An Intern by Taylor Mellin

As an intern, I gained invaluable first hand knowledge of the Happy Hollow Foundation's three core pillars: conservation, education, and play. Not only did I learn about these concepts, but I also saw them actively put into practice, which revealed the deep passion and commitment of those who keep the foundation thriving.

Across the park and through its programs, the message of conservation is clear, caring for animals, our planet, and our community. One notable initiative is Monarch Meadow, a project that provides a safe space for pollinators like monarch butterflies, squirrels, and birds. This area is filled with native plants that offer food and shelter, which is especially vital for monarchs, as their populations are rapidly declining. The meadow supports them during their long migrations by offering a protected and nourishing habitat.



The focus on education is grounded in making people, especially children, feel valued while ensuring accessibility. For example, Title I schools are invited to the park free of charge. Many of these students may have never seen such animals in person. At Happy Hollow, they engage in hands-on learning, connecting classroom topics like Earth science to real life experiences. These lessons stick with them far more than textbooks alone ever could. Around the park, signs explain how visitors can help protect the animals shown in each exhibit, reinforcing the idea that individual actions matter and can positively impact the world.

This educational mission also extends to corporate involvement. When companies volunteer, such as helping plant gardens, they build team bonds and leave with a sense of pride. Later, when employees visit with their families, they can see the lasting results of their contributions. The park, in turn, benefits from the help, creating a mutually rewarding relationship. Play is another essential pillar. As an AZA-accredited facility, an honor considered the gold standard, Happy Hollow ensures top-quality care for its animals. A key part of this is enrichment, or mental and physical stimulation. Through fundraising and creative solutions, staff tailor daily enrichment activities to each species. Macaws might have toys hung above them to encourage problem-solving, while the jaguar receives strong new toys to engage with. Every animal is given unique enrichment opportunities every day, which is no small task, but the staff makes it a priority, knowing how vital it is to the animals' well being.

The Happy Hollow Foundation also creates opportunities for people to play, regardless of age. The Senior Safari program, running strong for 11 years, allows adults aged 50 and up to enjoy the park with free admission. From 9 to 10 a.m., the park is open exclusively to seniors, providing a peaceful and playful environment without children. This program runs from May to October and helps reduce isolation while fostering joy and community connection among older adults. Another standout program supports children and their CASAs (Court Appointed Special Advocates). These children, often facing trauma, are invited to the park free of charge along with their advocate. They receive a healthy meal, time to play, and opportunities to connect with nature, all elements known to support healing. In fact, this experience offers five of the seven key markers shown to aid recovery from trauma: exposure to nature, mindfulness, play, community support, and proper nutrition.

Overall, my time at the Happy Hollow Foundation gave me insight into how impactful a mission driven organization can be when it lives out its values. Seeing conservation, education, and play not just talked about but lived through programs and people was inspiring. I leave this internship not only more informed but deeply motivated to carry these values forward.