This summer I worked for the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, a federal organization within the Department of the Interior. The agency manages our nation’s 560 National Wildlife Refuges that are scattered throughout every state. I was an intern at the Ernest F. Hollings ACE Basin National Wildlife Refuge. The ACE Basin is a tidal estuary that is located at the confluence of the Ashepoo, Combahee, and Edisto rivers. Named after Indian tribes that survived off the resources provided by the rivers, the basin has a total area of 350,000 acres, to which the national wildlife refuge is just 12,000 acres. During the colonial era, the ACE basin consisted of numerous rice plantations that were later sold to wealthy sportsmen because of it’s rich habitat, productive ecosystems, and abundant wildlife. Today the refuge is a protected wildlife area managed to protect the extremely diverse ecosystems such as rice fields, hardwoods forest, fresh and saltwater marshes, etc. My responsibilities were hands-on experiences and always involving wildlife. A major theme of my internship was providing and maintaining a suitable habitat for flora and fauna. Whether I was working with wood ducks, doves, feral hogs, deer, Chinese tallow tree, or long leaf pine trees, I was always doing something that would benefit the environment.
During my time at the wildlife refuge, I had a variety of responsibilities that were both challenging and educating. I was completely in charge of the wood duck and mourning dove banding. By placing little metal bands with serial numbers on the two different species’ foot, biologists can estimate population size, population growth, the health of the population, etc. Every morning around 5:30 a.m., I would roll out of bed and into the utility vehicle I drove all summer. I would then use wheat as bait for wood ducks and doves. The annual quota is 100 bands per species. I completed the dove banding and had 95 ducks banded when I left! Even though I lacked 5 ducks of reaching the quota, I believe Larry Hartis, the head biologist, is working on catching the last 5.

I had two other major responsibilities: feral hog eradication and “cruising timber”. Feral hogs displace native populations such as deer and are horrible for property management. Through extensive reconnaissance, I was able to pinpoint where and how many pigs were coming onto the property. After weeks of baiting the feral pigs with corn and figuring out which trapping technique worked best, the pigs were finally removed from the property.

“Cruising Timber” is a slang word in the forestry world for determining which trees need to be cut in a block of woods. Though “cruising timber” sounds like it could be an easy and fun activity, I quickly learned that it requires a great deal of endurance. Walking through the snake, mosquito, and spider-ridden forests in 100-degree heat can be mentally and physically exhausting. I determined which size and species of trees needed to be cut in certain blocks of land. Some blocks were
managed for longleaf pine or loblolly pine, and some were managed for hardwoods.

It served as the stepping-stone for my career in forestry. I learned that cruising timber is something I enjoy, but would not like to do my entire life.

The knowledge I gained from this summer is endless. Some of my accomplishments include learning different species of frog sounds, operating machinery, learning different plant species, being able to identify species of birds in midflight. I even learned which species of ticks or flies that bit me by examining the bite marks on my skin. My boss, Jason Craig, is a federal wildlife officer whose knowledge of the woods was extremely helpful. He knew the answers to some very obscure questions I had involving plant and dragonfly species.

There were negative parts to the internship, but that is to be expected. The amount of ticks and bug bites I got this summer was shocking. No matter how much bug spray or how many layers I wore, I always pulled at least 2 ticks off my body per day. Some people may view that as gross or dangerous, but I view it as a sign that I have spent time in the woods that I love. The heat and humidity of the low country was suffocating at times. Hydration was another hurdle to overcome and I often had to drink a water bottle per hour.

Prior to attending the internship with the Fish and Wildlife Service, I knew my career path involved forests, nature, and wildlife. I have now learned that I would prefer to work for a private company or agency. I felt limited to what I could do and what I could legally operate while working for the federal government. For example, I have cut grass using a ride-on lawn mower my entire life. But on the
refuge I was unable to cut grass because I had not taken the safety and operating
class. I was unable to use a chainsaw and a weed eater as well. Some may view this
as a blessing in disguise, but I felt restricted because I have been using landscaping
tools for a long time. This internship was truly a life-changing experience, and I
could not have asked for a better atmosphere and co-workers.