

Name of Award:

2018 Hiram M. Chittenden Award for Interpretive Excellence

Name of Nominee:

Blake A. Johnson

Position Title, Series, Grade:

Natural Resource Specialist, GS-0401-09

Organization, Location, and Mailing Address:

CESAW-OP-LRJ

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

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Hiram M. Chittenden Award for Interpretive Excellence
Executive Summary
Blake A. Johnson
B. Everett Jordan Dam & Lake

Ranger Blake Johnson is relatively new to the Corps of Engineers, only being with the organization for four years, however he has had a noteworthy impact on B. Everett Jordan Lake and the Wilmington District's outreach program. He started his career as a Pathways Intern at Falls Lake while attending North Carolina State University. Upon graduation in 2017, Ranger Johnson was converted to an outreach role as a permanent Natural Resource Specialist position at B. Everett Jordan Lake, Falls Lake's sister project. Blake has found a true niche and great enjoyment in interpreting the natural world and the Corps' role in it over the past few years.

Ranger Johnson has made great strides in increasing B. Everett Jordan Lake's online presence, doubling our Facebook followers in 2018 and creating the Wilmington District's first Instagram account. This method of communication via social media has been essential, since the Piedmont of North Carolina has been plagued with high rainfall totals due to Hurricane Florence in September, 2018. The numerous rainfall events caused downstream river levels and Jordan Lake to rise, and on five separate occasions, boat ramps and campgrounds had to be closed, creating a great deal of stress for both the recreating public upstream and landowners downstream.

Blake's skillful ability to interpret water management data, flood release plans, and lake level forecasts for a diverse audience through social media platforms is impressive to say the least. Unfortunately, social media can bring out the worst in people, allowing them to freely express opinions that are not always courteously written. Ranger Johnson diligently addresses each and every comment or concern, typically within hours of receipt. Often, these online posts lead to phone calls to the Jordan Dam Visitor Center from the public, as well. Blake often handles these calls, usually from people who are scared about rising water levels. He demonstrates integrity every step of the way in his interactions, providing information and listening empathetically to their frustrations. Because of his effective communication with the public, he quickly earned the trust of his supervisory team to tell the Corps Story.

Blake has also been proactive in creating new relationships with partners and enriching existing ones, adding more than 14 events to our outreach calendar, most of which he staffed. He also re-worked school programs to include the Every Kid in a Park pass and ensured the programs met the North Carolina Standards of Learning. In addition, Ranger Johnson focuses on programs and events that show children and their families what careers are available in the natural resource management field. And, of course, his efforts spotlight what it's like to be a Park Ranger for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers!

Taking the reins of the outreach program that hadn't had a ranger lead for years, Ranger Johnson took it upon himself to evaluate what the current program offered, and how he could make it better. With boundless energy, he is constantly looking for ways to improve existing outreach efforts or create new ones.

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Citation

Blake A. Johnson

B. Everett Jordan Dam & Lake

Ranger Blake A. Johnson has made significant impacts on visitors and the recreating public in the Raleigh-Durham area. He is passionate about getting the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' story out to the public in any way he can and looking for new and creative ways to reach the public every day. Blake has a true passion for inspiring the next generation, focusing his efforts on providing children valuable opportunities to learn about careers in natural resource management. As a sincere role model, he demonstrates the Army Values of Selfless Service, Integrity, and Honor in everything he does, from daily interactions with visitors, to social media posts, to planning and working outreach events, where he interacts with hundreds of people. Blake Johnson is to be commended for his refusal to accept an outreach program that is merely good and relentlessly works to make B. Everett Jordan Lake's outreach program great.

Creativity and Originality

Ranger Blake Johnson has only been an Outreach Ranger for two years, but has revived a stagnant outreach program one great idea at a time. One of the most effective changes Ranger Johnson made to B. Everett Jordan Lake's outreach program was in the current method of reaching out to schools to advertise interpretive programs. Typically, the staff advertises water safety programs to local schools in the spring, with reasonable results each year. Realizing this had been moderately effective and looking to better our results, Blake proactively visited county school administrator offices to get their input on the best ways was to reach out to teachers.

Based on those recommendations, Blake created an entirely new interpretive program, directed at fourth graders that covered both water safety and environmental education topics to fit within the North Carolina Standards of Learning. Targeting fourth graders also allowed him to incorporate the Every Kid in a Park (EKiP) passes. Along with the change to the programs offered to schools, he took a chance and advertised programs at the beginning of the school year, instead of traditional springtime. The changes he incorporated were tremendously successful, allowing hundreds of local fourth graders to hear a water safety and environmental education message from a USACE ranger and receive an EKiP pass.

Not only did Blake revamp programs for local schools, he also gave USACE rangers new opportunities to participate in outreach events that allowed us to impact our greater community and stretch beyond project borders. One area in particular that he's passionate about is career-focused events for children. Blake has found opportunities to put together a USACE booth at several events hosted by partners that focus on different jobs and careers paths. The target group is often families with elementary school children. His "Be a Park Ranger" photo op booth is a huge hit! The kids (and parents!) get to dress up like a USACE Ranger and get a photo in front of a backdrop of Jordan Lake. They do all of this while learning how cool it is to be a Park Ranger!

Blake's determination paid off and, with his coordination, he and other rangers reached well over 4,000 visitors, school children, and community members in 2018.

Some of those interpretive contacts were made at the State and Area Envirothon. USACE Ranger staff has historically been involved with the North Carolina Envirothon, which is a natural resource management competition for middle and high school students that provides scholarship money for the top teams. Typically, USACE staff has taught and provided tests at both the local and state levels, and in 2018, Ranger Johnson was asked to become part of the team responsible for bringing the International Envirothon to North Carolina. He represents USACE on the planning committee and is the lead test writer for both the Aquatics section and Wildlife section. This is yet another example of how Ranger Johnson has taken previous efforts in outreach and challenged himself to increase USACE involvement.

Made a Positive Experience for Visitors

Blake has definitely made a substantial difference in how visitors experience B. Everett Jordan Lake. The B. Everett Jordan Dam, Tailrace Fishing Area, and Visitor Center are in a rural region and, while we do have regular visitors, these areas have never been a true destination at Jordan Lake, other than bank fishing, bird watchers, and folks buying annual passes. We do not get the visitation that a typical day-use area with large shelters or a swim beach might. Again, not one to be daunted, one of Blake's long-term goals is to make the Visitor Center and Tailrace destinations for the recreating public and increase our visitation. He has several big ideas to get us there that he hopes to phase in over the next several years. He began that process in 2018 with a simple interpretive program that was wildly successful.

There is a healthy group of birdwatchers who comes to the Tailrace and Visitor Center areas to watch for the bald eagles, herons, and osprey. To capitalize on his current audience's interests, Blake organized a Birds of Prey interpretive program at the Visitor Center's underutilized amphitheater. He organized a Saturday afternoon program and contacted a local gentleman, who happens to have several species of birds of prey in captivity. Advertising on Facebook, lake bulletin boards, and public places like the local post office, Blake attracted nearly 50 people to attend the program. This may not sound like much, however, Jordan Lake has never hosted a successful stand-alone interpretive program at our Visitor Center. So, a turn-out of 50 people, without the help of a captive audience in a campground or typical day-use area, was a noteworthy success! This event, simple as it was, brought in plenty of folks who were there just to see some birds of prey, but walked away with a better understanding of who the Corps is, and what Jordan Lake has to offer.

Though most of Jordan Lake's recreation areas are leased to the State of North Carolina, Blake works to impact visitors at the State Park day-use areas and swim beaches, as well. One of the most successful water safety initiatives has been our life jacket loaner stations that provide nearly 200 life jackets for use by those who come to the NC State Park swim beaches at Jordan Lake. The program is nearly 20 years old and still going strong. However, when Blake took over the program and recognized that dwindling recreation budgets made it difficult to continue to provide the life jackets, he went looking for a willing partner. What he found was an existing good relationship with Chatham County Safe Kids that he made even better. Again, demonstrating his uncanny knack for taking a good program and making it better, Blake secured life jackets for our loaner program from Safe Kids that were free of charge to USACE. Not only did he secure life jackets, but he was also got several water safety billboards posted around Jordan Lake, with funding provided by Chatham County Safety Kids.

Enhancement of the Public's Understanding of USACE and B. Everett Jordan Lake

This criteria is where Ranger Johnson shines. Since he came on permanently in 2017, Blake had been working steadily on utilizing social media as a tool for educating the public. Blake began updating Jordan Lake's Facebook site with lake level and release information, flora and fauna facts, or even trivia questions for followers to answer – all in an effort to increase Jordan Lake's digital footprint. In 2018, he was successful in more than doubling Jordan Lake's followers on Facebook. However, that wasn't enough for him. Knowing Facebook only reaches a fraction of those online, Blake gained permission from the Wilmington District Public Affairs Office to create a Jordan Lake Instagram account, as well. Jordan Lake now has the first Instagram account in the Wilmington District. That account has exploded with popularity and given USACE another platform to reach people.

2018 gave Blake multiple opportunities to sharpen his outreach skills via social media, time and time again. In the fall and winter of 2018, B. Everett Jordan Lake was flooded multiple times, with little relief from heavy rainfall and high water both at the lake and, subsequently, downstream. He worked tirelessly to keep Jordan Lake's social media platforms updated with flood releases, lake level information, and recreation area and boat ramp closures. By posting this information, he not only kept the public informed, but opened us up to questions, and sometimes criticisms of flood operations. These questions, and even criticisms, were all taken in stride, and Blake used each and every one as a learning opportunity for the Facebook user and others who might read his response. He represents B. Everett Jordan Lake with the utmost integrity, while interpreting the Corps Mission.

One final initiative worth noting is one that has been in planning stages through 2018, with a launch date of April 2019. Blake is currently planning for a brand new event to be hosted at the Jordan Lake Visitor Center. The event, called the Environmental Futures Fair, brings together professionals in the natural resources management and/or outdoor recreation fields in one place. This event will build off of Blake's original idea of the "Be a Park Ranger" booth, but expands it to include many of our partners at Jordan Lake and beyond. It's included here because the up-front work of gathering partners, securing experts to lead interpretive programs, and advertising efforts all happened in 2018.

Ranger Johnson said it best, "Our goal is to expose youth, as well as families, to a wide array of outdoor-oriented careers and to volunteer opportunities in their communities that benefit the outdoors. Growing up, I wanted a career in nature but knew little about how to get there so this is my chance to help others make a choice."

How many times as Park Rangers have we been told by a visitor, "I always wanted to be a Park Ranger!" This ambitious event, put together entirely by Ranger Blake Johnson, will give kids and their parents the opportunity to see what careers are available to them. Maybe some of those kids we see at the Environmental Futures Fair will be inspired to become our next generation of USACE Park Rangers!



