
Ding Darling Update

◆ January 2025



The University of Iowa Special Collections & Archives have been hard at work on the Ding Darling Papers, and preparing for the Fall 2026 exhibit. See what we've been up to!

Hello everyone!

My name is Collin Vandewalle, and I have reached out to you all before about the University of Iowa Libraries' 2026 Ding Darling exhibit. I hope that you all have had a great holiday season! Seeing as it is now 2025, we thought it would be a good time to send out a refresher about the exhibit and discuss some of the updates to the project. It is our plan to continue to send out these updates semi-regularly to make sure everyone is on the same page.

The Exhibit Plan:

At the start of every semester, the University of Iowa Libraries presents a major exhibition in the Main Library Gallery. Each exhibition is a collaboration between a team of Library staff and guest curators, and usually includes complementary online resources, public programming, and class visits.

In fall 2026, my supervisor, Lindsay Moen (Lead Public Services Librarian in UI Libraries Special Collections and Archives) and I (graduate student in the University's SLIS program and assistant in the special collections) will be co-curating the exhibit on J.N. "Ding" Darling. It will be in honor of what would be his 150th birthday.

We are building the exhibit around 3 main themes. We want to first highlight Darling himself and showcase his incredible efforts in conservation. The second is the idea of legacy and how important it was to Darling. He created many institutions that outlived him. It has been 63 years since he passed, and we want to show how these institutions/ideas he created have continued to thrive in that time. Finally, we want to look at this idea of legacy mainly through environmental conservation. With climate change rampantly affecting our planet, this is the time to highlight the messages left by Darling.



ORIGINAL DING DARLING WATERCOLORS FOR CONSERVATION OF WILDLIFE STAMPS

We want to showcase the incredible work that has been done to help preserve wildlife in this country while also emphasizing how all that work is in danger of being lost, especially here in Iowa. We want to leave people with a sense of warning about our future environment, but with glimmers of hope for how we can fix it.

We will be not only creating the physical exhibit but also event programming as well as multiple online resources. An example of these resources will be a 150-year timeline starting with the birth of Ding. The timeline will include a point of information for every single year of that timespan. It will start with Ding's life and then after 1962 will highlight what his legacy institutions have done in the time since his death. The final year will cap with the celebration of this exhibit! As we continue to refine the exhibit, we will keep you updated.

What has been completed:

2024 was a very productive year for exhibit planning. Before starting the big pieces of the narrative, we wanted to first get to know Ding Darling and update of the collection materials at the University Libraries. Lindsay and I spent a great deal of time reading through his writings and his biography, studying the original cartoons, and meeting with experts. We have been in contact with leading Darling expert, Sam Koltinsky, who will be advising us throughout the entire research process. I have thoroughly enjoyed learning more about Darling and uncovering interesting or humorous stories about him. For example, did you know that Darling helped stage what FDR called the largest raid of the US treasury? Or that Darling's first job out of college was reporting on cadavers found in the Missouri river? Or how about the time he asked his secretary to chloroform a turtle? All these stories and more will be highlighted in the exhibit!



CONSERVATION STAFF HARD AT WORK TREATING DING'S ORIGINAL WATERCOLORS

While we were doing this research, we also were undergoing reprocessing of the entire collection in Special Collections and Archives. This reprocessing included creating new storage containers for all of the original cartoons, and re-boxing material that had not been changed in 50 years. The final step of the reprocessing saw us reorganize our finding aid in ArchivesSpace, our online platform that the public can use to view what is in our manuscript collections. We are thankful that we did this work because, to our horror, we found that an entire index of correspondence had been mistakenly left out of our finding aid for over a decade. Everything is now integrated into the new finding aid, which should fully be completed by this summer, including new content that was not described before. You can look through it for yourself [here](#).

The final area that we have been working on has been to reach out to all of you. It has been quite a rewarding experience to see how many institutions are excited to help us celebrate Ding and his conservationist legacy. We hope to continue to find more stakeholders to make sure we include as much of his legacy as possible.

Spring 2025 Goals:

As the new spring semester begins, we are in the early stages of creating the content for the exhibit. By the end of this semester, we hope to have the first draft of narrative text completed. The sections of the exhibit that are being worked on right now include: 1800s Iowa to give context for when Darling was born, the life of Ding Darling, the Duck Stamp, and the beginning of the legacy portion with a case on Shirley Briggs, Rachel Carson, and 100 Grannies (a local Iowa City group focused on a livable future). Once the text has been completed, and images have been collected, we will be starting the layout process.

We will also be meeting regularly with the Main Library Gallery's Exhibition and Engagement Coordinator, Sara Pinkham, to discuss the overall exhibit goals and look ahead at programming ideas.

Finally, we will be reaching out to more groups and institutions that have connections to the legacy of Ding Darling. We want to make sure we are as transparent about this exhibit as possible, and so it is imperative to us that everyone who has a stake in Darling's legacy has their voice heard or is recognized.



**[STILL LIFE WITH CHRYSANTHEMUMS]
WATERCOLOR BY DING DARLING**

Helpful Links

- Learn about the Main Library Gallery where the exhibit be hosted in Fall 2026:
<https://www.lib.uiowa.edu/gallery/>
- See the new and improved finding aid to the Ding Darling Papers:
<https://aspace.lib.uiowa.edu/repositories/2/resources/4332>
- View the Jay N. Darling Legacy Center powered by Ding expert Sam Koltinsky:
<https://jaydarlinglegacycenter.org/>



Final Words:

We are very excited about the trajectory of this exhibit, and the message it can carry. As a graduate student it has been such an amazing experience to be able to work on this event with you all. Thank you for showing an interest in this project, and we cannot wait to continue this partnership between so many fantastic institutions. I want to end this with a quote from Darling himself about the need of a united front for conservation

"The conclusion is obvious that in the relationship between government and conservation, we have a parallel in the chemists' laboratory when two elements, though in proximity, refuse to react on each other until a catalyst is introduced. Just so, governmental agencies and conservation requires a catalyst—and that catalyst is a public educated in the fundamentals of conservation. Desirable as national planning undoubtedly is, it must have an informed public well versed in history to make it work."
(Relationship of our government to conservation, Ding Darling)

We will also be reaching out in the future individually as we get closer to the exhibit opening in Fall 2026. In the meantime, if you have any questions or input that you would like to share, feel free to reach out to us at these email addresses:

Thank you for reading!

Contact Us:

Lindsay Moen (Lead Public Services Librarian and Co-curator)- Lindsay-moen@uiowa.edu

Sara Pinkham (Exhibition and Engagement Coordinator)- sara-pinkham@uiowa.edu

Collin Vandewalle (Graduate Assistant and Co-curator)- collin-vandewalle@uiowa.edu

University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections and Archives- lib-spec@uiowa.edu