

It Shows



Achieving your childhood dreams and going even further is quite a feat! Craig Hicks has done just that. We have followed him from his time as an undergraduate at Penn State DuBois to work with bog turtles and golden-winged warblers to wildlife management with the USDA. In this piece of his story, he tells about embarking on a different aspect of his career as a WILDLIFE DISEASE BIOLOGIST for the National Wildlife Disease Surveillance and Emergency Response Program of USDA, APHIS, Wildlife Services.

Penn State in your career—it shows.



“The last week of my position as Wildlife Biologist at Cleveland-Hopkins International Airport was spent at the Bird Strike Conference in Canada. The conference brings together people, throughout the world, who deal with bird strikes at airports. The event showcases new methods, new products, and research being conducted. The first time I attended the conference was after I had been in the airport job a week. This time I felt like I knew what was going on and I presented one paper and co-authored another.

I had made it to the position of the people I had admired at the first conference. It was a ‘heady’ experience.” says Craig, reflecting about his last days in the position in Cleveland, Ohio.

The paper presented (“Managing Bird Populations at an Incompatible Land Use near an Airport: Dike 10B Confined Disposal Facility”) dealt with a year-long demonstration project to reduce wildlife hazards to aircraft. There was a rather large piece of property, adjacent to the

airport, that needed to be managed. An inter-agency agreement was signed with the other federal agency that owned the land. A variety of techniques were used, e. g., harassment, exclusion, dead gull effigies, and habitat modification to manage the wildlife population on the land and reduce bird strikes at the airport. The results were amazing with an 86% reduction in gulls actively utilizing the facility during the study. The paper that I co-authored (“Dead-Bird Effigies: A Nightmare for Gulls?”) evaluated the efficacy of dead gull effigies on this same property. (To review a copy of the papers, go to www.birdstrikecanada.com and click on “Papers from 2007 Conference”.)

“Here I was presenting the study methods and results to people I had gotten to know and admired at the first strike conference I attended. I felt so confident, in what I had done, that it was very easy to stand up and speak about it. The people I had looked up to came and asked questions and were very supportive. A gentleman from Taiwan wanted assistance in doing what we had done. Two state directors commented that my presentation had been one of the best there. It was a totally awesome experience and very different from the feelings I had had at the first conference.”

The conference ended on Friday; Craig began his new position in Columbus, OH the following Monday. No down time here!

Craig Hicks—Wildlife Disease Biologist

A first group of 23 disease biologists for the United States was hired in 2003; a second group of 21 began service in 2007. Craig had applied for a job in the first group, but was not selected. After applying again, Craig was chosen and became part of the second group.

One of the biggest challenges for Craig, as he joined the state office, was to delineate his role as wildlife biologist from that of veterinarians with whom he worked closely. He quickly discovered that while vets understand how to diagnose and deal with disease, they are not charged with managing diseases in wild populations. Craig found that he needed to learn to use resources of other agencies to achieve common goals. The key element is nurturing “collaboration” and bringing agencies together.

Craig regularly finds himself collaborating with the USDA’s Veterinary Services, the Ohio Division of Wildlife, the Ohio Department of Agriculture, the Ohio Department of Health, the Ohio State University and others.

As a Wildlife Disease Biologist, he will, for example, trap and sample feral hogs for surveillance of Classical Swine Fever, Swine Brucellosis, and Pseudorabies. Live-trapped, hunter-harvested, and sick or dying birds will be sampled to determine if they have the most severe form of Avian Influenza. Hunter-harvested deer will have their lymph nodes studied to determine if they have chronic wasting disease; this study is a collaborative effort with the Ohio Division of Wildlife. Furbearer blood samples will provide information regarding the prevalence of Tularemia. Many times, samples will be shuttled to labs by State pilots; that service saves driving time and ensures that samples are as fresh as possible when analyzed.



Goose sampling in the field

“On a typical day, I may find myself loading sampling

supplies and driving 2 hours to a hunter check station. Cloacal and oral samples from the ducks at the hunting station will be bar-coded, kept refrigerated and transported to a state lab for analysis. The bar-code information, sample data and lab submission information will be entered into the National Veterinary Services Laboratory (NVSL) data base; later the state lab will enter the test results into the NVSL data base as well. The different agencies have different roles to play.”

During the last hunting season, Craig, along with several other Wildlife Services’ and Ohio Division of Wildlife employees, collected over 1000 wild bird samples, as well as 575 environmental samples. Again, he must record all of the information about each sample into the data base and disseminate the results to all parties involved.

As he reflects on his first six months as a Wildlife Disease Biologist, Craig realizes how much he has accomplished and where he would like to go with the position.

“Ohio’s first Disease Biologist was responsible for both Indiana and Ohio and was based in West Lafayette, Indiana. Logistically, he could not spend as much time as he wanted in Ohio. He had put a large number of the pieces into play to start the Ohio disease program, but I had to make sure the pieces were “well-oiled”, organized and assembled properly. I tried to bring order to the sampling efforts, get the data bases in order and have the information entered correctly. One of the major things accomplished has been the writing of a standard operating procedures for sample collection and data entry for each disease. Being stationed at the state office, I am receiving more exposure to accounting, agreement writing, proposal development, hiring procedures and securing funding to expand programs. In the future, I would like to work more closely with our State counterparts to broaden the scope of disease surveillance throughout the state. Personally, I would like to gain more supervisory experience to help lead technicians through sampling projects and to prepare me for a future in the supervisory roles of our agency. The National Wildlife Disease Surveillance Program continues to serve as a model for around the globe and I feel privileged to be a part of it.”

Craig has gone far from his days at Penn State DuBois. However, some of the initial skills learned at DuBois form the very core of what he does today. “For example, we learned how to sample wild populations and how to handle the samples when we got them. The correct foundation was laid at Penn State DuBois and I’ve been using it ever since. The “conceptual” view of sampling presented at University Park would not have given me the foundation I needed for many of the jobs I have held. The hands-on understanding is critical.” indicates Craig. He has many other examples to share and will always be grateful to the people and program at Penn State DuBois who helped him get started in his career. “I try to give back to DuBois by returning to the campus and talking to students in the classes about the education I received there. I hope it helps them understand the great resource they have.”



College class instruction



Deer sampling to monitor for bovine tuberculosis

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