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Thursday, June 11, 2015

“A year of life after River Stewards”

Allie Rakowski, 2014 Cohort

It's been one year since graduating from the University of Dayton with a BS in Biology and SEE, minor. When friends and family ask me what I've been doing or what I've done since graduation I usually give them the short version, "I've been taking a few seasonal jobs and applying to graduate school." While that is true, it nowhere near encompasses the experiences I've had, the people I've met, and the landscapes that I've seen. Right after graduation I took an internship with the Ohio EPA in their surface water division in Columbus. I specifically worked under the Wetland Ecology Group where I got to assist two biologists and two other interns in taking National Wetland Condition Assessments (NWCA) and Ohio Rapid Assessment Methods (ORAM) of Wetlands. Basically, these assessments grade different aspects of a wetland such as hydrology, vegetation, soils, buffer area, and more to determine wetland class and health. I learned so much about each assessment method, soil profiling, and even got some lessons on bryophyte identification.



After working the summer on wetlands, I headed out to the prairies of Montana for the months of October and November. I was volunteering for an organization called Adventurers and Scientists for Conservation (ASC) on a project called Landmark. ASC partnered with the American Prairie Reserve to collect wildlife data. If you have not heard about the American Prairie Reserve, it is definitely worth looking up. In short, the American Prairie Reserve is an organization aimed at creating and managing a grassland reserve that could reach as far as three million acres. The reserve reintroduced bison in 2005 and will soon be nearing 500 total bison. Anyway, the six Landmark crew members lived on the reserve and our job as volunteers was to hike 8-12 mile transects and record field observations on wildlife. We would carry a

tablet, GPS and other equipment in the field and every time we saw an animal we would mark the location, number of animals, approximate age, health, behavior, and the direction it was moving. We were also responsible for maintaining motion-activated camera traps, which was always fun to review the footage to see what the camera caught. On these transects we were likely to see bison, pronghorn, mule deer, white-tailed deer, coyotes, bald eagles, golden eagles, rabbits, prairie dogs, sage grouse, sharp-tailed grouse and different species of hawk. On a more rare occasion, we'd catch a glimpse of a badger. Being on the prairie in a remote location was a completely new experience for me and it gave me a lot of time to take in the landscape and to reflect. I got to experience -20 degrees in November, see the Aurora borealis, see a black footed ferret (an endangered species), and meet some great people from all over the country and Germany. If you ever get the opportunity to visit Montana, don't forget about the prairie. They call the state Big Sky for a reason and the sun rises and sunsets are unrivaled.



The prairie was absolutely beautiful, but I was off again onto a different landscape. In February and March, two other technicians and I helped a University of Tennessee graduate student with his Elk Forage research project. We were tasked with taking vegetation data in North Cumberland Wildlife Management Area which is about an hour north of Knoxville. We would set up 40 meter transects and identify the vegetation (mainly trees) that crossed the transect and looked for evidence of deer and elk forage (basically if a branch had been chomped on). Since it was winter in the mountains of Tennessee we experienced quite a bit of snow and got to test our winter driving on unplowed mountain roads. We got to see a ton of white-tailed deer and turkey, practice our animal track identification, and we even glimpsed a few elk. Personally, I had never had any winter tree identification, so I was able to learn a great deal from the other techs and graduate student.



As for my most recent excursion, I will be heading up to northern Minnesota to work as a wildlife technician for the National Park Service. While I don't know what is entirely in store for me, I know I will be taking data on wildlife (such as grey wolves) using camera traps and hair snares. I'm really excited to be working for the National Park Service this summer and can't wait to meet the other wildlife techs that I'll be working with. And as for the future, I am currently applying to graduate schools for wildlife ecology or management.



While I can't say that this is a typical career path for a recent graduate, I can say that this was definitely the right one for me. It has been stressful constantly applying for jobs and not

knowing where I'll end up next, but I have seen some amazing things in the past year and have leaned more than I ever could have hoped for!

Cheers!

River Love

Allie Rakowski (2014 River Steward Cohort)

