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Biological Intern

I'll admit it now: coming to Great Meadows this summer, I was a bit nervous. Although this isn't my first encounter with the Fish and Wildlife Service—I worked for two summers with the YCC—it is my first chance to accomplish some “real” biological work in any capacity. Living away from home wasn't really worrying me that much, after all, I had just finished my first year at Cornell University studying Environmental Engineering, and had loved every minute of it! How much different could it be with eight other roommates, anyway? No, I would say that I was mainly worried that I would start working and realize that my passion wasn't in this field. For the past few years, I have been constructing my life around the premise that I am going to pursue a life in the field of conservation and biological research. And, to think that my first real exposure to what I perceived to be my future might not be as I pictured, was frightening.

Most of my peers are getting internships or jobs now to test the waters, so to say, to see what profession suits them. You could say that I am doing the same in taking this internship, but there is one key difference: I already had my heart set on working in this field. So, if I began and realized partway through the summer that this was not for me, then I would be back at square one as far as what I'm going to “do with my life”. Thinking about it now, I'd say that an attitude such as mine could be dangerous and a bit headstrong. It was probably this predetermined course of action which caused me the most grief; I hadn't left myself much room for wavering decisions.

However, this vision I have for myself did not form overnight. No, my story begins three years ago, at the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge. This is where I got my first taste of the Fish and Wildlife Service by working with the Youth Conservation Corps. I was sixteen, needed a job, and thought I would take a shot in the dark and apply. At the time, I was scarcely aware that there was even a National Wildlife Refuge just a 15 minute ride from my house.

What seemed inconsequential at the time—it was merely a summer job, what more could I expect?—turned out to be, I kid you not, life altering. Had I not been chosen for that summer's YCC group, there is no doubt in my mind that I would not be where I am today. I still had two years of high school ahead of me, and only the vaguest idea of what could possibly be so fulfilling as to pursue it long after my school days were over. My experiences while with the YCC showed me that THIS is what I wanted to do. Although I did not perform biological work as a YCC member, there were ample opportunities to help out the biologists with their projects. It was these experiences—combined with the absolute love and dedication everyone showed in their work—that sold me on a life of conservation biology.

At times, working with the YCC was little more than glorified manual labor, but I loved it enough to come back for more two summers later, this time as the Youth Leader. In the time that had passed since my previous work at the refuge, I had graduated high school and was eager for something new and exciting: my upcoming freshman year at college. My final summer at Parker River solidified my decision to pursue this field further in college, and it was through the relationships that I made there that I found out about the SCA and the Career Discovery Internship Program, which in turn lead me to the next chapter in my life, here at Great Meadows.

I can now say that, from day one, my experiences at Great Meadows have proven to be everything I was looking forward to, and more. There has not been a single moment when I have been at want for something to do, and I am grateful for that.

I didn't know quite what to expect upon arriving, but I had some ideas: Obviously, I would be outdoors; assignments would be tackled head-on; I would learn the finer details regarding this environment and its various habitats. With the projects that I have been a part of, to say that I accomplished all of those things would be an understatement. Looking back, I believe one of the best parts of this internship was the speed with which everyone begins to contribute to projects. A perfect example of this was my first day on the job, which was actually not even spent at Great Meadows; I went to Mashpee and conducted a vegetation survey. Despite having never done a vegetation survey before, no one questioned my ability to learn on the fly. By plunging into that task—like so many others—I was able to help from the start, and discovered that I was more capable than I initially thought.

If I were to tell anyone unaccustomed to field work half of my stories, they would write me off as crazy. Between marching into the colony of thousands of angry terns, pulling the four-speared beast otherwise known as water chestnut, and camping out on an island once used for aerial bombing practice, I would have to say part of me would agree with them. But, when I think about all of the incredible work that I have participated in, I realize how eye opening this summer really has been. In many cases, at the end of the day, I can safely say that what I did was truly a one-in-a-million opportunity. And, as wild as some of those things may seem to the uninitiated soul, to them, I say crazy is all relative.

Every day that I have spent here has been enlightening. Before arriving, I had, at best, rudimentary knowledge of any plant species. For an invasive species intern this could be seen as a major flaw, but I preferred to look at it as having plenty of room for improvement. I learned that there is quite the difference between textbook knowledge and field knowledge. Although both are useful, I was an amateur as far as field knowledge was concerned.

Thanks to the incredible guidance and helpful fun facts provided by Amber Carr, I learned about more native and non-native plants than I thought possible. Now I can proudly say that, in the span of a few months, I went from hardly knowing the difference between a Maple and an Oak (bad, I know) to being able to identify enough invasive plants to realize there are about 15 different species along River Road by the dorm. Having the knowledge to pick out the invasive species from among the natives is almost like a curse; once you know which plants don't belong, it's as if they are leering at you, overtaking all the native vegetation. It's no longer a game of what doesn't belong, but a game of what DOES?

Despite being an invasive species intern, my time has not been spent solely on learning how to identify native or non-native plant species. I am grateful for the chances I have had, taking part in various assignments. From marsh bird and bat surveys to tracking Blanding's turtles (and maybe watching a rock or two), I have run the gamut as far as projects go. Getting a taste for the many different projects in motion throughout the Eastern Massachusetts Complex has shown me the dynamic lifestyle within the Fish and Wildlife Service.

It was here that I learned not to shy away from new endeavors, and to take advantage of any and all opportunities presented, even if I have no previous experience with the activity. Another equally important lesson was to actively learn on my own time. As much as I could

learn during work, I knew that there was much more that could not fit into the typical work day. Whether it was for purely personal reasons—like wanting to know exactly what creatures we had crawling around in the bottom of our canoes—or to know more about that curious plant that seemed to be everywhere, doing a bit of investigation after work I think did me a world of good. The project I had on the side—filming short “how-to’s” on invasive plant identification to supplement the CISMA organization’s website—helped me with my own plant identification.

I realize that three months is the blink of an eye when it comes down to it, but my time spent here has been some of the most meaningful of my life. My first-hand experiences have all proven far more significant than anything I could have gleaned from a textbook. Having the chance to work with so many different people, on so many different projects, has given me greater insight to the overall mission of the refuge. I feel that the Fish and Wildlife Service’s mission to conserve and manage lands and waters for the benefit of current and future generations is a noble one, and I am honored to say that I have been a part of such an organization.

The opportunities which I have been able to take advantage of through the SCA and the Career Discovery Internship Program have been invaluable. There are not many other programs out there that are dedicated to introducing the next generation to the Department of the Interior, and the experiences I have gained from my time volunteering for the Fish and Wildlife Service have been incredible. It is my hope that I can take much of what I have learned over the course of this summer back to Cornell with me; not only to supplement and enrich what I might encounter in the classroom, but to also spread the word about what the Fish and Wildlife Service is about and all that they are doing for the benefit of our nation’s resources.

As an SCA intern, I had to travel to West Virginia for training—a “first” for me, one of many “firsts” over the course of this summer. It was in Sherpherdstown, West Virginia that I learned the finer details regarding the Fish and Wildlife Service. Throughout that week, I was flooded with information regarding the Fish and Wildlife Service, but the company I shared was the most impactful. Never had I been surrounded by so many people who shared as much passion for conservation and biological research as myself. It was exciting and invigorating to hear the stories of how these employees found their way to the FWS, and it gave me the resolve to join them in whatever capacity I could. What I saw in West Virginia showed me how following your passion can lead to a much more fulfilling life, and an environment conducive to change and progress.

As this internship comes to a close, I realize that, although this chapter of my life may be coming to an end, the saga will continue: “Life Post-SCA”. Everything that I have experienced this summer has given me the determination to ensure that more people become aware of the importance of nature conservancy and biological research, in addition to the organizations that promote these ideals. I have been lucky; had it not been for my introduction to the Fish and Wildlife Service several years ago, it is entirely possible that I might be among the many whom are woefully uneducated regarding the Service and all that it does.

Looking back on my time here at Great Meadows, I am sure that I have changed and grown in many ways. Some changes may be imperceptible, but I refuse to believe that spending three months surrounded by people of such varying backgrounds and experiences has not affected me in some way, however slight.

Through this internship, I got more than just work experience; living in a house with eight other interns was a trip in itself. Even though we were not all involved in the same projects, living in such close quarters meant chances were high that you would be aware of what the others were doing. This helped fill in some of the gaps that were inevitable as a result of working at such a large complex. Whether it was learning how to cook an actual meal; discovering that rearranging a room is best left for the morning; learning what kinds of plants are in our own back yard; or talking about how we each got involved in this field and what we hope to do in the future, life in the dorm was an invaluable part of this internship as a whole. I cannot imagine a better summer, except for one that didn't end with my leaving behind all of the exciting projects and great coworkers here at the refuge. This has been an incredible experience with many memories and lessons that I will not forget any time soon.