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## Education Requires Sacrifice says Graduating USU Wildlife Scientist



USU Uintah Basin student David Baird, right, Quinney College of Natural Resources Undergraduate Researcher of the Year, with USU President Stan Albrecht at January's 2014 Undergraduate Research Day on Utah's Capitol Hill.



Baird constructs a Canada goose nest platform during a service project. His faculty mentor Rich Etchberger says the undergrad readily participated in wildlife volunteer projects, while juggling busy academic, research and family commitments.

After years of working in construction, Roosevelt, Utah, resident David Baird was ready for a change. But with a wife, children and a mortgage, he wondered if full-time college study was a reasonable move.

“My wife, Stacie, who would bear the largest burdens if I returned to school, was my biggest champion,” Baird says. “She encouraged me to look into wildlife science studies at USU Uintah Basin because she knew that’s what I loved.”

With trepidation, Baird gave Department of Wildland Resources faculty member Rich Etchberger a call.

“I thought I’d be treated like just another number, but Dr. Etchberger was very helpful and assured me he and the rest of the faculty cared about the success of each student,” says the 34-year-old, who graduated from Utah’s Murray High School in 1998. “He even challenged me to talk with current students, which I never did. But, over the past four years, I’ve discovered the USU Uintah Basin faculty really does care about students.”

Baird, who graduates this spring with a bachelor’s degree, was recently named *Undergraduate Researcher of the Year* for

USU’s Quinney College of Natural Resources. The father of five credits his family with his success.

“For much of my education, I’d leave home around 7:30 a.m. and wouldn’t return home until 11 p.m. at night,” Baird says. “That means Stacie spent nearly every waking minute caring for the children and our household. Her success in caring for our family, in my eyes, is much greater than my educational success and I could not have reached my goals without her.”

He says his children have also been a major source of support.

“I have five beautiful, amazing little girls, who give me hugs, attention and recharge my purpose,” Baird says. “My two oldest, ages 9 and 7, have really stepped up to help out around the house and I’m motivated to succeed because of them.”

Mentored by Etchberger, Baird started an ambitious undergraduate research project in spring 2013. The commitment meant leaving a custodial job with benefits, but he and wife felt the potential rewards outweighed the risks.

The study, funded by the Bureau of Land Management and USU Uintah Basin, involved organizing mountains of data collected over a 30-year period on waterfowl populations of Utah’s Pariette Wetlands. Described as an oasis in the Uinta Basin desert, the Pariette Wetlands provide respite to a wide range of avian species, including mallards, Canada geese, bald eagles, sandhill cranes and peregrine falcons. Encompassing more than 9,000 acres, the freshwater marshlands are the Bureau of Land Management’s largest wetland development in Utah.

“With the help of two others, I’ve entered more than three decades of waterfowl census data into a computer,” says Baird, a recipient of the Linda Stuart Gurr Scholarship.

Painstakingly verifying each line of data was a major challenge, he says. Another challenge was organizing the data in a way that made sense of the statistical analysis.

“It took some time — and several mock studies — to get to a point where I felt good about the methodology of the analysis,” Baird says. “In the end, I think the biggest help in getting through these challenges was discussing them out loud with others.”

Baird was encouraged by Etchberger to present his research at Utah's 2014 Undergraduate Research Day on Capitol Hill this past January in Salt Lake City.

“Being accepted to present at this conference was one of my goals from the very beginning of my research,” he says. “I wanted to end my educational experience with a bang. I think sharing results of work I've done with legislators provided a meaningful communications experience that will benefit me in my future career.”

Baird has presented his research at several other conferences and is working on a manuscript for publication. He was hired by the BLM as a Natural Resource Specialist in January and plans to pursue a master's degree in wildlife science, with the goal of becoming a BLM wildlife biologist. While looking forward, Baird is also taking time to look back and reflect on his undergrad career.

“I enjoy having the opportunity to think through all the sacrifices of others that have made my education a success,” he says. “I know that, no matter the individual, every education obtained is because of sacrifice. I am really lucky to have so many people who have been willing to sacrifice for me and my family.”

***Related links:***

- [USU Uintah Basin](#)
- [USU Department of Wildlife Resources](#)
- [USU Quinney College of Natural Resources](#)

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