

# Wildlife Studies

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# Making a Place for Wildlife Studies at USU Eastern



Wildlife Students

Wallace Stegner in *Wolf Willow* talks about the importance of place and how it provides its own form of identity when he said, "I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from." Put another way, "Our where determines our who," says Reg Saner.

That appears to be the case for Michael King, Utah State University Eastern wildlife science professor. He loves where he lives and cannot seem to get enough of it, even after 32 years of living in Price. Glance through his collection of finely crafted photographs and you get a strong sense of his passion for place. The vast landscape that surrounds him has opened his eyes to a variety of things; often things that move. Wild things in the air and on the land and in the water. It has been this way since he was a boy growing up in Carbon County.

What an apt place, then, to become a wildlife biologist. And what a perfect spot to teach the science of wildlife and for students to study it.

King knows this and he's well aware that his students know it too. Up until five years ago, however, students studying wildlife at USU Eastern earning their associate degrees had to move on to some other place if they wanted to pursue a bachelor's. What made it doubly frustrating was the fact they had to

leave an area strategically located with agencies key to their field of study, entities such as Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management and Natural Resources Conservation Service.

It was like being a computer science or entrepreneurial student starting off in Silicon Valley only to leave halfway through for someplace else. Why would you? For wildlife students in Eastern Utah, this is their Silicon Valley, so why should they leave? Being able to work as interns at these agencies in and around Price is ideal. They are not only where they need to be, they are doing what they need to do: building resumes and gaining invaluable on-the-job experience.

King knows this in the same way wildlife science professor Rich Etchberger recognized the importance of place back in 1995 when he established the wildlife program at USU's Uintah Basin campus in Vernal. This was long before the merger of USU with the College of Eastern Utah in 2010, but King had his eye on the Basin. He saw what was happening as a potential model for a program of his own at his college. By the time he became interim president of CEU in 2008, he was ready to start the conversation about what it would take to get a four-year wildlife science degree program started at Price. Those in on the conversation included Etchberger, Snow College and the wildland resources department at USU.

The door opened when CEU merged with USU in 2010. King stepped down from his administrative post and stepped up his efforts to get the new four-year wildlife program off the ground.

"The program wouldn't be here without the merger," he said. "It is up and running now and doing well. It's exciting for me to be on the ground floor. It is certainly something that I had been hoping to do for a long time. A nice way for me to spend my pre-retirement years."

And Casey Olsen, for one, is grateful that he happened to be in the right place at the right time. Olsen distinguished himself by becoming the first to receive a BA in wildlife science from Price at the college's 2015 commencement ceremony. It was a big deal and he knows he could not have done it without King.

Olsen was 35 years old at the time, making him the quintessential non-traditional student. But this Utah boy from Snowville did not start out that way. He first attended USU in Logan straight out of high school where he got involved early with the College of Natural Resources, including a chance to work as a

landowners assistance specialist with the Division of Wildlife Resources in Utah's northern region. He liked what he was doing and stayed on as a "seasonal" with DWR for four more years. When a full-time job with the division opened in Price, he jumped at the chance. It was all good except for the part about not being able to complete his degree. Moving back to Logan to finish was no longer an option.

It meant that Muhammad would need to come to him if he wanted to finally bag that four-year degree. This place-bound urgency did not go unnoticed by King. He scrambled to get the courses Olsen would need to complete his four-year degree and in the process helped to make the new baccalaureate program a reality. It is safe to say that Olsen was able to walk across that stage last spring and receive his bachelor's degree – in Price – because of what King did many years prior. Being able to stay in place to earn that degree has earned a special place in Olsen's heart for his professor.

"Dr. King is awesome," Olsen said. "He bends over backwards for you. He is not only interested in how you are doing as a student, but also in how you are personally doing."

Good for him and good for the students who benefit from his knowledge, experience and passion for place. King was honored this last year as academic advisor of the year in the College of Natural Resources and as a finalist for the university's prestigious Robins Awards. He is also finishing a six-year appointment on the seven-member Utah Wildlife Board, appointed by Gov. Gary Herbert and confirmed by the Utah Senate in 2011.

It is not the accolades, though, that he desires. What he wants is assurance that the program will continue and thrive long after he retires. He knows he does not have the 20 years that Etchberger has had in the Uintah Basin, which is why he is working to get additional full-time professors hired at Eastern. While this would benefit the Price campus, he envisions it bolstering the Uintah Basin as well.

King already coordinates with Vernal and Roosevelt. Students from the Basin participate with his Price students on annual bear-denning trips. He broadcasts some of his classes to Vernal and Roosevelt, as well, and generally drives there to teach in person three to four times during the semester.

He understands, as Etchburger has shown, that programs like these are well-suited for rural Utah. When they are run well, and resources shared, their impact can be

enormous. The accolades Etchburger received of late, speaks to this. In November he was named the 2015 Carnegie Professor of the Year for the state of Utah, one of only 35 in the nation to take home this award. He did not obtain this honor by coasting. During the past two decades, Etchburger has received 65 grants with more than \$2.4 million in funding to help support 300-plus undergraduate research and internship students. Best of all, 100 percent of the alumni in his program have started successful careers, gone on to graduate school, or both.

And so far, thanks to Olsen, King's program also boasts 100 percent placement. ("We'll see what happens this next commencement," he said with a smile.)

The streak looks pretty good at holding when you consider this year's crop of students. All five who are planning to receive their bachelor's degree in April from USU Eastern have already, or continue to have, internships or seasonal positions with local agencies, especially with the DWR.

"We have a lot going for us being here," King said. "There are almost always opportunities to get involved with these agencies in some form and those opportunities lead to bigger and better opportunities for the students."

Work opportunities like sampling area streams and lakes, working on aquatic invasive programs such as checking boats for quagga mussels, working on habitat crews, building fences, planting fields and spraying for noxious weeds. It's all good, every bit of it says Xaela Walden of Salt Lake City. This future biologist (she is still deciding between habitat and wildlife) can't get enough of it. As an intern with DWR last summer, she worked in the fisheries and habitat departments doing pretty much everything across the board, from electrofishing to vegetation monitoring. She also got to meet with various organizations to discuss and present habitat projects for different species like big horn sheep and mule deer. She even did a bat survey and telemetry flights for several different species.

"I enjoy going to work every single day," she said. "There's not a day I don't want to go. I am still working for the habitat department right now. I like the days I go to work more than the days I don't go."

Another April graduate, TJ Cook, of Price, spent last summer as a warm-waters-fisheries technician with DWR. He'd be content to do anything with fisheries. Tyrell Mills has been working for DWR full and part time for several years, including work at the Huntington Game Farm. Andrew Todachinnie of Montezuma Creek, also graduates

in spring. He spent his summer working in northern Utah with Professor Terry Messmer, USU wildlife professor in the wildland resources department, doing radio-telemetry work tracking sage grouse at Deseret Land and Livestock. "I've had lots of opportunities I couldn't have otherwise had," Todachinnie said.

Scan a map of where these students have worked and studied along their four-year path to a Price-based degree and you see it has entailed a lot of road time. Travel is key to their studies and their eventual careers. Place certainly still matters even for graduates like Olsen because now "where" he works heavily dictates "what" his work involves as a wildlife-landowner-assistance specialist with the DWR. His "where" takes in all of Utah's southeastern region, "... a pretty good chunk of ground," he said.

A pretty good chunk, indeed, chunks of ground where the deer and the antelope play. Well, more like where deer, elk, moose and your occasional skunks, pheasants, snakes and prairie dogs play and call home. He gets all kinds of calls. Without those places, he'd have no place to work. Farmers and ranchers also call this region home. When predator and feeders interact with them, trouble often ensues. So he's there to mediate.

Like Olsen, with his rural roots, all of these students are products of place – places they grew up, places they hunted and fished, places that motivated them in one way or another to choose wildlife as a career goal.

Here's the thing, though: they are students who seem to know exactly who they are, not just where they are from. They are candidates for a bachelor's in wildlife science from USU Eastern with full-time jobs in their future. Their "where" does seem to be determining their "who." Point taken, Reg Saner.

~ *John DeVilbiss*