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## Saving Wildlife around the World

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# Saving wildlife around the world

**I**t was a pleasantly warm, sunny, September day in Oregon as I paddled hurriedly after a sick duck. Unable to fly, he was still an agile swimmer compared to my wobbly sit-on-top kayak, weighted down with capture equipment and a precariously-balanced pet carrier full of miserable waterfowl. As I closed in, I dropped my paddle and grabbed the pool-skimmer-like capture net. Following his trail of bubbles, I could see him swimming just under the surface to my right, orange webbed feet kicking frantically.

“Gotcha!” I exclaimed, leaning heavily to the right and sweeping the net down. As it hit the water I watched him swerve directly under my kayak and cursed as he surfaced on my left side, inches away. I shifted and swung left to make a reckless grab at him. I felt the kayak tip and just had time to groan to myself before I toppled gracelessly into three feet of pungent, mucky, murky, pond water.

I stood up, sputtering, dripping wet, with hip-waders filled to the brim, but relieved to find everything else in my kayak remarkably dry and intact (except my dignity). A few sick ducks blinked at me wearily from the carrier, unimpressed. As I wrung out my shirt, a pop-hiss announced that my auto-inflating life-vest had (belatedly) decided I was in mortal danger.

I heaved a sigh. My capture partner, just behind me on his paddleboard, was laughing so hard he was in tears. After awkwardly

sloshing and clambering my way back into the kayak, we managed to herd and corral the troublesome duck until he could be netted and carefully placed in the carrier with his sick comrades.

Working as a biologist for Oregon’s wildlife health and population program, I never quite know how I’ll be spending my day. I might be cataloguing cougar DNA samples in the lab, out darting a deer with a tranquilizer gun, or acting as zookeeper to a couple of wayward orphaned bear cubs. Or standing in three feet of water, wearing a glorified water wing around my neck, and being laughed at by a bunch of ducks.

It is, perhaps, an appropriate choice of career for someone who grew up in the beautiful Columbia River Gorge and enjoyed fishing with her dad, the quiet solitude of the woods, and the rambunctious company of a houseful of dogs, cats, hamsters, ferrets, parakeets and goldfish.

When I graduated from Linfield in 2007 with a degree in biology, I couldn’t have imagined where the next five years would take me, or when they might bring me back home to Oregon (much to my mother’s chagrin). Pioneering a new study abroad program for Linfield in the Galapagos Islands in 2006 had me nose-to-nose with curious sea lions, beak-clacking albatross and ancient giant tortoises, igniting my passion for wildlife conservation.

I leapt from graduation to an internship helping release California condors back into the wild; bounded into two years in Australia as a Fulbright scholar researching fur seals and introducing tourists to the smallest penguin in the world; dove headfirst into summers on some of the most remote islands of the Pacific with the sun-loving, endangered Hawaiian monk seal; and side-stepped into six months on the fringes of the Antarctic, being belched at by elephant seals and buffeted by the 12-foot wingspan of the wandering albatross. I cannot find words to describe how incredible these experiences have been nor how fortunate and grateful I’ve been to have had these opportunities.

When I trace my journey, it may have been nurtured by the damp, fertile forests along the Columbia River, but it truly came into bloom in Linfield’s welcoming classrooms, corridors



*Julia Back '07 left Linfield with her biology degree and has worked with wildlife around the world. She has returned to Oregon, working for the state’s wildlife health and population program. At left, she is releasing a Western painted turtle back into the wild near Corvallis. In the photo at the right, Back holds a mallard duck with botulism while one of the state wildlife veterinarians treats it. Inset: They prepare to give the mallard IV fluids through a vein in its leg.*

and campus. I still remember sitting in my advisor's office as a slightly awkward and nervous sophomore. In his infinite wisdom, Professor (now emeritus) Joel Marrant told me to stop worrying so much about choosing a major (particularly a so-called "sensible" one), to take classes I thought I'd enjoy, and asked me when I was going to study abroad. When I applied for my Fulbright grant, I have no doubt it was the whole-hearted letters of recommendation written by several Linfield professors that tipped the balance.

After seeing the wider world, I found my heartstrings tugging me back toward the Oregon forests where I'd grown up. Here I've been able to use the experience and skills I gained working with exotic creatures to help protect the critters we're more used to seeing in our backyards: ducks and deer, quail and black bear, and

our more elusive mountain goats and bighorn sheep.

One of the worst avian disease outbreaks in the country struck close to home this year, killing several thousand waterfowl at a wetland near Portland. In our wobbly kayaks we collected the specimens that diagnosed the outbreak as botulism, then caught and treated as many sick birds as possible, both limiting the spread of the disease and giving them a second chance at survival. More than 100 of these were released back into the wild after recuperating at Audubon's Wildlife Care Center. Some days I might come home a little wet, smelly or bedraggled, but for that sort of reward I wouldn't trade this life for anything in the world. I can't wait to see what tomorrow, and the next adventure, will bring. 🐦

- Julia Back '07

