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Mentor Highlights

Matt Tarr

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Professor Matt Tarr is an associate extension professor wildlife specialist at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) Cooperative Extension/ NREN, and has been with UNH for thirteen years.

Below is a correspondence with Professor Tarr about his own research and his mentoring experiences with undergraduate students.

Inquiry: What is your current research? Did your undergraduate studies point you toward it? What interests you most about it?

MT: My research is currently focused in two primary areas, which are determining the ecological role that non-native, invasive plants play in providing food and cover resources to wildlife, and understanding the reproductive and spatial ecology of birds that breed in anthropogenic landscapes (i.e., the NH seacoast).

When I was an undergraduate at UNH (’92-’96), the opportunities I received to work as a research technician were instrumental in helping me become serious as a student, seek a variety of additional work experiences, and ultimately, to pursue advanced degrees in the natural resources field. Although the topics I studied as an undergraduate are different than those I focus on now, the positive personal and professional experiences I received while working with faculty mentors are central to why I currently design my research to involve as many undergraduates as I can.

I enjoy conducting research that has both theoretical and practical applications to help advance our understanding of ecological processes, how wildlife interact with their habitats, and how landowners can work with the habitat to benefit wildlife.

Inquiry: What is the purpose of a mentoring relationship? What should the student and you gain from it?

MT: When mentoring undergraduates my goal is to provide each student with a unique experience that will excite, prepare, and encourage them to pursue additional challenges and opportunities in

their chosen field of study. When students finish this experience, I want them to have learned new skills, worked both independently and as part of a team, observed, tested and/or applied theoretical ecological concepts, and to understand how the results of their work can be used to help guide conservation and habitat management decisions. For me, it is incredibly rewarding to feel the excitement and watch a student come to life when they are involved in a unique project, as they realize it is just a sample of what their chosen field has to offer them.

Inquiry: Please describe some positive, memorable mentoring experiences or mentees.

MT: Since 2012, I've had the great opportunity to serve as faculty mentor for eight students that have received either SURF or URA funding through the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research. Each of these students have brought their own experiences and perspectives to our work together, and I am pleased that all of these students have secured professional work in their field. I am especially happy that one of my first SURF mentees, Logan Cline, is now working on a M.S. studying saltmarsh sparrows here at UNH with Dr. Adrienne Kovach, and another SURF mentee from 2013, Randy Shoe, is currently working on his M.S. with me, studying shrubland songbird ecology.

Inquiry: What advice or tips would you give a faculty member new to undergraduate mentoring?

MT: Mentoring can take a lot of time. In particular, helping an inexperienced writer write an effective research proposal is incredible challenging and time consuming, but very rewarding when you see them finally start to get it, and especially when they are able to look at a final product and be able to say, "Wow, I did that!" When conducting field research, I spend a lot of time training students so they can work independently, but not to be so overconfident that they don't recognize when they should ask for help.

I like to involve students in all aspects of a project, providing them with as much background information as needed so they can fully understand the significance of the question they are asking, and understand what they are contributing to the science. When we are conducting research, I encourage my students to regularly critique our methods and suggest methods to capture important information we might be missing.

It is important to select your students carefully. I need a student that will work well with the other members of my research team. If the student is a bad fit, it can make for a difficult situation for everyone involved. I screen my students carefully and try to learn what they have for experience, what their interests are, and what they want to do after finishing their undergraduate degree; I want to be sure that my project fits the student to ensure that the experience is beneficial to both of us. Also, the best student in class is not always the best student to mentor; keep your eyes out for those students who are struggling. Sometimes that student is struggling to find direction, and to understand how the information they are learning in class is actually applied to the profession they want to be passionate about.