Playing the field

Great Gull Island is owned by the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH). It’s a former military base used mainly to study the common and roseate terns that nest there every summer. It isn’t far offshore, but to me it felt remote. The boat came twice a week, on Fridays to bring food and weekend visitors and on Sundays to take the weekenders home. The buildings were old, with no electricity or running water. I didn’t care.

After graduating from college, I drifted a while, then returned to New York and took a waitressing job. I wanted to get back to biology, so I volunteered at AMNH. Great Gull Island was normally used only during summer, but I learned about a fall project studying bird migration along the Atlantic coast. I quit my job and returned to the island. During the day, I removed birds from mist nets and banded and released them. At night, I played cards with the other staff members by candlelight. I watched the seasons change. Every evening at dusk, a snowy owl emerged from the old gun emplacement where it hunkered down during the day and flew off over the ocean.

I enrolled in a master’s degree program at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. While I was there, I took a semester off to work at another field station, on Barro Colorado Island in Panama, a former hilltop that was marooned when the Panama Canal flooded the area. I lived in the rainforest and woke to the sound of howler monkeys. I spent days watching lizards and recording their behavior. Once, I returned to my room at the end of the day and found it invaded by army ants.

I moved to Cornell University for a Ph.D. studying interactions between herbivorous insects and host plants. Then came a search for faculty positions, which led me to a teaching post at a liberal arts college. What I enjoyed most about that work, I found, was taking students outside: getting them on snowshoes, sending them out to catch grasshoppers, taking them canoeing. But full-time teaching had never been my dream, and when I saw an ad for a field station job, I applied.

Now I’m manager of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Field Station in Saukville, Wisconsin. I’ve been here 15 years. It’s the perfect job. I have a research program. I teach and advise. I facilitate research projects and support the teachers who bring classes here. I participate in the management of the land, at the field station and other university-owned areas: a regionally significant wetland, a virgin prairie remnant, an abandoned iron mine that’s an important site for hibernating bats.

My work is structured by seasons. As the snow melts, I track bud break and leaf development. In summer and fall, I administer workshops on topics ranging from creative writing to sedge and grass identification. Winter means hikes on the frozen wetlands that, at nearly 900 hectares, are a large part of the property. I’ve surveyed rare orchids and an endangered dragonfly, participated in prescribed burns at our prairie site, and taken students to watch through night vision telescopes as bats exit from our hibernaculum. I’ve watched sandhill cranes court outside my office window and seen them later shepherding their growing chicks.

Experiences like these aren’t just scientific; they’re natural, and human. I’ve found a career that allows me to have such experiences and also share them with others. I like to think I’m helping inspire the next generation of students, as I was inspired by my own field station visits years ago.

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