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# Cracking the Code

## WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE STUDENT CHAPTER OF THE YEAR?

By Joe Quehl, Mandie Lang, Brilyn Brecka and Leah Bell

The student TWS chapter at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point is a staple within the campus' wildlife program — a program with a reputation of producing profession-ready undergrads.

Formed in 1971, our chapter is fortunate to have decades of support from the College of Natural Resources. Last year, we reached an all-time high in membership, almost breaking the 200 mark, and we're on a similar trajectory this year. Our board has 11 positions, from president to social coordinator to web designer. We run 20 different research projects, each with co-leaders who run field seasons, coordinate volunteers, and present research.

At the 2019 annual TWS conference in Reno, Nevada, we received the Student Chapter of the Year Award for the seventh time. It was quite an honor, and it made us wonder, could some of the lessons we've learned over the years benefit other student chapters, too? We know we don't have all the answers and every student chapter is different. But we know how *we* operate and how *we* overcome obstacles. Maybe some of the experience we have

gained could help other student chapters facing similar challenges.

### Getting members in the door

With an average of 170 paid members, our student chapter is the second-largest student organization on the UWSP campus. One way we recruit members is through involvement fairs and other campus events that let current members reach out to new students. However, a significant portion of our members are recruited by faculty and staff in the College of Natural Resources.

Our wildlife faculty and academic advisers are *huge* supporters of the student chapter. From the time we step on campus, they stress the importance of involvement in the society for *all* wildlife students. UWSP wildlifers are no strangers to the phrase, "If you graduate from UWSP with a wildlife degree on your resume but without TWS involvement, employers are going to wonder what's up."

For the past eight years, we have had the privilege of having Jason Riddle serve as our chapter's adviser. He has been essential to our success, not only through promoting membership and highlighting the benefits of joining the Society in and out of the classroom, but also through continued support of our chapter in officer meetings and general meetings. He even participates in research projects with us! If you want the same kind of support on your campus, we recommend you simply ask. You may find faculty members just as willing to help out.

This support from our college and staff has allowed us to build a solid foundation of dedicated members, both past and present. For as long as anyone can remember, the time (5 p.m.), day (Tuesday), and location (Trainer Natural Resources building, room 170) of our weekly meetings have remained the same. This consistency — and tradition — has proven to be a key to our success.

▼ **Members of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Student Chapter of The Wildlife Society accept the 2019 Student Chapter of the Year award at the annual conference in Reno, Nevada.**



Credit: The Wildlife Society



We also get tremendous support from alumni, who accept our invitations to speak at meetings because of the benefits our chapter provided to them when they were students. By sharing their experiences in the field, our members see how involvement in TWS is a priceless tool to their future success. These alumni not only share valuable life lessons. Often, they present chapter members with opportunities to participate in volunteer experiences and workshops.

Our student members are the foundation to our success. Their dedication, excitement and initiative drive us to pursue new projects, events, and beyond. These efforts do not go unnoticed. Since today's society is heavily integrated with social media, our chapter uses that to our advantage. We created a Facebook page, an alumni Facebook page, a Snapchat account and an Instagram account to promote our activities. Current members can see what projects their colleagues are working on, and they may inspire them to take part, too. We like to use social media to reach as many members, nonmembers, alumni and future employers as possible.

### Keeping them engaged

As a student chapter, we offer lots of opportunities for students to get involved. These opportunities keep our members engaged and active. Our 20 student-led research projects run continuously throughout the school year and cater to a range of interests, from mammals to birds to habitat manipulation.

Students can gain field skills that translate directly into job experience, helping them become more qualified and prepared for wildlife careers. Our ruffed grouse, fisher and deer projects offer telemetry practice. The small mammal, woodpecker and lagomorph projects provide data collection and research experience. The Adopt a Wildlife Area project offers habitat management skills.

Projects also help members gain leadership experience and soft skills, including organizing volunteers, managing a budget and arranging field study sites. Each project has three to five co-leaders who manage the details and work closely with general members to arrange volunteers to help with outings, conduct research and analyze data. Since each project receives a budget for supplies and travel



Credit: University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Student Chapter of The Wildlife Society

◀ Lagomorph project co-leader Sabrina Claeys combs an eastern cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) for parasites. The project is one of many that students can take part in to gain field experience.

expenses, these co-leaders also gain important experience in managing funds.

Members also have opportunities to present their research at various symposia. The Jim and Katie Krause CNR Student Research Symposium allows students to showcase their research to peers, faculty and the public. We also send students with research to The Wildlife Society's annual conference, the Wisconsin State Chapter annual meeting, and the Midwest Fish and Wildlife Conference, expanding their opportunities to network with professionals and present their research.

In addition to our field projects, we offer a number of workshops throughout the year on topics ranging from first aid to chainsaw certification and from Trapping Matters to Bird Camp. We also have a variety of soft skill workshops with rotating topics that focus on leadership, conflict resolution and team building. This year, we are introducing new workshops on topics like field skills, how to start a research project, graduate school and Mammal Camp. All of these opportunities help members learn new skills that make them more employable and hopefully keep them engaged with the Society.



## A Legacy — and its Lessons — Continue

By Travis Booms

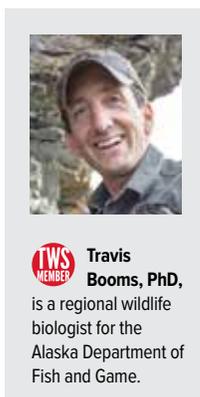
While the students in the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point chapter of The Wildlife Society have changed over the years, the fundamental aspects that make it a success haven't. The chapter has introduced hundreds of wildlife students to the hands-on, real world work of the wildlife field — one of the greatest values any student chapter can offer — and it continues to thrive.

About two decades ago when I was president, the chapter ran over 20 independent projects a year — each with a lead and a host of dedicated participants. They estimated prairie-chicken populations, counted roadside raptors, monitored salamanders, tracked wolves, took part in public outreach and assisted with deer registration. That active program continues today.

The unparalleled motivation and passion showed by chapter members also continues, as officers and board members spend hundreds of hours behind the scenes planning, discussing and keeping up with paperwork. The real work of a successful chapter is not glamorous. It's figuring out budgets, permits and permissions. It's troubleshooting events, reserving rooms, renting vehicles — and herding cats. Thankfully, the UWSP student chapter still has dedicated officers, board members and project leaders who embrace these thankless tasks and mentor freshmen to take them on when seniors graduate. This too, has not changed.

Perhaps the most important attribute persisting through the years is the chapter's culture. Whether you walked into a meeting 20 years ago or showed up tomorrow, you would be greeted by the same enthusiasm, smiling faces, welcoming handshakes and family atmosphere. Sure, the chapter experiences some bumps. Personality conflicts, disagreements and competition for experiences arise, but those are the exception, not the rule. Members are genuinely interested in attending meetings, engaging in shared experiences, creating friendships, establishing networks and building knowledge collectively.

The chapter is a family of past, present and future members connected by a shared experience that cuts across categories. Issues like age, race, gender and wealth haven't really mattered in its culture across the decades. In some respects, student chapters like this one may be role models for all TWS organizations as they strive for inclusiveness and a culture in which all are welcome.



**TWS MEMBER** Travis Booms, PhD, is a regional wildlife biologist for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

## Reaching out

We always try to incorporate networking and collaboration into our chapter, whether it's with other student organizations on campus or outside organizations like the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

On campus, we try to promote integrated activities with other natural resources-related clubs, such as the student chapters of the American Fisheries Society and the Society of American Foresters and the Fire Crew, a student-run prescribed burning unit.

If your student chapter is relatively small, consider reaching out to other student organizations on campus and host some joint events! This is a great way to meet new people and combine resources to have larger events with more visibility.

Off campus, we work closely with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and local nonprofits in our area. The DNR works with us to provide valuable learning opportunities to students by hosting workshops and participating in various DNR-operated programs. We are an active participant in the Adopt a Wildlife Area program, where we help DNR staff manage the nearby Buena Vista Wildlife Area grasslands by conducting various management actions.

We also work closely with the Raptor Education Group Inc., helping winterize the enclosures of its rehabilitation center in Antigo, Wisconsin, and allowing students to learn about the captive side of wildlife conservation.

These partnerships provide students the opportunity to meet professionals in the field. Try to reach out to your local wildlife-related organizations and form a relationship. If the partnership is successful, they may be eager to continue working with you on other programs and opportunities.

## Letting loose

Apart from the work we do conducting research and planning workshops, we also plan a lot of social events like root beer float socials, game feeds, and get-togethers. These events are just for students to come, meet each other, hang out, and have fun! Remember that you are a student organization at heart. These outings are great opportunities for students to get to know each other.



Social events create a welcoming sense of community within your chapter. They allow students to meet new people in an inviting atmosphere and may be just as important as any survey or research project that we have. Once students see that your chapter is fun and worth their time, it will not be long until they are volunteering on skills-based projects.

### Some helpful tips

If you're starting from scratch, it may seem like a daunting task, but our recommendation is to start from the bottom and build up. Ensure you have a group of passionate, motivated students as your officer team. They should be excited to see your chapter grow and willing to make it happen. Each officer should have individual roles and responsibilities so tasks can be delegated appropriately. We have found that our chapter needs more and more specific officer positions as it grows. Don't be afraid to change up positions based on your chapter's needs. Involving students in leadership allows them to take ownership within the organization and helps create a framework of engaged members.

If you already have a board elected, consider working on member recruitment. Focus on building strong relationships between students through social events and outings. We have found that members are much more likely to get involved within an organization where they feel like they belong and know people. Make students aware of involvement opportunities with your chapter once they join and encourage them to think of the club both as a social and a skill-building organization.

If you've seen membership start to take off, we would recommend organizing workshops that are open and relevant to all members. These will allow students to build fundamental skills they will use in their future careers. This also will allow your chapter to build relationships with outside organizations that are extremely valuable to the future of your club. Be sure to focus on both hard and soft skills!

Once you've built the foundation, think about starting a student-led research project. This is one of the more difficult tasks for a student chapter, so be persistent. We take a vote in our chapter to approve new projects. It's a good way to assess if there is enough interest in a project to get it started. Be sure there is a group of student co-leaders to keep up with the details and a faculty advisor to provide



Credit: University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Student Chapter of The Wildlife Society

guidance. Many of our projects have existed for over a decade, have presented research at numerous conferences and continue to put in hundreds of student volunteer hours each season. They offer some of the best ways to get students involved and excited about coming back.

Above all, we encourage student chapters to get your members involved in a variety of activities. Stress the importance of getting involved and how it relates to post-graduation placement. Do not just see yourself as a professional organization. And be patient, putting in the time and effort your society needs to grow.

Thanks to the alumni who laid the foundation, our organization has helped us in more ways than we ever thought possible. If anyone has any questions, please feel free to email us at [wildsoc@uwsp.edu](mailto:wildsoc@uwsp.edu). ■

▲ A team of volunteers poses as they prepare to remove brush and woody encroachment on the Buena Vista Wildlife Area as a part of a partnership with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.



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