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FACULTY HAPPENINGS

Drs. Jerry Choate, Elmer Finck, and Rob Channell are serving as members of the local committee of the Central Plains Society of Mammalogists for the current year. The annual meeting of that organization will be at Fort Hays State University the weekend of October 15-17, 2004.

Dr. Jerry Choate is coordinator for a project funded by a two-year, \$281,224 subgrant from the Kansas Department of Wildlife & Parks to survey amphibians and reptiles in Kansas. Part of the funding was used to hire two FHSU Biology graduates, Travis Taggart and Curtis Schmidt, to conduct the fieldwork associated with the project.

A new departmental committee, consisting of Mark Eberle and Drs. Jerry Choate (chair) and William Stark, has been established to investigate developing an annual award to honor a graduate student in the Department of Biological Sciences. The award will be described in the next issue of this newsletter.

Dr. Jerry Choate received a Dane G. Hansen Foundation grant (\$26,000) to cover the salary of the Discovery Room manager at the Sternberg Museum for one year. In addition to her responsibilities at the museum, the Discovery Room manager assists the Department of Biological Sciences by growing certain animals for use in lab or by assisting graduate students with that task.

After teaching Mammalogy and Biological Scientific Writing (plus other courses) each year since 1971, Dr. Jerry Choate was appointed full-time director of the Sternberg Museum of Natural History beginning in fall of 2004. He remains a member of the faculty of the Department of Biological Sciences and continues working with graduate students and serving on committees, but he no longer has teaching responsibilities in the department. Dr. Elmer Finck and Mark Eberle have assumed responsibility for teaching Mammalogy and Biological Scientific Writing, respectively.

Dr. Choate received several small grants from the Hays Convention & Visitor Bureau, Wal-Mart, and Western Beverage of Hays.

Dr. S. Christopher Bennett, Mr. Gregory Liggett, and Ms. Cheryl D. Schmidt have joined the Department of Biological Sciences. Dr. Bennett is currently teaching Human Anatomy and Physiology and serves as Associate Curator of vertebrate paleontology at the Sternberg Museum of Natural History. Mr. Liggett is also an instructor as well as an adjunct curator of vertebrate paleontology at the Sternberg Museum of Natural History. Ms. Schmidt, a recent graduate of FHSU with her MS in Biology, is currently teaching Humans in the Environment and Biology of Humans.

GRADUATE STUDENTS

Korrie Chapman completed the requirements for the MS degree in Biology. His major professor (Dr. Jerry Choate) reports that he is employed in Nebraska.

Cheryl Schmidt also completed her requirements for the MS degree in Biology; her advisor was Dr. Karen Hickman.

Justin Hoffman completed the requirements for the MS degree in Biology. His major professor was Dr. Jerry Choate. His thesis, titled "Biogeographic relationship of the plains pocket gopher (*Geomys bursarius*) and the yellow-faced pocket gopher (*Cratogeomys castanops*) in Kansas," is being divided into two manuscripts for the purposes of publication. Justin has begun PhD studies at the University of Nebraska.

News Release:

Rachel Copeland-Knight, Wellington graduate student, recently presented research she conducted while being supported by a Fleharty Fellowship. The fellowship, which Copeland-Knight was awarded for the 2003-2004 academic year, is an annual graduate research stipend equivalent to those of the graduate teaching assistants in the Department of Biological Sciences. The title of her presentation

was "Assessment of Old World Bluestem Invasion In Northern Oklahoma."

"It's a grass that is commonly planted in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. It's an invasive type of grass that can out-perform other types of vegetation in terms of growth," said Copeland-Knight.

- FHSU Office of University Relations

NEW GRADUATE STUDENTS

Welcome to the following new graduate students: starting in January 2004 were Kurtis Cooper and Scott Thomasson from FHSU, and Amy Zavala from Wichita State University, KS and starting in August were Shaun Dunn from Central Missouri State University; Shannan Nilz from University of Arkansas – Little Rock; Hector Serna from Briar Cliff University, IA; Matthew Sexson from Baker University, KS; Eric Starkey from FHSU; Anthony Thomas from FHSU; Cody Thompson from University of Northern Iowa; Shayne Unsworth from Weber State University, UT; Ben Wheeler from Bethel College, IN.

PUBLICATIONS

The following paper was published:

Lovell, D. C., W. R. Whitworth, J. R. Choate, S. J. Bissell, M. P. Moulton, and J. D. Hoffman. 2004. Geographic relationships of pocket gophers in southeastern Colorado. *Transactions of the Nebraska Academy of Science*, 29:45-55.

This publication represents the culmination of a long-term research program on the pocket gophers of southeastern Colorado. Dr. Jerry Choate initiated the program in the late 1970's, and Dr. Michael P. Moulton began the research as part of his thesis project. David C. Lovell and "Wild Bill" Whitworth continued the research in the early 1980's as part of their thesis projects. Dr. Steve Bissell was a collaborator in Colorado. Justin Hoffman helped with completion of the project, and Dr. Jerry Choate got the manuscript ready for publication. Moulton, Lovell, Whitworth, and Hoffman all were graduate students studying under the tutelage of Dr. Jerry Choate.

MEETINGS

On 2 October, eight FHSU biology students and Drs. Greg Farley and Elmer Finck attended the fall 2004 meeting of the Kansas Ornithological Society (KOS) at Baker University, Baldwin City, KS. Three graduate students presented papers at the meeting: Amy Zavala presented a paper entitled "Effects of

rotational vs continuous grazing on ground nesting birds in the Red Hills of Kansas"; AJ Thomas presented a paper entitled "Assessment of the prevalence of West Nile Virus in resident and migratory birds in western Kansas"; Matt Sexson presented a paper entitled "Timing of peak migration from 1966-2003 for songbirds captured at the Fort Hays banding station." The paper session was quite insightful, and each FHSU presenter did a phenomenal job. The meeting ended with a banquet featuring John Dunn, a nationally recognized birder, who spoke on the topic of identifying sparrows in the field. Overall, the fall 2004 meeting of the KOS was a good experience for each FHSU student and faculty who attended.

SUMMER RESEARCH

During seven weeks in June-July 2004, several current students, faculty, and alumni from the FHSU biology department and other professionals were hired by Dr. Daryl Mergen, owner of Mergen Ecological Delineations, to conduct rare and sensitive plant surveys in the Chippewa National Forest in northern Minnesota and the Black Hills in South Dakota and Wyoming. Other students were employed by SES Inc. and Aqua-Terr, Inc., both Kansas environmental companies, to work on natural resources inventories of rangelands in Kansas, Colorado, and Montana. Increasingly field research done previously by federal and state agencies, such as the U. S. Forest Service and NRCS, is being contracted out (outsourced) to the private sector. As a result, many opportunities for well-paying, professional positions in field biology (both temporary and permanent) with private companies are now available and can be expected to increase in the future. Courses and programs in botany, range, and conservation biology offered through the biology department provide students with the necessary background to be highly qualified for such positions and projects. This summer's crew working for Dr. Mergen surveyed more than 60,000 acres and located and collected information on numerous rare plants and some animals. Surveys such as these provide the fundamental data that the U.S. Forest Service, NRCS, and other federal and state agencies with the basic research data needed to develop conservation and management plans for natural resources in the regions.



Members of the survey crew pictured in Minnesota included, back row, left to right, Dusty Tacha (undergraduate), Laura Bohnen (biology alumnus), Kurtis Cooper (graduate student), Dr. Rich Packauskas (entomologist), Dr. Bob Tatina (Dakota Wesleyan botanist, South Dakota), Dr. Joe Thomasson (botanist). Front, left to right, Mr. Dave Buscher, soil scientist and owner, Buscher Environmental (Colorado), Bill Cook (biology alumnus), Sonny (survey mascot), Scott Thomasson (graduate student), and Dr. Daryl Mergen (alumnus, botanist, and owner, Mergen Ecological Delineations). Students not pictured that worked on rangeland inventories were undergraduates Jim Leiker and Allen Casey.

Surveys in Minnesota often led to encounters by crew members with various hazards including questionable roads, mosquitoes, ticks, biting flies, and deer fawns waiting until the last minute to jump up from hiding at a surveyor's feet (in bear country). In the South Dakota and Wyoming regions frequently saw wildlife such as turkey, grouse, elk (look closely), and frogs, among others. No one reported seeing a mountain lion, although they were common in the Wyoming survey region. At least two students working in the field on a continuation of one project into the fall in Colorado were attacked by a kicking/spitting llama but survived by retreating to the nearest fence while alternately using a shovel to defend themselves.

Among the especially rare plants collected during the botanical surveys were two ferns, *Botrychium lanceolatum* from Minnesota and an unidentified species of *Botrychium* from Wyoming (final identification will require a DNA analysis), and Baker's mariposa, *Calochortus apiculatus*, from Wyoming. The collection of Baker's mariposa represents a new state record for Wyoming and the Black Hills and is the subject of a manuscript being prepared currently for publication.

All of the students, alumni, and faculty who participated on the various projects enjoyed themselves, and agreed that the field experience acquired was invaluable in understanding the connection between what is learned in the classroom and its application in the real world. The opportunities afforded by these botanical surveys and rangeland inventories will continue to expand in the future (as evidenced by the fact that Dr. Mergen was notified in late September that his company has been awarded a contract for the summer of 2005), and Fort Hays State students, faculty, and alumni will continue to participate and benefit accordingly.

News Wanted!

The Natural Inquirer is always accepting materials for our next issue!

Feel free to submit any briefs regarding faculty news, research, graduate student news, grants, professional meetings, Biology Club news, unique education opportunities, and other biologically related materials.

For submissions to future issues of the Natural Inquirer, please submit all materials (electronic or hard copy) to:

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