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Graduate Scholar: Taking research to the nest level

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Finding and tracking the growth and development of songbird nestlings is how Sarah Winnicki nurtures her research nest, and getting to tweet about her work makes this prairie sentinel happier as happy as a bird, or at least a grasshopper sparrow.

Winnicki is a master’s student in ornithology at Kansas State University where she is a member of the lab of Alice Boyle, assistant professor of bird ecology. See page 19 for more on Boyle’s work.

The team is studying grassland birds at the Konza Prairie Biological Station, a tallgrass prairie reserve jointly operated by the university and The Nature Conservancy. The team searches for nestlings and then tracks them using transmitters and tags to monitor their growth and the predators the young birds face. Winnicki is using the work for her master’s thesis on cowbird parasitism and how it affects the growth and development of nestlings of grassland species at Konza Prairie, grasshopper sparrow, dickcissel and eastern meadowlark. The cowbird is a bird that lays its eggs in other birds’ nests.

Winnicki has been a birder since her childhood in Ohio where she was involved with the Ohio Young Birders Club. She parries her love of bird-watching with conservation and science communication efforts through her website, Twitter account and YouTube channel.

“An area I love, sharing it seems very natural,” Winnicki said. “I love birds, but I also want to share that passion with others.”

“Social media like Twitter allow me to connect not only with other scientists interested in my work, but also with anyone interested in birds in general,” Winnicki said. “Because of my communication through social media, I have been able to connect with non-scientists, with professional scientists in other fields and with collaborators, all while leaving a trail of data.”

Winnicki coauthors two university-related programs with helping her enhance her science communication efforts. In 2014, she was accepted to the Kansas State Sunflower Science Communication Fellowship program for graduate students and postdoctoral researchers. The fellowship is part of the Manhattan area’s behind-the-science program that is funded by the National Science Foundation and an Institute of Museum and Library Services grant. Winnicki also takes part in the Kansas Science Communication Initiative, which helps K-State faculty, students and staff engage the public in science and research.

“The training with the axon fellowship program provided very insightful feedback on my science communication skills and techniques, such as presenting out when I was using jargon or when I was being too technical and how to connect my research to people,” Winnicki said. “The experience has been helpful for my public science communication but also for my teaching and for my professional science communication as well.”

Involvement in the Kansas Science Communication Initiative has helped Winnicki find a large audience and hone her message for a broader group.

Winnicki was drawn to K-State while an undergraduate at Denison University in Ohio. The school did not offer an ornithology program, so she applied to Research Experience for Undergraduates, or REU, programs offering a bird-research project. She was accepted to K-State’s program with Boyle’s lab in 2014 and 2015. She then joined Boyle’s lab as a master’s student.

After completing her master’s degree in 2019, Winnicki plans to seek her doctorate. Her goal is to lead a faculty position teaching ornithology and natural behavior and to continue her research on songbird nestlings.

Sarah Winnicki is passionate about sharing her prairie songbird research. Watch videos, look at photos and learn more about her work.

Website: saraustincki.com
Twitter: @sowinnicki
YouTube channel: bit.ly/2PZRrlc

Learn more about the Kansas State Science Communication Fellowship program. k-state.edu/advising

Bohn: Graduate Scholar: Taking research to the nest level

Secure more  Graduate Scholar: Taking research to the nest level

Ready, set, graduate

Program prepares first-generation students for graduation and beyond

By Taylor Faunce

Jean-Carr and Karina Moncayo-Michel are both first-generation students — the first in their families to pursue or receive bachelor’s degrees. Carr, junior in human development and family sciences, and Moncayo-Michel, May 2018 graduate in communication sciences and disorders, have both benefited from the First Scholars Program at Kansas State University. The university is part of a national research-based project to increase graduation rates among first-generation students.

“I am beyond grateful for the First Scholars program,” Carr said. “I’ve gotten a lot of resources and advantages that I would not have had without it.”

In 2014, the university was selected to host First Scholars, a program of The Suder Foundation that supports first-generation students through graduation by focusing on holistic development. The program offers academic, social and personal development along with financial support at five other participating public universities. First Scholars students earn in the first K-State cohort, and an additional cohort has been added each year. The scholars receive a $5,000 scholarship each year for a total of $20,000.

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But First Scholars is more than a scholarship program because it offers student support based on research to address the unique challenges first-generation students face, said Rebecca Price, assistant director of the K-State Office of First-Generation Students. Each program year focuses on a different area, such as helping scholars connect to campus, organizing the college experience, expanding career and community opportunities, and transitioning to the future.

By partnering with The Suder Foundation, K-State is collecting data, measuring student success characteristics and supporting students during college. What K-State coordinators learn could help first-generation students nationwide.

“Through our work with K-State, we want to show that if we applied evidence-based practices community, First Scholars can work at any four-year, public state university,” said Diana Schott, executive director of The Suder Foundation.

The startup funds for the program covered four years, and K-State has added a university-funded cohort for the 2018-2019 academic year. With additional funding from The Suder Foundation, K-State established the Office of First-Generation Students to provide leadership and strategic coordination.

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Moncayo-Michel wanted to help potential future students see a college campus. For her project, the coordinated K-State campus visits for students from her hometown of Liberal — a predominantly Hispanic/Latino community in southwest Kansas — and other schools in the area.

“Out of all the fun things to do to talk to future students,” Moncayo-Michel said. “My goal was to let them know there are a lot of resources on campus to help them.”

Marks of success

K-State’s inaugural First Scholars cohort just completed the fourth year with remarkable statistics.

76 percent of the students are on course to graduate between three and a half to five years.

3.26 cumulative GPA.

3.1 percent earns laude grades.

49 percent of the graduates have joined or plan to join the workforce.

31 percent of the graduates will attend graduate school.

Learn more about the First Scholars program and how to support it.

k-state.edu/seek