

FEBRUARY 2024

TrailBlazer Grant

2023 Report



A COLLABORATION:





Dear Donor,

On behalf of the Student Development working Group and Early Career Professional Working Group we would like to extend our deepest gratitude for your contribution to the TrailBlazer Grant program. As our grant continues to grow your contribution will ensure we can continue to support the first steps of more members of our professional wildlife family. The 2023 TrailBlazer grant saw 77 applicants and awarded a combination of 14 monetary and gear awards. Our first year of applicants has included members from across the globe including Switzerland, Australia, Nepal, and beyond. Applicants also ranged in degree type with 49.4% holding or pursuing a bachelor's degree, 29.9% a Masters degree, 18.2% a doctoral degree, and 2.6% an Associates degree. Applicants provided ample feedback on the grant with the overwhelming majority being positive feedback and welcome constructive criticism that will help us grow moving forward.

As an extension of The Wildlife Society's goal to break down barriers that prevent professional growth for all members, the 2024 TrailBlazer grant is refining its ability to address historically underrepresented or marginalized groups in wildlife conservation. This includes visible/invisible disabilities, socio-economic background, first generation college students/degree holders, veterans, non-traditional students, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, ethnic heritage, and race. As biologists' diversity is at the core of what makes the ecosystems we value function similarly, the efforts of this grant will diversify our community, strengthening the profession in the process.

We invite you to explore some of the stories shared by the 2023 TrailBlazer grant award winners below to see for yourself the members of our wildlife family who you have empowered through your generous donations. Please understand these are their unedited words and photos intended to introduce you to these members at the dawn of their careers. As the 2024 TrailBlazer grant is now underway we invite you to share your experience as a doner with others to encourage the continued growth of this grant so we can ensure every wildlife biologist at the beginning of their professional journey is given the strength to make their career exactly what they envision.

Sincerely,

The Wildlife Society's
Student Development Working Group Board

2023 TrailBlazer Awardees

Elizabeth Mast

Receiving field gear through the Trailblazer Grant offered by The Wildlife Society aids me in staying dry, warm, and prepared while studying the impact of climate change on sensitive lake ecosystems and their biology. As part of a long-term, year-round sampling program, my research necessitates waterproof field gear for events like midwinter sampling and drilling through ice to study the lake below. Recently, a summer storm descended upon my field site, and I was able to stay completely dry amidst a stormy lake while collecting data because of my field gear. Additionally, studying remote lakes requires me to be prepared with sturdy gear, and I am very grateful for the backpack that will accompany my endless field days. Quality field gear can make a true impact on these research experiences, and I am thankful for the rain gear and field backpack I obtained through the Trailblazer Grant. Additionally, as a first-generation graduate student, funding is especially significant while I pursue my research endeavors. It is meaningful to have the support of the Wildlife Society during my graduate career, and I appreciate your efforts to enable students to pursue their love for our field.



Kassandra R. Karssen

As a professional Wildlife Biologist with the US Fish and Wildlife Service and a general nature enthusiast a good pair of binoculars is a must. I have been pursuing this field both academically and professionally since 2013 without ever having had my own pair of binoculars, I spent my academic career borrowing pairs of binoculars that in many cases had seen better days because I never really had the funds to buy my own and as a new professional and the state of the world it was just never feasible. When I saw the TWS email go out about the opportunity to win a pair of Vortex Binoculars I thought first to send it around to all of my past and present biological interns thinking surely they would benefit from this opportunity, never thinking of myself. I almost didn't put in for it, then I got to thinking how it would be nice to have a dedicated pair that I could call my own and keep safe for the long haul. Imagine my surprise to see the email saying I had been chosen. The binoculars arrived just in time to help me complete my July round of Henslow's Sparrow surveys. My current refuge (Big Oaks NWR) is a Globally Important Bird Area because we support such a large breeding population, so it is important to collect good data to help inform our management decisions for this species. I was able to easily hike the many miles of transects we have with this new set of binoculars and loved how comfortable the carrying case was! I had never seen such a thing previously, I often have to walk through some nasty thickets so being able to safely stow the binoculars in their case was great and the fact that I wasn't having to carry the weight of them solely on my neck was fantastic. In the future I plan to continue to use them for various birding endeavors, both on the job and in my free time, but I also will be using them for additional activities like our annual Butterfly Survey and some hunting opportunities. I am beyond grateful for the pair of binoculars and will be encouraging others I know to apply to future grants, because I know many others that would benefit from this type of award. Field Biologists do a lot of important work, but sometimes the gear can be expensive and you have to prioritize things like a sturdy pair of boots over something like a pair of binoculars. This program is a wonderful thing and I hope additional students and young professionals continue to benefit.

Thank you for such an awesome piece of equipment!



Edwin Jacobo

I would like to start this statement by saying that I am deeply grateful for your hard work supporting students and early-career professionals from underrepresented groups. Through efforts like this, we can have a diverse wildlife professional community. Thank you. I am a Ph.D. student from Washington State University, working on the stopover ecology of migratory songbirds in California and Oregon. This year, I experienced a very contrasting fieldwork season. The snowpack in the southern Sierra Nevada created very challenging conditions for my fieldwork in the riparian forest of the Kern River Preserve. Early in the season, I had to navigate my study site in chest-deep cold water with no more equipment than a pair of rubber boots. You can imagine how difficult it was to collect data in such circumstances. I could barely feel my feet while walking and wading in early April. Of course, I often thought about getting a pair of waders to conduct my fieldwork. However, I did not have that much money in my budget. With a graduate student's salary, spending that money could impact other key aspects such as housing, food, or transportation. Luckily, my advisor recommended me to apply for the Trailblazer Grant. I applied and got one of these grants, and I did not hesitate to pull the trigger and buy a pair of waders as soon as I was notified. Getting this grant improved the quality of my research and made my life way easier. Instead of freezing every morning in cold water, I could focus on the birds I was studying. No more getting back from the field with wet pants, socks, and shirts. Having adequate field gear was a game changer; I could capture birds over water with less risk for birds and me. I was able to spend more time in the field because I no longer rely on my physical endurance to support cold temperatures.

The field gear I purchased with this grant will help my research in years to come. I will always thank SDWG members for supporting students and early-career wildlife professionals.



Sara Payne

Being gifted with these binoculars has changed the game as a young wildlife professional. As someone who loves to take a deeper look at the outdoors and everything that lives within that space, these binoculars have helped me learn so much already. I just traveled around Scotland for two weeks and the first thing on my packing list was this gift. I was able to see and learn about so much more using these as I hiked along mountains and boated through the Bays of Scotland. Even though I have returned from that short adventure, I am now back in South Florida for my internship and am ready to continue to use them. Florida is a great place, full of diversity in the wildlife around you, and I am so excited to see how this gift helps me learn more. This gift has truly given me an upper hand as a young, female professional who is still trying to figure out what she wants to do in the future. In the world of wildlife and research, it will allow me to look beyond what I see at first glance and learn more about the world around me which will in turn help me grow into a curious, open minded professional in this field.



Kelsey Shepherd

As a person with a disability, I face unique challenges in my day to day life that can affect my ability to conduct fieldwork. However, with the financial support from the Trailblazer Grant, I have been able to acquire specialized gear tailored to my needs, including a pair of hiking boots and a custom pair of safety sunglasses. These items have ensured my ability to participate fully in my fieldwork and complete my final year of data collection for my master's degree safely and successfully. Support from the Trailblazer Grant has helped ease the personal financial burden's that accompany conducting fieldwork as an early career professional, while also enhancing my ability to make meaningful contributions to the scientific community. I am immensely grateful to have received this award and am excited to continue to pursue my passion for research and discovery- now with new and important fieldwork gear!



Isa Mattioli

This award has helped me buy valuable field gear to assist with my career in wildlife biology. For starters, I was able to purchase a headlamp to use for my Pismo clam lab surveys. My lab does long term monitoring of Pismo clams, which involves monthly surveys in the intertidal beach during low tide. Often, low tide occurs very early in the morning. The purchase of this headlamp allowed me to light up my survey site and collect better data. I was also able to purchase a field bag to hold my gear for my senior project research. For my senior project, I am researching the impact of southern sea otter predation on Pismo clams in the California central coast. This involves carrying a lot of gear to various locations on high elevation on the beach, and moving around to keep the otter in view. This award has helped purchase supplies that I would not have been able to otherwise to promote success within my current jobs as well as within my senior research project.

Diversity within the wildlife field is something that is very important to me. As a gender queer person in the wildlife field, it is rare that I see others like me represented within the field. My goal in life is to show others that the wildlife field is a safe and accepting place, as well as provide a role model for other queer individuals in the field. I know that when I see queer people represented, I feel safer being open about who I am and therefore would enjoy working there more. I work towards being a queer role model in my daily life by always being open and honest about my sexual and gender identity and my pronouns use in my multiple labs or club meetings I attend. I also work to champion diversity within Cal Poly SLO's student chapter of The Wildlife Society. I currently serve as the Cal Poly Wildlife Club President, and through this role I have personally instituted a new officer Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion officer position. Through this role we have been able to highlight marginalized voices in wildlife as well as educate our members on how they can promote a more inclusive field as well.



Michela Seronello

This summer I have been fortunate to have the amazing opportunity of serving as a mammal research intern in the Amazon Rainforest of Perú. I have been spending about 6-8 hours hiking along transects in the rainforest every day while conducting mammal surveys. One of the most prominent groups of mammals I have been studying are primates, including night monkeys, black-capped capuchins, Colombian red howler monkeys, saddle-back tamarins, black-capped squirrel monkeys, and dusky titi monkeys. With the help of my Vortex binoculars, I have been able to conduct primate follows, which is a research method that consists of following a group of primates, even if it means venturing off-trail, and making observations on the behavior and distance of each individual over several 10-minute intervals. These binoculars have allowed me to observe primates clearly from thick in the rainforest canopy, at heights of 20-30 meters. It has been a dream come true to spend this summer learning directly in nature and studying so many amazing and diverse species. I am excited to broaden my field work experience, encounter new mammal species, and continue to develop my work in wildlife conservation.



Sutirtha Lahiri

Through the generous support of The Wildlife Society equipment grant, I have finally been able to arrange for my fieldwork in the South Asian wet grasslands. My project is on understanding how habitat loss across decadal time spans has influenced grassland bird communities and extirpations. This project is in two parts; collating historical data and conducting a resurvey. For the first part, I visited the Natural History Museum at Tring, UK to gather historical bird data from museum collections and archives. Once I identified the dataset that was worthy of a resurvey, I then planned for my fieldwork. My study site is in the lowland wet grasslands in the Subansiri river basin in the Himalayan foothills of Northeast India. Here, I will be conducting fieldwork to assess bird community and abundance metrics through point counts and acoustic sampling. The support from The Wildlife Society will very much aid in my fieldwork. I will be using the tent whenever I have to camp at my field sites (photo below). I will also be using the headlamp during early mornings when I have to set up acoustic recorders. Both these equipment will greatly help in the success of my fieldwork. These equipment are quite expensive in India or, on many occasions, not even available. So the support from TWS in providing the financial support for this equipment is vital for my fieldwork, and I extend my gratitude for this generosity.



Carlos Hinojosa

Thank you for providing the opportunity for me to receive the Trailblazer Grant. This grant will serve as a transformative and invaluable resource, significantly impacting my journey as a student and aspiring wildlife conservationist. As a first-generation Mexican-American from the DC metro area and a Pell Grant recipient, the financial assistance provided by this grant will not only relieve a considerable burden but will also empower me to overcome challenges that were initially daunting.

Upon entering the majors of “Animal and Poultry Sciences” and “Wildlife Conservation” at Virginia Tech as a freshman, I found myself grappling with a sense of displacement and disadvantage due to the lack of basic field gear: mud boots, hiking boots, hats, and binoculars. Although I was able to borrow equipment from my departments, the absence of essential tools posed a significant hurdle to my engagement and performance within these majors.

Coming from a background that didn't traditionally involve outdoor pursuits, I never had a birding community or regular engagement with people who worked outdoors, I often felt out of place and struggled to establish a foothold within my major. At the time of submitting my application for this grant, I also expressed concern about buying field gear for an upcoming field expedition to Colombia. This grant will not only support me with the physical tools needed for my fieldwork but will also serve as a symbol of inclusion, affirming that individuals from diverse backgrounds are welcomed and supported in the pursuit of their conservation goals.

I know that as I navigate through my coursework and engage in field experiences, I will be reminded of the profound impact the Wildlife Society, the Student Development Working Group, the Early Career Professionals Working Group, and the Trailblazer Grant have had on my academic and personal journey. I am sincerely grateful for this opportunity, and I am committed to using this support as a catalyst for positive change within the wildlife conservation community. Thank you once again for your generosity and belief in my potential. I look forward to paying it forward by making meaningful scientific contributions.

