Alumni Profile  

Exploring the Natural World

By Heather Vander Plaat

A child, Travis Williams '98 spent hours outdoors near his hometown of Hastings, Mich. – exploring wooded areas, searching for snakes and collecting insects. Today, he’s at the helm of an organization that encourages the same kind of inquisitiveness in the natural world.

Williams is executive director of the Outdoor Discovery Center of Wildlife Unlimited, a non-profit wildlife preserve and outdoor education center just south of Holland. The 120-acre site, visited by an estimated 40,000 people last year, is home to hundreds of species of plants and animals. Many are viewable by the public along several miles of walking paths that meander through the property. Set among the variable landscape of wetlands, dunes, forests and meadows is a seven-acre deer and elk enclosure, as well as a handful of educational buildings, including a spacious interpretive center and a birds-of-prey facility.

Williams was hired to run the Outdoor Discovery Center in 2000, shortly after a local conservation group, Wildlife Unlimited, purchased the land. While one major objective was to create a place where wildlife and natural habitats would flourish, Wildlife Unlimited also envisioned the site as a learning center for the public as well as for local schools and organizations. The group partnered with the Ottawa Area Intermediate School District to develop a long-range plan for the site, bringing in Williams to help with its creation and implementation.

Williams's current role has given him a chance to forge a mutually beneficial partnership with Hope on a variety of levels. "They gather data that helps us track things like what organisms are living here and whether they're increasing in numbers," Williams explained. "All of that information is important because it helps us in the management of our preserve."

The center also hosts several Hope interns each year, providing an interdisciplinary model that gives students experience not only in biology, but also in management, land use, public relations and teaching. Anna Brownson, a Hope senior who intends to work in outdoor education, is an intern at the center this summer. She has been helping out with educational programs at local libraries and assisting Williams with an off-site beetle study along the banks of the Kalamazoo River.

"I've learned a great deal about teaching kids about wildlife, and my skills at handling wildlife, including birds of prey, have improved," she noted.

For his part, Williams is excited to wake up each day and share his passion for the natural world with adults and children alike. "As a kid myself, animal stories and favorite moments happen when visitors to our center – whether they're adults going on an eco-tour or children in one of our wetlands programs – get smiles on their faces because they've connected the dots and realized the intricate layers you feed in the environment," he said.

(Additional information about the Outdoor Discovery Center may be obtained at www.OutdoorDiscoveryCenter.org.)

As executive director of the Outdoor Discovery Center, Travis Williams '88 lives out daily his childhood interest in the natural world and his Hope training in biology and environmental science. In addition to serving as an educational resource for the community, the center is a haven for injured birds such as the great horned owl pictured above.

"Having the chance to be one of the front-line creators of a place like this and to work with all kinds of tremendous people that make it happen has been such a rewarding experience," Williams said. "It allows you a lot of perspective when you look back, because you know how it started. That makes you appreciate every little piece that's been added along the way."

When Williams began, the property housed only a former township hall and a few vehicle tracks. Today, the public can enjoy its walking paths, wildlife enclosures and educational buildings five to seven days a week, dawn to dusk. A newly completed "memory trail" gives people with disabilities access to many of the property's highlights via a hard-surface trail. The facility also offers a wide array of inquiry-based, hands-on educational programs – both on and off site – to the general public, schools and local organizations. Nine staff members have joined the center in recent years to meet the growing demand for the center's resources. Last year alone, approximately 23,000 children participated to some degree in its programs.

"Not everyone needs to be an environmentalist," Williams said, "but the more children become aware of the environment and understand the interconnections of ecosystems, the better educated they'll be as adults about the impact of their choices."

As a student at Hope, Williams pursued a degree in the sciences, majoring in biology and earning minors in environmental science and geology. In addition to playing on the football team and working as a lab assistant, he also was one of the first students to take an interest in improving the educational displays and developing protocol for animal care in the college’s Science Museum, a popular destination for local school groups, and Dr. Kathy Wennett-Murray, professor of biology. Williams also volunteered to develop and present programs on reptiles, amphibians and predators to local elementary school children, she recalled.

"He was always around to lend a hand with the projects we had going on in the department," she said. "If you offered an optional field trip or outing, he was the first to sign up."

Biology professor Dr. K. Greg Murray described Williams as a student who studied biology for its own sake. "Travis was one of those people who had a real interest in organisms. He didn't seem focused on any one career at that point; his main focus was loving to learn about living things," he noted.

Williams has nothing but praise for the education he received at Hope. "It was an incredible place to study science," he said. "I have to give a lot of credit to Dr. Murray and Dr. Wennett-Murray, who both really lit my fire in terms of encouraging me to go outdoors and study. Hope also offered all kinds of opportunities for study through travel. I went on several field-type biology trips while I was there – to the Bahamas, the Colorado Rockies, southern Indiana, and Kentucky."

Following graduation, Williams worked as an environmental engineer and then as a biology instructor, simultaneously earning a master's degree in education at Aquinas College. He also served as a naturalist with the DoGrail Nature Center in Holland. In 2003, he received his master's degree in strategic management at Devonport University. He now lives on site at the Outdoor Discovery Center with his wife, Stephanie Jones '99 Williams, and their children, Joshua and Megan.