

Skills learned in college are put to use every day on the job

With a few years between college and her current position, Laura Sass (B.S. Wildlife Ecology 2002) can look back and say that the skills she learned while at the UW-Madison are being put to good use every day in her current position as a stream habitat ecologist for the Illinois Natural History survey. Laura says that during her time in the department she had many opportunities to work closely with the faculty and graduate students. “From this I learned valuable lessons on how to collect and manage good data. I also learned computer, field, statistics and research skills that I use every day in my job.”



Stream habitat ecologist Laura Sass collects samples from a river flood plain restoration site in Havana, Illinois.

In her current position Laura is one of a team of four people who work on projects for the Illinois Natural History Survey. Her team is developing a new habitat index for wadeable streams in Illinois. She currently is hiring a summer technician whom she will help train to collect field data in the summer. She also assists the local IL DNR stream biologists when they need help gathering samples or require assistance with other projects. During the winter months she enters the data collected, runs analyses, and works with co-authors to make decisions about the project. She and her teammates also attend professional meetings where they present their research findings to other professionals and submit their work for publication. “I really like the fact that this position allows me the freedom to be in charge of my own projects and pursue my own research interests,” says Laura.

“I also love the fact that I have a position that allows me to get out into the field.”

Laura advises Wildlife Ecology students to do whatever it takes to get experience in the field before graduating. “Help grad students, check the DNR websites, watch the job boards. Don’t be afraid to travel for the summer to work. Even if you have to take out a student loan to cover your expenses, the experience will help you once your graduate,” says Laura. She also suggests that following graduation, don’t hesitate to accept temporary positions and make them as different as possible. “This make you more employable and helps you figure out what you enjoy doing.”