**Showcasing the DNR: We’re not just wardens**

*DNR Wildlife Division is home to a wealth of talents and occupational duties*

**By KAREN CLEVELAND**

**Michigan Department of Natural Resources**

“Are you the game warden?”

It’s a question Michigan Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Division staffers hear often when the public sees us working.

This isn’t a surprise. The DNR’s conservation officers are highly recognizable and interact with the public a lot.

In contrast, many DNR Wildlife Division staffers don’t often deal directly with the public, but their fingerprints are all over Michigan’s conservation story.

They create habitat for endangered species, design hunting regulations, teach Michiganders about nature and so much more. They come from many different backgrounds and do many different jobs, but the one thing they have in common is caring about protecting Michigan’s natural and cultural resources.

The one type of job that people sometimes think of when they think of wildlife conservation is a wildlife biologist, and the Wildlife Division has a lot of them.

Some work on large-scale, statewide issues, but many, like Jeremiah Heise, work in just a couple of counties. Heise’s beat covers Bay and Saginaw counties where he can be found working on a variety of different projects.

“Sometimes I’m developing hunter surveys, entering and analyzing data and conducting managed deer or waterfowl hunt drawings,” Heise said. “Sometimes I’m fishing skunks out of swimming pools or working with farmers to address crop damage from deer; other times I’m picking up wildlife specimens for necropsy at our Wildlife Disease Lab or banding ducks and geese.”

While the minimum education qualification for applying to be a DNR wildlife biologist is a bachelor’s degree in a natural resources field, like many of our wildlife biologists, Heise continued his education and got a master’s degree in wildlife ecology. He also worked hard to get as much practical experience as he could along the way.

Even though a large part of his job with the DNR involves working with wetlands and waterfowl, some of the projects he’s found most satisfying are ones that focus on connecting with people.

Heise updated and improved a clunky old deer hunting lottery process to make it easier for hunters to use and for the DNR to run. And he’s working on ways to reach out to Michiganders who don’t hunt and fish to help them enjoy the state’s wildlife resources as well.

Helping Michigan residents get to know the nature around them also is a big part of the job of graphic designer Shennelle Anthony, a key member of the Wildlife Division’s communications team.

You might have already seen some of her work if you’ve ever used a hunting digest, studied the details of our coastal wetland posters or got an elk or Kirtland’s warbler license plate for your car.

Being the Wildlife Division’s in-house graphic designer means Anthony gets to work on a wide variety of projects and constantly improve and stretch her abilities.

“I was really proud of the illustrations that I worked on for the 2021 hunting digest covers,” she said. “I was mostly satisfied with the results since it was out of my comfort zone. Illustration is its own discipline and requires a different skillset from design.”

What does it take to get a job as a wildlife graphic designer?

Shennelle got a bachelor’s degree in graphic design and had built a solid portfolio of her work before applying for a job with the Michigan DNR. She suggests looking for internships or pro bono projects with wildlife conservation organizations to help build the kind of portfolio to make you stand out during a job interview.

And while design is an acquired skill that takes continuous effort to improve, Anthony cautions to take the time to have interests and hobbies outside of design.

“I think being a well-rounded individual can contribute greatly to the creative process,” she said. “You don’t always need to ‘Eat. Sleep. Design.’ which is a common phrase used in the field.”

One wildlife staffer you’ll probably never see is Robin Reed, one of the division’s surveyors, but his work helps protect wildlife habitat. When someone mistakes state land for unoccupied land that anyone can use for whatever they want, the DNR’s surveyors get involved.

Surveyors document where our public land boundaries are so that violators – whether it’s dumping trash, cutting trees, making trails or even constructing buildings – can be stopped and wildlife habitat protected.

Disputes can even end up in court, and Reed has had to provide testimony more than once about his findings.

“On the (witness) stand in court I’ll never forget the judge saying, ‘I am inclined to award the property to Mr. (blank) but on the testimony of the surveyor, I find for the state,’” Reed said. “Wow. That was cool.”

Reed didn’t go to college dreaming of working for the DNR. He started his career in his father’s surveying business and applied for his job at the DNR when the economy hit a downturn.

While he’s a licensed surveyor, which means completing a bachelor’s degree, getting four years of experience, and passing an exam, it’s possible to start a career as a DNR surveyor with an associate’s degree.

Being a surveyor for the DNR involves all the same rules and tools as being a private surveyor, so working in the public sector may be a good choice if you like math, want to spend your career outdoors 12 months a year, and are up for learning the extra oversight and procedures that come with a government job.

While some “wildlifers” took a straight-line path from school to a career with the DNR, others took a more winding path like Sarah Cummins, the supervisor for the Wildlife Division’s Policy and Regulations Unit.

The unit covers a wide range of responsibilities, from providing input on regulations and legislation to running hunting license lotteries, issuing specialized wildlife permits and processing Freedom of Information Act requests from the public.

With the variety of skills and knowledge of different subject areas her staff brings to the division, Cummins’ route through working for a tribal government, being an editor in the private sector and developing security standards for the technology industry helped her pick up the perfect mix of experiences.

Cummins came to the DNR with an undergraduate degree for a job as a regulatory analyst, but she found the support at the DNR to grow.

“My undergraduate degree is in English. Not long after I joined the DNR, my supervisor encouraged me to pursue a master’s in public administration,” Cummins said. “I’ve found my graduate degree very useful, especially in understanding the legislative process and administrative law.”

And while she loves the way that working here fills her desire to make a positive contribution in the world, like many of us who work for the DNR, her job involves more time in the office than outside with the resources we conserve.

“Even though my role is administrative, and I spend most of my time at a desk or in meetings, I think it’s important to not be afraid to get my hands dirty – and my boots muddy,” Cummins said. “I always appreciate the opportunity to spend the day outside working alongside other people who want to do good things for wildlife.”

And me?

My career has taken a few twists and turns.

I started in a job building databases and tracking hunter harvest information. Then I was a bird biologist working on statewide and Great Lakes regional conservation projects, and now I’m working in wildlife communications, making games and looking for ways to share what we do with more Michiganders.

In the wildlife conservation community, there’s room for all sorts of talents. If you love wildlife, there may be a place for you, too.

For more information about current DNR job openings, visit [Michigan.gov/DNRJobs](http://www.Michigan.gov/DNRJobs)

Check out previous Showcasing the DNR stories in our archive at [Michigan.gov/DNRStories](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-79137_79770_79873_80003---%2C00.html). To subscribe to upcoming Showcasing articles, sign up for free email delivery at [Michigan.gov/DNR](http://www.Michigan.gov/DNR).

###