

B&C PROFESSOR'S CORNER

Introducing the Club's Newest Professor – William F. Porter



William F. Porter

Boone and Crockett
Chair of Wildlife
Conservation
Michigan State
University

We all can recall those pivotal moments when life went off in a new direction. For me, one of those moments was snowshoeing along a ridge in the Whitewater Wildlife Management Area of southeastern Minnesota and coming upon a group of four big gobblers. Those

birds flew off the ridge and glided a half mile into the valley below. That was my initiation to the wild turkey, and I was hooked. Over the next five years I worked with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources on what would become a big part of my life's passion. My dissertation work on wild turkeys in the upper Mississippi Valley led to a broadening of our thinking about the habitat requirements of this species. The findings contributed to a dramatic expansion of the trap-and-transfer programs that resulted in restoring this species throughout the Midwest and Great Lakes states.

My wife, two young sons and I moved from Minnesota to Syracuse in 1978 to join the faculty of the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry. Syracuse is well-known as one of the first forestry programs in the country. There I taught wildlife management and winter ecology and found that I loved working with students. Over the years, I recruited graduate students who shared my passion for wildlife, and we developed a research

program that covered everything from moose to mice. The common thread to this research was our desire to practice science that was effective. We wanted to find solutions to wildlife management problems through a deeper understanding of animal behavior and ecology. We made remarkable discoveries that had important implications for wildlife managers.

Our work with whitetail deer is a good example. Early in my career I began working with foresters who were having trouble regenerating forest stands of yellow birch, sugar maple, and black cherry. Deer were browsing regenerating shoots to the point that these tree species were being outcompeted by less-valuable species such as American beech. A series of research projects examining the movement behavior and genetics of deer showed that their populations were actually composed of smaller units of related females. These female groups were so faithful to their home ranges that even when an entire group was eliminated, individuals from surrounding groups did not adjust their movements to take advantage of the empty space. A doctoral student of mine, Nancy Mathews, coined this social-spatial structure of the population the *rose-petal hypothesis*. When she plotted the overlapping home ranges of deer in multiple groups across a landscape on the computer, it looked like roses to her. This idea had valuable implications to foresters because it meant they could focus hunters on specific areas to reduce the deer population. Then they could harvest the stands and the regenerating forest would be free from browsing by deer. By good fortune, it took about five years for females dispersing from

distant groups to find the empty patch, and that was all the time needed for most of the regenerating trees to grow taller than deer could reach.

Over the years, I have always tried to incorporate new technology into our research. From infrared imagery to geographic positioning system (GPS) radio collars, we have participated in a revolution in wildlife research. One example is a study of moose-automobile accidents in Maine that is published in the most recent issue of the *Journal of Wildlife Management*. This study used satellite imagery and recent advances in geographic information systems (GIS). A master's student working with me, Zachary Danks, found that if we want to reduce the risk of moose-automobile accidents, then managers need to focus on the environmental characteristics of the landscape near the accident site—within a radius of 25 miles, rather than within 25 yards of the roadside.

In parallel, I've spent a good portion of my career exploring larger policy issues related to conservation in the Adirondack Park. This is a 6-million-acre state park (three times the size of Yellowstone) in northern New York where society is making a strong effort to sustain the biological integrity of a largely intact wilderness, while at the same time promoting growth of a vibrant economy. Together with a large number of partners, I have spent the last 10 years examining the policy issues of conservation as they relate to sustainability. These partners have included economists and social scientists, government officials and business leaders who bring the analytical tools and the insight required to make sustainability a reality. This

Four male turkeys walking through a thicket at the edge of the forest.



work resulted in a book published in 2009 by Syracuse University Press, *The Great Experiment in Conservation*.

As I begin the Boone and Crockett Professorship at Michigan State University, the team already includes four new graduate students and two post-doctoral research associates. We will continue our research on chronic wasting disease, explore the use of new satellite imaging technology for mapping habitat and begin studies to improve hunting opportunities for wild turkeys. In the coming year, I look forward to talking more with Boone and Crockett Club Members and Associates about how we can best contribute to the emerging conservation agenda. Our long-term goals will include training the future leaders in wildlife conservation. The power of diverse programs at Michigan State offers a remarkable opportunity for students to learn the science and policy cornerstones of conservation. These Boone and Crockett Fellows at Michigan State will follow former students of mine now leading conservation efforts. People like Dr. Dale Garner who is now Chief of Wildlife for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, Dr. Kathy Fleming, a biologist with

the USGS Fish and Wildlife Service at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, and Dr. Karl Didier who represents our future through his international wildlife conservation work for the Wildlife Conservation Society.

hectic schedule over the past 10 years. Sitting back isn't my style, though. Each December when the snow flies, I still get the desire to sit in a blind over a rocket net hoping the turkeys will come in to bait before I'm frozen.

The common thread to this research was our desire to practice science that was effective. We wanted to find solutions to wildlife management problems through a deeper understanding of animal behavior and ecology. We made remarkable discoveries that had important implications for wildlife managers.

But what excites me more these days are big ideas for tackling the larger challenges of wildlife conservation. The Adirondack experience whetted my appetite for working on the big issues facing conservation. I was attracted to Boone and Crockett and to Michigan State University because of the opportunity to work with those big issues and with leaders that bring the passion and capabilities to accomplish bold plans.

In a quiet moment on the second day in our new home on the outskirts of Williamston, Michigan, a flock of wild turkeys came through the yard. If there was ever a sure sign we made the right decision, this was it. I am honored to be the first Boone and Crockett Chair in Wildlife Conservation at Michigan State University. I look forward to working with the Club as it tackles the crucial issues that are just ahead in wildlife conservation. ■

William T. Porter



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