



Summer Natural Resource Interns Have Unique Experiences in Harney County

High Desert Partnership's Summer Work Crew play an important role in furthering collaborative work in Harney County.

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By Scott Barton



Every year, High Desert Partnership (HDP) provides a select number of internships to high school and college students who are interested in the fields of natural resources, biology, wildlife management, and the like. The work they do supports collaborative efforts and this summer, furthered the work of several collaboratives: Harney County Wildfire Collaborative, Harney County Forest Restoration Collaboration, the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative and the Youth Changing the Community Collaborative.



A Passion for Mentoring Youth

Kaylee Littlefield is HDP's Monitoring Program Coordinator and oversees all the summer interns in a group that's known as Summer Monitoring Crews. Kaylee came to Harney County via Eastern Oregon University where she earned a Bachelor of Science Degree in Rangeland Management in 2021.

She's deeply passionate in her current role, stating that "Ultimately, what I hope is that each crew member will walk away wanting to go into and continue a natural resource career field.

Hopefully the positive experience they had with HDP plays a role in that decision."

More specifically, she maintains that there's a lot of information for every crew member to not only learn, but retain. A lot of that has to do with the names of different plants and animals. Not only is it imperative for them to learn the common and scientific names of plant and animal species, but also the USDA Plant codes associated with each one specifically.

More than anything, however, the chance for the Summer Work Crew interns to work hands-on, in the field, and with a significant level of autonomy is what Littlefield hopes each member takes away.

2023 Team and Projects

According to Littlefield, the crew for 2023 came in ready to learn and work, and has more than exceeded expectations. That's been exemplified by all the tidbits of information they've soaked from other natural resource professionals, not to mention their own observations out in the field. With a total number of six interns for the summer, Abby Hobdey and Emily Hamant worked on the stream crew; Owen Graham, Noah Kulp, and Brayden Burke rounded out the team on the habitat crew and Sarah Weber interned at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

This summer has seen the team work on the most diverse set of projects to date. As a result, "the local natural resources community has increased their excitement of teaching and showing the crews all the wide variety of jobs that are present in natural resources," says Littlefield.



The flagship project for both crews was salvaging fish and mussels from Summit Creek in the Malheur National Forest prior to restoration. Both the stream and habitat crews worked with seasoned professionals, the Forest Service, and the Burns Paiute Tribe in this project as well as banding birds on Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

Meet the Crew

Brayden Burke

Brayden Burke is 20 years old, and he's attending BYU-Idaho where he's working toward a Bachelor's degree in Wildlife Management. Brayden saw the Summer Work Crew job opportunity on the [Southeastern Oregon Job Board](#) for Natural Resources, applied, and got the job.

As the team lead for the habitat crew, a lot of his work has involved taking environmental DNA samples and electrofishing for carp to see how far up Silvies River they've gone. In addition to taking inventory of native fish species, Brayden has also participated in the banding of migratory birds this summer. This work has taken place on the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge where he also took inventory of habitats near the main headquarters that are set for treatment of the invasive perennial pepperweed.

Brayden is finishing out his summer to the east of Burns, in the rural community of Juntura. Here he's performing similar work as he did at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, but his target species is an invasive annual grass called medusahead.

He sees the efforts as meaningful, adding "I hope the work I've done will help improve the wildlife populations as well as the habitat they live in. As a wildlife major, I have gained a lot of experience with fish and plants native to this region. . . It's also taught me how to lead."

The future is undoubtedly bright for Brayden. He has his eyes set on completing his undergraduate degree and hopes to earn a master's degree. One day he hopes to become a wildlife biologist.

Abby Hobdey

The summer seems to have flown by for Abby Hobdey, who's in her second year at Treasure Valley Community College. As a member of the stream crew, her work has been mostly in the water. She's spent the majority of the season mapping fish habitat and characteristics of streams on the Malheur National Forest.

She's also been involved with the Summit Creek restoration efforts. She's snorkeled to survey mussel, fish, and frog populations and has also mapped the streams' available habitat. She sees value in this work as it will benefit wildlife, their habitat, and Grant and Harney County recreationists for years to come.

Abby has fish on the brain, and there's little doubt her experience with the stream crew this summer will be of great benefit as she pursues to finish her associates degree in Natural Resources and a bachelor's degree in the future.

Reflecting on her summer, she says "I could not have asked for a better opportunity." While her work with native fish was impactful, her favorite memory was banding ducks. She adds that "Growing up hunting, a banded duck was always an amazing opportunity. So, to really understand how much work goes into it and how valuable the information that's collected is means a lot."

If she's not in the classroom, one thing is sure, Abby will be found close to water in the future.

Emily Hamant



This summer's stream crew lead, Emily Hamant came to Harney County with a degree in Wildlife Biology. Much like Abby, her focus has involved mapping and restoration of streams, fish habitat and impacts on streams due to cattle allotment.

Despite long days in the field and cold nights, Emily sees tremendous value in her work. "This work has been great! I've learned leadership skills and have come to truly appreciate the importance of forest health. I'll be able to apply my new knowledge to graduate school, help understand ecological functions, and apply it in future jobs."

However, when asked about her favorite experience from the season, water played a central theme, just like Brayden and Abby. "We found 5 waterfalls on one stream! We took a break and swam at the bottom of the largest waterfall!"

Pictured from left to right are interns Abby Hobdey and Emily Hamant and U.S. Forest Service seasonal employee Jesaca Culley at one of the five waterfalls they came across.

A close second was bird banding. A natural lover of birds, being able to get up close and physically experience the world in which birds live was an experience she won't soon forget. What made it even more memorable was that the banding occurred in the middle of the night.

Like every member of the Summer Work Crew, Emily has a bright future ahead of her. She's currently making plans to pursue her PhD in ecology and hopes to pursue a career in academia.

Owen Graham

Also a member of this year's habitat crew, Owen Graham was raised in Harney County and is going into his Senior year of high school.

Having a lifelong interest in wild animals and wild places, Owen jumped at the opportunity to apply for an internship with this year's Summer Work Crew. His original plan was to do archaeology and learn about past civilizations in Harney County and thought learning about Natural Resources was a good place to start. After this summer his interest in learning more about birds, wildlife and invasive plants increased.

After a hard, but enjoyable summer of work, he plans on pursuing further education in natural resources with a focus towards wildlife. For the immediate future, he's focused on being recruited to play college football after his senior year of high school. Wherever he winds up, he's sure to make an impact.

Noah Kulp

It isn't every day that Harney County gets a visitor all the way from Pennsylvania, but Noah Kulp decided to make the cross-country trek and call Harney County home for the summer.

With a sense of wanderlust and love of the natural world, he was excited to see what life out west was all about. After a summer filled with memorable work experience in unfamiliar ecosystems, Noah is headed back to the east coast. We hope he takes with him fond memories of his time in Harney County and will be able to apply his skills with his ongoing work.

Sarah Weber

A University of Oregon student working as the Substation Management Technician at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge this summer.

Sarah has undergraduate degrees in Earth and Environmental Science and has been assembling her own hydrology education program studying environmental surface processes. As part of that program, Sarah's work this summer has been assisting Zachary McCloy, the Substation Manager for the south refuge, "Our responsibilities are to manage irrigation and maintenance operations in the southern area of the refuge from Page Springs Dam to Krumbo Reservoir. This includes monitoring water flows within the Blitzen River, canals, and water levels of impoundments, as well as the maintenance of water-related infrastructure, roads, and refuge machinery and structures.

When Sarah was asked about a favorite experience this summer, her response: "It's hard to choose a favorite, I've had so many! One of my favorite recent instances involved a request to diagnose and rectify a drainage issue in one of our fields so that a permittee could continue mowing. I personally find the journey of problem-solving to be highly rewarding, so tromping around investigating the canals and water structures to determine where the problem was and then fixing it has been one of my favorite experiences of this job."

Final Thoughts

The warm months seem to fly by faster and faster every year in the Harney Basin. New signs of life begin to appear in early spring, and in an instant, we're on the back side of the 4th of July. But when the days are long and the natural world is at its crescendo, there is much to learn and work to be done.

Though often found in remote locations, without a cell signal, and largely out of sight, the members of the Summer Monitoring Crews work diligently and passionately to not only further their own skills, knowledge, and experience, but also leave a positive and lasting mark on the Harney Basin.

To the 2023 Summer Monitoring Crews, we say Thank You. Your passion, diligence, and dedication have left an indelible mark.

This article is provided by High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting six collaboratives including the Harney County Wildlife Collaborative.

