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Scientist Profile: Taylor Ellis, Wildlife Technician

Golden Gate National Recreation Area (<https://www.nps.gov/goga/>), Point Reyes National Seashore (<https://www.nps.gov/pore/>)



Wildlife technician Taylor Ellis conducts most of the surveys for northern spotted owls on Marin's National Park lands.

NPS / Maritte O'Gallagher

On becoming a field wildlife biologist...

"I got started pretty early. My parents always appreciated nature. We went on lots of hikes when I was a kid, and I had an older friend that would take me bird watching. I also had a teacher in high school who taught us marine biology and zoology—not so much out of a textbook, but through actual fieldwork projects and trips. That gave me a sense of what it might be like to actually be a wildlife scientist.

"I ended up majoring in cognitive science in college. But by the end of it, I realized I definitely didn't want to work indoors. The economy was pretty bad, so it wasn't like people were beating down your door to hire you. I found a program through AmeriCorps called the [Student Conservation Association \(https://www.thesca.org\)](https://www.thesca.org)

(SCA), which helped connect me to a spotted owl monitoring position in New Mexico. It sounded exactly like what I wanted to do, so I went for it. Then one thing led to another. A cool thing about the National Park Service, and the U.S. Forest Service too, is that a lot of these jobs are semi-transferable. Being persistent and willing to move is huge. You start to learn. Once you have a little bit of experience, more stuff starts coming your way. So that happened to me. And it just kept happening."

From adventures as a seasonal to settling in at Point Reyes...

"At the beginning of your career, most of the wildlife biologist jobs available are seasonal. That's actually one thing that attracted me to this line of work. I liked trying out living in an interesting place for some period of time. It was perfect for right out of college, when I didn't know necessarily where I want to live forever, and I enjoyed moving around. It's pretty attractive as a way to explore the country while learning and doing service. I got to do owl work in a lot of really nice places: Point Reyes, Lincoln National Forest in New Mexico, the Sierra Nevada. I also did a desert tortoise job in southern Utah and Canyon Country. Between every job, I'd do a patchwork of other jobs and travelling. I was even able to get a master's degree in biology up at Sonoma State during the off-season, thanks to the flexibility of my position.

"I did the moving around thing for about 8 years. I feel pretty lucky to have been able to do it. I knew at the time I wouldn't have a lot of chances to to explore new areas in such detail, but I see it even more now that I've settled in here at Point Reyes."



"It's just nice to be surrounded by nature and wildlife right here at work," Taylor says of working at Point Reyes.

NPS / Maritte O'Gallagher

"I've been here at Point Reyes since 2011. I started off as a seasonal. Now I work basically year-round, even though the owl monitoring is still seasonal. That ended up being good for me, because I found more projects to work on, like the [Drake's Estero restoration effort](https://www.nps.gov/pore/getinvolved/planning-drakes-estero-restoration-project.htm) (<https://www.nps.gov/pore/getinvolved/planning-drakes-estero-restoration-project.htm>), contributing to a county-wide [wildlife camera program](https://wildlifepictureindex.onetam.org/WMS/#/) (<https://wildlifepictureindex.onetam.org/WMS/#/>), and helping out with the new [bat studies](https://www.nps.gov/articles/collaborative-bat-study-begins-in-marin-county.htm) (<https://www.nps.gov/articles/collaborative-bat-study-begins-in-marin-county.htm>). It's good to

have back up stuff going on instead of just one thing. The owls are a ton of work during the season, but then it's done until the following year."



Northern spotted owl parent and owlet share a branch in Marin County. The northern spotted owl is federally listed as threatened in California, Oregon, and Washington.

NPS / Taylor Ellis

place for the species now."

On northern spotted owls...

"I like their personality, and that they're very approachable compared to a lot of wild animals. I really get the chance to observe their core little family unit without feeling like I'm disturbing them."

"I didn't realize when I came to work here at Point Reyes that there's a good chance that the Marin population of spotted owls is going to be the [last intact population of northern spotted owls](https://www.nps.gov/articles/marin-spotted-owls-buffered-from-barred-owl-invasion.htm) (<https://www.nps.gov/articles/marin-spotted-owls-buffered-from-barred-owl-invasion.htm>), because of the barred owl invasion. Everywhere north of here, it's probably too late to sustain larger populations. That makes me feel lucky to be here, because here's this animal that I know so much about, and turns out, this is probably the most interesting and important

On field work...

"A lot of the fun of it is going out and trying to find the owls. They're doing all the work, I just try to show up and observe what they're doing. You've got to use your judgement to find them. It's all based on what we know about the history of the site, which could be very detailed, or it could be...nothing. Maybe all that you know is that you heard one there last night. You can start by looking at aerial photos to try to find where the best habitat might be. Then you get out there, and you're just looking around and thinking about where they might go. You don't walk along a certain transect. You just walk along whatever looks like the best way. So there's more freedom in that sense, as long as you find the bird."

"The physical side of the job can be challenging. I spend all week having to hike with weight. A lot of time on the weekend, all I want to do is...not have to go on a hike. I'm already in this beautiful area, so during the season I like to take it easy—just read and sit outside where it's nice, go for a swim or something like that. And when it's not crazy busy here, I'll go out and do some travelling."

"I like the field work so much, and anything that's an advancement over where I am would have dramatically less field work. So I have passed on "better jobs." With the Park Service, you're surrounded by other people who are also interested in conservation. When it's for science, the important thing is getting good data on the owls. It means a lot to me to be happy today. And be at an organization I respect."



Clues like owl pellets and droppings can help Taylor confirm he's on the right track to finding the birds.

NPS / Maritte O'Gallagher

Further Reading

[San Francisco Inventory & Monitoring Network: Northern Spotted Owls \(https://www.nps.gov/im/sfan/spotted-owls.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/im/sfan/spotted-owls.htm)

[Pacific Coast Science and Learning Center: Northern Spotted Owls \(https://www.nps.gov/rlc/pacificcoast/northern-spotted-owls.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/rlc/pacificcoast/northern-spotted-owls.htm)



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