

Eat, Prey, Dove! - S2E2

Dr. Rideout

Welcome to a talk on the wild side your biweekly tour of all things wild in Texas. I'm your host, Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak

George Echols

I'm your co host, Georgie Eccles.

andrew Lowery

Howdy howdy and I'm Andrew Lowery.

Dr. Rideout

Hey guys, how are you?

George Echols

Doing good. Its a little warm outside

andrew Lowery

Yes a touch toasty.

Dr. Rideout

Yeah, it's definitely summer here, or super summer as we like to call it in South Texas. Yeah. So what's going on?

andrew Lowery

Oh, not too much. You know, I heard that there's a really awesome movie out in theaters right now. I think you actually saw it. If im not mistaken.

Dr. Rideout

There is well, it was in the theaters a couple of weeks ago. But yeah, it's a terrific movie. And I think if it's not streaming online, already, it will be later this summer called Deep in the Heart.

andrew Lowery

So it's a wildlife documentary figure that you'd never guessed it with us. But it is in fact, a wildlife documentary. And it's kind of really cool, because not only do you get to listen to the beautiful voice of Matthew McConaughey throughout the entirety of it, which itself is a blessing.

Dr. Rideout

How much do we love Matthew McConaughey. I'm sorry, I just have to stop here for a minute. It's

andrew Lowery

like honey or the Alamo. He's like a Texas Essential.

Dr. Rideout

He is, I am not. I'll make a confession. I'm not into celebrities. I don't try to keep up with any family, or anything like that. I'm just not into celebrities. But I just love Matthew McConaughey. There's just

something special about him. He's just I think, I think, of course, I've never met him. But I just think he's a good guy. So yeah,

andrew Lowery

that's the impression I've gotten. Yeah, I don't know him personally, either. But yeah, seems like a pretty cool dude.

Dr. Rideout

Yeah, I think so. But yeah, and he did a great job, narrating this film, and it is wildlife. But it's also just conservation of natural resources, lots of really great messages in it.

andrew Lowery

So it's a cool fact about this. Not only is Matthew McConaughey a part of the project, we have Ben masters, who is actually kind of somewhat interconnected with CKWRI if I'm not mistaken, I think CKWRI was actually involved in this film. If I'm not mistaken,

Dr. Rideout

Yeah, and by CKWRI, if you're not familiar, that's who we work for. That's the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute. Yeah. And I think we were one of the sponsors, one of the Official sponsors. Big sponsor, though, was Texan by Nature.

andrew Lowery

Yeah, Texan by Nature, awesome stuff that they're doing. We actually have some episodes coming up guys. Where we actually talk to one of the recipients of some of their...

Dr. Rideout

Their conservation wrangler program is what it is. Yeah. So we've got a conservation Wrangler, partner of theirs coming up, Texan by Nature does some really great stuff. But yeah, he and Katy Baldock, with Fin and Fur Films they have several times let us use photos of theirs at no charge. And they've just done a lot of great work for us that we were we've been able to use their photos and their videos to help put the word out about what we do.

andrew Lowery

Yeah. Jay Kleberg, was also one of the producers on there. And if I'm not mistaken, he's a part of the Kleberg family of note that we've mentioned a moment ago.

Dr. Rideout

He is one of our Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute board members. Yeah. So we're related to this Deep in the Heart film, and in a lot of ways, so yeah. but it's a great film.

andrew Lowery

Yeah, we got a lot of love for it, guys. And if you've never got to see the beauty that is an ocelot, these guys got some of the best footage that has ever been taken of them in Texas ever, literally ever. So please, go check it out.

Dr. Rideout

Yeah, the footage of ocelots is, is really amazing. And I mean, I literally sat there in the theater, and I kept going, okay, and they have this angle to, and they've got that angle at the same time. And how

were they getting all these terrific angles? I mean, the cinematography is great. And I looked up the cinematographers. And there's a whole long list of them. So I'm not going to name anybody because I would

andrew Lowery

that was the only reason I did not include their names because they have a lot of really talented cinematographers

Dr. Rideout

so many people, so many talented people on this project, but great footage. Also the bats in Central Texas and coach whip footage was just fantastic. But then also bears and mountain lions and blind catfish also. Yeah, I just really kept thinking how they got that footage how they got that angle and that angle and this angle. Yeah, they did a great job. So kudos. If you didn't get to see it in the theater, you should definitely look forward to streaming online. So in today's interview, we're going to be hearing a lot about Doves. And I have a question for you guys. Have you ever been confused about the difference between a dove and a pigeon?

George Echols

I'm going to say no, but I can see how and this is because I studied birds. So I have to be a little bit. I have to pay attention to this kind of thing. Otherwise I embarrass myself. I think that pigeons, I'd like to call them dirty doves. They look similar to doves, but they kind of like, you know, I don't know, the Ratty version of a beautiful dove. The rejected dove

Dr. Rideout

the pesky version of a dove. Yeah, the annoying one. Okay. Yeah, well, Georgia is a much better birder than I am. And I'm probably not setting the bar very high there. But Georgia is an excellent birder, so she doesn't have confusion. I on the other hand, have sometimes been confused about why something is a dove or a pigeon or not the other and there's good reason for that turns out the difference between doves and pigeons is more linguistic than taxonomic. Scientifically, there's no difference between the birds. But these two words came to us differently. The word dove came into English from Nordic languages. with doves associated with love and world peace and pigeons are commonly thought of as pests to try to steal your food at the park. So I thought we would just talk a little bit about the differences and the similarities since they're really both the same thing with two different names. Turns out both pigeons and doves are members of the family Columbidae . But it makes sense that since they are the same thing, there are over 300 species in its family, and they're found everywhere except Antarctica, the high Arctic and the driest regions of the Saharan desert. various species have adapted to almost every habitat on Earth from grasslands, forests, savannas, deserts, even urban areas. So why do we call some doves and others pigeons? Let's start with how they are similar. Both pigeons and doves have compact round bodies for a bird. And they have short legs and tapered wings. They also typically have small rounded heads and short bills. And both birds are really lazy nest builders. Now we do know that about them, they're just going to stick three twigs on a windowsill and call it good. So they don't put much time into the nest. Okay. But there are some differences. There's a lot of variation in the sizes of pigeons and doves. But generally speaking, the birds that we call doves in English are smaller, they typically only weigh up to about half a pound. Pigeons are the larger species in that group, there's some of the pigeons might be as big as a turkey. And I guess one of them weighs up to almost nine pounds. So there are also some differences in their tails. Doves typically have longer tails that look more fanned out than pigeons, especially in flight. Now this is nature. So keep in mind, we're talking about common names, too. So there are going to be some exceptions to these general rules. But those those are

generally how they get called either a pigeon or a dove in English. Now, here's one last thing that adds to the confusion in my mind. Some of them get called both. One example is a common pigeon, which is also called a rock dove. So yeah, some get called pigeon some dove. So go ahead, write poems about peace pigeons and curse the doves at the park. It doesn't really matter. They're they're both the same thing. And this dovetails really nicely into our interview, so let's get on with it.

We're here today with Owen Fitzsimmons. Owen is the web-less migratory gamebird, program leader at Texas Parks and Wildlife. That's a whole mouthful.

So hello Owen, and welcome to Our Podcast.

Owen Fitzsimmons

Hi, y'all. Thanks for having me. It is a mouthful. A lot of people are curious about the web-less. And you know, I have to tell the story. Basically every time I introduce myself anywhere, when you talk about migratory gamebird. Basically everything's broken down into waterfowl, which have webbed feet and everything else, which is what I cover, which don't have webbed feet. So somewhere along the line, someone came up with a webless. And that's where that comes from. Yeah.

Dr. Rideout

Okay. Yeah. I thought that was interesting, too. I guess it's better than saying non waterfowl or non ducks and geese or it's I don't know,

Owen Fitzsimmons

right. It used to be the migratory shore and upland gamebird program somewhere along the line. I guess that was that was even longer and someone decided to shorten it. Yeah.

Dr. Rideout

Okay. So well, why don't you start by telling our listeners what you do as the web-less migratory game bird program leader.

George Echols

Sure. So as a program leader, I'm basically the state lead for monitoring management and to some degree research for web was migratory game birds, which include all those non waterfowl, migratory gamebirds is primarily dove sandhill cranes, those are what I spend most of my time on. But I also worked Woodcock.

Dr. Rideout

Okay, cool.

George Echols

Hi. Oh, I'm moving on to what you're talking about with Dove? It seems like dove along with Sandhill Cranes are one of the major species in your role. Could you tell us a little bit more about the various species of doves that are in Texas, where to find them what habitats they live in? And just some of the ecology about them?

Owen Fitzsimmons

Yeah, sure. You know, we're, we're kind of fortunate to be situated geographically where we are in the southern US, most doves are, you know, tend to be more of a subtropical or at least a little bit more of a

warm weather species. And we have several species that we have here in Texas, the most of the ones that people are most familiar with, I guess, are mourning doves, white winged dove. And to some degree, some of the ground does in the big game species that we have are morning white wing, and in South Texas, where you guys are the white tip, which is more of a ground dove. But we also have common ground of the Inca dove. And we actually have a few pigeons that a lot of people don't realize that we have in Texas, out in West Texas have the band tailed pigeon, which is pretty much found in the mountains is kind of a rocky mountain species. And then along the border, we have the red billed pigeon, which is another Colombard. But yeah, Texas is a really good place and has really good habitat and really good climate for species. And so we're kind of fortunate to have several to enjoy recreationally and ecologically.

George Echols

Yeah, that's, that's fascinating, because I had no clue that there was such a large range of doves in Texas and pigeons, too. That's certainly something that I didn't know. I didn't either.

Dr. Rideout

I'm just surprised as he's rattling off those names. I'm like, what? Okay, all right

Owen Fitzsimmons

Yeah, that that doesn't even bring up the, you know, the accidental or the rare. The rare species or the exotic species? We have got Eurasian collared doves, they are everywhere now. And of course, you know, your feral pigeons your rock doves. Now, they're kind of everywhere. But you know, one of the things about them is they're very adaptable. They are a generalist species. And so they're able to kind of thrive in all different kinds of habitats. And even with the major changes in land use and urbanization that's going on in our state. These birds are pretty well adapted to that kind of thing and, and are doing well.

George Echols

So we have such a large population of doves be well, different species in Texas. Can you tell us how big dove hunting is in Texas? Is it a big deal down here? Or across?

Owen Fitzsimmons

Yeah, it absolutely is. You know, morning doves are the most popular game bird in the country. And the most popular gamebird in Texas. And speaking of just the morning dove, Texas, harvest about a third of the morning does that are harvested in the entire US every year, we have about a third of the of the dove hunters in the country. And we also harvest about 85 to 90% of the white wings that are harvested each year in the country. So no other state even comes close. I mean, it's it's a huge deal here. You know, there's no no ifs ands or buts about it. You know if you're going to if you want to talk about dove hunting, Texas is the place

Dr. Rideout

Wow. I had no idea. Really didn't Yeah. So Texas is the place why, what makes Texas such a good place? Is it is it just about our culture? Or is it also that we have the habitats the weather whatever,

Owen Fitzsimmons

you know, morning dove have kind of been here while the white wings are more of a recent recent addition to the, to the hunting the bag, you know, the past few decades, but morning dove have, kind of been the historic data that everyone's chased for many, many years. And most of the morning dove

found in the US are found in the central flyway you know, everywhere from North Dakota down to Texas. And so not only do we have great habitats here we have very robust, high abundance populations here with more than doves so during the early season in September, most people are hunting their local populations in their areas. But as these birds start to migrate now, Texas is kind of the funnel what is it what I like to say the funnel for the central flyway so we get most of those birds that are coming down out of the Dakotas, Kansas Nebraska, they all fly right through our state on their way down to either here or Mexico. And we also get a fairly large percentage of birds from other flyways as well, that kind of funneled through our state. So we're very fortunate in that regard as far as dove hunting and, you know, white wings like that are kind of a recent phenomenon. Historically, they were only found in the lowest of the most southern four counties in our state. And somewhere around the mid 80s, late 80s, early 90s, they started to move north out of that and occupy urban and suburban areas, and they're mostly urban these days. But they've since expanded throughout our state, they are now found as far north they're, they're breeding as far north as Nebraska and Colorado. I actually saw one I was in Washington State on on San Juan at one of the San Juan Islands off the coast last July, and walked out of my hotel room. The first morning, we were there, and there's a whitening system right on right in front of the hotel. Yeah. So they're, they're expanding their range very quickly. And so it's, it's, there's a lot going on, there's a lot changing as we move so

Dr. Rideout

So how were white wings able to do that is that I mean, they're in the lower four counties here in the state, and then they're all the way you know, north. Is it about brushy encroachment climate. How did they do that?

Owen Fitzsimmons

Well, what's interesting is it's happened range wide. So white wings are definitely a subtropical species are found throughout Latin America. And the US southern border, you know, Arizona and Texas, primarily is kind of in the very, very northern extent of their range historically. And at least in Texas, as people began to clear farmland clear land for farm for agriculture, they clear these riparian areas in the Rio Grande Valley in the early 1900s. That's where these birds nested and white wings are kind of unique with, you know, compared to mourning doves, which typically nest on, you know, solitarily, white wings or colonial nesters historically. And so they had these huge colonies in the riparian areas along the Rio Grande. And when that habitat was destroyed, as they cleared the land for agriculture, those birds ended up over over the next few decades moving into citrus groves that were planted down there. And there was a series of freezes in the 50s and 60s that killed those citrus groves. And they kind of, you know, somehow made their way into urban areas where, where they are today where you have, you know, mature pecan trees and city parks and live oak trees in people's backyards. And, and now they're their entire ecology has kind of changed. We no longer see these big colonies. And a lot of the birds that we that we find in Houston, some of the big metro areas, DFW Austin, San Antonio, we think are no longer migratory, because they don't need to go anywhere. So there's there's a lot of questions on on how they're using these urban areas, what's changed over the past 50-60 years with their annual ecology. And, yeah, it's changing rapidly. And there's a lot we still don't know about.

Dr. Rideout

That's really interesting. So you mentioned something that I want to touch on, we've already established that hunting dove hunting is a big deal here. Let's talk about annual changes, what factors seem to make for a particularly good year for dove hunting? And can you tell us Do you have any idea how this year might be shaping up for doves in various parts of the state?

Owen Fitzsimmons

Yeah, that's a great question. So the populations are fairly variable, especially mourning dove in Texas. We have surveys that we conduct every spring to try to assess, you know, a breeding population. And really, I think what it comes down to is does really like kind of a Goldilocks. As far as weather goes kind of a Goldilocks situation where not too dry, you know, not extreme drought, and definitely not too wet. They tended to do better when it's a little bit more dry. But you know, there's a lot of questions there too, on what really drives that that variation from year to year. When you know that mourning doves, will reproduce very quickly. Pair of mourning does can have up to six broods per year. So they'll reinvest and reinvest and reinvest and just crank out those young and so when they have a really good year, the population basically explodes. You know, and then when they have a couple of bad years, they're able to recover that you know, with one good year so you see a lot of that kind of boom and bust to some degree but we have so many does. You know when it comes to hunting, there's always plenty of dogs available to hunt. We're not We're not anywhere close to harvesting kind of a, you know, anywhere close to overharvesting. Yeah, yeah. So we're in a good spot here in Texas. I'll repeat that over and over, I tried to tell our hunters that for sure.

Dr. Rideout

That's good to know. So is it too early to tell for this year? Do you have any kind of idea for this year with, we're actually in the middle of conducting our spring surveys now. That's kind of too early. But I feel like as dry as it's been in many parts of our state, you know, we're coming off several wet years, I think last year was one of the top three wettest summers we've ever had. Yes. So I feel like we might be coming back around that, that 10-12 year drought cycle, which was actually really good for doves. You know, in 12 years ago, we saw a couple of years with the 2011 2012 drought, we saw kind of a, I would say, like an average, you know, abundance level. And then somewhere around 2013. Man, the dove population exploded for four or five years. And so we may see that, again, I'm really closely watching that, because like I said, there's still a lot we don't know. And one thing I'm trying to do now with our survey data is, is try to figure out what's really driving this from year to year. And so I'm looking at some land cover databases, and particularly one called crop scape, because I think small grains and agriculture can have a big part to play and reproductive success each year. So we're trying to see see what some of those drivers are in the annual variation, and even what's driving distribution, because that's changed over time to throughout our state.

George Echols

So all in do you anticipate any policy changes? You're saying? It's been super wet the last few years? And now this year? It's going to be dry will that with your surveys, and your approach's to try and to understand these distributions? And does the species ecology lenbout a particular towards urbanization, and so on? A lot of components here, right? Do you anticipate any changes in policy like bag limits, so on if that's increased, decreased, or any important updates that dove hunters in Texas should be aware of

Owen Fitzsimmons

No, we're actually pretty fortunate in that. Harvest doesn't have a huge impact on on populations one way or the other. And we're actually, if you look at a yield curve, if you go back to your population ecology, harvest ecology one on one, we're way off on the right side of that yield curve. So we're nowhere near any kind of overharvest and when we talk about migratory gamebirds, like waterfowl does crane, we typically have regulatory packages, right? So you have a sort of the standard, or the more conservative, or the more liberal package, which is the higher back limits more days in the season, and then that you start to restrict that as, as you, you know, tend toward overharvest. And so with doves, we're in what we call the standard package, which is 15, bird bag limit, 90 day season. And we're

a long, long way from moving to that more restricted package. And so, so no, I don't see any policy changes anytime soon. In fact, this past year, we were able to, to work with the Fish and Wildlife Service to get two extra special white wing days in the South Zone. So we now have six special white wing days early in the season, which is, you know, provides more hunting opportunity for our our hunters down south and, and if anything, I'm hoping that we might be able to expand some of that even further. So that might be the only policy changes. But otherwise, no, I don't foresee any changes from the bag limit and the 90 day season for a long time to come.

George Echols

I'm sure there's going to be a lot of people glad to hear this for sure. What about other game bird species that you've mentioned so far focusing on as part of your role as program leader Kranz or any other species that there might be some newsworthy policy changes off that you want to talk to us about today?

Owen Fitzsimmons

Yeah, really the big one on the radar right now at sandhill crane. You know, kind of Texas is the place to hunt sandhill cranes, the mid continent population, which is the largest Sandhill Crane population in the world, most of those birds winter in Texas every year. And crane hunting has always been kind of a small, limited number of hunters, you know, hasn't really been a super popular sport. But the past 10 years, it's it's really been taken off and really 2015 is kind of when we started seeing that increase in hunters and harvest. But this past year, we actually doubled the number of hunters and doubled the harvest in one year, which is it kind of shocked everybody. So it's really taken off. It's it's super popular these days. So we're kind of closely watching that, you know, we have very healthy populations, the mid continent population numbers, somewhere around 900,000 Plus which is very, very healthy compared to some pest population abundance trends. But you know, these birds are long lived and slowly produced. So, you know, there's there's a real worry that, you know, if you start to overharvest, and you start to see those declines, there's not like doves, where they can have one good year and build up population right back up. You kind of have to forecast a few years out what that's going to be so. So yeah, we're just we're closely watching that and keeping track of harvest and the number of hunters there.

Dr. Rideout

When you say they're long lived, how long does Sandhill Crane live?

Owen Fitzsimmons

I think the average this is off the top of my head, I might be completely making this up, I think the average somewhere between the mid teens to the early 20s. Really? Yeah, they'll live a long time. And they'll typically raise one young per year. Per-pair. And you know, of course, that's, again, you have one or two bad years. And they don't see that that influx of young birds in the population, but you're still harvesting a large number, you to tend to see the population decline pretty quickly. That's kind of what we're keeping our eye on at this point.

George Echols

You know, and I want to I just want to revert back a little bit to what we're talking about with the dozer had a thought about urbanization of doves, and how they're, they're moving into areas that are human dominated and human created. Is there any evidence to suggest that there's more doves that are moving within city limits during hunting season? And that these birds are super smart? And like, Hey, I'm not gonna get shot here. So I'm just gonna hang out here. And then once, you know, like, is there any

evidence to suggest that because these birds seem like they're really adaptable, they've got to be intelligent, the generalists, or they have the ability to obtain a lot of different food resources and, and live in different kinds of habitats. So I was wondering, are they are these birds starting to move into city limits, because they have a better understanding of when the hunting season will be? And that could be based off seasonality, of course, like changes in temperature. So on constant seasons in September, as you said, so there's gonna be some kind of environmental weather changes, that might be a trigger for them to start moving more into areas that are safer. What do you think?

Owen Fitzsimmons

Yeah, yeah, I think, you know, birds will definitely respond to hunting pressure. I don't think that they, they necessarily are, you know, thinking about having to worry about that. But, but we do, there's a lot of evidence based on our banding, we have a banding program. Each year, we we band, somewhere in the neighborhood of 5,000 doves a year. And a lot of the returns and the recaptures that we get from the birds in, in bigger cities, we see that these birds live longer. Most doves I think, you know, on average, or they live, it would be about a year and a half, two years old. They're not really long lived. But some of these birds in you know in in Houston and DFW and some of the big metro places. We're getting recaptures on those birds that are 10-12 years old, which is not unheard of. But you know, that kind of points to the fact that they're, they're pretty safe there. But there's still a lot we don't know, you know, we think a lot of these birds aren't migratory because they've got what they need in the city, it's a little warmer in the winter with all the concrete. They've got backyard feeders, they've got, you know, plenty of water. So we think they're, they're, they're kind of tending toward becoming more non migratory, but there's also still a certain percentage of them every year that do group up each fall and start to head out out of town and hit the agricultural field, and kind of do the classic pre migratory congregation where they get out and start feeding heavily before they head out. But there's still a lot of questions there, you know, one of my goals this year, and probably next year, is to start putting transmitters on these birds and really start to try to understand how they're using these these urban areas, you know, throughout the year and, and just get a better understanding of how many are stay in year round. How many are moving out in you know, still migrating like they historically did. And yeah, there's a lot of questions they're itching to try to answer soon.

George Echols

Oh, that's, that's exciting. I look forward to hearing about this project up there for sure.

andrew Lowery

No, that's very exciting. I'm I'm over here like shaking. Yeah, it's really cool. So Oh, and you know, we, we kind of have a format of this question. It's not our famous question, but it's one of our beloved ones. We have a lot of young people, a lot of young students who are interested in Working for Parks and Wildlife or, you know, some sort of related job, if you could give them, you know, one piece of advice to like how they should gear themselves towards trying to achieve that goal. And then also, you know, if there's an experience or a tactic that you yourself used to get to where you are, and you don't mind sharing, we would we would love to hear and I'm sure our viewers would love to have that piece of advice.

Owen Fitzsimmons

I'm a Kingsville grad, I got two degrees there. A lot of my guys, guys and gals that I went to school with, got into parks and wildlife pretty early on, I didn't get in onto the agency, I didn't get hired on until 2018. So I'm relatively new. I've done I've worked in the private sector I've worked in NGO for for NGOs, finally got on. But I think the biggest piece of advice I would give is, you know, don't think you're going to get in

on your first try. But don't give up on trying to get a position. It took me a while I bet 10 interviews over about as many years before I finally landed a position with the state. And I can't even tell you how many interviews or how many applications I've put in with Fish and Wildlife Service and other state agencies. So you know, these agency positions are very competitive. And it might take you a few tries, but just stick with it. Keep building your resume, keep getting experience, you know, and just just keep after it. And eventually, with you know, enough interviews and enough enough attempts you'll you'll get in. And you know, and another thing with the interview is, you get that interview experience. And you start to get your name out there with with some of the hiring panels. You know, Parks and Wildlife is a pretty small world in the Wildlife Division. And if you're a good candidate, and your name pops up, and maybe you're a second or third running, your name is going to pop up again, the next time you interview and people are going to be kind of looking, you know, watching for you. And that makes the interview. So just stick with it. And, and eventually you'll you'll land a position and it's a very rewarding agency to work for. Like I said I've done private, I've done NGO, and I've enjoyed all of it. But I was very surprised at how how qualified and how capable the people here at this agency are. We're all kind of stretched in like all government agencies, but but man I I couldn't ask for a better group of people to work with.

andrew Lowery

You know, I think that's absolutely, like great advice. Because I mean, I know everyone's experience is different from another person's, but I can 100% agree with you. it's kind of a matter of sticking with it and putting in the work. And, you know, sometimes you got to prove yourself to where then you'll get the interview, you know, at least that's been my experience. But thank you so much. That's great advice. I think our listeners will really enjoy that.

Dr. Rideout

Yeah, I mean, you can't be thin skinned in a field where there's so much

andrew Lowery

thorn scrub. Yeah.

Dr. Rideout

Yeah, everything's getting Thor's grubby there. But yeah, when there's so much competition, you got to you know, you got to accept that there are going to be some rejections before you get that job. Yeah.

Owen Fitzsimmons

Yeah. Especially those more entry level natural resource specialist, kind of jobs. There's a lot of graduates that are going for those. Yeah. And, you know, I didn't get those, I was out competed. I didn't have what they were looking for. And, you know, it took me many years of working and kind of getting into a specialized field with migratory birds before I landed the higher level position. You know, so, again, just stick with it and, and, you know, kind of just keep your eye on it. And eventually, eventually, it'll work out.

George Echols

Okay. Oh, and here comes our famous question. Or favorite question that we like to ask is biology blunder and where things go a little bit Ori or you end up with a funny story. Have you got any biology blunders or blunder that you want to share with our listeners today?

Owen Fitzsimmons

Oh, yeah. You know, I've got a million of these both stories. One interesting one, you know, the last job that I had, I worked with another guy you might know David Newstead at the Coastal Bend bays and estuaries program and my main job was to manage rookery islands colonial waterbird nesting islands on the Texas coast. And so part of that was predator control on some of these islands. You know, if you get a raccoon or a coyote on one of these islands, they can just devastate the entire colony overnight. And so I had developed some tactics with the nightvision with many thermal thermal scopes and stuff, and I would go out there and remove these animals, these predators and, you know, driving a boat at night is always super sketchy. And it was especially so there's a particular set of islands that are along the Corpus Christi ship channel. And one of the things about that is you get these big tankers that come through the ship channel, and they're so heavy, they display so much water, that they'll pull all the water, like if you pull your boat up on the channel side of one of these islands, when that tanker comes in, it'll suck all the water out and leave your boat sitting on bare sand. And then as soon as they go by all that water comes rushing back up. And if you're not prepared, it'll throw your boat up on the island, you know, several feet to where you can't get it off, and you put it all the way up on what would be normally dry land. So anytime I was doing work on these Island, you know, David and I, I can't tell you how many times you'd hear a tanker, you'd hear the Chugga chugga chugga. And about the time you hear on, you realize you've got to sprint back to your boat, and pull the anchor and get out in the water where you can actually, you know, keep it safe. And so I was out there one night, trying to turn to remove some predators and the other night. And I hear that Chugga chugga chugga. And so I take off running in a dead sprint with night vision. I can't see what I'm doing. And I eventually get to the boat just in time to watch it. Watch it get pushed all the way up on the island. And I'm like, no, no, no. So at that point, you know, the thinker's pass the boat is stranded, there's no way I'm getting this 20 foot boat with 150 horse motor, you know, I'm not dragging that 20 feet back up to the water's edge off dry land. So it's two o'clock in the morning, I can't call anybody nobody's gonna answer their phone to come get me. So I think the only only thing I can do is sit here and wait for the next tanker to throw a wave. And maybe I can push the boat back down with you know, with that water. And so that's what I did. I sat there for about another three hours until the next tanker came by. And I just barely managed to get off and, and I lost my boot in the process. And I remember I was putting back to the boat ramp at about three or four in the morning, just completely exhausted, covered in mosquito bites, lost the boot. And I was just like, Man, I just go to sleep. This is a terrible idea. I'll never do this again.

Dr. Rideout

That's a great story. I had no idea those tankerers could do that.

Owen Fitzsimmons

Oh, yeah, it's really interesting to watch till they soak up that water. You'll see flounder and other fish just flopping around on the sand. And really, yeah, yeah, it's wild.

Dr. Rideout

Man. You know, it's been, it's been really great hearing about your work? Do you have any, anything else you'd like to talk to us about today?

Owen Fitzsimmons

Um, you know, I just, I just want to say, I really enjoyed this podcast, and I'm glad that you know, my fellow people there at a&m Kingsville are putting this on, you know, I, I feel very fortunate to be a Kingsville grad. And I kind of ended up there by accident. And I was originally an engineering student for about a week and a half. Yeah, for about a week and a half. Because I didn't even know wildlife biology or wildlife management was a career option. And as soon as I heard it, I switched. And I feel like it was

just it was made to be and I was, I was very lucky to be in the right place at the right time, and be at a school like that and be surrounded by so much. You know, so many great people. And so I'm just really glad that you guys are putting this on and you know, all the Kingsville students that are that might be listening to this, just take advantage of where you're at and know you're at a really, really good school and just, you know, take full advantage and live it up because it's a really cool place. It's a really cool institution and, and good cranks out some really, really well qualified and great wildlife biologist.

Dr. Rideout

Yeah. Well, that's great to hear. I'm so glad that that the fates knew exactly what you needed and put you in the right place. That's pretty cool. And thank you for the compliment, too. We appreciate it. You know, we're just newbies trying new things here. And so it's it's really good to hear that there are some people who enjoy what we're doing.

Owen Fitzsimmons

Yeah, absolutely. And, and you're in the right spot, too. I mean, I travel all over the state now with my job. And South Texas is always just, it's just so full of life. You know, the habitats there that the wildlife is there. It's just, it's just one of the coolest places on the planet. And yeah, like I said, everybody listening, if you're there, take advantage of it and live it up while you're there. it's an awesome place.

Dr. Rideout

That's great. Thank you so much. We appreciate being here.

Owen Fitzsimmons

Absolutely. It's my pleasure. To talk on the wild side

Dr. Rideout

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