The Directorate Resource Assistants Fellowship Program Offers Fisheries and Wildlife Students the Rewards and Experiences of a Lifetime

Photo credit: Santa Clara River Conservancy

By Andrew Dennhardt

On one of my first days as an intern, I heard the call of a male least Bell's vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus*). He was barely visible to the naked eye, moving from branch to branch amidst dense and dark foliage along the Santa Clara River. Despite the difficulty of viewing him, his call quickly reminded me of why I came to Ventura, California in the summer of 2019—to help conserve the eloquence of his inimitable song for generations to come.

The least Bell's vireo was first listed as federally endangered in May 1986, and its decline stemmed from riparian habitat loss and degradation due to land use change, spreading invasive plant species, and brood parasitism by the brown-headed cowbird (*Molothrus ater*). Since the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and its partners began implementing habitat restoration programs and cowbird population control measures in the 1980s, vireo populations have responded positively—increasing tenfold in some areas. For managers, what's left to understand is how the vireo population may attain stability, naturally sustaining itself in the presence of current and future threats to its persistence.

I arrived at the Ventura U.S. Fish and Wildlife Office in late May, charged with working alongside staff biologists to synthesize historic information on the conservation and management of this rare migratory songbird. My research particularly focused on conserving vireos that inhabit areas of the Santa Clara River, one of southern California's last remaining natural riverways. With the Ventura team, I produced a management and monitoring plan for the vireo, highlighting future recovery of the species and the means to that end. Right now, though, you may be asking yourself: "But how did Andrew get to the banks of the Santa Clara River, admiring the song of the least Bell's vireo, in the first place?"

Well, imagine that you have a lifelong passion for fisheries and wildlife. That was easy, right? Okay, now imagine that you have been a student for the past 10 years, both as an undergraduate and graduate—honing your craft to become a wildlife biologist. Every step of the way, you've worked hard to become a well-rounded professional. You've surveyed wildlife in the field, summarized statistics in the office, and shared your science with others at various conferences. Now, you're nearing the end of your university education, and you're wondering what's next. Consequently, you start looking for new and exciting opportunities to engage with potential employers. However, in a competitive job market, you soon find that it can be a monumental challenge to acquire a permanent job. For me, that's where the USFWS Directorate Resource Assistants Fellowship Program (DFP) came into play. Entering its sixth year, the DFP is an exceptional pathway for students to earn a permanent position with the federal government,

particularly in one of the land management agencies of the U.S. Department of Interior, including the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and Fish and Wildlife Service.

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Following acceptance into the program and a week-long orientation at the National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, DFP interns set out on their 11-week projects. DFP projects tend to focus on a conservation-management topic, and interns are encouraged to learn about and participate in the diverse work of their duty stations. During their time in the program, the DFP and its duty stations jointly subsidize intern travel, wages, and housing in qualifying regions—and in addition to all of that financial support, the greatest program rewards are still to come. Following certification of a completed project, students must return to their universities to finish their degree programs, and within two years of receiving their degrees, former DFP interns can be hired directly on to permanent positions with one of the aforementioned agencies. Earned rewards of the internship include a non-competitive service status and Direct Hire Authority—both of which expedite hiring in the federal government. Overall, the DFP delivers challenging and relevant projects, between- and within-agency exploration, novel networking opportunities, and expedited hiring. Talk about the collective rewards and experiences of a lifetime! And for such a remarkable career opportunity, DFP interns have the honor and responsibility to tell the story of our experiences in the program. This has been mine, and I am very grateful for the opportunity.

To my Ventura and Region 8 colleagues, and especially to the USFWS Directorate: thank you for continuing to sponsor such a student-centered program. You've graciously opened your doors to us, and by such a gesture, I know that our conservation future is stronger together. On behalf of the 2019 DFP Fellows, we sincerely look forward to serving your agency and the American people for years to come. To my Michigan State University colleagues and their partner organizations: thank you for reading and sharing this story. If you'd like to learn more about the USFWS Directorate Resource Assistants Fellowship Program, then please visit: https://nctc.fws.gov/topic/youth/ and https://www.facebook.com/usfwsdfp/. The application period is open during January-March each year, and 2021 projects will be proposed internally to the USFWS as early as September or October 2020. Visit your local USFWS office today in order to network and strike up a conversation, and help identify or create a DFP opportunity for the future. The rewards and experiences of a lifetime are waiting for you!

The least Bell's vireo, *Vireo bellii pusillus*.

Andrew Dennhardt, seen above holding a California condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*) during its summer checkup at the Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge, is a Ph.D. candidate currently working with Dr. Roloff. Andrew's research focuses on explaining patterns and processes of both population- and community-level variation in wildlife monitored on broad scales. He can be reached at dennhard@msu.edu.