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Wetland, wildfowl certificate program draws first class from four states

By Mary Hightower
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Fast facts

- Students hail from Arkansas, North Carolina, Texas, Louisiana
- Program provides key step toward career fulfillment
- Osborne: “We think this program is going to be a game-changer.”

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MONTICELLO, Ark. — Brandon Bennett knew from his earliest days what he wanted to do with his life.

Bennett, who grew up in the Independence County community of Charlotte, Arkansas, is among the four students recruited for a unique graduate certificate program being offered through a partnership among the Five Oaks Research and Education Center, the University of Arkansas at Monticello and the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture.

Much of the learning will take place at the Five Oaks Duck Lodge in Humphrey, Arkansas, owned by George Dunklin, Jr., former Arkansas Game and Fish Commission chairman and member of the Ducks Unlimited board. Another part of the training will take place on the UAM campus. The new class took part in an orientation at Five Oaks in March.

“This is a great example of a public/private partnership and I could not be more thrilled to be involved with UAM and the U of A System Division of Agriculture,” Dunklin said. “This class will forever be the first class of graduates of this program. I am very impressed with each and every one of them and can’t wait to get started.”

The students of the 2021-22 inaugural class are:

- Bennett, who graduated in May with a B.S. in natural resource management from UA-Monticello
- Delanie Warren, who graduated in May with a B.S. in rangeland ecology and management from Texas A&M in May 2021
- Katherine Allen of New Roads, Louisiana, graduated from Louisiana State University in May with a B.S. in natural resource ecology and management, and
- Cole Howard, who graduated with a B.S. in wildlife biology from North Carolina State University.

“These students are so talented,” said Douglas Osborne, associate professor at UA-Monticello

and director of the Five Oaks Ag Research and Education Center, who will lead teaching and research for the class. Osborne's Ph.D. is in wildlife ecology. "Our field is so competitive and what George is doing to help students is incredible. We're going to bring these students in and find their strengths and their weaknesses. We want them to become super marketable and pursue careers in wetland and waterfowl management."

Osborne said that unlike courses that boast dozens of students, the small program with Five Oaks and UAM can provide in-the-field experience unavailable in larger programs.

"If we can get them to the next step in their career, it's game time!" Osborne said. "We think this program is going to be a game-changer."

Brandon Bennett

"I knew from the time I started kindergarten that I wanted to work with wildlife," Bennett said. That desire led him to UA-Monticello and Doug Osborne's lab, where he volunteered at every opportunity.

"As soon as I heard about this program being developed, I knew it was for me. This program is going to give me the experience I will need to make a smooth transfer into being a waterfowl biologist and land manager," Bennett said. "To be able to team up with forward thinkers such as Dr. Osborne, Jody Pagan and George Dunklin is an absolute home run in my opinion. In doing this, the students get both research and real-world experience from the best in the business."

Pagan, a UAM alumnus, is chief biologist at Five Oaks.

Katherine Allen

Allen's decision to pursue a career in wildlife was more recent.

"I've always wanted to work with animals since I was a kid. I just didn't know what exactly." She became inspired by the passion she saw in Kevin Ringleman, an associate professor of waterfowl ecology and management at LSU.

During her orientation at Five Oaks, Allen said her "brain started turning" as they toured the grounds and surrounding habitat, wondering what relationship there was between the local vegetation and the migratory ducks.

"I'm more interested in looking at the vegetation they eat on their wintering grounds and how that gets them up north. Are they coming here for that vegetation or is it just the land?" she said. That's the research "I would want to do at Five Oaks."

Delanie Warren

Warren came to the program thanks to an e-mail from a family member who is involved with Ducks Unlimited.

"I grew up living in the country and loved everything about the outdoors," she said. "Through FFA, I was a part of the wildlife judging team, which also helped me push forward with my passions to have a Rangeland Ecology and Management major at Texas A&M University.

While at Texas A&M, Warren was involved with the collegiate Ducks Unlimited chapter as an officer of the chapter for two terms. "As an officer, I began to see my passion grow for wetland and waterfowl conservation and knew it was the career path I wanted to take," she said.

Warren said she believed the “graduate certificate will provide plenty of knowledge and experience to pursue my goals to work as a private land manager or with Ducks Unlimited.”

Cole Howard

Howard said “my interest in range and land management has stemmed from several aspects of my upbringing. Growing up I worked with cattle on my grandparents’ farm and gained an appreciation for the land.

“The biggest influence, however, was getting into hunting and enjoying the outdoors. I had several great mentors that helped me get into hunting which really gave me an appreciation and passion for wildlife and land conservation,” he said.

Howard said he’s looking forward to what he can draw from the certificate program.

“I believe this program will further hone my academic knowledge as well as teach me the necessary hands-on skills it takes to become an effective land and wildlife manager,” he said. “I know this program and the people involved will springboard me into my dream career in the waterfowl field.”

For the program partners, the potential is enormous.

“This collaboration among Five Oaks, UAM, and the Division of Agriculture provides opportunities for specialized post-graduate education in the management of natural resources and for collaborative research in bottomland hardwood and wetland ecosystems,” said Robert Ficklin, interim dean of UAM’s College of Forestry, Agriculture and Natural Resources. “Our new graduate certificate program is unique not only in the state but also in the nation. It is going to be exciting to see how these education and research programs develop over time.”

Pagan took note of “how passionate they were about wetland ecology and waterfowl ecology. I was really impressed with the top four. They all have different sets of expertise.”

Pagan said some students who go into the field may have lots of classroom time in the subject matter, but what’s “lacking is the boots on the ground, dirt-under-the-fingernails experience. Having this big outdoor classroom is a big deal.”

“Hopefully we can feed these kids into positions that will make a difference in the state, federal and private lands and improve habitat,” he said.

Mark Cochran, vice president-agriculture for the University of Arkansas System, said, “This is a one-of-a-kind partnership that brings together the three elements of land grant work, teaching, research and extension. Wildfowl and the wetlands in the Mississippi Flyway are in critical need of the research and learnings that will come out of this program.”

UAM Chancellor Peggy Doss said, “Our College of Forestry, Agriculture, and Natural Resources is continuing its tradition of recruiting exceptional students into its world class programs. The new graduate certificate in waterfowl management will prepare UAM graduates to make a substantial positive impact on wetland and waterfowl research in our region and the nation.”

About the College of Forestry, Agriculture and Natural Resources and the Arkansas Forest Resources Center



The College of Forestry, Agriculture and Natural Resources and the Arkansas Forest Resources Center, a University of Arkansas System Center of Excellence, bring together interdisciplinary expertise through a partnership between the University of Arkansas at Monticello and the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture.

The College and Center are headquartered at the University of Arkansas at Monticello campus, but their programs range statewide with the mission of developing and delivering teaching, research and extension programs that enhance and ensure the sustainability and productivity of forest-based natural resources and agricultural systems. Academic programs are delivered by the College of Forestry, Agriculture and Natural Resources through the University of Arkansas at Monticello. Through the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, research is administered by the Arkansas Agricultural Experiment Station, and extension and outreach activities are coordinated by the Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service.

About the Division of Agriculture

The University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture's mission is to strengthen agriculture, communities, and families by connecting trusted research to the adoption of best practices. Through the Agricultural Experiment Station and the Cooperative Extension Service, the Division of Agriculture conducts research and extension work within the nation's historic land grant education system.

The Division of Agriculture is one of 20 entities within the University of Arkansas System. It has offices in all 75 counties in Arkansas and faculty on five system campuses.

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