

Gliding to Success with the Flying Squirrel Project

by Brilyn Brecka

The Flying Squirrel Project is just one of over 20 student-lead undergraduate research projects supported by the UW-Stevens Point Student Chapter of The Wildlife Society (TWS) that offers students hands-on research experience. After nearly two years of empty traps, student co-



Sherman traps are baited with a mixture of dried oats and peanut butter.

leaders, Tess Bigalke, Marinn Champeau, Alyssa Johnson, Amber Smith, Katie Stough, Sam Sodke, and student volunteers have finally caught some southern flying squirrels (*Glaucomys volans*). The 2020 trapping season is going well for the project; they have captured and tagged 8 individuals: 7 males and 1 female. One of their favorite squirrels is a large male they nicknamed “Chonkers”, who has been caught at least 10 times!

A typical trapping night for the Flying Squirrel Project starts at 5:30 pm. Co-leaders meet with volunteers to bait and set Sherman traps placed in trapping grids at Schmeckle Reserve. The project operates two trapping grids with approximately 20 traps per grid. Students set traps that are hanging in trees, baiting them with a mixture of dried oats and peanut butter, an irresistibly delicious snack for the small mammals. Once the traps are set, the group will leave and meet back up at 10 pm with bright headlamps and hopeful thoughts of closed traps. Checking the traps is as simple as making sure the door is closed. Sometimes, they catch mice instead, but flying squirrels are the intended targets! Traps that are closed for the remainder of the night, and any mice are safely released.



Traps are specially built to hang in trees.

If they catch a flying squirrel, they carefully immobilize the squirrel to safely and humanely collect data and attach an ear tag for future identification. They record sex and weight of each squirrel. Once processed, the flying squirrel is safely released into the darkness to enjoy the rest of its night, and students leave the woods with smiles on their faces.

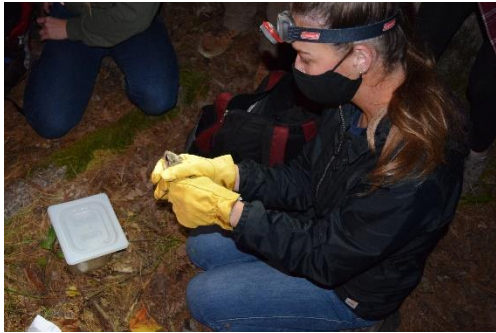


Students transfer caught squirrels from traps to a cloth bag for easier handling. Chemical immobilization is safe for both the animal and students trained to handle the flying squirrels.

The project is largely designed to provide students opportunities to trap, handle, and collect data on small mammals. However, Co-leader Marinn Champeau, TWS member and senior at UWSP, says the research objective is to gather as much flying squirrel data as possible, and monitor changes in their population. When asked about

reasons for the project's sudden success, Marinn suggested a cyclical population cycle as a possible explanation for catching more this year than in past years. Alyssa Johnson, another co-leader for the project, also expressed interest in analyzing habitat types of areas squirrels are caught.

Some of the most valuable experiences this project offers are gained by being a co-leader. Not only do co-leaders sharpen and refine their "hard" field skills (setting traps, handling live animals, taking measurements on small mammals, recording data, etc...), but they also get to



Co-leader Katie Stough holds "Chonker," a frequent visitor to the trapping grid.

develop a strong set of "soft" skills, such as managing volunteers, communications with peers, and teamwork. As a co-leader, one of the most valuable skills Marinn has gained was, "being comfortable talking in front of people and being comfortable teaching others." The flying squirrel project begins in September and usually ends in October. Next year will see some new co-leaders, and hopefully, more success trapping flying squirrels!

Dr. Shelli Dubay is the project's faculty advisor.