

JBLM Operation Wildlife interns make a difference

By Catherine Hamilton-Wissmer, JBLM Directorate of Public Works Environmental Division December 18, 2020

JOINT BASE LEWIS-MCCHORD, Wash. -- Transitioning service members, military spouses, college students and local community members interned with Joint Base Lewis-McChord biologists and foresters in 90-day rotations throughout 2020 to gain hands-on experience with a wide range of environmental projects as part of a collaborative partnership between JBLM Fish and Wildlife and JBLM Forestry.

"We're service members making leaders out of students and students making scientists out of service members," said Dennis Buckingham, conservation ecologist and internship coordinator. "Military participants are typically signed up through career skills program partners - especially WorkEx and Operation Warfighter. A leadership-from-within model lets us send crews in multiple directions on any given day, so we can accomplish more while participants are building a management-level resume."

Through the Operation Wildlife internship program, participants have the opportunity to work alongside biologists on a diverse range of projects where they gain hands-on experience and an understanding of Western Washington's ecology and environmental management techniques.

"I've been interested in wildlife conservation since I was a kid but also was determined to join the Army," said Capt. Kayla Hodges, an Operation Wildlife intern who completed the program in summer 2020. "I commissioned as a military police officer in 2012, and I just completed eight years in the Army - ending in the 42nd Military Police Brigade as a company commander. I chose this program, after researching all of the programs I learned about through the Service Member for Life - Transition Assistance Program."





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Capt. Kayla Hodges, 42nd Military Police Brigade, inspects a bluebird nest during her internship with Operation Wildlife at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in summer 2020. (Photo Credit: Capt. Kayla Hodges, 42nd Military Police Brigade)
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Working with Operation Wildlife, participants can become nationally certified wildland firefighters and state certified herbicide applicators while making important industry connections.

“In addition to discovering all kinds of new fungi, I was able to do things that I was completely unfamiliar with - particularly after eight years of being a desk jockey,” Hodges said. “Some days I was in waders or a kayak assisting with a western toad survey, and other days I learned about prescribed burning for ecological purposes and all of the planning, preparation and work that goes along with that.”



[<https://api.army.mil/e2/c/images/2020/12/18/3407d350/original.jpg>]

Although the events of 2020 have limited participants due to COVID-19, there has still been an impressive contribution of 13,240 volunteer hours by 60 interns to Operation Wildlife.

There are no start and end dates; the internship is offered year-round. The rotating staff fluctuates with the seasons.

“It was definitely a great way to deprogram and reset on my way out of the Army,” Hodges said. “I thought this would be a good way to gain some exposure to fields related to wildlife conservation, since this is where I’d like to pivot in the future.”



[<https://api.army.mil/e2/c/images/2020/12/18/0fe86434/original.jpg>]

Operation Wildlife includes more than 90 projects on base, including habitat mapping, rare bird monitoring, environmental compliance for logging operations, prescribed fire management, invasive species control, oak woodland restoration and native seed collection.

The project helps JBLM achieve its sustainability goals. It involves the community to meet the environmental needs and maintain training lands while remaining cost effective.

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[Joint Base Lewis-McChord website](https://home.army.mil/lewis-mcchord/) [<https://home.army.mil/lewis-mcchord/>]

[More Operation Wildlife information](https://home.army.mil/lewis-mcchord/index.php/my-Joint-Base-Lewis-Mcchord/all-services/public_works-environmental_division/jblm-fish-and-wildlife/jblm-fish-and-wildlife-volunteering) [https://home.army.mil/lewis-mcchord/index.php/my-Joint-Base-Lewis-Mcchord/all-services/public_works-environmental_division/jblm-fish-and-wildlife/jblm-fish-and-wildlife-volunteering]