Dear Prospective Student:

Thank you for expressing interest in my lab and ongoing research at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry. I strive to provide a challenging graduate education experience, which translates to a relatively small cohort of students focused on related issues and using similar methods and techniques to foster synergistic learning. It is important to realize that student interest in wildlife research tends to outpace the financial support available for such work, so any available positions are very competitive. That being said, there are generally three ways to get into graduate school, especially if your interests are to work on expensive-to-study large animals.

First, find an advisor with existing projects that have funded graduate positions and at least partial funding for the expensive field activities. Like many researchers, once I secure the funding required to support a graduate student, I advertise graduate positions on my website ([www.frair.weebly.com](http://www.frair.weebly.com)) as well as the following internet job lists:

* The Wildlife Society (<http://careers.wildlife.org/home/index.cfm?site_id=8764>)
* Society of Conservation Biology (<http://www.conbio.org/professional-development/scb-job-board/>)
* Texas A&M University (<http://wfscjobs.tamu.edu/job-board/>)

These sites are excellent resources for a prospective graduate student and biologist. My philosophy is to allow students as much flexibility in developing their research questions and approaches (empirical, modeling, etc.) within the bounds of existing avenues of funding within my lab. Unless otherwise advertised on these sites, research funding in my lab will already be dedicated to existing student projects. Keep checking these sites regularly because I will post positions as new funding sources come online. Also, if you are supported by a teaching assistantship (see next paragraph), then there may be room to include you within the bounds of existing field research funding.

Second, students with a strong academic record may be awarded a Teaching Assistantship (TA) that pays salary and tuition during the academic year, and allows students time to focus their research ideas and work with an advisor to try to secure the funds required to complete their degree program. TA’s at ESF are highly competitive and are not at my discretion to award. To receive one requires strong academic standing (generally GPA ≥ 3.5) and high GRE scores (combined score ≥ 1300). They also require a minimum of 20 hours of work per week on campus during the academic year, usually associated with the instruction of a class, which may severely constrain the possible avenues of research a student might undertake (note most work on large mammals takes place in winter months when students are teaching classes). Students always underestimate the cost to their own graduate studies of being on TA support – with students typically taking an extra year or longer to complete their programs via this route. TA’s also do not come with summer salary, so it is unwise to enter a program without other funding already secured. It is common for students in my lab to be partially supported by research and partially by TA.

Third, come with your own funding. Enterprising and motivated students can develop graduate projects perhaps with employers such as government agencies, secure some funding, and then team up with an academic advisor to initiate the project. If attempting this route, it is important to communicate that early to me, so that any field work undertaken before you begin your studies has had the benefit of advance faculty review. Alternatively, students able to cover their own stipend and tuition (such as via a Fulbright Scholarship or NSF GRFP) can more easily be placed on a field research project. Finally, entering the course-based Masters of Professional Studies (see <http://www.esf.edu/graduate/acadprog.htm>), a program in which students pay their own way, could enable you to assist with ongoing research projects in my lab to gain valuable field and analytical skills as well as graduate-level academic training.

There are certainly other models for getting into graduate programs, and submitting a formal application to a program such as ours guarantees you visibility for potentially unadvertised positions. To learn whether a TA would be available also requires a formal application. But please recognize that such applications are subject to high rejection rates despite your qualifications, as it requires that your timing coincides with a window of opportunity (meaning existing funding or assistantship). Checking the web sites I mentioned before ensures that there is at least a window of opportunity you can apply to.

In terms of the details, it is my policy to not accept students into a Ph.D. program who have not already completed a M.S. program of study. Moreover, I also will not accept any graduate student without already having research funding in place for a significant portion of their graduate program. The wildlife biology program at ESF can support only a limited number of students through competitive TA’s, so the only assured funding is through external sources (which are hard to acquire!). If you have a strong academic standing, and wish to be considered for a TA, then you may apply to the ESF graduate program and list me as your desired advisor. Should you choose that route, you would be responsible for writing grants to procure your own research funding, and need to recognize that grant proposals typically have a 10-25% success rate. If you are seeking a Ph.D. and have interest in theoretical ecology or modeling based on existing data, then this is a viable way to proceed. But for M.S. students or those desiring a strong field component to their research, this option is generally not viable unless tied to an existing line of funding in my lab. If you fall into the latter category, keep your eye on the job lists above to see what fully paid opportunities may become available.

Keep in mind that there is a huge pool of exceptional students jockeying for positions in graduate schools, especially to study charismatic species. With 50-100 emails in my inbox every day, please don’t be dismayed by this largely form letter, or the fact that I am unable to meet with you until a formal application has been submitted and a funding opportunity identified.

Best of luck to you in your academic pursuits.

Sincerely,

Dr. Jacqueline Frair