

CAREER**● Research Wildlife Biologist**

Many people imagine wildlife biologists wrestling large game animals to the ground, slapping radio collars around their necks, and then creeping through the forest for weeks on end to study the creatures. According to Mariko Yamasaki, research wildlife biologist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, there's a lot more to wildlife biology than that. To Mariko, "nature is fascinating on many, many levels, from the tiniest ant all the way up to charismatic animals such as bears and wolves. We have to get away from the notion that animals with feathers or fur and big brown eyes are more important than slimy, scaly creatures with beady eyes. All organisms have a role—we must be sure that their contribution to the big picture is recognized."

What is your educational background and experience?

Mariko: My background is basically a long and colorful stringing together of different experiences. I have bachelor's degrees in anthropology and zoology and a master's degree in natural resources (specific to wildlife). By the time I got out of school in the late 1970s, I came up against a surprising attitude—people in my home state really couldn't conceive of having female biologists supervising in the field. So I looked outside my home state. I ended up studying bald eagles for the Bureau of Land Management out West. This sort of snowballed into a permanent appointment in Washington as a wildlife biologist for the Bureau of Land Management. Today I work at the Northeastern Forest Experiment Station, where I do research in forested lands that cover a 200 mi. radius, including parts of Maine and New Hampshire.

What organisms are you studying in the field right now?

Mariko: I'm studying small mammals, such as mice, shrews, voles, and squirrels. My colleagues and I also study insectivorous bats, migratory birds, and terrestrial salamanders. These are animals that we know something about, such as their basic biology, but we don't know how they respond to forest management. We're looking at these critters to get a sense of how they fit into the bigger picture.

What types of questions are you trying to answer about these animals?

Mariko: One question my colleagues and I are trying to answer right now is how terrestrial salamanders respond to "even-aged management" of northern hardwoods. Even-aged management involves harvesting a large area of trees whose ages are within 20 years of each other. Foresters often use even-aged management because it is an efficient means of harvesting large amounts of timber at one time. My hypothesis is that when a large area of trees has been harvested, the ground temperature might change because the area is suddenly exposed to direct sunlight. This might affect the population and distribution of terrestrial salamanders in a negative way. I use the data I gather to make

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recommendations to forest managers about how they can manage tracts of forest to best support the needs of salamanders and other wildlife.

Do you work with other people a lot?

Mariko: There's an old stereotype that a wildlife biologist leads a solitary life studying nature. This simply isn't true—it's important to know how to work with people and how to understand and deal with a variety of viewpoints. There is rarely a day that I sit alone in my office. But I will say that a wildlife biologist does have some control over the matter—generally, you can work with people as much or as little as you want.

Do you ever have to deal with crisis situations?

Mariko: Not really, but I do see a lot of controversy, particularly related to wildlife and the use of natural resources. My work has often become the object of heated debate. Some people will support my findings wholeheartedly, while others call them worthless. There are any number of ways of dealing with this kind of pressure. I've found that it's real important to get my information together and analyze it as thoroughly as possible so that I can really stand behind what I'm saying. It's also important to realize that everyone is entitled to an opinion.

What are the most interesting or exciting aspects of your work?

Mariko: Oh heavens! Being out and observing the natural world. Being able to test hypotheses. Being up real early on a bird survey. It's never the same twice. I also enjoy discovering something new—there's nothing any more special than that. There's a lot out there! The scale of things to observe and study is mind-boggling.

What advice might you give to someone who is searching for a career?

Mariko: I think it's important to do something you are really interested in. My career, just like anybody else's, is not always a bed of roses. But if you really care about what you do, you can get beyond the problems and complications inherent to any job. It's also important to think that you've got something to contribute. I think that I can help contribute to the way people view wildlife, and that's important to me.

More On This Career

If you are interested in learning more about a career in wildlife biology, contact **The Wildlife Society**, 5410 Grosvenor Lane, Bethesda, MD 20814-2197 or the **American Institute of Biological Sciences**, 144 Eye Street NW, Suite 200, Washington, D.C. 20005.