Bringing Nature to Our Backyard

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Professor Sean Menke (right) with students Joel Gard ’12, Victoria Jones ’13 and Alex Gilbert ’12 (left to right) helping to database the department’s Herbarium collection, which is an old and very valuable collection!

If you ask me, “I work with ants in the tropical rainforest” is not a great pick up line, whereas “I work in a remote part of the tropical rainforest” is pretty good. Suddenly, you become some adventurer and it’s kind of cool, rather than just being a dorky biology geek. Science, like dating, is in large part salesmanship. While Dr. Menke states that the closest to the rainforest that any average person might get is the zoo, he also points out that the closest wildlife is in your backyard. Society has convinced us that it is not actually wildlife because it is so accessible and therefore not a novel aspect of our lives. “When I go to a national park and I’m driving down the road, and all of a sudden the car in front of me slams on its brakes, and someone starts taking pictures, I look out to see what they’re taking a picture of, and it’s a bloody white-tailed deer. It’s the same thing as in their garden back home 300 miles away, and yet they don’t look at it there they look at it in the forest, like the forest is what is natural.” We ignore these animals within urban environments because we do not see them as anything out of the ordinary and Dr. Menke thinks that is a big problem.

Sean believes that there are two different styles of ecologists. “Those that are interested in answering a question and don’t care so much about what organism they study and then those who want to know everything about a certain group of species and I’m more on the question driven side.” Because of his fascination for lizards and snakes, Dr. Menke chose to study these organisms while getting his Masters degree at the University of Oklahoma on herpetology. When he went to the University of California for his PhD, he intended to continue his study of herpetology. However, his advisor at the time was working with ants and because of the ease of working with invertebrates and their large local abundances (ants are everywhere), Dr. Menke decided to switch to ants as a main focus. This switch allowed him to ask the questions he was interested in, albeit in a different, but according to him, a better way. He says that he used to think an ant was just an ant, like everyone else. Until he actually began researching and studying them and found not only are they very unique, but they are also an integral part of our environment. “They do crazy things, there are so many different styles of ants, some that glide through the air or walk on water, they do all these really cool things that we tend to have no idea about, and it’s stunning.” And they have such a large impact on our global ecosystem that it is really exciting to be working on something that has that big of an effect.

Dr. Menke’s research now is going to focus predominately on looking at organisms in our urban environment. He is driven by two things: questions about our environment and his desire to get people to realize that they play a role in our environment, and therefore everything is relevant to them. He discussed his method of going around to people’s houses and knocking on their doors, asking to look at the ants in their yard. These people, stunned by the obscure question, began to learn more about what is just outside their door. It seemed to me that Dr. Menke’s favorite part of doing research that deals with organisms in urban...
environments is people’s realization that there is wildlife in their own backyards. Dr. Menke’s main goal is to get people to understand why he cares and why they should care about ecology and evolution. "I want my work to be transferable and relevant to their lives, I want people to know that they're actually a part of the system."

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