

Midwest Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (MWPARC) Student Travel Grant Report 2025

Awardee: Donovan Capet

Professional association: Aurora University (recent graduate)

In one or two paragraphs, describe the work you participated in that was facilitated by this award.

During the Spring of 2025, I performed 11 road surveys along two adjacent roads bisecting wetland ecosystems within Chicago's Calumet Area. Due to anecdotal data and word of mouth from locals, a high level of freshwater turtle mortality was reported along a specific stretch of road, thus the area was hypothesized as a hot-zone and the focus of the project. Within the hot-zone, we wanted to assess total road mortality, whether there was a peak observation time frame, and how much traffic was using the wetland roads. With Dr. Mellisa Youngquist and additional support, I conducted road surveys every Monday morning and input data into iNaturalist. Using this also allowed other members of the community to record additional observations outside of our Monday surveys. Once sightings were recorded, deceased and living animals were relocated off the road to avoid potential recounts and potential collisions, respectively. Later in the spring, trail cameras were attached to posts along multiple sections of the road to record any vehicle that passes by.

Over the 12 weeks, March-May, over 99 unique observations were recorded, 73 of which being freshwater turtles, primarily the Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta*). The amount of animals recorded each week increased as reptile and amphibian breeding seasons began. Moreover, most observations were recorded at the potential hot zone and an additional cluster on the adjacent road we monitored, which may be a point of interest. Furthermore, the trail cameras reveal both roads are used 24 hours a day by thousands of vehicles, all posing a risk to freshwater turtles and other wildlife. The data indicates a need for different solutions, such as possible barriers and road modifications to protect wildlife from road collisions.

How has this work aided you in achieving your career goals?

Being involved in this work has greatly increased my knowledge on all aspects of working on a conservation research project, including grant writing, field research, data analysis and visualization, and field site travel. Furthermore, I experienced multiple levels of variability (e.g. weather conditions, time constraints) while conducting field work, which improved my ability to make quick, effective decisions on how to complete tasks. After being involved in this project and internship, I know now that I want to continue pursuing conservation research and explore other ecology and zoology field opportunities. Particularly, I am interested in learning more about herpetile and road ecology. I am thankful for the support MWPARC has provided me to work on this project.



Image description: Donovan holding a hatchling painted turtle.