



# One Path for Wisdom

**From the age of five on, there was never any doubt in Michael Wisdom’s mind—he would help conserve wildlife and their habitat.**

Many people follow circuitous routes toward a career, or even multiple careers in their lifetimes. Childhood dreams fade into pragmatism, the lure of a bigger paycheck pulls us in different directions, or we simply change our minds about what we want to do.

For Mike Wisdom, though, there’s only ever been one path.

“I always knew from age five that I wanted to be a fish or wildlife biologist,” he says. “And that never wavered.”

Today, Wisdom is a research wildlife biologist and team leader at the Starkey Experimental Forest and Range for the U.S. Forest Service in the Blue Mountains of northeast Oregon. The Forest

Service’s Pacific Northwest Research Station launched Starkey in 1987. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation was a vocal advocate for its creation and has been a major supporter and financial contributor ever since.

Starkey consists of 29,000 acres, entirely enclosed by 8-foot game-proof fence. For decades, elk, mule deer, cattle and hunters have all carried GPS units there. It’s created unique opportunities to study how they interact and respond to one another, as well as to different levels of logging and grazing, plus road and trail use by trucks, ATVs and mountain bikes, prescribed burns and much more.

From analyses of elk nutrition to elk-deer-cattle

grazing interactions to how a warming climate is impacting all of those things and the habitat that supports them, Starkey is a seemingly endless source of data with real-world management applications on forestlands across the West.

“That’s always the mark of good research in my mind,” Wisdom says. “Something that generates curiosity and further questions to explore.”

Over the years, more than 80 federal, state, private, tribal and university partners have collaborated on Starkey research, which has helped to address a broad spectrum of national issues in natural resource and elk management. Those collaborations have produced more than

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400 articles in peer-reviewed scientific journals.

Wisdom has been a part of the Starkey team since late 1987, eventually becoming project leader while collecting crucial ungulate management data and orchestrating ecology and management studies of elk and mule deer.

Before settling in at Starkey for the long haul, though, Wisdom worked on forests and rangelands across the country, studying more than 90 vertebrate species. His love for wildlife started out early, fishing, hunting and trapping with his friends in the forests surrounding his childhood home in northern Illinois. As a teenager, Wisdom worked on bird surveys for a local wildlife foundation.

He earned a wildlife management degree from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, where protégés of Aldo Leopold guided him. During his sophomore year, he was part of a team of undergraduates who landed a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant to study potentially imperiled vertebrates in Wisconsin. Less than 20 percent of research proposals submitted to the NSF receive grants, much less those submitted by a group of 19-year-olds.

"It was just luck," he says, laughing. "We were actually told by some of the faculty members at the university that it was a good exercise for young, naive undergraduates to try. All those professors were very supportive and helpful, but were shocked that we received it."

From there, Wisdom went to New Mexico State University, where he earned a master's degree in wildlife and range science before taking a job as a fish and wildlife biologist with the Bureau of Land Management in Coos Bay, Oregon. His tenure there coincided with the rise of the

northern spotted owl controversy, and he spent much of his time learning to call and capture the birds. He also did stream restoration and fisheries work to improve spawning habitat and stream connectivity for salmon and steelhead.

While working for the BLM, Wisdom also helped develop a habitat use model for elk in Oregon and Washington. That's when he connected with Jack Ward Thomas, the biologist who

## **"After all these years, he's still happily fulfilling his childhood dream, much to elk conservation's benefit."**

started research at the Starkey Project. Thomas brought Wisdom into the fold at Starkey before going on in 1993 to become the first wildlife biologist to serve as chief of the U.S. Forest Service. Wisdom decided to work on the project for a few years before going back to school one last time for a Ph.D. in forestry and wildlife from the University of Idaho.

His first job at Starkey centered on showing timber managers, ranchers, public land managers, wildlife biologists and the public why the station is such a unique resource for wildlife research and conservation. He led countless tours of the experimental forest, always listening and gathering input from collaborators. Thirty years later, it's still a task he's well suited for, says his longtime coworker, Mary Rowland.

"He can talk on his feet very easily and he's very good at it," says Rowland. "He could, without a note, just walk up and talk to any group."

Rowland is the other research wildlife biologist on

the Starkey team, and she's been there almost as long as Wisdom. As Forest Service budgets have waxed and waned over the years, she says Wisdom has stepped up many times to be Starkey's most powerful advocate when the project looked like it was headed for the chopping block.

"When he's seen that handwriting on the wall, he's just jumped in," Rowland says. "I wouldn't say he's done it singlehandedly, but he's really kept the project going when we could have been shut down. He is so passionate about the project and the work done here."

Wisdom has helped develop an incredibly rich and long-running data set on the interactions between wildlife, people and habitat. Whereas university research is often curtailed by the length of time graduate students are in school, Starkey provides an arena for decades-long studies.

Wisdom, Rowland and their colleagues can tweak variables like animal populations and hunter numbers within the experimental forest to conduct landscape-scale experiments, the likes of which are rare.

Current research at Starkey includes studying how elk and mule deer hunters use the landscape in relation to their success, long-term responses by elk to prescribed burning and a variety of timber harvests from thinning to clear cuts, and effects of a warming planet on elk productivity, just to name a few. It's a lot to juggle, but Wisdom says he's excited about Starkey's ongoing and future work.

After all these years, he's still happily fulfilling his childhood dream, much to elk conservation's benefit.

"Even to this day," Wisdom says, "there wouldn't be anything else I would pick to do."