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ALUMNI

As Forester in Nebraska, Gardner-Webb Alumnus Has Meaningful Career

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON SEPTEMBER 20, 2021



▲ This view from on top of the ridge at Gilbert-Baker Wildlife Management Area (WMA) shows where Luke Gazak works.

Luke Gazak, '18, Takes Care of Trees, Supports Work with Wildlife

When people hear the word “forester,” what comes to mind is a person who plants and takes care of trees. However, for 2018 Gardner-Webb University alumnus Luke Gazak, a forester with the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf), the job is much more than that. His role in Chadron, Neb., is a cooperative position created and funded by the NWTf, Nebraska Game & Parks Commission (NGPC), Nebraska Forest Service (NFS), the U.S Forest Service (USFS), and the Nebraska Environmental Trust (NET) grant.



- ▲ Luke Gazak poses with DJ, a dog trained to track and find evidence of mountain lions. DJ and Gazak found mountain lion scat which is currently being sampled for DNA. With the data they gather, they hope to learn more about the lion population and how to manage them.
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Recently, Gazak spoke via Zoom with GWU students in a new biology/chemistry professional readiness class. He is grateful to be employed in a job he loves, where he is surrounded by breathtaking landscapes. “There are countless layers and fine details with my work and career, but every day is different and I am learning to be a well-rounded conservationist, forester, and outdoorsman,” Gazak related. “This unique position requires a deep understanding of wildlife, biology, and forestry and it is the most enjoyable and fulfilling career path I could have ever hoped for. In fact, I still can’t believe I get paid to do this.”



- ▲ This picture was made after a four-day fight to contain a wildfire.

Gazak, a native of Holly Springs, N.C., majored in biology at Gardner-Webb because of his passion for wildlife and nature. “I was fortunate to have incredible mentors and professors who gave so much towards my education,” he shared. “The skills and knowledge I gained during my time at Gardner-Webb has pushed me forward into this meaningful career.”

The NWTf is a private, non-profit conservation organization that emphasizes the importance of hunting for conservation, and quality wildlife habitat for wild turkey and countless other species. Gazak spends 70 to 75 percent of his time dedicated toward wildlife biology and wildlife management with NGPC biologists. “Among other things, I take part in mountain lion research (collaring, tracking, collecting DNA), assessing the presence of infectious diseases in white tail and mule deer, and population surveys for pronghorn, wild turkey, elk, and trout,” he noted. “In addition to wildlife work, I am tasked with supporting NGPC, NFS, and USFS during wildfires and prescribed fires. I have been on countless wildfires and prescribed fires, and I am required to have a deep understanding of utilizing, suppressing, and containing fire.”

Likewise, his responsibilities regarding the NET grant from the state of Nebraska entail conservation practices, with Gazak directing work in the Pine Ridge ecosystem of North West Nebraska. “These forest management projects are designed to reduce the overall fuel load in the forest, prevent the likelihood of catastrophic crown fires, improve tree quality and overall forest health, and promote healthy wildlife habitat,” he explained. “The objective is to leave behind the strongest and healthiest trees, less fuel for a wildfire to consume, space and resources for new growth, and an overall healthy forest for wildlife.”



- ▲ These two photos were taken at Gilbert-Baker Wildlife Management Area on Luke Gazak's project site. In the photo on the left, the aim is to cut and remove less desirable trees, promote the growth of the strong and more desirable trees, manage the age classes of the trees in the forest, and reduce the fuel load to mitigate intense wildfires. The photo on the right shows the same area after the work is complete and the forest has had a few weeks to grow into its new space, promoting strong and healthy trees that are a balance of young and old.
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