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Research Discussion with Philip Kavouriaris

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Philip Kavouriaris

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Kavouriaris Interview 11.30.22

[00:00:00] **Caroline Winnenberg:** My name is Caroline Winnenberg. I am the chief editor of Steeplechase the ORCA Student Journal. I am here today with Philip Kavouriaris on November 30th, 2022. Philip is pursuing his master's in biology and he's here to talk to us about his research project "Analyzing Post Fledging Movements, Survival, and Space Use of First Year Black Vultures in Kentucky."

So tell me a little bit about your research project. How did you come to that topic?

[00:00:32] **Philip Kavouriaris:** Well, I have been working as a wildlife biologist for a number of years before with a special interest in raptors [and] birds of prey. And I've also worked for a number of wildlife management agencies.

So I discovered this project back in 2020. And applied for it. Dr. Andrea Darracq is my advisor here. But yeah, I haven't worked with Black Vultures before. They're very intelligent I would say kind of crafty species, so it's been really interesting working with them.

[00:01:02] **Caroline Winnenberg:** Yeah, That's really cool. So what's the- what's the central question in your research?

[00:01:09] **Philip Kavouriaris:** So there is currently an issue with the birds. They have- their populations have grown, their ranges have expanded in recent decades, and so unfortunately that's caused some issues with certain- especially in the agricultural community.

So they will primarily eat dead things, but on occasion they will go after live vulnerable, like birthing livestock, et cetera. So there was an effort made by the USDA number of years ago to kind of pursue more information about the species. Cuz you know, there's a surprising amount that we don't know about them.

And so that's kind of where I come in. My focus is particularly on looking at their nesting ecology. So basically what are their, what's the rate of nest survival? You know, how many birds are able to make it out of the nest and enter the adult population. Specifically we're also looking at what types of nest predators affect the species.

So we don't really know anything about that. And then the second part of the study's focusing on looking at juvenile movements which is what the, the poster in question was on of tracking these birds for six months after they leave the nest and kind of just seeing what types of areas they're using.

[00:02:25] **Caroline Winnenberg:** Yeah. So you were measuring, you know Vultures and how many survived past the Nest. . So how many nests in total did you look at? Did you watch?

[00:02:35] **Philip Kavouriaris:** Yeah, so I guess I should explain a little bit more about that. So I wasn't physically sitting there watching the nest, so beginning in the summer, the spring and summer of 2021.

So we did two nesting seasons this past year as well. So we went out and put trail cameras on the nests that we could find. We put out postings in different communities, birding communities, agricultural communities. Cuz what's interesting about this species is that they prefer to nest in old abandoned sheds, barns, houses. So. Some of these nests. You know, were most of these nests were on people's property, so over two seasons I believe we monitor 47 nests in total. And this is statewide. So their range extends eastward in Kentucky basically up until the Appalachian. So we covered, we tried to cover, you know, it was a lot of driving, but we tried to cover it as much as we could.

[00:03:32] **Caroline Winnenberg:** This sounds like it was a huge project, you know, a lot of people involved. This wasn't just something you know, a, a research project you might have come up with yourself and worked on here. This is, that was a really cool opportunity. How did you find this and come to apply for it.

[00:03:47] **Philip Kavouriaris:** I just I'd been looking to looking for an opportunity to get my master's somewhere and I was just kind of looking for the right project, the right fit. And I saw this come up and I believe either late, I believe, late 2019. And I was working out in Wyoming at that time, and so I just applied for it.

I interviewed in early 2020. You know, it was an interesting time to, to be entering grad school. Mm-hmm. . wasn't able to visit Murray. I wasn't able to meet, Dr. Darracq in person. I should mention we're also the project's also in collaboration with Dr. Matt Springer at University of Kentucky. So again, it's a big project. Yeah, I just applied for it and I guess it worked out.

[00:04:29] **Caroline Winnenberg:** That's really cool. I'm glad you got to work on something you're passionate about. Yeah. So tell me about the Raptor Research Foundation and the conference you attended in October.

[00:04:39] **Philip Kavouriaris:** Yeah that was that was just a phenomenal experience.

I've been lucky enough to be able to [go] to a number of conferences, both you know, in Kentucky during COVID when things were more online, attending some of those. But then getting to go to Florida in October was tremendous. I knew some people there. But moreover, I was, you know, I, I try to keep up on the you know, Raptor, Raptor research. And so getting to actually put faces to the names I was really able to, to make some connections there. And you know, I presented my poster and I got some, some pretty helpful feedback as well. So I would say, all in all, it's a, it was a pretty pretty great trip all around.

[00:05:17] **Caroline Winnenberg:** Well, that's really good to hear. So what are your next steps for the work you've done? I know, I saw that you were looking to publish with Steeplechase in the spring. Is there anything else you're planning on doing?

[00:05:29] **Philip Kavouriaris:** Yes, so currently I am so field work is officially over.

I'm currently analyzing data in the early stages of the writing process. So we're just kind of working on that for now. Hopefully. You know, I have everything kind of come together in the spring. And the overall the, the big idea the big goal I guess is to you know, not only just you know, complete my thesis here, but to also, you know, publish any number of number of scientific journals.

Again, that's a little ways off, but that's the ultimate goal here, cuz there's. , there's gonna be some stuff that you know, hasn't really been looked at before, so we're kind of eager to, to get that out there once we, you know, dig through the numbers a little bit.

[00:06:10] **Caroline Winnenberg:** Did I see that you presented at scholars week this fall?

[00:06:14] **Philip Kavouriaris:** I didn't present at this Scholars week, yes. But I plan to do that in the spring.

[00:06:19] **Caroline Winnenberg:** Awesome. I'm looking forward to seeing your work. So with this project, it, you know, it was a huge undertaking. Looking back, is there anything you wish you had done differently or thought about, early on?

[00:06:32] **Philip Kavouriaris:** Yeah, it's kind of difficult to say. You know, coming in, this was, you know, the first, this was the pilot 2021 was the pilot year. We put, you know, we put a lot of thought and planning into, into how we would go about it, but. It was one of those things where, you know, some things you just didn't realize until, you know, afterwards that maybe this could have been better.

But this, but I think overall I think we approached it the right way, I guess. You know, a couple of things, you know, going forward if, if the project continued, that would be something we would change. But I think, I think we did, we did the best we can. .

[00:07:13] **Caroline Winnenberg:** So what what's something in particular that you found really interesting about the data you've collected?

You know, I know you're still, you know, going through it, but something that jumped out to you as you've started going through the data.

[00:07:27] **Philip Kavouriaris:** Well, I guess first of all a lot of the data is going, going through, like we have not just photos, but videos taken at. Just kind of looking at some of the behaviors of these birds.

You know, you know, just looking at kind of some of the, the parental care stuff. You know, just watching the chicks kind of grow up, I think. But I guess, I guess, I guess the biggest thing for me is kind of seeing how resilient this species is and resourceful and, you know, yes, they, they do cause problems which is unfortunate, but. It was just, it's just fascinating for me to, to be able to, to see that there're intimate moments, you know, up close and you know, kind of seeing them grow up, like, you know, you know, seeing them from an egg and then when they finally, you know, meet the nest for once a year. I don't know. That's that's pretty cool.

[00:08:17] **Caroline Winnenberg:** You are anticipating graduating in May, right?

[00:08:20] **Philip Kavouriaris:** That's correct.

[00:08:21] **Caroline Winnenberg:** So what are your plans post-graduation?

[00:08:24] **Philip Kavouriaris:** Well I would like to join a management agency, either at the state or federal level. Now location wise, I guess we'll see. I'm, I'm pretty open to that, but I've always been more interested in the management side rather than research in wildlife.

Cause I'm really more like hands on. I kind of want to be out there. Kind of solving problems, helping, you know, make compromises, stuff like that. So that's kind of what, what initially drew me to this project is kind of blending those two sides, research and management. So that's the plan. Yeah. But I guess I'm hoping to other interesting opportunities, so we'll see.

[00:09:04] **Caroline Winnenberg:** In this field of would it, would it be the field of wildlife preservation and ecology?

[00:09:09] **Philip Kavouriaris:** Yeah. Wildlife yeah, ecology wildlife, biology, you know.

[00:09:13] **Caroline Winnenberg:** But how did you know you wanted to study? Going to biology and then later on or- ornithology?

[00:09:19] **Philip Kavouriaris:** Yep. Well, it was, it was kind of a long process. You know, I started out a, a typical origin story for, for people in this field, you know, growing up. . You know, I grew up in the suburbs, but I was still out there like chasing bugs and, you know, I was always interested in nature and we'd spend a lot of time at our, our cottage in Michigan.

I'd be out chasing turtles, stuff like that. But I just knew that I wanted to study animals. I figured out later on that of being a veterinarian was not for me. So I, my undergrad at Michigan State, I majored in Zoology and I found that rewarding, but I kind of had a hard time figuring out exactly what I wanted to do.

So it wasn't towards the end of my time there. I was working in an entomology lab actually that I actually figured out you can, you know, get paid to work with wildlife. And you know, my first internship in Nevada after, after that then I was, I was stuck. I was stuck. Like this is, this is where I'm supposed to be.

So it kind of took me a while. But I took almost a decade off between undergrad and grad school. So you, it took me a while to find my spot, you know, but seems like having the right position.

Well,

[00:10:28] **Caroline Winnenberg:** I'm really happy for you about that. So then last question. What is your favorite animal?

[00:10:33] **Philip Kavouriaris:** Oh gosh.

Well, I guess it definitely has to be a bird. My favorite is it's called the Northern Goshawk. It's this tremendously fiercesome looking, aggressive looking forest hawk. It's a native to North America and Europe as well. And they're, they're large and the adults a lot of times have these like blood red eyes.

And I remember one of my earliest field experie. I was doing nest surveys for them out in New Mexico and they have this really piercing sharp cry. And I remember looking up and this this angry goshawk was dive bombing me. And so the first goshawk I ever saw was trying to, you know, take me out.

I was just running away, but I've always had a fascination.

[00:11:22] **Caroline Winnenberg:** So that's really cool. Thank you so much for coming and allowing me to talk to you. I'm really excited to see more and read more about your work. And thank you guys so much for listening. I hope that you found this interesting and rewarding. Be on the lookout for our next publication of Steeplechase.

And you'll be able to read Phil's work there. So thank you.