Before you decide to embark on graduate study in my lab at Cal-State Fullerton (CSUF), it might be helpful for you to know how my lab works, and some of my expectations of graduate students who work with me. Also, I strongly encourage you to contact and meet with current and former students, who can give you their perspective on their experience here at CSUF and in my lab. Good students have, of course, deviated from these guidelines in one way or another. However, understanding these things now may help reduce the chance of frustration later.

Although CSUF offers only MS degrees, I am very active in my research and therefore expect my students to be active and interested in research as well. I assume that you are here to gain additional experience and skills that will help you go on to a PhD program or to get a meaningful job with a governmental agency, NGO or consulting firm. I also assume that you have thought and read enough about the kind of work I do to know that our interests overlap, and are looking to learn more about these areas of biology and ecology than you learned in your undergraduate program. This means that your passion for the subject will motivate you to gain additional technical (e.g. GIS) and quantitative (statistics) skills in and out of the classroom, and, most importantly, to read and know the relevant primary literature without prodding from me. Your intellectual investment in your project will be critical for your success and happiness here.

Your graduate studies and, especially, your research, should be one of your top life priorities during your time at CSUF. Good students spend most of their time in the lab or library when they are not in the field, in class, or teaching. Because of the commitment required, you should not expect to be able to keep a full-time job outside school. You also should not take a full-time job before you defend; the odds of your finishing decrease dramatically once you physically leave CSUF. This may require sacrifices on your part, but I assume that you are pursuing an advanced degree as an investment in your future.

Although I will help you throughout your program however I can, your research project and graduate program are ultimately your responsibility. I expect you to make and meet deadlines and to manage your time well. Also, because there are many competing demands on my time, I expect you to be on time for scheduled meetings (and let me know if you need to miss one) and, when turning in drafts of written work for comments, to have them to the point to where you are satisfied that you've done your best (this should apply to your coursework as well). My students are a high priority for me, and I will try to give you as much time and constructive feedback as I can, and as quickly as possible.

Early in your program, you and I will work together to design a research project that you will enjoy, that suits your interests and skills, and that tackles a problem of interest in ecology or conservation that meshes with my research program. This begins with a research proposal, usually drafted during your first or, at the latest, second semester as part of BIOL500AB. Done correctly, this document can be continually revised and updated as you move through your project, so that it can serve as an outline for your final thesis. My general approach is to develop projects that are sufficiently interesting, novel and scientifically rigorous so that they will result in at least one paper in a refereed scientific journal. If your project goes well enough to merit publication, I will encourage you to work with me to revise your thesis into a manuscript for publication, with you as first author, me as second, and including any other co-authors that we decide contributed significantly. If
you still have not submitted a manuscript for publication a year after your thesis defense, I'll reserve the option to write up your results in manuscript form, with me as senior author and you as a contributing author. By the end of your program, you also should have given at least one oral presentation at a national or international scientific meeting, e.g., ASM, ESA. I also will encourage you to write proposals for small grants to fund your research, because this is very good experience for future writing and fund-raising, and because it will help you feel invested in your project.

Most students in my lab will be field-oriented people and do field-oriented projects. I expect you to work hard and accept that field projects never involve a 40-hour work week on your part. I also expect you to make good decisions in the field, which means not taking unnecessary risks with your own health or safety or that of others, not being careless with equipment or resources or acting in a way that damages the environment. To the extent that you can cajole others (paid or otherwise) to assist you with your research, you should recognize that your commitment to the project is very different from theirs, and be patient and appreciative of their help. I expect you to follow all the stipulated rules of collecting licenses, research permits and access to field sites as best you can and with the well-being of study animals and natural areas as top priorities. This may include completing or helping me complete the various reports that are associated with working with vertebrates, on public land, and on funded projects. To facilitate this, you should take and keep good records of all your work and observations, including photocopying field notes and entering data on a computer often and keeping back-up copies. When you complete your program, you will be expected to leave electronic copies of these data, with a thorough description of metadata and methods, with me, and, if required by a supporting agency or institution (e.g., NSF-LTER), archived elsewhere.

Most students come to enjoy the field work and data collection parts of their project, whereas, by comparison, data analysis and writing are much more difficult and daunting. One of our mutual challenges will be to decide when you are finished with field work and when you need to start making progress on the "real" work. We (you, I and your thesis committee) will make these decisions at the beginning of your project, with the recognition that things may change as the project progresses. As a general rule, most MS students should expect to have two field seasons of data, though some projects that require more intensive periods of sampling may last only a year. You should plan at least 6 months for intensive analysis and writing before you submit your final thesis draft to me, which should be about 2 months before you plan to defend. The extent to which you can keep up with reading, analysis and writing throughout your program will determine how long your degree takes. Realistically, most students should plan to finish in 2-3 years, but not much longer unless there are unforeseen problems.

Most of my students are supported on teaching assistantships (TAs), which can provide you with some excellent teaching experience and training, especially if you are considering a teaching career or additional grad school. Unfortunately, TA salaries at CSUF are quite low relative to the cost of living in southern California, and your salary will depend upon how much you teach (usually between $600-$1200/month). A limited number of graduate assistants (GAs; 10 hours/week) are available and these pay less (~$300/month). An even smaller number are supported by research assistantships (RAs). Some students may be on part-time RAs (one semester and/or summer support), depending on external
project funding, and are expected to contribute a significant amount of time to the broader project. TAs and GAs are assigned by the department and I have little control over these decisions; to date, however, most students in the department have received at least some level of support. I have been successful so far at getting funding to support research costs (materials and supplies, limited travel) for my students and aim to continue to do so. It is more difficult to find money to cover all travel costs and salaries for field assistants, but we will try, and will use volunteers whenever possible. If opportunities arise for you, as a student, to apply for funds, I expect you to be willing to pursue them. Also, if small pools of university or departmental funds are available, I expect you to apply for them because they are usually easy to get and help keep the lab running.

You will have a desk, usually in the lab (MH338), and access to a PC desktop computer with internet and network access. Many students use their own laptops nowadays, and if this is an option for you, I may ask you to share or offer your designated computer to someone who does not have access to another one. There usually are not funds for photocopying or making long-distance calls and faxes unless you are working on a broader project with specified budget for these things.

The Biology department has weekly seminars (usually Wednesdays 4-5) that you should attend whenever you are not teaching, in class or in the field, even if the topic is not in your research area. You also should participate in informal meetings and gatherings, e.g., Ecolunch, Biology Graduate Student Club, picnics, meetings with speakers, whenever you can. These activities will help you feel connected to the department and are a good way to practice listening and talking about your interests and research outside of the classroom.

Our lab meets weekly for 1-2 hours and I aim to meet with each of my students individually for 1 hour each week (more if needed). We can re-schedule or postpone an individual meeting if you feel there is nothing to discuss, but please try to do this in advance. Timely attendance and participation in lab meetings is absolutely required (via BIOL580/599) unless you are in the field; we will try to find a meeting time that fits all of our campus schedules. Typically, one of us will be responsible for running the lab meeting each week, which may involve a group reading of a recent or seminal paper in the primary literature, an update or discussion of research results, or group comments on a manuscript or presentation. Everyone is expected to update the lab on their research progress once per semester. Because our space is shared and limited, everyone is expected to participate in the maintenance and up-keep of the lab and lab resources, e.g., field gear. To the extent to which you all can help each other out, in the field, lab, etc., you will have a more productive and memorable graduate experience.

*If you are interested in working with me, please contact me ([pstapp@fullerton.edu](mailto:pstapp@fullerton.edu)) preferred; phone: 714 278 2849)* so we can set up a meeting to discuss current openings and opportunities in my lab.

*Good luck!!*

*Dr. Paul Stapp*