

# DATA VERSIFY

Christie Bahlai

## Researcher Background:

I'm a computational ecologist and data scientist at Kent State University. I study how humans and nature interact, using math, models, and fieldwork to understand ecosystems and help make decisions for a more sustainable future. I earned my PhD in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Guelph, and since then I've worked on projects ranging from invasive species to sustainable agriculture. I spend a lot of time studying insects, especially ladybugs, because they're fascinating, helpful in agriculture, and sometimes surprisingly tricky to understand. I also teach and mentor students, helping them turn messy data into real scientific stories.

## Q: Why did you become a biologist?

A: I became a biologist because I love figuring out how the natural world works—and honestly, because I've always been curious about the tiny, surprising things you might miss if you don't look closely. Studying biology lets me explore those details, ask questions, and try to solve real-world problems along the way.

## Q: What is your favorite part about your job?

A: I love solving puzzles, and nature is full of puzzles. The natural world is full of complex systems, like ecosystems full of insects, plants, and other animals, and figuring out how all the pieces fit together is both challenging and exciting. That moment when I figure out something new - I fit together pieces of a puzzle that no one has before - that's the ultimate rush.

## Q: What obstacles have you overcome to get where you are?

A: Becoming a faculty member wasn't a straight path for me. After finishing my PhD, I spent five years in a postdoc position, applying for academic jobs without much success, which was frustrating and sometimes made me doubt myself. Part of the challenge was that I approach science in a slightly unusual way, so some people were more skeptical about my work than



they might be about more conventional projects. I also look a little different than people expect a person in my field to look: I'm a mom-ish, fat-bodied woman who builds computer models and plays with bugs, so I've had to really work to build my credibility in the field. Eventually, I landed a tenure-track job at Kent State, but it took persistence, patience, and learning to navigate a system that doesn't always treat everyone the same. From that experience, I learned that persistence and luck are just as important as talent in science.

**Q: What are hobbies and/or interests that you have outside of your research?**

A: When I'm not doing research, I love spending time with my two kids and working on my garden, working very hard to get rid of more lawn and plant more flowers every year. I also enjoy home composting, which sounds strange for a hobby but really does help keep the garden going; and taking care of my three quirky rescued housecats.

**Q: What is your favorite thing about your hobby/how did you get into it?**

A: Gardening came very naturally to me. I actually did a lot of work on farms during my graduate training and now my work doesn't have me outside as much, so when I moved to Ohio I was happy to put down roots in my yard (pun intended).

**Q: Do you feel that any dimension of your identity is invisible or under-represented/marginalized in STEM?**

A: I'm a fat white bi woman with femme and heterosexual presentation, and I think my gender identity is related to more covert marginalization, while the fatness very definitely is associated with a more overt marginalization.

Being a woman, I get most of the typical heteropatriarchal stuff - it's almost never overt in the workplace but it is still more pervasive than I'd have expected. This comes in the form of just being expected to take on the 'carer' roles like being the note taker or event planner, the needing to out-perform men significantly in order to be seen as equal. This is mixed with being a person who exists in a fat body, which comes with people perceiving you as less competent, less serious, and often less deserving- and a lot of the ways I move through the world are in response to social conditioning by those very real factors.

The combination of these identities means I'm 'approachable' and often perceived as a caregiver by colleagues and students. This isn't itself a bad thing, but 1) it means my workload involves more caring and emotional labor than many of my colleagues; 2) asserting boundaries or giving tough feedback, no matter how constructive and gentle, is often received very badly because it goes against people's expectations of me; and 3) navigating all that while still trying to be high-performing at research is exhausting.

**Q: What advice do you have for aspiring biologists?**

A: Learning science in the classroom can be very different than doing science in the field: for one, in science class you'll get a grade so you can tell if you're right. But once you're doing science in the wild, that all goes away. Biology is messier than you think, and experiments rarely go exactly as planned: that's why it's exciting! But it also can be

really hard when you're used to there being a solution. Be ready to deal with uncertainty, think critically, and ask questions constantly. Learn to troubleshoot on your own, but don't be afraid to seek help when you need it. Stay curious, pay attention to the details, and be persistent: the skills you build in navigating complexity will serve you far beyond the lab or the field. And remember, there's no single "right" way to be a scientist; your unique perspective is an asset.

**Q: What do you believe are key elements that contribute to being successful in biology?**

A: Being successful in biology requires a mix of careful observation, creativity, and organization. You need to be able to design experiments, analyze data thoughtfully, and communicate your findings clearly. Collaboration is essential- science is rarely done alone, and working with people who bring different experiences and perspectives makes your research stronger and more interesting. Staying flexible and open-minded is key, because new discoveries often challenge assumptions, and embracing diverse ways of thinking will help you see problems in new ways.

