

DATA VERSIFY

Gerald (Jerry) Wilkinson

Researcher Background:

Gerald Wilkinson (he/him) is an evolutionary biologist at the University of Maryland. He and members of his lab study social behavior, communication, evolutionary genetics and genomics, and aging. They study a variety of animals, but especially bats!

Q: Why did you become a biologist?

A: I liked catching lizards and snakes when I was young. As I got older, I started identifying birds and discovered that different species live in different places. Biology seemed the best choice that would allow me to continue to learn about animals, especially since I had no interest in medicine. After a summer internship working for the Bureau of Land Management, I realized that I would prefer to be an academic rather than work for the government, so I went to graduate school.

Q: What is your favorite part about your job?

A: I have been fortunate to be a researcher, educator, and administrator. As a researcher, I like having the freedom to choose what I work on. As an educator, I enjoy helping students get excited about research and find a job they enjoy. As an administrator, it is very satisfying to help someone advance their career.



Top Jerry capturing bats in a cave in Trinidad.
Bottom: Jerry and postdoc, Jack Rayner, taking samples from a captured bat.

Q: Do you have any aspects of your identity that you feel are underrepresented, marginalized, or minoritized in STEM or society?

A: I was adopted at birth, as was my brother, who is three years older than me. My

mother never went to college, but my dad got a degree and became an accountant. He hoped I would also pursue accounting, but I found it boring. I was lucky, though, in that they never discouraged me or my brother from pursuing our interests. Many years later, I discovered I have 5 maternal half-siblings and 2 paternal half-siblings. I learned from my paternal siblings that my biological father went back to school and got a PhD after retiring from the Air Force.

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

A: When I was finishing my PhD, I applied for a couple of fellowships to pursue postdoctoral research, but all were declined. I was disappointed and thought I might not have a career, so I focused on writing my dissertation. I then discovered that one of my chapters had an exciting result. I submitted that chapter to a high-profile journal called *Nature*, and it was published. The next year, I applied to two more fellowships and got both of them. That one paper and those experiences helped me get the job I still have.

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

A: I like to swim, snorkel, hike, go on bike rides, kayak, and take photos. I have been fortunate to travel all over the world for my research and often try out my hobbies in new places.



Jerry (right) with his wife, Cindy (left), and daughter, Sara (middle), in the Rocky Mountains, USA.

Q: What is your favorite thing about photography?

A: I enjoy taking photos of animals, which is often challenging. It can be fun to try and figure out how to get an ideal photo of a particular animal in a difficult place, like a bat flying in a cave or a fish swimming underwater.

Q: How did you get into photography?

A: I first got a single-lens reflex camera when I was a sophomore in high school. My brother and I turned our bathroom into a darkroom so we could develop our own black and white photos. I learned a lot by trial and error.

Q: What advice do you have for aspiring biologists?

A: Find something you enjoy and that gives you pleasure. Then, learning more about it never seems like work. Sooner than you think, you are likely to make a discovery that has not been made before.

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

A: Try to be a keen observer. Pay attention to details and never be afraid to ask questions. There are no dumb questions. Biology can be complicated, which can be intimidating, but also exciting because new discoveries are constantly made.