

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California



March 8, 2012

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Cal Poly Students' Reptile Research Earns Nearly \$11,000 in Grants

SAN LUIS OBISPO – Would it hurt rattlesnakes if they were moved away from places humans like to frequent? And how are Western fence lizards able to become immune to Lyme disease after being bitten by ticks that carry it? Two Cal Poly biology grad students have received research grants to find out.

For his rattlesnake research proposal, Biological Sciences master's student Kory Heiken received a \$500 grant from the Chicago Herpetological Society and a \$9,050 from Vandenberg Air Force Base to study rattlesnake relocation there.

He'll investigate whether there is any physiological impact on Southern Pacific rattlesnakes (Crotalus oreganus helleri) after they are moved to isolated areas on the base, away from places frequented by humans.

"Nuisance rattlesnake translocation – moving snakes a long distance away as a means of managing them – may be stressful to the snakes," said Biological Sciences Professor Emily Taylor. "Vandenberg Air Force Base is interested in the impacts and whether translocation is effective in reducing negative interactions between humans and snakes. Through Kory's study, we will also learn much more about this common species on the base."

Heiken, originally from San Clemente, earned his bachelor's degree in Integrative Biology from UC Berkeley. He is working as a research and teaching assistant in Cal Poly's Physiological Ecology of Reptiles Laboratory (PERL) with Taylor. He will use the grant for travel between Cal Poly and the Vandenberg research site, and other project expenses.

Grad student Kyle Weichert was awarded a \$500 grant from the Chicago Herpetological Society to study the ability of the Western fence lizard to kill Borrelia burgdorferi, the bacterium that causes Lyme disease. The grant will pay for some lab supplies needed to perform the research. Weichert will study the effects that high testosterone, the steroid hormone corticosterone, and differences between males and females may play in the lizard's ability to develop immunity to Lyme disease.

"Kyle's study has important implications for the ecology of this infectious disease," Taylor said.

Weichert, originally from San Jose, graduated from Cal Poly in 2007 with a bachelor's degree in Biological Sciences. He worked in the biotechnology industry before returning to Cal Poly's Biological Sciences master's program. He is also working as a research and teaching assistant in Taylor's PERL lab.

For more details on snake research or the PERL lab, go to www.calpoly.edu/~bio/PERL/index.html.

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