

{STAFF PROFILE}

DR. ERIK RUNQUIST, CONSERVATION BIOLOGIST

{BY JOSH LE, SOCIAL MEDIA AND MARKETING COORDINATOR}

Prior to joining the Minnesota Zoo's Conservation Department in 2012 to work on protecting some of the smallest creatures in Minnesota, Dr. Erik Runquist grew up chasing butterflies in the mountains of Oregon. This is where his interest for the "little things in life" began. After high school, Runquist attended the University of Florida and later received his PhD from the University of California, Davis for genetics studies on Sierra Nevada butterflies (which required more chasing).

"I was thrilled to join the Minnesota Zoo's Conservation Department," said Runquist. His work with prairie butterfly species in particular has created international recognition, as well as has increased our partnerships with conservation-focused organizations and agencies across the Upper Midwest. "The Minnesota Zoo's visionary leadership to help them [the butterflies] is commendable."

When asked what a typical day at the office was like, Runquist responded, "My work changes with the seasons. During the summer, I am either out of the office conducting surveys for rare butterflies at remnant prairies across the Upper Midwest, or I am managing breeding and rearing operations for these endangered butterflies [on-site] at the Zoo with our talented staff. In the colder months, the butterflies are sleeping so I work on outreach, data analysis, and reports. Our program is also launching conservation genetics research and studies on the effects of some common pesticides this year."

It's pretty safe to say that Dr. Erik Runquist is key in protecting these endangered, yet important species for our natural environment. He especially enjoys sharing his passion with his four-year-old son, bringing him to the Minnesota Zoo on his days off, as well as checking out the wildlife in their own backyard.

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