

HOLY NAMES COLLEGE

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A Newsletter for Alumni and Friends

Exploring the Academic and Professional Pursuits of Faculty



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Holy Names University!**

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Robert Lassalle-Klein, PhD, Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Philosophy, and Julia Smith, PhD, Associate Professor of Biology

Every Time You Turn on a Tap, You Should Thank

by Joe Devney '93



With its granite cliffs and dry climate, the Northern Sierra Nevada bears only a passing resemblance to the hilly urban haven that is the Holy Names College campus. This is where Julia Smith spends much of her time away from campus, discovering how the Northern Sierra ecosystems work, and why they are important both to wildlife and to the humans living at lower altitudes.

Julia Smith, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Biology at Holy Names. She earned her PhD at the University of California nine years ago, and has been at Holy Names ever since. At about the same time she started at Holy Names, she began spending her summers near Truckee, California, on a U.S. Forest Service Partners in Flight project that is now also sponsored by The Nature Conservancy. While working on the project, she lives at a field station operated by UC Berkeley, along with several graduate and undergraduate students. In 2002, she took a six-month sabbatical from teaching to devote more time to studying these high elevation meadows.

The long-term study, "Monitoring Bird Populations in Montane Riparian and Wet Meadow Habitats—Determining the Effects of Meadow Characteristics, Grazing Practices and Restoration," was started in 1990 by Julia's friend and colleague, Mark Reynolds of The Nature

Conservancy, as a part of the U.S. Forest Service "Partners in Flight" program. The study now has several more participants, including Holy Names College and San Francisco State University. Julia joined the team in 1995.

The Treasures of the Sierra Nevada

The objects of the team's study "stand out like jewels on a string amid the barren granite peaks of the Sierra," says Julia. The researchers have been studying 50 high elevation meadows in an area of nearly 60 square miles. (Julia says that the meadows range in size "from your living room to several golf courses.") The meadows are popular with many kinds of wildlife, as sources of food, water, and shelter. The study focuses on the bird life to be found in the meadows, in an effort to learn about the health of the ecosystem as a whole. Birds are good indicators of ecological health because "they are not restricted to one aspect of a habitat—they can be found using resources on the ground, in shrubs, in trees—just about anywhere," she explains. The canary in the coal mine is an apt analogy.

Julia and the other team members understand that the meadows are also popular with real estate developers, especially the meadows at lower elevations: they are among the flattest expanses of land available on the slopes, good for shopping centers and golf courses. The researchers are gathering their data so that local communities, the federal government and conservation organizations can make informed decisions regarding the future of these important pieces of land.

Learning from the Birds

The research includes four kinds of meadows, classified by whether they are wet or dry, and whether the dominant vegetation is woody or not. To gather their wildlife data, the researchers catch the birds in large, fine-mesh nets, thirty feet wide and ten feet tall. The birds are counted, weighed, and measured, and their health is evaluated before they are tagged and released.

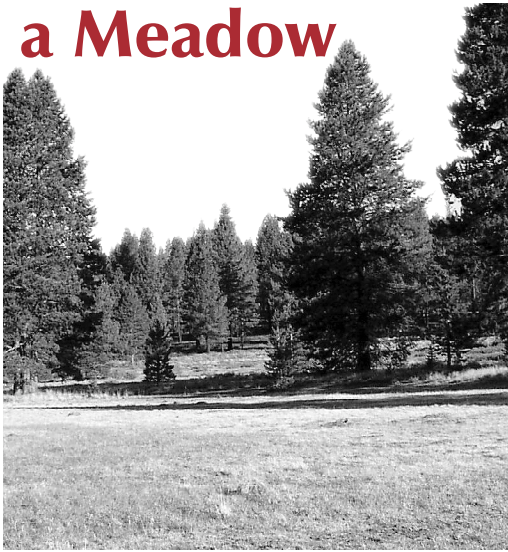
The study looks at birds classed as "neotropical migrants," meaning that they breed in North America and overwinter in Central and South America. The researchers have found an astonishing consistency in the populations during the course of the study. The birds "don't just return to the Sierras, or to the Tahoe area, or to the Sagehen Basin," Julia says. "They return to the same hundred-square-meter area along the Sagehen creek. We catch the same individuals in the same net year after year."



This makes for a fragile population, one very sensitive to changes in the environment. "If you cut down or alter even a small patch of forest it will probably result in the death of the individuals who rely on that specific piece of property; they don't know where to find food or shelter anywhere else."

In studying the ability of the meadows to support the birds, the team found that moisture is the limiting factor. The wetter meadows—those with streams run-

a Meadow



ning through them or that hold more moisture for other reasons—are the most popular with wildlife, and the species population and diversity is fairly constant year-to-year. The populations of the drier meadows fluctuate, and are smaller in drier years. The wet meadows support more species overall, and more species classed as “threatened.” Julia and her colleagues also found that “bigger is better:” large meadows are the most species-rich, and they contain all the species found in smaller meadows. The “wet woody” meadows also have the most stable bird populations from year to year. The researchers have concluded that conservation efforts should be concentrated on the larger, wetter meadows.

Bringing the Benefits Home

Saving the meadows is important not just for the birds and other mountain wildlife. The meadows of the northern Sierra Nevada regulate the water flow to the flatlands on both sides of the range. They slow down the snow runoff and filter the water. Many of California’s cities depend on this natural process of water treatment. As Julia explains it, we get our water in a “very artificial” method of trapping snowmelt in reservoirs. If it weren’t for high quality “healthy” meadows slowing down the flow of water from the Northern Sierra, our reservoirs would quickly overflow, and the cities’ drinking water would flow into the Pacific Ocean.

Although her sabbatical is over, Julia plans to continue spending summers at the Sagehen Field Station, and sharing what she learns with her biology classes at Holy Names.

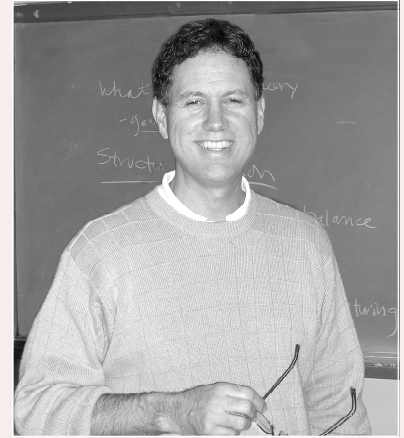
Robert Lassalle-Klein, a Lay Theologian

by Joe Devney '93

Robert Lassalle-Klein, PhD, who started this academic year as a new Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Philosophy, comes to Holy Names College most recently from DePaul University in Illinois, but he has a significant history in the Bay Area. He earned his B.A. in English Literature at Santa Clara University, a Jesuit school. He then went on to obtain advanced degrees from the Graduate Theological Union, the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, and the San Jose State School of Social Work.

As you can guess from the schools in this list, these further courses of study took Bob into a new direction: his primary academic and professional pursuits are theology and sociology, and he also has a strong background in philosophy. Bob has written extensively on theological topics, and has done social work with Spanish-speaking immigrants. He coordinated the Santa Clara University Big Brother program in East San Jose, and he co-founded a family services center for Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees in Oakland’s Fruitvale district. He has also worked with Mexican and Central American youth in San Francisco. Describing how such experiences influence his theology, Bob says, “I try to work out of the lives of real people, and to see how the Christian tradition lives in their lives and practices.”

Bob’s experience with these Latin American immigrants and other work in Latin America, along with his strong Jesuit connections, led him to the work of Ignacio Ellacuría, the president of the University of Central America in San Salvador. Ellacuría, he says, “was a philosophical genius.” He was also viewed as a threat by the Salvadoran government, because his University was investigating and publicizing the government’s human rights abuses. Ellacuría and other Jesuits were assassinated in November 1989 under orders from the head of



Salvadoran security, an incident that eventually led to the U.S. Congress withdrawing its support from the Salvadoran government.

The two men were connected through the Jesuit community. Ellacuría’s best friend, Jon Sobrino, was on Bob’s dissertation committee, resulting in a study of “The Jesuit Martyrs of the University of Central America.” Sobrino asked him to write about the murdered man’s life for a larger audience. Bob is completing a full-length book about the history of the University from its founding in 1964 until Ellacuría’s death in 1989. He also co-edited *Love that Produces Hope: Essays on the Thought of Ignacio Ellacuría*, and has in other ways tried to let people know about this martyr whom he found so inspirational.

Bob’s work as a theologian, of course, extends far beyond the life and work of Ignacio Ellacuría. He sees himself as bringing a needed perspective to the field. “I am a lay person, and that’s important. Theology has been done often by sisters and priests,” he points out. In contrast, “I am married and have three kids...I’m a lay person with a family, and those concerns come into my theology.”

And he is happy to bring that perspective to Holy Names, which he says “is a great place. It’s a small college with an incredible emphasis on teaching students. And you have the time to spend with these students and really work with them.”