More than Monkey Business

For Junior Abby Griffin, there are no lazy days of summer. The animal science major from Maple Grove, Minn., spent last summer working with primates at the Como Zoo in St. Paul, Minn., traveling to New Zealand as part of a study abroad experience, and visiting Ireland with her family.

The work at the Como Zoo is a foretaste of what Griffin hopes is a future career, and she is doing all she can to make the dream of becoming a zookeeper happen. It started in high school when she spent three summers volunteering at the Minnesota Zoo in Apple Valley in the farm exhibit.

Last year she applied to Como Zoo for a summer internship working with primates and spent her days taking care of the small monkeys cleaning, feeding, and planning enrichment activities for them. “I spent time preparing their food, but I also helped wherever the keepers needed me to help,” she says.

“One of the greatest opportunities I had was the two days when I could shadow someone working at the zoo,” she continues. “I loved spending time in the large cats exhibit and gaining experience in aquatics.” The internship experience puts confirmation on Griffin’s unique career aspirations.

As a zookeeper, she will need her four-year degree and a lot of hands-on experience—something she has enjoyed at the University of Minnesota Crookston. “I am interested in the care side of working with animals,” Griffin explains. “I thought at first I wanted to be a veterinarian, but what I want to do is different. As a zookeeper, I will have the chance to work with animals as a caregiver and that aspect appeals to me.”

Especially For the Birds

The clock was ticking, the competition was intense, and they were down to the last question. That’s when the team rose to the challenge responding with the correct answer. The Wildlife Quiz Bowl competition held in October at the annual conference of The Wildlife Society gave the five-member team from the University of Minnesota Crookston a big win and a chance to demonstrate their knowledge and ability on the national stage.

The captain, Senior Matt Toenies, Randall, Minn., led the team of natural resources majors through four rounds of competition with sixteen other teams. It was a satisfying win and a proud moment for coaches John Loegering and Vanessa Lane, who both teach in the Agriculture and Natural Resources Department.

Toenies transferred to the U of M Crookston in fall 2012 to complete his bachelor’s degree. His interest in wildlife was evident early. As a four-year-old, he began drawing birds and animals and says after his parents put up birdfeeders, “I became obsessed with wildlife.”

As part of the quiz bowl team, Toenies focused on birds, and that is the same place he hopes to focus on in graduate school. During his internship with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Shallow Lakes Program, his work was with waterfowl and

Matt Toenies holds a black-capped chickadee. His interest in birds was sparked in childhood when his parents set up birdfeeders for watching birds.
“On campus, I have had the chance to give vaccinations and work directly with animals, adding to my resume when I was interviewing for the internship with the Como Zoo,” Griffin shares. “I am hoping to apply for a second internship for summer 2014. The more experience I gain, the better my chances for employment at a zoo.”

Griffin wants to work and care for animals others may not want to or have the opportunity to. She says it all began years ago when her family took home a puppy from a shelter with several severe health challenges. “Caring for that black lab introduced me to the kind of caring I would like to have as a zookeeper,” she reflects.

She is preparing herself well, and it seems every day brings her a step closer to the career she has dreamed of since her first summer as a volunteer at the zoo.

Toenies, a middle child of eight, was homeschooled until taking advantage of Minnesota’s post-secondary enrollment option as a high school senior. His early interest in wildlife has led to particular enjoyment of taxonomy.

“I think it is fun to organize and place things in the natural world,” he states. “I also love learning the Latin names because once you know enough Latin, you begin to understand the roots and gain a deeper understanding of language.”

Like his appreciation for Latin, Toenies has come to appreciate the prairie. “It is different from lakes country where I grew up, but in many ways, I have liked experiencing another of Minnesota’s landscapes,” he continues.

No matter where he lives or what path his future takes, Toenies will be watching birds and taking advantage of all the opportunities a wildlife career can offer.