San Clemente Island (SCI) is the southernmost of the eight Channel Islands in the Pacific Ocean off the southern California coast. Five of the islands are part of the Channel Islands National Park, but since 1934, SCI has been owned and operated by various naval commands. The island’s 60-mile radius is home to more than a dozen of the Navy’s range and operational areas. It is also home to an important Natural Resources Office (NRO).

The NRO is responsible for the island’s land use and management of its cultural and natural resources. A mix of cactus and grassland, the island is also home to University of Minnesota, Crookston Alumnus Matt Brinkman, ’09, who chose a degree in wildlife management.

After growing up in St. Joseph, Minn., and attending the northernmost campus in the University of Minnesota system, Brinkman never imagined he would find himself on a small island some 70 miles off the coast of California. But, this strange new way of life as a predator biologist fits his interests perfectly.

Working with the NRO to restore the island’s ecosystem to its natural state, Brinkman is in charge of protection of endangered species, like a rare subspecies of the Loggerhead Shrike, a bird that as late as 2004 numbered only 78. He conducts predator surveys and works to prevent degradation of the shrike’s nesting areas. Along with protection of the shrike, he guards the health of the island foxes giving them distemper and rabies shots.

“The island’s fox population cannot be removed from the island,” Brinkman says. “We work to remove only non-native predators and give protection to the natural habitat.

“When I first thought about living on an island in the Pacific, I imagined something tropical and green, but San Clemente Island has cool summers and mild winters. The roads range from good to almost non-existent, and when something needs fixing, we do it ourselves,” he reflects. “I grew up on a farm and am familiar and comfortable with those expectations.”

Brinkman’s schedule includes working ten days straight followed by four days off. To leave the island he must go through Navy security and fly out on a 19-passenger plane on the half hour flight to the California coast. “We stay in hotels during our days off
and the four-day break gives us enough time to do something while we are on the mainland,” he shares. “I really am enjoying the work and the people I work with; this has been an amazing experience for me.”

While a student, Brinkman worked closely with Associate Professor John Loegering, Ph.D., as a work study. The summer following his graduation, he assisted Loegering with research on the Golden-winged Warbler, a bird whose population has been in decline since the 1960s.

“When I was in high school, I had never heard of the U of M, Crookston until I found out a classmate of mine had decided to go there to major in natural resources,” Brinkman recalls. “I started looking into what was available on the Crookston campus, and after a visit, I decided I would too. By the time I was finishing my sophomore year, I was hooked.

“I would recommend the natural resources major at the U of M, Crookston because of the experience they provide. The field trips and hands-on learning are great, and the professors are willing to help you get you where you want to go.”

While a student, Brinkman enjoyed playing Ultimate Frisbee on the Campus Mall and pool in the Sargeant Student Center. “I met a lot of people hanging out in the student center,” he says. “It was the place where all the majors were mixed together. I enjoyed getting together for a game of pool or whatever was going on there.”

He was also a member of the Student Chapter of The Wildlife Society, the Natural Resources Club, and played intramurals. Brinkman is headed for graduate school, and in fact, is preparing for his graduate entrance exams. When a fellow crew member left recently for another job, Brinkman was moved to a permanent position on the island. Someday, he would like to become a professor. “I owe thanks to Dr. Svedarsky and Dr. Loegering for my interest in becoming a professor,” he goes on. “I was given the opportunity to help teach and assist with labs when I was an upperclassman and found it really enjoyable.”

Even though he thinks about the future and where he would like his career to take him, Brinkman is taking advantage of every opportunity this island experience affords him—making the best of his island living and learning.

If you are interested in learning more about a major in natural resources, visit www.umcrookston.edu/academics.