

# March's Speaker, Kari O'Connell

If Dr. O'Connell's presentation is as spirited as her interview, Willamette Hall will be humming next Friday evening. From a childhood filled with love for the out-of-doors, Kari O'Connell easily entered the academic world of biology. Now she enjoys research and mentoring as she delves into the Forest of possibilities at "The Andrews." Today, she's also opening the doors of the natural world for her 15 month old son--I wonder if he's been up in the canopy yet?

Kari grew up in Hickory, NC near the "spectacular Blue Ridge Mountains." And, "Yes, yes, and yes!" She formed an early childhood interest in nature. Here's what she told me:

"I played in the woods behind our house for hours at a time. I was never afraid of getting dirty, and I was interested in anything about the natural world, including snakes and salamanders. Both my parents really enjoyed (and still do) going hiking, so they took my sister and me hiking in the mountains of North Carolina just about every weekend when the weather allowed. My dad was a biology professor at a small liberal arts college and an amateur naturalist. He definitely had a particular influence in my career and life choices. On our hikes, we used to walk very slowly along behind my sister and mom and check out everything interesting--"conks" on fallen logs, birds, trees, aquatic insects. He also used to take us to some pretty crazy places, scrambling over boulders in streambeds, bushwhacking through rhododendron, and scrambling along cliffs in the Linville Gorge area. I think it just about gave my mom a heart attack, but she usually joined in. I feel very lucky that my parents shared the natural world with me from a young age. I am trying to do the same with my 15-month-old son.

"I went to a small, liberal arts college in Minnesota. I had originally wanted to become a microbiologist, but the thought of working inside in a lab did not appeal to me, so I converted to working on plant ecology through summer opportunities with my college advisor Tim Sipe. I started by counting tree rings on saplings (volunteer), and then did summer field work measuring deer browse in a Minnesota State Park. After spending a summer amongst the deciduous trees, I was hooked. Tim encouraged me to take the opportunity to do summer undergraduate research at Colorado State University, which led me directly and indirectly to where I am today. I still keep up with Tim. He was a great mentor.

"My area of research specialization (when I have time to do research!) is Forest Ecosystem Carbon Dynamics. As an undergraduate and shortly thereafter, I worked with Indy Burke, professor in natural resources at Colorado State University, and she showed me the opportunities in nutrient cycling and ecosystem ecology. Then I got a great opportunity to work with my PhD advisors, Tom Gower and John Norman, at UW-Madison on a large interdisciplinary project funded by NASA. My piece was looking at the role of bryophytes in forest carbon cycling in the boreal black spruce forests of central Saskatchewan. I loved it, except for all the mosquitoes."

Kari's had some great experiences both in research and in leisure. She enjoys telemark skiing, hiking, rock climbing, trail running, backpacking and reading a book in the sun. But as far as landmark experiences go: "Being a mom--the best thing I have ever done by far. I have a 15-month-old son named Jack William. He reminds me to slow down and enjoy life."

Her other landmark experiences include hiking with Bob Pyle, nature writer and lepidopterist. "In April 2004, we hiked through old-growth forest at the Andrews. What an incredible guy. He was our first writer in residence at the Andrews (which I will tell you more about at the lecture). And, "doing field work in hectares and hectares of giant Sitka Spruce blowdown in Cascade Head Experimental Forest, north of Lincoln City. That is steep country!"

Kari's most memorable travel experience was in Australia and New Zealand. But she had no time to tell me about that because of the demands on her very busy life. She says, "Education has become a strong interest of mine and fits in well with the rest of my job: Coordination of research and education programs at the Andrews Forest, administration of the headquarters facilities, management of the Forest itself, and involvement with the long-term climate and vegetation programs. Besides me, several faculty at OSU have received funding for an Ecosystem Informatics Summer Institute for undergraduates and early graduate students at the Andrews. The first Institute will be this summer. I'm working with the Environmental Leadership Program at the U of O to provide capstone experiences for seniors working on an environmental education project. We're designing an interpretive brochure and classroom lessons based on the Lookout Old-Growth trail at the Andrews." <http://eco-informatics.engr.oregonstate.edu>

Kari received a BA in Biology in 1995 from Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, MN. She graduated Magna Cum Laude and was Phi Beta Kappa. She earned her PhD in Forestry at University of Wisconsin-Madison as a NASA Earth System Science Graduate Fellow, 1997-2000. In 2004 NASA recognized her as a New Investigator Program Fellow. She's currently a Postdoctoral Research Associate in Forest Science, Oregon State University.

She continues to be funded by the NASA New Investigator Program. Her research involves "looking at the tradeoffs of managing forests for two different strategies: for reduction of fire risk and for enhanced carbon sequestration as a method to reduce atmospheric C and potential threats from global climate change."

What will we hear about Friday night? "Overview of forest and stream research at the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest and how it has and is influencing forest management and policy in the McKenzie River Watershed and throughout the Pacific Northwest. I will also talk about some of our emerging and future directions--new interdisciplinary partnerships, innovative education programs, and managing forests for the future."

With her academic enthusiasm and abundant energy, Friday's program will hum!

01/07, BLUE RIVER, OR - Leaders of the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest in the central Cascade Range of Oregon, officially nominated the Forest to become a core research site in NEON (National Ecological Observatory Network), the most ambitious and comprehensive ecological observation program ever planned in the United States. If the effort is successful, this research site will become the primary biological "representative" of western Oregon and Washington, parts of northern California and southeastern Alaska - a huge Pacific Northwest land area that runs from the Pacific Ocean to the eastern edge of the Cascade Range.