

Big Skyence

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Program helps track Montana species

HELENA - The Montana Natural Heritage Program was recognized recently for developing a new system that has completely changed how plant and animal species are monitored.

The new system allows the program to efficiently add or update hundreds of species records - a process that once took weeks or months. The result is better information for monitoring and conserving the state's most precious species, such as the harlequin duck.

The Montana Natural Heritage Program was selected for the award from a network of 75 natural heritage programs and conservation data.

"The Montana Natural Heritage Program staff has pioneered the development of new tools that support conservation effectiveness not only in Montana but also throughout NatureServe's network," said Mary Klein, Acting President for NatureServe.

The MTNHP revolutionized the data processing system by developing a new automated process that greatly speeds entry of new "Element Occurrence" records to the main database.

These records identify locations of "Species of Concern" or important habitat areas. In the past year, the new system has enabled the MTNHP to double its database from approximately 6,000 records in January 2005 to more than 12,000 in 2006.

UM lands \$1.5M for undergrad science ed

The nation's largest private supporter of science education, the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, has awarded a \$1.5 million grant to The University of Montana.

The grant proposal was written by UM biology professors Bill Holben, an expert in molecular microbial ecology, and Carol Brewer, whose expertise is plant physiological ecology.

Holben said the money will significantly boost the University's science education in several ways.

First, the undergraduate curriculum in UM's Division of Biological Sciences will be revamped. The revised curriculum will be injected with more math and computer science, as well as more "hands-on" experiential learning and components of communication studies and ethics.

"A lot of our undergraduate biology courses lack significant hands-on experience to really ingrain the concepts learned in the lectures," Holben said. "This will change that."

The grant also will provide resources to enable faculty members to design and participate in

this new, innovative curriculum.

In addition, Holben said the funding will allow undergraduates with little or no research experience to work in laboratories alongside doctoral students, post-docs and faculty members "to learn how scientific research works in the real world."