Dear Prospective Graduate Student:

Thank you for expressing interest in my lab and ongoing research at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry. I strive to provide a challenging graduate education experience, which translates to a relatively small (4-6 student) cohort of students focused on related issues and using similar methods and techniques to foster synergistic learning. As you might imagine, student interest in wildlife science tends to outpace the financial support available for such studies, so any available positions are very competitive. That being said, there are generally three ways to get into graduate school, especially if your interests are to work on expensive-to-study critters like we do in my lab. First, find an advisor with existing projects that have funded graduate positions and at least partial funding for the expensive field activities. Investigating my web site was a good first step. Like many researchers, once I secure the funding required to support a graduate student, I advertise positions on internet job lists hosted by The Wildlife Society (http://www.wildlife.org/jobs/index.cfm), Society of Conservation Biology (http://www.conbio.org/jobs/), and Texas A&M University (http://wfsccnet.tamu.edu/jobboard/index.htm). These sites are excellent resources for a prospective graduate student and biologist. Alternatively, students with a strong academic record may be awarded a Teaching Assistantship that pays a salary during the academic year allowing students to focus their research ideas and work with an advisor to secure the funds required to complete their degree program. This can be a less desirable approach because much time may be lost in seeking resources (which are hard to come by) rather than conducting research. So by far, the most desirable option is to apply to an already funded position. Finally, enterprising and motivated students can develop graduate projects with employers such as government agencies, secure some funding on their own, and then team up with an advisor to initiate the project. Of course, students able to cover their own stipend and tuition can more easily be placed on a field research project and can work with me to write grants to secure funding for themselves, but recall my previous point about how your time will be spent. Such students might choose to enter grad school under the course-based Masters of Professional Science; see http://www.esf.edu/graduate/acadprog.htm. The MPS program also may be desirable for a teaching rather than research track, it depends upon what you want to do on the other side of your degree. Each approach is possible within my lab depending upon the status of research funding. My philosophy is to allow students as much flexibility in developing their research questions and approaches (empirical, modeling, etc) as possible within the bounds of existing avenues of study within my lab.

There are certainly other models for getting into graduate programs, and submitting a formal application to a program such as ours guarantees you visibility for potentially unadvertised positions. But such applications are also subject to high rejection rates despite your qualifications, as it requires that your timing coincides with a window of opportunity (meaning existing funding). Checking the job list sites above at least ensures that there a window of opportunity you can apply to, but they are not exhaustive so applying outright to a program of interest is also encouraged.
In terms of the details, it is my general policy not to interview with or accept graduate students without research funding in place for the majority of their graduate program. At the present time, all grant resources available in my lab have been assigned to existing students and only those prospective students who are competitive for a Teaching Assistantship (or those needing no support) will be considered for additional positions. Teaching Assistantships at ESF are highly competitive, meaning they are not at my discretion to award, and require strong academic standing (generally GPA ≥ 3.4) and high GRE scores (combined score ≥ 1300). The wildlife biology program at ESF can support only a limited number of students through Teaching Assistantships, so the only assured funding is through external sources (which are hard to acquire!). If you have a strong academic standing, and wish to be considered for a Teaching Assistantship, then you may choose to apply to the ESF graduate program and list me as your desired advisor. Should you choose that route, you would be responsible for writing grants to procure your own research funding, and need to recognize that grant proposals typically have a 10-25% success rate. The better alternative is to keep your eye on the job lists above to see what fully paid opportunities may become available.

Best of luck and thanks again for your interest in my lab!

Sincerely,
Dr. Jacqueline Frair