

# New Mexico Museum of Natural History & Science Awarded \$220,119 from NSF to Study Relationship between Wild Mammals and Parasites

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## MEDIA CONTACT

Patrick Rodriguez

505-629-2257

[patrick.rodiguez@state.nm.us](mailto:patrick.rodiguez@state.nm.us)



ALBUQUERQUE – The New Mexico Museum of Natural History & Science (NMMNHS) is pleased to announce that it has received a grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF) in the amount of \$220,119. Funding for this generous award will go toward supporting the Steppe Parasite Networks (STEPP-NET) collaborative research project.

“Research such as this furthers our understanding of the environment and provides opportunities for graduate students to gain significant experience in pure research that will inform and strengthen their understanding as well as giving them a step-up for their future careers,” said Margie Marino, executive director at NMMNHS.

The primary focus of the STEPP-NET project, which involves multiple institutions, including NMMNHS and the Museum of Southwestern Biology at the University of New Mexico, is to conduct fieldwork in Central Asia that will help scientists better understand the relationships between wild mammals and their parasites.

These parasites are members of highly diverse and ecologically important groups, and many are sensitive indicators of ecosystem quality. The infections they cause can have major negative impacts on wildlife. These parasites can also play an important role in transmitting diseases from wild to domesticated species, and also to humans. However, knowledge of the diversity of parasite species, their geographic distributions, and the precise hosts they occur on and in is highly fragmentary for much of the world.

“We will focus especially on tapeworms and fleas from the mammals of the diverse and ecologically important grasslands and deserts of Central Asia (Mongolia and Kazakhstan),” said Jason Malaney, bioscience curator at NMMNHS. “These new data will be contrasted with North American grasslands

and deserts to improve our understanding of the factors that cause wildlife disease outbreaks that often spill over to domesticated species and sometimes humans as zoonotic pathogens that cause disease, like the current COVID pandemic we are experiencing.”

The STEPP-NET project also creates opportunities for STEM graduate and undergraduate students to participate across the spectrum of modern biodiversity science – from international fieldwork to specimen curation and digitization, genomics, and integrative taxonomy.

### **About the New Mexico Museum of Natural History & Science**

*The New Mexico Museum of Natural History & Science is a division of the Department of Cultural Affairs, under the leadership of the Board of Trustees of the New Mexico Museum of Natural History & Science. Programs and exhibits are generously supported by the New Mexico Museum of Natural History Foundation, through the generous support of donors. Established in 1986, the mission of the New Mexico Museum of Natural History & Science is to preserve and interpret the distinctive natural and scientific heritage of our state through extraordinary collections, research, exhibits, and programs designed to ignite a passion for lifelong learning. The NMMNHS offers exhibitions, programs, and workshops in Geoscience, including Paleontology and Mineralogy, Bioscience, and Space Science. It is the Southwest’s largest repository for fossils and includes a Planetarium and a large format 3D DynaTheater.*

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