

HOW TO GET A FEDERAL JOB

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The Basics: Getting a job with the United States Government can be frustrating. It takes time, persistence, a positive attitude and the ability to move on after you "swing and miss." This brief discussion is intended to give you some absolute requirements, a few suggestions and even a secret or two.

In the general Wildlife / Fisheries / Natural Resources arena, there are already about six or ten choices to make, the first of which being which department(s) interest you the most: The U.S. Department of Interior is probably the best known employer in our field (National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation and Bureau of Indian Affairs are among many options). Other departments include the Department of Agriculture (U.S. Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service), the Commerce Department (National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration, National Marine Fisheries Service), and the Department of Defense. Limited environmental and natural resources jobs can occasionally be found in the State Department and other surprising places. Pages of agency-specific information could be written for each of these options, but that's beyond the scope of this document.

Benefits: Unlike what you might hear from pundits, job security in the Federal system isn't what it used to be. Sure, it's pretty secure, but there are frequent cost competitions, reductions in force, military base closures and other actions that can occur with little advance notice. And some agencies perennially get better funding than others. Folks in the National Park Service might have said in the 1930's that it was cool to "get paid in sunsets," but that's not a recognized currency when it comes to qualifying for a mortgage, paying off student loans or raising a family.

Other advantages, though, include pretty reliable annual raises, life and health insurance, the "Thrift Savings Plan" (somewhat like a 401-K), and typically great potential for career advancement. Some agencies will pay your relocation expenses, but not for most entry-level positions.

We usually get paid every other week. Typical employees start off earning 104 hours (2.5 weeks) of paid vacation and 104 hours of paid sick leave each year (that works out to be 4 hours every two weeks). Your sick leave accrues throughout your entire career and moves from one job to the next. Your vacation ("Annual Leave") does not; it most often needs to be used each year or it just goes away (so we call it "Use or Lose"). After three years, you get an increase to 156 hours of Annual Leave each year (six hours every two weeks, that's almost four weeks, pretty darned good!). Sick leave does not accrue above 104 hours per year. We typically get 10 paid holidays each year, though in some jobs (Park Ranger, Game Warden, Firefighter, etc.), you may have to work holidays, but then you get double time... Sunday and night differentials (25% and 10% in most cases) usually apply. Some agencies allow "flex time," some do not; that is, four ten-hour days, a "5-4-9" schedule, or maybe even some possibilities for three 12-hour days.

Types of Jobs: Positions can be found at several levels, from GED to PhD, and everything in between. This document will probably be out of date three minutes after it's posted, but let us explain the most common pay structure for scientific and resource management positions, the "General Schedule" or GS system. A typical summer job for a student without a BS degree is usually a GS-3, which starts off at about \$22,000 per year. A college graduate with a BS should at least qualify for appointment as a GS-4, which starts off at about \$25,000 per year. A graduate with an MS should qualify for at least a GS-7 position, which is about \$34,000, and a PhD should start no lower than a GS-9, or about \$42,000. A combination of education and work experience can qualify you to start at a higher level, but unless you get elected to Congress, you won't make more than \$100,000 for quite some time. Recently, the government has recognized the higher cost of living in certain geographic locations and additional "locality pay" adjustments from 18% to 30% are applied to areas such as the Sacramento, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego regions.

Jobs are classified into “Series” and “Grade.” The grade is often shown as GS-5/7/9, or 7/9/11 – for reasons that perhaps a few people in government can answer, there are relatively few even-graded jobs between the GS 4 and 12 levels (that is, though you might see a GS 6, 8 or 10, you’ll see far more 5’s, 7’s, 9’s and 11’s. The slashes typically mean that, once you get hired as a 5 in a 5/7/9 job, you will be promoted automatically to the next level, assuming you’re competent and you don’t do anything stupid – though there are often probationary periods. It’s also possible to get hired in a 5/7/9 as either a 7 or a 9, depending upon your qualifications and the needs of the employing agency. You typically will not get promoted more than once a year, no matter how wonderful of an employee you are.

The Series is a set of four numbers that fit in between the “GS” and the Grade, that is, in “GS-0401-5/7/9,” the 0401 or sometimes it’s just shown as “401.” Here are a few (of many) that may be pertinent to wildlife careers:

Series	Job Title	Series	Job Title
0025	Park Ranger	0404	Biological Technician
0028	Environmental Protection Specialist	0408	Ecologist
0081	Firefighter	0430	Botanist
0188	Recreation Specialist	0460	Forester
0401A	Biologist	0482	Fisheries Biologist
0401B	Environmental Planner	0485	Wildlife Refuge Manager
0401F	Environmental Specialist	0486	Wildlife Biologist
0401G	Fish and Wildlife Biologist	1812	Game Law Enforcement Officer
0401K	Natural Resources Specialist	5312	Sewing Machine Mechanic

Okay, I threw that last one in there just to make sure you’re still paying attention. Changing from one series to another (0404 to 0401, for example) sometimes requires you to start over, sometimes it doesn’t. And, within each series, there are these lovely little things called “steps,” which start off as a yearly pay raise, but they’re not as much money as you’ll get for a Grade increase. ALSO, look for what we call “Interdisciplinary” positions, which may be advertised (for example) as 0401/0430/0486; applicants may qualify for one or more of the specific areas but not all of them, and it’s still ok to apply.

Getting Started: There are several ways to get your foot in the door. Internships and volunteer opportunities are both pretty common. For the latter, check out the Student Conservation Association, Volunteers in the Parks and similar opportunities (a Google search will get you started). Serving in the military for three or more years is a great way in—it gives you a very strong hiring advantage. Also, two years of service in the Peace Corps, AmeriCorps or VISTA can give you what we call “Non-Competitive Eligibility,” which floats your resume toward the top of the stack.

Expect to work in a seasonal (summer) job for at least one or two years before being highly competitive for permanent jobs. Your experience in a seasonal job demonstrates that you have familiarity with the type of work and “culture” of the agency. A typical seasonal job is limited to 1080 hours in a year (about 6 months). Although it may seem discouraging, it is not uncommon for someone to work for 3-4 years in seasonal positions while they gain a breadth of experience in the agency and demonstrate their skill and dedication.

Two former “special programs” for hiring students, the Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP) and the Student Career Experience Program (SCEP), have been replaced by the new “Pathways” program. This program is then divided into three parts: Internships, a Recent Graduates category and the Presidential Management Fellows (PMF) program. Visit <http://www.opm.gov/hiringreform/pathways/> for more info on all of these cool options. They provide an “exploration” of all types of Federal careers (with pay and benefits!) and can lead to a non-competitive conversion or a career-conditional position.

Other things that might help your resume get noticed include working as an assistant to a graduate student, teaching assistant, lab assistant, and so on. Outstanding scholars (either the top 10% of your class at an accredited university, or a 3.5 or higher GPA on a 4.0 scale are the preliminary cut-offs) are eligible for a program with significant advantage (check the FAQ’s at the OPM Website listed below for more info on this).

It's hopefully not necessary to say that the Federal Government will not make hiring decisions based upon gender, race, religion, sexual preference and other similar factors. Persons with disabilities are eligible for many jobs, but it's clear that some jobs in the wildlife and natural resources arena are out of reach.

Where to find job announcements. This probably changes just about every day. Certainly, new vacancies are announced at least once a week, year-round. The best, all-around source for job vacancies is the "USA JOBS" website, operated by the Office of Personnel Management <http://www.usajobs.opm.gov/>. You can find announcements, suggestions, build your resume on-line and more. You can also generate a weekly (or more or less frequent) e-mail linking you to vacancies that meet self-determined parameters ("all GS-07-0401 vacancies in Southern Nevada" for example). But don't limit your search to this one site, many jobs are advertised elsewhere. Check the specific website of the agency/agencies in which you're most interested. We also recommend the Texas A&M University Wildlife Jobs board: <http://wfscjobs.tamu.edu/career-search/>

Most of the job websites besides USA Jobs allow you to create automatic searches, and they'll e-mail you when a job that matches your series and geographic area of interest is announced. Of course, if you check the box that you'll consider virtually any job in any state, prepare to get flooded with announcements. We'd suggest that you start off small and selective, and broaden your search as the weeks go by.

One of the best ways to find out about jobs is to do some research and make personal phone calls to the agency offices where you are interested in working and talking directly to the biologist or resource manager. Plan to make these phone calls in December or January for summer employment. If you want to make a lasting impression, ask to schedule an in-person meeting with the biologist to discuss job opportunities and careers, sort of a "pre-interview."

How to apply. Have you been to a resume workshop recently? If so, you should probably forget just about everything they told you. We do things differently than business and industry. A federal resume will rarely benefit from fancy fonts, colored paper and other commonly advised "attention grabbers." In fact, since most resumes are now submitted electronically, it's best to use a standard font (10 or 12-point Times New Roman, Arial or Courier), and not to use bold, italics, underlines, etc. Even more important, a Federal resume should be at the very least three pages long. Probably at least five pages if you have any significant experience. But don't get carried away: this author was once presented with a 78-page resume package (that applicant wasn't hired).

Your Social Security Number, mailing address, telephone number and e-mail address are expected, often required. Be sure to list your degree (and expected completion date, if applicable, of anything significant in progress, but don't list the PhD which you might earn 11 years from now). We do look for "diploma mills." Also, you will probably be asked to state your citizenship, and, if male, that you've registered for the Selective Service. List your former, pertinent jobs. Lists of publications, presentations, awards, professional certifications and similar things often fit well at some location in your resume.

Be aware that sometimes, a computer scans most resumes first. This means that you should take note of "key words" in the job announcement (and it's quite helpful to have the computer somewhat customize your resume to each particular job). The second step is often when a human resources employee conducts the second scan and ranks candidates, and to be honest, these folks don't always know what "Herpetology" is or what "GIS" means, so it can be helpful to define or spell these and other subjects out. Typically, it's only after the second scan that the hiring official will see your resume (he or she almost certainly knows what Herpetology is and what GIS means! But maybe not: you could be hired by an engineer or an historian).

In conclusion, here are some closing suggestions and requirements:

- Consider your job search to be a part-time (or full-time!) job. If you want to start a job next week, the Federal government is the wrong place to look. It can easily take six or more months to get your resume submitted, reviewed, and ranked, the candidates interviewed and the position filled. 9-12 months isn't out of the question.

- Telephone interviews are quite common, because the employing agency will almost never pay you to travel for an interview. However, if it's local, by all means ask for an in-person interview. Treat a telephone interview as a very formal event, ensure that you don't have the stereo blaring in the background and try to not get distracted. If you schedule an in-person interview, remember what they've told you: dress nicely, arrive 10 or 15 minutes early, and be prepared to talk about your strengths and weaknesses. You will almost always be given the opportunity to ask questions about the job at some point during the interview so do some homework, allowing you to ask one or two intelligent questions about the job or the agency.
- Early in your career, don't hold out for your perfect job. Getting your first permanent job in the Federal government is the hardest step, so be open to non-traditional opportunities, including non-biological jobs and jobs at a lower pay grade than you desire. While it's traditional to stay at an entry-level position for two or more years, you're basically allowed to transfer to a new job after about six months. Think carefully though before applying for a new job right after you've just gotten one, especially considering how uncomfortable it might be if you don't get that job and your supervisor is wondering how committed you are to your work. And realize that getting a great job in a highly desirable place (Wildlife Biologist at Yosemite National Park, for example) is nearly impossible early in your career (and unlikely even later!).
- Keep an eye on Opening Dates, Closing Dates and Cut-Off Dates. Given the competitiveness of most jobs, the closing dates are usually critical. Submit your resume one minute or one day late and you probably will not be considered. Of utmost importance is to know if the office must physically have your application or if it simply must be postmarked by the closing date. Some offices may let you fax your application, but most are now submitted electronically. Try to give yourself a few days cushion in case your application gets delayed in the mail or consider guaranteed overnight delivery with delivery confirmation. Remember, it is your responsibility to make sure your application is received on time. Many HR offices allow you to keep a resume on file and submit it toward a specific job with just a few mouse-clicks (but as mentioned above, it can often be better to make small changes to your resume for each vacancy).
- Be sure your application is complete and all required forms are submitted (including copies of your college transcripts if requested) and your application has an original signature. Your application may be denied if you are missing any pieces. If you are not sure, you can often call the office and have them confirm your application is complete.
- Sometimes, jobs are advertised as "Multi-Disciplinary," which means that they might hire a wildlife biologist or a fisheries biologist, a Natural Resources Specialist or a Natural Resources Technician. If you qualify for one but not the other, be sure that you use the right vacancy number on your resume.
- Considering promotions and other possibilities, it's quite beneficial to plan on staying with the government for at least three years, early in your career. After three years, you will earn "Career Status," which is somewhat like tenure for a professor (it's pretty easy to get hired for another job by the same or a different agency). If you work for an agency between one and three years, you get "career-conditional status, which makes the hiring easier the next time around, but it still takes work. If you leave after less than a year of employment, you have to start again at the very beginning. So, if you plan to go back to Graduate School in a year or two, the Federal system may not be right for you.
- Always keep track of a favorite professor or two and your previous employers. If you're new to the natural resources arena, it's still possible that the selecting official will call your former restaurant manager or office supervisor. As you progress in your career, try your best to keep supervisors happy, and try to keep in contact with them, even after they retire.

Be patient, and good luck!