

## Would this be guerrilla warfare?

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She spent a year and a half tramping over 53,000 acres of woods and prairies. She counted weeds the entire time.

SCSU graduate student Jill Babski was hunting down invasive plant species at the Minnesota Army National Guard training camp, Camp Ripley, near Little Falls, Minn. The work was part of the Guard's first-ever invasive plant assessment project, for which they had solicited the help of SCSU. Babski, who had a bachelor's degree in natural resources management with an emphasis on exotic plants and environmental restoration, landed the graduate assistantship that resulted from the Guard/SCSU partnership.



The project was exhaustive. Babski used global positioning system (GPS) technology to record and map weed locations on every acre of land. She then researched each invasive species, developed fact sheets on the characteristics and control of each, and developed weed management recommendations.

After months and months of tracking down weeds at Camp Ripley, Babski presented her final report to the Minnesota Army National Guard, and returned to SCSU for her final semester and to complete her master's thesis.

For the thesis, Babski developed a model that will predict the spread of three invasive plant species at Camp Ripley. One such invasive species is spotted knapweed, which looks very much like bachelor's button, according to Babski. Once the weed gets a foothold in open areas like fields, grasslands and roadsides, "It'll just take over." The military will use the model to locate such invasive plants early on, before they get out of control.

Babski has since helped Camp Ripley release their first batch of insects to eat the invasive plants she found on the land bordered by the Crow Wing and Mississippi rivers.

While working on that bio-control project for the Army, the graduate student met staff from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. They've since hired her for what Babski describes as a great start to her career. But

even if she hadn't had that networking opportunity through the project, she would have been able to job hunt with a powerful letter of reference attached to her resumé.

Wrote Lieutenant Colonel Richard Weaver, Minnesota Army National Guard post commander, in a letter to SCSU: ". . . the data collection, final report, and recommendations prepared by Ms. Babski was one of the most comprehensive and well-presented research projects [ever] done on behalf of the Minnesota Department of Military Affairs."

The Guard's cost? They funded Babski's master's degree program.

Babski's cost? Sore feet and a sunburned nose.

## **Students sign up with the National Guard**

Babski's invasive plant assessment is one example of the research that is being done by SCSU students with the Minnesota Department of Military Affairs at Camp Ripley. The camp, a closed facility that spans several ecosystems, has a high diversity of life forms, including more than 600 plant species, 200 bird species, 50 mammal species, and 20 reptile and amphibian species. Because the vast majority of the land is kept secure and free from development, it provides unique opportunities for long-term field studies.

*- Marge Proell*