

By Antoni Margalida

# Flying free before building my nest

I spent the first 17 years of my scientific life as a freelance naturalist, with no more academic credentials than a bachelor's degree in library and information science. It was challenging, but I found it intellectually rewarding, and I enjoyed exploring my scientific passion without facing the pressure and uncertainty typically endured by trainees pursuing academic careers. I was able to simply let my creativity develop. Then, 7 years ago, my career took a turn when I attended a conference about bearded vultures, which led me to earn my Ph.D. at the age of 38. Now, as a postdoc pursuing an academic research career, I am taking advantage of all that I learned during my years as an independent scientist.

I took this unconventional path because of the poor employment prospects for biologists in Spain in the 1980s, which deterred me from studying science. But I had become fascinated by bearded vultures as a teenager, and my emotional attachment to these birds of prey and to conservation never faded. So, after finishing my bachelor's degree, I signed a 6-month contract with the regional government to monitor bearded vulture breeding sites, and my scientific career began.

Not long after, the Catalan government was seeking a naturalist to do similar work. Someone told the government officials about a passionate young naturalist who spent all his time watching vultures, and they contacted me. I worked on regional projects as a self-employed naturalist, gradually getting involved in international conservation research efforts, and finally found myself as a freelance wildlife technician for the Spanish government.

As my research progressed, I published because I wanted to share my findings, not because I was hoping for an advanced degree or items for my CV. I didn't have to worry about racking up papers, the reputation of the journals I published in, or where I stood on the author list. This freedom allowed me to pursue the questions I was most interested in and to develop risky projects that might take ages to yield rewards, if any. And even though the salary of my early years did not even cover the cost of gasoline to get to the remote field sites, I felt I was the luckiest man in the world to work with the species that fascinated me most.

But at that conference in 2009, an influential conservation biologist approached me after my talk. He was interested in my field studies and publications, and we continued our discussion over dinner. He was surprised that I did not



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have a doctorate and suggested that I prepare a Ph.D. thesis under his supervision. I was astonished: He did not know me personally, although he had read the majority of my papers. I was also excited, because a doctorate would open career doors that had previously been closed to me. It would give me access to competitive research funds, which would enable me to tackle more ambitious scientific questions and conservation challenges.

So, 1 year later, I enrolled as a Ph.D. student. I worked with my adviser to select 31 of my papers, submitted them as a Ph.D. thesis, and was awarded my degree. I am now a postdoctoral researcher, with hopes of establishing my own research group.

I miss my earlier freedom to some extent, but the financial security of a full-time position is a real asset, especially now that I have a family, and the tools and collaborations that academia offers are extremely rewarding. At the same time, I'm glad I took an unconventional path. I believe that if I had gone straight into academia, where bibliometrics rule the lives of today's young researchers, I would have been less adventurous in my choice of projects. Blazing my own trail before returning to academia helped me on my road to becoming a successful, fulfilled scientist. ■

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