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**From Baker to Biologist: UW-Green Bay Grad Soars into Bird Conservation Career**

Written by Michael Shaw, UW-Green Bay | Photos by UW-Green Bay Photographer, Dan Moore

Q: What do a UW–Green Bay Phoenix and a master baker have in common?

A: Rising is essential.

Sarah Baughman—a 2025 UW–Green Bay graduate with a [Biology](https://www.uwgb.edu/biology/) degree—knows this firsthand. Her “rise” took time: investing ten years devoted to baking before returning to college to rediscover her love for birds, a passion she’s now shaping into a meaningful career. And, much like the pastries she once crafted, requiring patience and precision, Baughman’s recipe for success unfolded through a series of life events that not only shaped her purpose but also added a sweet and sometimes spicy layer along the way.

Or as she puts it: “Some people take a gap year, I took a gap decade.”

Originally from Sheboygan, Baughman began college at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay, Sheboygan Campus, where she fell in love with visual art, philosophy and the joy of learning. “I really found passion in fine art, philosophy, and the humanities—it was mind-expanding,” she remembers. The arts have remained a central part of her life ever since. “College was my first exposure to new ideas and critical thinking. It really encouraged self-reflection and the idea that we are here to learn and to expand.” She graduated with her associate of arts in 2015 and had plans to continue.

**A Decade of Dough: How Baking Shaped a Future Scientist**

It was, in fact, her interest in graphic arts that first led her to Paradigm Coffee and Music in Sheboygan—a community café and music venue known for its inclusive vibe, vegetarian-friendly menu, and strong local roots.

“I started working there doing their signage—sandwich boards and stuff. I think I was 17. Then I was at the owner’s New Year’s Eve party, and she said, ‘Hey, we need a baker.’”

And just like that, Baughman became a baker—for the next ten years.

Reflecting on the events of her life, whether she’s talking about baking or biodiversity, one thing becomes clear: Baughman doesn’t just speak of her passions—she lives them. “I lived and breathed baking because I loved it so deeply.” Another quality that shines in her is a sense of community. “That space was more than just a coffee shop. It was a community hub—an entire ecosystem, an entire part of me.”

**Rediscovering a Passion for Birds at UW-Green Bay**

Her love of birds really took off during a road trip with a friend to the Wisconsin Dells and a visit to the International Crane Foundation.

Baughman admits she was “a bit of a birder” growing up, having been introduced to birds at a young age by her dad, Scott. But this trip turned out to be more than a pleasant diversion—it was a revelation.

She was familiar with Whooping Cranes restoration initiatives, but seeing the work in action sparked something deeper. Baughman describes that moment “like a tire screeching in your life. I had to stop right there and go this other way with my life. It was an insane moment of ‘Oh, I just figured out what my passion is.’”

And if that sounds dramatic, consider her next step.

“The moment I got back in the car, I applied to UW–Green Bay over my phone. I filled in the initial application and wrote a little entry note with all the enthusiasm I could muster in that moment, which was quite a bit.”

After applying to UW–Green Bay from the passenger seat of a car—and being accepted—she wasted no time diving in.

**Fieldwork, Grants and Leadership: Building a Career in Conservation**

“I started taking classes in the spring of 2022,” she recalls. “And I met Erin Giese.”

Giese (pronounced “gee-zee”) is the Associate Director of the [Cofrin Center for Biodiversity](https://www.uwgb.edu/biodiversity/), a hub for ecological research and conservation at UW–Green Bay. Established in 1999, the Center promotes education, scientific research, land stewardship and community engagement to conserve the rich biodiversity of the western Great Lakes region. The Center also supports UW-Green Bay’s broader mission to foster environmental responsibility, hands-on learning and interdisciplinary collaboration. Much of this work is anchored in the [Cofrin Memorial Arboretum](https://www.uwgb.edu/arboretum/), a living laboratory and important habitat for more than 200 species of birds.

From the very first conversation, Giese could tell—Baughman really knew her birds.

“A lot of students say they’re interested in birds, but Sarah stood out right away,” recalls Giese. “She was casually naming species that most people wouldn’t recognize, and I realized she already had a solid knowledge base.”

Although Giese had just filled her seasonal crew, she didn’t want to let Baughman’s enthusiasm go untapped. Instead, she offered Sarah something more impactful: a leadership opportunity. Giese encouraged her to apply for a small research grant through the Freshwater Collaborative of Wisconsin—a statewide initiative that supports water-focused education and research—and two small student research grants through the Center and [UW-Green Bay’s Natural and Applied Sciences](https://www.uwgb.edu/cset/programs/) programs. It was a chance not just to participate, but to lead.

Together, they developed a project proposal, and Baughman helped secure a successful $10,000 grant to study coastal bird populations along Lake Michigan, from Milwaukee to northern Door County. Additional research support followed, allowing the project to expand its scope. Her work focused on the ecological importance of small stream mouths—lesser-known but biologically rich zones that provide critical food and habitat for migratory birds. “She really took that project and ran with it,” Giese says. “She scouted the sites, recruited volunteers, and coordinated community science efforts to conduct bird surveys across a huge area. In a way, she created her own job—and that initiative really set her apart.”

“That project catapulted me into biology,” Baughman recalls. “I shifted from [environmental science](https://www.uwgb.edu/environmental-science/) to [biology](https://www.uwgb.edu/biology/) with an emphasis in conservation and ecology.”

Baughman’s path wasn’t linear, but it was intentional. She didn’t just stumble into bird work—she built her way into it, one opportunity at a time.

“I was really into the field work,” Baughman said. “I loved being out there, collecting data, doing surveys—boots in the mud, hands on the frogs. That’s what drew me to biology over environmental science. It felt more grounded in field work, in being present with the ecosystem.”

That clarity came gradually. As she immersed herself in UW-Green Bay’s biology program, Baughman began to see how her interests in bird, data collection and community engagement could intersect. She wasn’t just learning about birds – she was learning how to lead, how to teach and how to connect.

**Blending Science and Community: Outreach Through Ecology**

One of her first roles was as a bird monitoring expert for a collaborative program between the Oneida Nation, Cofrin Center for Biodiversity, Northeastern Wisconsin Bird Alliance and Audubon Great Lakes. The Oneida Bird Monitoring Program focused on wetland and prairie restoration, and Baughman was invited to lead surveys on Tribal lands—an opportunity she didn’t take lightly.

“I’d go out with a group of volunteers—anyone who was interested—and we’d count birds, identify species, talk about the restoration work happening on the land,” she said. “We’d also share cultural teachings from Oneida Tribal Elders. It was a privilege to be part of that.”

Baughman’s work wasn’t just scientific—it was relational. She found herself drawn to the outreach side of conservation, where data meet community.

“Over the course of my few years at GB, I realized I love being out in the field, but I also love that part where we connect with the community and say, ‘Hey, we’ve developed this program. Let’s do outreach. Let’s educate. Let’s work with students.’”

That blend of science and service is no accident. It’s part of UW-Green Bay’s educational philosophy: to teach anyone willing to learn, especially those who create their own learning opportunities. Giese saw that spark in Baughman early on—and helped fan it into a flame.

“She created her own job,” Giese said. “That initiative really set her apart.”

Baughman’s understanding of biodiversity deepened through her work and studies. She began to see the interconnectedness of species, ecosystems and cultural knowledge.

“When we’re talking about biodiversity, we’re looking at a system and how delicate it can be,” she said. “The Thanksgiving Address comes to mind—it’s about recognizing the place of all these different beings. It’s a way of giving thanks to everything in the natural world—plants, animals, water, the sun, even the winds. It reminds us that we’re part of a bigger system, and every piece matters. Even when we’re out in the field, covered in ticks and it’s hot and buggy, we still have this recognition. These are all part of the system we’re trying to take care of.”

**Looking Ahead: Graduate Studies and a Future in Teaching**

Baughman has been accepted to UW-Green Bay’s new online [master’s program in Biodiversity Conservation and Management](https://www.uwgb.edu/ms-biodiversity/). “I’m being nurtured by this community—at UW-Green Bay and through the Oneida Bird Monitoring Program—in ways that are invaluable,” she said. She plans to continue her work with the Cofrin Center for Biodiversity while exploring career paths that blend science, education and community engagement.

Teaching is one possibility. Baughman lights up when she talks about leading outreach programs, guiding people through wetlands and helping them learn bird calls and plant names. “That’s closest to my heart,” she said. “I love bringing people out into the field and helping them connect with what’s in front of them.”

**Q: How has your time at UW-Green Bay inspired you to think boldly?**

**A:** “I had a 10-year career as baker I mean, I was completely set. It wasn’t like I went into baking thinking this is my passion forever, but once I started and found the encouragement to explore baking as a creative medium, it felt permanent. Once I found this new path back into academia, it was intimidating to think, ‘I’m going to let go of this and wander into this new world of unknowns.’”

**Q: How has education ignited your growth?**

**A:** “The professors and faculty at UWGB have given me the resources and the support to learn how to relearn after a decade of not being in college. I cannot speak more highly of them. I can easily recall how intimidated I was at the idea of going back into the learning environment — especially to jump into classes like chemistry and statistics, which challenged me in high school. The teaching approach I found at the Manitowoc campus (and eventually the Green Bay campus) gave me the realization of like, I can do this. If I’m passionate about it, there are people here to show me that I can do it.”

**Q: Is there a symbol or figure—real or imagined—that reflects how you’ve grown or transformed during your time at UW-Green Bay?**

**A:**“I blame the Phoenix for that. I guess it’s poetic to think about the Phoenix; I often describe my life in seasons or as chapters, and leaving Paradigm was the end of an entire book for me. With the start of this new story, I do feel like this is a different version of me. So its easy to see the parallels with the Phoenix.

**Q: How has your education challenged your perspective or changed your worldview?**

**A:**  Prior to returning to college, I had the impression that there were distinct separations between Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and the life sciences, like biology, chemistry, ecology, etc. Now that I have taken several courses led by Indigenous professors and worked with Tribal community members, my perspectives have drastically shifted: I’ve learned that these areas of knowing the natural world not only overlap, but are embedded in one-another. This perspective now informs how I approach conservation work.

**Q: What advice would you offer a fledgling Phoenix?**

**A:** “If you’re passionate about even a little spark of something in school, there’s probably someone on campus who’s already doing a program related to it. If you just say, ‘Hey, I’ve got an interest in this thing,’ somebody will help you write the proposal, develop the project, or provide encouragement to pursue it.”

**Q: What’s your favorite thing to bake?**

**A:** “Oh gosh. I really love making scones. I got really good at it. It’s gotta be a nice scone and not too sweet.”