

# Wildlife Protector Certification: An Interview with Megan Morris

By R. Bruce Allison

Tree doctor, do no harm! Even with the best of intentions, an ISA certification, and safety training, arborists can be causing unintentional harm to others when climbing and conducting work in a tree. Trees and people need each other, but there are many non-human “others” that are also dependent on trees for habitat and survival.

While on a recent visit to northern California, I had the opportunity to interview an energetic young woman who is at the forefront of a pioneering effort to educate fellow arborists on wildlife protection. Megan Morris is a Sacramento native who, after earning a degree in biological aspects of conservation at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, returned to California to work as a consulting arborist by day and pursue her passion for developing wildlife protection training programs at night and on weekends. She helped create coursework for the Wildlife Training Institute (WTI), established by David Lee in 2009.

**R. Bruce Allison:** Megan, What is the purpose of your organization?

**Megan Morris:** The purpose of the Wildlife Training Institute is to teach arborists how to protect birds and other wildlife commonly found in and around trees.

**Allison:** Who are your clients?

**Morris:** Obtaining a Wildlife Protector Certification is worth one ISA CEU, so many of our students are ISA Certified Arborists. We have also had other tree care and landscaping professionals take interest in our coursework. Once our students have passed the exam, they receive a diploma and green-marketing materials for use in promoting their own services. In this way, our students are not only receiving wildlife training, but are also able to promote their own companies as green businesses.

**Allison:** Why is this important?

**Morris:** There is the moral stance that we should be good stewards of the Earth and protect the wildlife that makes their home where we, arborists, make our living. However, in addition to this moral argument, in many cases there is also a legal mandate to protect the birds and wildlife. Inadvertently breaking these laws can lead to hefty fines and jail time—not to mention bad press.

**Allison:** Is this transferrable outside of California in the United States?

**Morris:** Yes! Our training material covers federal laws, so the certification is valid across the entire country.

**Allison:** What topics does your coursework cover?

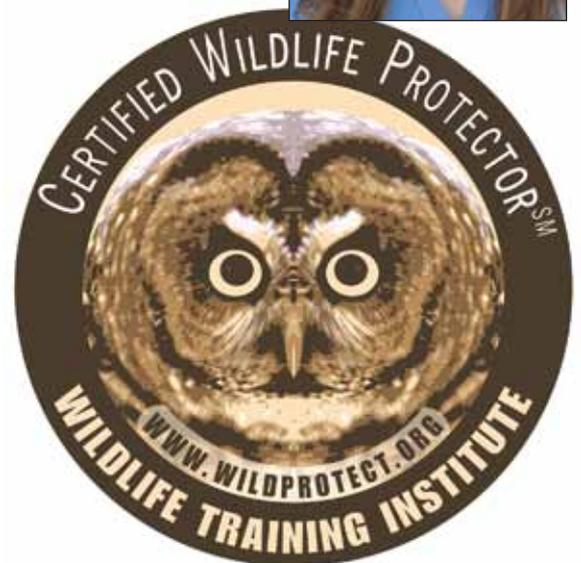
**Morris:** Our coursework has three general areas of focus: laws that protect wildlife, how to inspect a job site for wildlife, and what to do when you encounter wildlife.

**Allison:** What are examples of some laws that protect birds and wildlife?

**Morris:** The Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) was first passed in 1918, and it protects many, many species of birds. The Endangered Species Act (ESA) was passed in 1973 to prevent rare plants and animals from becoming extinct.

**Allison:** What are the consequences of breaking these protective laws?

**Morris:** Violation of the MBTA carries a fine of up to USD \$15,000 and a six-month stint in prison. That's nothing compared with violating the ESA, which carries a fine of up to \$50,000 and a year in prison.



**Allison:** Which birds/wildlife do the laws protect?

**Morris:** The MBTA protects all but a few birds in the U.S., including but not limited to ducks, geese, woodpeckers, hawks, owls, herons, doves, songbirds, and even the American crow. The ESA is currently protecting 1,481 U.S. species listed as threatened or endangered, as of August 3, 2013.

**Allison:** What is a prework survey? And why is it important?

**Morris:** A pre-work survey is a quick assessment of a job site and the trees within it, looking for signs of birds and wildlife. The prework survey is an incredibly important tool. The earlier a potential wildlife conflict is observed, the more options that are available to rework the job plan and avoid large costs associated with violating wildlife protection laws and lost work.

**Allison:** When should you use a prework survey?

**Morris:** You should conduct a prework survey prior to starting work on any job. The best time to observe wildlife is during the early morning or late afternoon.

**Allison:** What are some common nest types?

**Morris:** Cavity nests, cup nests, and platform nests are a few of the most common types. Keep your eyes peeled for these as you conduct your prework survey.

**Allison:** What are active versus inactive nests?

**Morris:** An active nest is a bird nest that has eggs, young, or is in the process of being built. An inactive nest is an old nest that is no longer in use. Active nests enjoy broader legal protection than inactive nests, but there are notable exceptions that we cover in depth in our coursework.

**Allison:** What should you do if you come across injured or orphaned birds/wildlife?

**Morris:** Contact a local wildlife rehabilitator as soon as possible.

**Allison:** What is a Wildlife Protector Certification?

**Morris:** The Wildlife Protector Certification is offered to our students that successfully pass our exam (with a score of 80 percent or higher). Students who pass the exam earn not only their certificate, but also receive one ISA CEU, materials for marketing a green business, a one-year membership to the Wildlife Training Institute, and get their business listed in a national network of Certified Wildlife Protectors.

**Allison:** How can a student become Wildlife Protector Certified?

**Morris:** The most convenient way to sign up for our coursework is via our website ([www.wildlifetraining.org](http://www.wildlifetraining.org)).

**Allison:** Is the training available in person or online?

**Morris:** Both. We offer our coursework online for the convenience and ease of our students. We also have in-person training available. Largely, our students have chosen the online learning route; it's a sign of the times. That being said, larger tree firms may be more interested in a group learning style and setting.



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*R. Bruce Allison is an ISA Board Certified Master Arborist. He is the owner of Allison Tree Care, Inc. ([www.AllisonTree.com](http://www.AllisonTree.com)) and is a past president of the Wisconsin Arborist Association.*

*Thank you, Megan. You are doing a great service for arborists everywhere by reminding them that they aren't the only ones who need trees for a living.*