The Fifth Annual Darwinian Student Symposium

Lincoln Park Zoo, April 26, 2008

On Saturday April 26, 2008, the Committee on Evolutionary Biology (CEB) sponsored the Fifth Annual Darwinian Student Symposium, a forum for students working in the evolutionary sciences from molecular genetics to paleobiology. This year's event was held at the Judy Keller Education Building, Lincoln Park Zoo. Students and faculty members from CEB and the Departments of Ecology & Evolution, Organismal Biology & Anatomy, and Geophysical Sciences, attended, resulting in a record turnout of approximately sixty people. The symposium series was initiated by students who wished to present their research and practice their presentation skills in front of a familiar audience that would provide constructive feedback. The day was filled with student talks and ended with a roundtable discussion group on professional development.
Sixteen students gave conference-style presentations of their research this year. The diversity of presentation topics reflected the range of interdisciplinary research within the evolutionary community at Chicago. Along with a diverse array of conceptual questions, students at this year's symposium were working on a variety of organisms, including mammals, fishes, insects, mollusks, plants and fungi. In addition to laboratory work, students presented field research conducted in North America, Africa, and Oceania.

Paleontology talks focused on the evolutionary origins of modern teleost fish diversity (Matt Friedman), basal dinosauromorphs from the Late Triassic in North America (Nate Smith), and the taxonomic and ecologic structure of ancient marine faunas (Paul Harnik). Talks in animal behavior, focused on primates this year, addressed the role of play behavior (Matt Heintz), the development of dominance hierarchies (Susan Longest), the effects of inbreeding (Kara Nuss), and the hormonal correlates of parental care (Michelle Rafacz). Biogeography talks covered migration patterns in bats (Edna Davion), phylogenetics and conservation of land snails (Rebecca Rundell), and population divergence of montane frogs in relation to climate change (Lucinda Lawson). Other students spoke about plant adaptation to extreme soil environments (Sara Branco), influence of fungi on plant community assemblages (Kelly Gravier), postnatal skeletal development in mammals (Brandon Kilbourne), and the composition of vertebrate skeletal remains among different habitats (Josh Miller). Two

students focused on the origin of repetitive elements in genomes, but in quite different contexts: Matt Keirle studies the mushroom Rhodocollybia laulaha in Hawaii while Roman Arguello studies Drosophila melanogaster in the laboratory.

The day concluded with a round-table discussion that focused on strategies for funding student research and planning for postdoc and tenure-track positions after completion of the Ph.D. This roundtable discussion was relevant to both beginning and advanced students, as it provided a timeline for submitting grant proposals, making professional contacts, and developing competitive job applications. The input of many faculty members and advanced graduate students made the discussion especially lively and informative.

As in previous years, this year's symposium required a lot of effort from many people who deserve recognition for their work. Carolyn Johnson and Monica Polk organized transportation and catering. Sue Margulis arranged the venue at Lincoln Park Zoo. The day's schedule was developed by student volunteers Matt Friedman, Lucinda Lawson, and Kara Nuss. CEB Chair, David Jablonski, moderated the roundtable discussion. Planning is already underway for the Sixth Annual Student Symposium to be held in Spring 2009. We invite anyone with an interest in evolution to attend!