I sat down with Justin Runyon, Ph.D, a research scientist at the Rocky Mountain Research Station in Bozeman, Montana. Though Justin's formal title is “Entomologist”, most of his work focuses on plants and the plant-derived chemicals that mediate plant-insect interactions. Justin and I chatted about the basics of his job—the pros, the cons—and he also shared some advice for new or current graduate students. This document provides highlights of our conversation.
Advice for students

I asked Justin what advice he had for students interested in a science career. Here’s what he shared:

I encourage students to do a Master’s degree to really learn what you are interested in. A Master’s degree is a great place to learn what you like, what you don’t like, and most importantly, learn about really cool areas of science that you didn’t even know existed. When I started my Master’s program at Montana State University, I knew I enjoyed learning about plants and insects so an Agronomy program made a lot of sense. I did enjoy my research but during my program, I became exposed to chemical ecology. I had never heard about chemical ecology, but soon realized that I enjoyed it much more than what I was researching for my Master’s. A Master’s degree gave me the exposure to figure out an area of science I wanted to pursue for my career.

As far as advice for those already in a program: read. Set aside blocks of time each week to read. Reading helps you become familiar with the field, methods, key contributors, and most importantly, reading can lead to some of the best research questions!