Cristina Chirvasa is among 475 awardees selected this year from more than 1,242 nominees representing 433 institutions. She is just the second student from the college to win this award, since Ethan Hammer won it in 2019. The awards were announced March 25 by the Barry M. Goldwater Scholarship and Excellence in Education Foundation.

“Goldwater Scholars are selected from among the nation’s top STEM undergraduate scholars,” says USU President Noelle Cockett. “This well-deserved recognition is a testament to the exceptional achievements of our students in academics, research and service, as well as the outstanding mentorship by our faculty.”

Each year, USU may submit up to four nominations for the award; a process, coordinated by the USU Honors Program. Award recipients receive one- or two-year scholarships of up to $7,500 per year toward annual tuition and expenses.

Cristina Chirvasa, majors in Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences and Wildlife Ecology Management

Growing up in Romania, the closest Cristina Chirvasa usually found herself to actual wilderness was watching Animal Planet. Notwithstanding the electronic distance, she became entranced by wild animals and felt drawn to ecosystems of all kinds. When she moved to the Salt Lake Area with her mom at age 10 seeking social and educational opportunities, it was with the family dog on her lap.

As an outsider, and a student learning English for the first time, she felt pressure to prove that she could make positive contributions to her new community. Her spirited strategy was to move beyond the ‘above and beyond’ standards for kids her age; committing herself not only to academics, but to volunteer opportunities, work, internships and extracurricular activities. As an Undergraduate Research Fellow, Chirvassa is double majoring in Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences and Wildlife Ecology and Management (and don’t even ask about her minors…there are three).

Chirvasa’s academic superpowers are her fearlessness and networking prowess. During a high school internship at the Bureau of Land Management, she probed her mentor for access to hands-on experiences in fisheries, and pounced when they surfaced. She later teamed with Tim Walsworth, from the Department of Watershed Sciences in the Quantitative Fisheries and Aquatic Ecology Lab and the Ecology Center, exploring how zooplankton affect algae blooms in Utah Lake to help maintain cleaner water. Confirming a relationship between carp and algae blooms would make it easier to support carp removal efforts, she said, which requires significant money and manpower to perform. She is also working with Andrew Kulmatiski from the Department of Wildland Resources looking at how plants in the western U.S. will be impacted by climate-change-caused shifts in precipitation.

Chirvasa is an Honors student, a Community Engaged Scholar, and a Quinney Scholar. Her next stop, she hopes, is Oxford. She has a goal to become a Rhodes Scholar and to work in conservation science, and hopes that her deep research experience and this award will help to make that more likely. She is just in her Sophomore year, after all, and says that the details tend to work themselves out. Meanwhile she is going to embrace any opportunities that wander her way.