

Scott Dallow: Placement with Worcestershire Wildlife Trust

Location: Worcestershire Wildlife Trust, Lower Smite Farm

Duration: 01/08/2016 – 31/07/2017

During my tenure as Conservation Assistant and Volunteer Coordinator at Worcestershire Wildlife Trust, I was given the opportunity to strengthen my skills and abilities both in practical and admin-based terms. The opportunity to gain licences in both chainsaw and brush cutter use allowed me to not only gain these qualifications, but put them to use as often as I chose to throughout the appropriate seasons to complete appropriate work tasks across the 80 nature reserves. Practical work was the main drive throughout my placement after I was given the choice to focus my attention in any particular direction. This allowed me to complete tasks on a large number of the Trust's nature reserve, working alongside not only the countryside and reserves team, but with volunteers also. Being the main contact for all current and potential volunteers allowed to connect with the volunteers and take a leading role when out on volunteer work parties. Leading volunteer work parties provided the basis for leading other sessions too; for example, taking a group of college students with learning difficulties out on reserves to provide them with the opportunity of outdoor practical work. The transferrable skills I had learned allowed me to connect with the students also and provide them with an enjoyable and worthy experience which the college is looking to continue with in the future.

When in the office, I was responsible for communicating with all countryside staff members to provide support where needed. Some of my main responsibilities included writing the quarterly WildTimes magazine which was the publication that all volunteers received. I made changes to the magazine publication layout and format where I saw fit and tried to incorporate a theme in each issue. I was also responsible for the annual volunteer conference held for over 75 volunteers and for which I organised the event, guest speaker, lunch and walk around one of our new nature reserves.

The main objectives of the Conservation Assistant post were to, as a member of the conservation team, carry out the requirements typical of a ranger-type role, support, organise and recruit all volunteers and to support the conservation team across the range of tasks and projects. Within the objectives were many key tasks. These included mainly practical conservation work, including management of unimproved grasslands, ancient heathland and woodland along with assisting the reserves officers with planning, decision making and carrying out conservation projects. I was able to progress in the field of practical conservation, learn about and improve upon my knowledge of practical conservation. This happened through contributing to practical work that included coppicing, ride-side clearance, hay cuts, fencing, hedge laying (I also taught some volunteers how to lay a hedge at one of the reserves) and invasive species management. An example is work at Tiddesley Wood where we were clearing the ride-side vegetation because the aim was to increase sunlight and remove the overgrown invasive bramble and scrub to enhance the opportunity for wildflowers to flourish.

Volunteer support was also a key task of the role; the Conservation Assistant is responsible for all current and potential volunteers and is the main contact via phone and email for all. I

also, as part of the role, dealt with retention of volunteers, as well as recruitment, by constantly making the volunteers feel welcome and aiding in finding the most appropriate opportunity for all, including those losing sight with volunteering or struggling to find motivation.

I was in control of my own working week whilst at the Trust and was able to focus my motivation in the direction of my choosing. This allowed me to home in on my passion for practical conservation. Each Tuesday and Thursday I would aid in co-leading and often leading practical volunteer work parties for over ten volunteers each week and the practical task would be different each time. For example, during the winter months, the task would be based around coppicing and other woodland management jobs and during the summer months we would tackle invasive species and carry out any boundary work that needed doing on reserves, as well as completing the hay cuts on reserves that required this type of management. I learned much about practical conservation, habitat types and species requirements and was able to apply this knowledge when carrying out practical work. For example, when working on heathland sites, we were taking out young trees and scrub to prevent succession and aid heathland bird species such as the yellowhammer. During the other days of my working week, I would either catch up on emails or phone calls, work on the volunteer schedule and volunteer newsletter, carry out smaller practical tasks or assist the conservation team in any of the jobs they had. An example of this is when a wooden kissing gate had been damaged at the Devils Spittleful reserve and I took the relevant materials and tools one Friday and repaired the damaged gate.

Although my working hours were Monday to Friday (9am to 5pm), I was able to work on weekends at take time off in lieu during the week. When working at weekends, I was leading volunteer work parties; for example I helped to lead the Blackhouse Wood work parties carrying out ride-side clearance and coppicing on the final Sunday of each month throughout the winter.

The placement allowed me to improve upon many transferrable skills and during my time I learned a range of new skills and felt as though I moved forward in my career development. Professionalism was key during my time at the Trust and I felt as though my confidence grew as a result of becoming more professional in the workplace. Clothing, punctuality, politeness and dealing with colleagues, bosses and volunteers all contributed to my professional development because it increased my maturity, communication and personable skills by allowing me to interact with a range of different people.

Communication was vital during my placement because I was in constant contact with colleagues across the entire Wildlife Trust and Trustees due to needing to understand what work needs doing in any week or anything urgent that needs attending to along with asking for articles for the magazine I was writing and forwarding the volunteer schedule for each quarter of work. Also, along with being in contact with members of the public when out on reserves, I was the main contact for all current and potential volunteers meaning that forwarding on essential details about work parties, changes to any volunteering timetables and any opportunities within the Trust needed to be dealt with at appropriate times and to all that were concerned.

Organisation and time management skills were important because of the deadlines I was expected to keep to. I had the WildTimes magazine, the volunteer work party schedule and other constant tasks that needed regular attention to keep running and keep to deadlines for. Also, I was expected to organise and plan my own working week. I chose to base my week around the practical tasks that needed completing out on reserves, however I co-lead and lead two volunteer work parties every week (Tuesdays and Thursdays) and had emails and answerphones to answer to as well as regular office-based tasks. Therefore, organising, planning and prioritising my working week was vital to ensure success.

Using initiative, both when working in teams and independently, was useful due to the nature of the role. The fact that I was in control of my working week allowed me to take my own initiative not only choose my preferred tasks for the week, but to also choose the necessary tasks in relation to priority. I was required to be effective when working within the conservation team to ensure effective results; for example, completing deer surveys or clearing up after a fallen tree out on reserve. Also important were my leadership skills, having received leadership training, due to the nature of the volunteer work parties each week. I would co-lead with the relevant reserves officer normally, however I was asked on a number of occasions to lead the volunteer group myself. This happened, for example, when visiting the Knapp and Papermill reserve when, having been asked by the central reserves officer, my task was to lead the group in a fencing task; we were repairing the boundary fence before the introduction of livestock.

Practical habitat management was an important aspect of my placement because this was the area that I was most looking forward to developing. I gained my chainsaw and brushcutter licence, completed an outdoor first aid course and used the BCS reciprocating mower. These allowed me to improve my skill set and doing chainsaw and brushcutter work over the course of the year enabled me to enhance my knowledge around correct protective measures take and to be constantly improving my use of these. Alongside these more specific skills, I enhanced my knowledge around the safe use of and practical use of hand tools, including hand saws, bow saws, loppers and long-handled bill hooks, regularly giving the health and safety talk prior to volunteer work parties. I was also ladder trained. All of this increased my overall awareness of health and safety and helped me to understand the importance of risk assessments and safety procedures out on reserves, including taking necessary first aid and being responsible for collecting relevant information from volunteers regarding their welfare and anything necessary about their health. Health and safety was also addressed in the office, with the correct procedure understood should there be a fire or an incident at Lower Smite.

I also completed media training, as did all the staff members, and this was lead by BBC Radio 4 presenter Brett Westwood who gave mock interviews and provided appropriate training. This training allowed me to feature on an episode of Midlands today as part of a segment on the mini wetland digging with our volunteers at one of our reserves, Hill Court Farm. I also was able to produce promotional videos for the Trust that feature on their website, Facebook page and YouTube channel. These videos were based around the mini wetland digging at Hill Court Farm, slow-worm ecology and their presence at Lower Smite Farm (the home of Worcestershire Wildlife Trust) and a video based around the day in the life of a Conservation Assistant.

Moreover, I dealt with management plans, mainly aiding in support with the Hardwick Green nature reserve management plan, contractor liaison (mainly dealing with the fencing contractors at Chaddesley Woods nature reserve) and ordering and picking up materials; an example of this is when I ordered fencing materials for a fencing volunteer task at Wilden Marsh nature reserve and picked up the required materials before the task. These three things enabled my confidence to grow through the use of mature, personable skills and overall being in charge of such important tasks. Furthermore, I facilitated courses that ran at Lower Smite Farm; an example of this is when an ecologist from the Trust ran a course based around reptiles and amphibians and I was the facilitator for the course for the day, ensuring all bases were covered from the initial presentation to looking for slow-worms on site.

As well as the aforementioned achievements and responsibilities, there were other projects that I aided in the running of. One of those was to lead a group of college students for a number of weeks, there was a Monday group and a Tuesday group, in practical habitat management work parties; the main objective was to teach the students, who had learning difficulties, about practical conservation and to allow them to carry out management tasks themselves.

Whilst being at university, I gained much knowledge around the subject of ecology and wildlife conservation. The main aspects that I could carry into the placement were based around habitat ecology and in particular how certain habitats react differently to management regimes. For example, during the ecological conservation unit of my second year, we focused on heathland as a habitat that was in need of conservation and management in the United Kingdom. An assignment was based around heathland management for different species as well as for maintaining the already rare habitat in general. Although my placement was in Worcestershire, and the species may have differed slightly, I was able to put the basic theory into practice when aiding decision making at the Wildlife Trust: a heathland site was in need of management and I helped in the decision to remove some of the larger trees from the site in order to prevent long-term succession.

My placement firstly provided much new theory and fresh ideas about conservation and ecology. The Wildlife Trust are required to consider members of the public on many of their sites, where footpaths are present as one example, thus it was interesting to view conservation from this angle because it allowed me to understand why management of particular habitats occurs in order to benefit human beings as well as flora and fauna. Also, I hadn't been out in the field to properly understand the theory and process behind making informed decisions about practical habitat management and my placement not only provided the opportunity to get into the field and aid in the decision making process, but also allowed me to interpret habitats in ways that I had not before; taking hay from meadows at different times of the year to suit different species or when to call in a deer stalker to cull deer should the survey suggest that they were becoming an issue.

I also had the opportunity to gain some experience in consultancy work. This was not particularly a part of my placement, but the opportunity came about because of my passion for the placement and my willingness to get involved. I aided in multiple bat surveys, both

dusk and dawn surveys, and heard many species, including myotis, on the bat detectors across sites all over Worcestershire. I was also fortunate to get involved with amphibian, reptile and small mammal surveys.

There were weaknesses however. To begin with, confidence was the largest trouble of mine; I had been put into the work environment and had a lot of work to take on and found this difficult at times, however as the first few months went on, I became more confident and began dealing with the workload more efficiently and effectively and have now become a more confident and rounded person because of the placement. Moreover, my organisation and time management skills were tested. Although these have improved, this was not without some troubles. I found it difficult to organise myself efficiently at times, for example when I had the newsletter to complete but at the same time had multiple practical tasks and site visits to fit in to my schedule during the week, however throughout my year, I was able to understand and appreciate the value in prioritising work and putting the most important jobs first.

As well as this, the transferrable skills gained on placement have readied me for my final year at university. My organisation and time management skills have been improved, as mentioned, and this will allow me to effectively balance my time between assignments, independent research and reading and dissertation work, along with revision for exams. My drive and determination have also been enhanced because I have worked for the Wildlife Trust and confirmed my passion for ecology and conservation, pushing me to achieve my potential in the final year. Moreover, because of my role whilst on placement and my need to be in constant contact with not only members of staff but volunteers also, my confidence has grown because I have had to tackle challenges head on and be confident in the decisions I am making for all concerned. This confidence has allowed me to grow in person and take a mature approach to my final year preparations.

Since being on my placement, I have confirmed that I would like to enter the practical conservation sector. However, having had a flavour for the consultancy aspect also I now have a second area of passion and interest. The consultancy work allowed me to put surveying skills to use and I aim to improve these whilst at university and beyond because I have passion for surveying and monitoring species. I also wish to pursue work in the practical sector because I have passion for the practical work, i.e. getting out into the field and making a personal contribution through carrying out the work myself and motivating volunteers in this field of work too. In my opinion, I need to, perhaps decide which area I would like to focus on and dedicate my time working towards because although I can experience both at the same time, I need to drive towards securing a job in one of the two areas rather than completing bits of work in both.