

Ecosupport –Junior Ecologist Placement report

1-) The business of my placement company, how I came about finding the placement

Ecosupport is an ecological consultancy company based in Hampshire providing services to a range of private and commercial clients. The main purpose of Ecosupport is to assist both commercial and private clients with the ecological aspects of the planning application process by surveying sites (to determine the presence/absence of protected species, the population size and significance of the population), communicating with the local council and natural England in order to ensure all requirements are met enabling a smooth application, producing reports to clearly summarise results and provide mitigation strategies to ensure that environmental law is not broken and that protected species are disturbed as little as possible.

Ecosupport undertake work for clients including Taylor Wimpey, Amey and Foreman Homes. Due to the nature of the work, the busiest times for the company are between March and October with mid-summer usually being the peak. However 2017 was an exceptionally busy year for Ecosupport which led to further staff additions and higher work-loads for all members of the team including myself. The reason for March-October being the busiest time of year is because many of the protected species hibernate during the winter and therefore the majority of the surveys and reptile capturing can't be conducted during the winter months.

I first found out about Ecosupport in 2015 when an email was sent out to all the students on my course advertising the opportunity to take on casual bat survey work with Ecosupport. I started doing bat surveys for them over the summer and built a good relationship with the Senior Ecologist, the owner of the company and other members of staff which lead to them offering me a placement. Before working with Ecosupport I was unaware of Ecological Consultancy being a potential career path and did not realise the scale of the industry until starting my placement.

2-) Job role and responsibilities

As the Junior Ecologist I almost exclusively supported the Senior Ecologist however when required I did cover other members of the team as a result of holiday, sickness and workload. During my time at Ecosupport I assisted with a large range of different ecology work with a mixture of outdoor work, office based work and client facing work. My main responsibilities were:

- Conducting reptile surveys
- Capturing reptiles and translocating them to new sites

- Carrying out bat surveys on buildings (emergence surveys) and on land (bat activity transects)
- Deploying dormouse tubes across 12 sites then checking on a monthly basis
- Assisting with phase 1 habitat surveys
- Deploying static bat detectors
- Analysing bat calls using Analook
- Writing reports and ecological assessments
- Collecting water samples for great crested newt DNA samples
- Regularly interacting with clients, explaining the current ecological situation/what further work will be required and suggesting short term mitigation to avoid the killing or injuring of protected species.

Other tasks I completed included:

- Setting up trail cameras and analysing the recordings to establish presence/absence of badgers
- Collecting water samples for great crested newt DNA samples
- Preparing quotes to send to clients
- Posting water/bat dropping samples
- Creating an Ecology board for a public exhibition
- Engaging with members of the public
- Creating hibunaculans for slow worms
- Overseeing bat and reptile destructive searches

Throughout the year I took on more tasks and responsibilities such as organising and leading bat surveys as well as explaining to the clients what the results meant going forward. I also started working on the railway, supervising vegetation management teams employed by AMEY to ensure that environmental law was followed correctly and no protected species were harmed.

3-) Company's expectations of me and the work that I have done for them

Working as an Ecologist for Ecosupport involves working long days, varied hours, often working independently and managing a large workload. I was required to be very flexible with my working hours and would often have to be at work early and finish late. Over the busiest periods I conducted bat surveys 3-5 times a week in the evenings and I also had to do dawn surveys which meant having to wake up at around 3:00am. It was challenging scheduling my own time to ensure that all work got completed on time especially as weather conditions were an important factor. However I quickly developed a good system which enabled me to get everything done in a short space of time.

The role also involves a lot of travel so I am expected to drive to client sites most days which can be anywhere in Hampshire or in some cases can be much further. For example, I have travelled as far as Hastings and Bury St Edmunds to conduct a dusk/dawn survey and have had to stay in a hotel overnight.

I wrote a large number of reports for Ecosupport which were required to be written in a professional manner and needed to be detailed and referenced whilst remaining easy for clients to understand. Some other members of the team were struggling to achieve this and I therefore took on a large quantity of reports compared to other junior ecologists.

4-) A summary of key projects, experiences and/or achievements

One of my key projects was working on four separate sites in Picket Piece near Andover. I undertook the phase 1 surveys of these sites with the senior ecologist and then after that these sites were given to me to manage. I had to conduct monthly bat activity transects on each of the sites as well as Emergence surveys on two buildings. I also put out static detectors across the sites ensuring that all habitat types were included to ensure an accurate representation of the overall activity on site was achieved. I analysed the data recorded on the static detectors using Analook as well as summarising the data from transects, emergence surveys and the statics in tables with summarised notes detailing all necessary information. I also travelled to each of the sites in Andover regularly to survey the land for reptiles. On one of the sites I identified a large number of pyramidal orchids which I highlighted to my manager and this was then included on the report. As well as this on another of the sites I identified 3 knapweed broomrape plants as well as a large quantity of greater knapweed. As a result a plant specialist was required to survey the site to ensure that appropriate mitigation for the site would be implemented. It is very important that I have a good knowledge of plants to ensure that any rare plants are identified to allow time for mitigation strategies to be agreed if necessary.

Over the year I improved my report writing skills and I quickly became very capable at summarising the data collected and writing up reports in a professional and coherent manner. This meant that I was able to produce documents that detailed all necessary information whilst ensuring they remained easily understood by clients. I became a valuable member of the team especially during busy periods as deadlines would not otherwise have been met. Being able to pick up report writing quickly was essential especially as other junior ecologists had struggled with their report writing skills.

For me, one of my key achievements was being trusted to lead bat surveys which involved: organising the dates, finding available sub-contractors, arranging the logistics, instructing people on where to sit and what to focus on, helping and training new subcontractors and supervising during the survey. During my time on placement I have undertaken approximately 100 bat surveys in total, 50 of which I have led. This has enabled me to further develop my bat surveying skill exponentially during my time on placement.

Despite only being a one-off task I was particularly proud of creating an ecology board for a public exhibition held for a proposed development. This was to detail the protected species found on site, the mitigation that would be in place to protect them and further improvements that will be made to the habitat. This was displayed at the exhibition by the senior ecologist.

My biggest overall achievement of my placement is being offered a Graduate job as an Assistant Ecologist which I will start after finishing university. This is a prospect which I am extremely excited for as I really enjoy working at Ecosupport and I am looking forward to further developing my career with them.

5-) What I have learnt on my placement

Over the course of my placement I have learnt a lot about the industry and what working at an Ecological Consultancy entails. I have developed a further understanding of the steps that need to be taken as an ecologist from the beginning of a development to the end. During my time at ecosupport the main focus of my work was surveying and report writing and as such I haven't yet developed a full understanding of all aspects of being an ecologist at an ecological consultancy firm and I am looking forward to further develop during my time at Ecosupport after university.

Working closely with the Senior Ecologist with the phase 1 surveys has helped me to improve my ID skills, especially for plant species. My knowledge of bats has significantly improved whilst on placement and I am now very confident in identifying bat species from their frequency, sound and characteristics. I am also now competent at analysing bat calls on analook software as a result of many hours spent filtering through and summarising data. I was lucky to be invited to a night of bat catching at a disused railway tunnel which is home to hundreds of bats. During this survey we caught approximately 200 bats with 7 different species being recorded. This was an invaluable experience as a licence is required to catch bats and an opportunity to see such a wide variety of species and high number of bats up close is very rare.

6-) What I have learnt on my placement about professional behaviour.

On my placement I was regularly dealing with clients and colleagues which enabled me to learn how to conduct myself professionally in a workplace. I learnt to always be professional when dealing with clients and to represent the company in a positive light.

Due to the nature of the work I was often working on private land at unsociable hours which caused some issues with clients and members of the public as sometimes myself or other members of the team were mistaken for trespassers. Occasionally the situation got quite heated and I learnt how to calmly resolve the situation in a professional manner with one particular occasion leading me tell the client's son that I would sit in the van whilst he called his dad to check. Despite the fact he had previously been shouting and swearing at me, after calling his dad he apologised and allowed me to survey the land. This was a key experience which required me to think and react quickly. I learnt a lot about how I could deal with disgruntled land owners in the future.

7-) How I have put into practice the skills and knowledge from the first two years of the course

I used some of the knowledge I had gained from my studies at university throughout my placement. For example, I already had some knowledge of how to conduct a phase 1 survey which meant that I knew what I was doing very quickly.

I also used skills such as data analysis, research and report writing which I had gained at university and I believe I am more prepared to write reports and assignments in my final year.

Overall I would say my first and second year prepared me quite well however I believe it would have been very helpful for plant identification skills to be a larger part of the course especially as this would be relevant to everyone studying Ecology and Wildlife Conservation.

8-) Reflection on my professional development throughout the placement year (including transferable skills and understanding of business)

I feel that I have developed a lot during my placement in terms of ecology experience but also with my understanding of business and the workplace. This was my first full time job and a real learning curve for me. I feel like I adapted to working life quite quickly as I really enjoyed the job and had a good relationship with the team. My manager was pleased with how I conducted myself in the workplace and was very pleased with my attitude towards work. I took on a lot of tasks and responsibilities and was always happy to help as much as possible, often working more hours than I

was contracted and even working some weekends. I improved my organisation and time management skills which has always been something that I have struggled with.

I believe that through dealing with a wide range of clients I have improved my communication skills and have now got a better idea of how to effectively manage client relationships and keep clients happy.

I also was required to train bat surveyors, teaching them how to identify different species as well as background information about the ecology of bats. This was achieved using Batlib, an app on android phones, and by conducting surveys with the trainees shadowing. Other than bat surveys I also took new staff members out and showed them how to set up and undertake dormouse surveys and reptile surveys. I also taught new staff members plant species and how to analyse bat calls using Analook. All of this training took place in practice as I found this the most effective way of training new staff members. This was a positive experience for me and I am looking forward to furthering my experience of training other members of staff in the future.

9-) How the placement experience has prepared me for study in the final year

My placement has helped me to prepare for final year in a number of different ways. I feel that my knowledge of ecology has improved a lot which I believe will help me in my studies. I also think I will be able to relate my experiences with theory.

My placement has been the inspiration for my dissertation. I am focusing on bats and I conducted my research over the summer. My knowledge of bats and their behaviours has helped me with choosing my research question, drawing up hypotheses and conducting the research. In addition, I have done a lot of data analysis during my placement which will also benefit me when I come to analysing my findings.

As previously mentioned placement has also really helped me with ID skills and survey skills which will be very helpful whilst conducting the fieldwork aspects of my assignments.

10-) How the placement experience has influenced your pathway/unit choices for final year

Although I was already likely to choose the units I have chosen before placement, it has led to me being very confident in my choices. Three of the four units I have chosen are directly relevant to ecological consultancy whilst the fourth I have chosen because I am very interested in it as opposed to it being relevant to what I want to do.

11-) How the placement experience has influenced your plans for your career

My placement has had a huge impact on my career plans. Before I started my placement I had several ideas about what I wanted a career in, for example: teaching, outreach work or conservation. After completing my 5 week placement in my first year of university I realised that manual conservation work wasn't right for me and decided to look at different routes. My placement at Ecosupport has shown me that working as an Ecological Consultant is the perfect career for me as I am able to combine my passion for wildlife with a varied and interesting job. I have been offered a job with Ecosupport for when I finish university. My role will be Assistant Ecologist and I aim to work my way up in the company and my long term goal is to become a Senior Ecologist.

12-) You might also comment on how well prepared you were for the placement year and what you might do differently in future when applying for and starting new jobs

I believe that I was fairly well prepared for my placement as I had worked for the company before and I knew some of the members of the team, however if I were to do it again I would further develop my ID skills before starting as this would have given me a head start with the phase 1 habitat surveys. Before I go back to Ecosupport I would aim to have further developed my identification skills, particularly of trees.

13) Challenges

One of the biggest challenges I have faced on placement was having to be assertive with workers that I was overseeing as well as land owners. I am naturally not very assertive so this is something that I have had to work on. It is very important that I am assertive as part of my job to ensure that environmental law is not broken and that protected species are not harmed. An example of this was overseeing the vegetation cutting on the railways. The teams cutting the vegetation did not want to change the way they were operating. I therefore had to be assertive whilst being understanding to ensure that the correct procedures were followed to ensure bird nests were undisturbed and reptiles were not harmed.

The other significant challenge was conflict between staff members. A particular member of staff that no longer works for Ecosupport worked in an unprofessional manner, was rude and didn't get along very well with many of the other staff members. This was a challenge as despite the personal

issues between myself and the other member of the staff I had to ensure I remained professional at all times ensuring that personal differences did not affect my work.

14) Summary

My placement has been an extremely positive experience and has been a highly valuable addition to my academic studies. My hard work during placement has been rewarded with a graduate job and has allowed me to develop a wide range of skills and expand my knowledge.