



Natural Talent Case Study

Name: Ross McIlwrath

Age: 23

Traineeship: Peatlands and Micro Moths

Dates of traineeship: 3rd April 2017- 2nd April 2018

About your traineeship



Can you give an overview of your Natural Talent UK traineeship? (What organisations are you placed with/type of work you will be involved in?)

I have been placed with Butterfly Conservation in Stirling. I will be surveying peatland habitats, to build up a greater picture of their moth diversity and to develop a species list to determine indicator species of healthy peatlands. I am particularly looking forward to studying and highlighting micro moths, a group which is undervalued and understudied, and investigate their role in peatland ecology. I am excited to engage with the public at special events and open eyes to the wonder of micro moths and the value of peatlands.

Why did you apply for a Natural Talent traineeship?

During my time at university I developed a keen interest in moth trapping. Since I graduated university in July 2015 with a Masters of Zoology with Animal Behaviour, I have been seeking employment within the environmental conservation sector. The traineeship I found to be an incredibly exciting opportunity, as it would allow me to pursue my passionate hobby in a professional environment. This position would allow me to increase my identification and survey skills, as well as conveying to the public how significant and how amazing moths can be!

What kind of employment were you in before undertaking a Natural Talent traineeship?

Before undertaking the Natural Talent role, I was working for the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) at their Castle Espie centre in Northern Ireland. I worked there in a variety of capacities; working with the Grounds and Reserve team as an Assistant warden helping conserve and manage the habitats for the wild flora and fauna, as a Learning Assistant leading school groups and educating them about the natural world and as a Retail Assistant aiding the public to get the most out of their visit. It was here my passion for conservation and public engagement really blossomed.

What voluntary experience had you done prior to your traineeship?

I have volunteered for many different organisations. I spent a summer on a student placement with the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust in Jersey, assisting the bird keepers taking care of their wonderful collection and learning about their captive breeding programmes. Before I gained employment with WWT, I volunteered for 9 months as an Aviculture Assistant looking after the captive waterfowl. I found rearing the beautiful ducklings and goslings to adulthood was an incredibly rewarding experience. Over the last number of years I have been conducting surveys and helping out at a few public events for many organisations; British Trust for Ornithology, Royal Society for Protection of Birds and Butterfly Conservation. I love contributing to citizen science which is something I find very rewarding and increases my own understanding of wildlife and conservation. And I also love talking to the public and getting them enthusiastic about the natural world.



What are you most looking forward to during your traineeship?

The prospect of identifying moths that I've never seen before is thrilling to me! I can't wait to get out to my survey sites to discover what moths are yet to be found. I am greatly interested in learning about peatland ecology and how it impacts the Lepidoptera diversity. I am excited to learn and share my new found knowledge.

What skills do you anticipate this traineeship will give you?

With nearly 1500 species of micro moth in the UK identifying them can be quite a challenge! I anticipate that I will overcome this challenge by learning from specialists, using identification resources and improving upon my own experience to develop my identification skills. I expect to acquire knowledge and experience in survey techniques, data handling and project design. Public engagement is a skill that is often overlooked, but it one that I believe is vital for up-and-coming young conservationists. I hope to practice and enhance these skills and to share my enthusiasm for this amazing taxa with volunteers and the general public.

How do you feel your traineeship benefits the conservation sector in the United Kingdom?

Moths are a group of animals that have been well studied in the UK from the Victorian Era. Micro moths make up a significant portion of this group, but due to their small size, historically have been ignored by moth recorders. Therefore, often little is known about them and their roles within ecosystems. With modern techniques and equipment these are becoming are more accessible group to identify and study. My traineeship is important as only by increasing our knowledge about this little known group, will we be able to conserve them, along with their habitats and raise awareness of their importance. I also hope to encourage existing recorders and encourage new recorders to study and appreciate this spectacular group.

The peatland habitats I will be studying are also very important. They provide vital ecosystem services and host a range of unique flora and fauna. Most of the peatlands in the UK are severely damaged or have been degraded by human activity. My traineeship will hopefully not only show their value for moths but also raise public awareness of their importance.

What career path do you see yourself pursuing and how will this experience help you?

I hope to pursue a career within the environmental conservation sector. This traineeship will provide me with experience of planning and running public engagement events, which are essential for raising awareness about conservation issues and encouraging the young naturalists of the next generation. It will provide me with a unique area of expertise that I can develop beyond the traineeship and share with the rest of the sector. This traineeship will endow me with the identification skills and survey techniques, which will help build a greater picture of the true impact of micro moths and influence conservation management decisions with them in mind.