

### Kent Countryside Partnership Trainee

Back in March I made the decision to apply for a traineeship with North West Kent and Medway Valley Countryside Partnership. I had never heard of the countryside partnerships but once I had met with Reece and Andrea and learnt about the work they do I knew it was an opportunity I did not want to miss out on. In the seven months of my traineeship I have had the most amazing and varied experiences. I have learnt so much from all the staff and the volunteers. Everyone has been so generous with their time, so enthusiastic about the work they do, and so keen to share their knowledge.



Great crested newt eDNA survey.

I am often asked what my favourite part of my traineeship has been. I have loved every part of it, however, an entire day spent with baby barn owls is hard to compete with. Jo and Sarah, from MVCP, and I got to spend the day with a licenced bird ringer as we travelled to eight barn owl nest boxes to ring the barn owl chicks. Holding three barn owl chicks at once is an experience I never expected to have.

I have had the opportunity to take part in and learn about many different types of ecological surveys. I spent two days carrying out Great crested newt eDNA surveys with MVCP's Andrea. This is a way to determine if the newts are present in a pond without needing to see the animals. It involved collecting water samples from 20 points around the edge of ponds. Luckily, I managed to avoid falling in, but I came close a few times! Getting in the water was, however, all part of

the fun when we donned the waders to search for signs of water voles in the ditch system of Leybourne Lakes.

I also began dormouse surveys with MVCP's Mark, checking the boxes once a month through to November. Unfortunately, we never found any dormice, but we did find wood mice, shrews, and blue tit chicks, and even some angry bees one time. We also carried out a number of butterfly surveys across chalk grassland in Medway, and a reptile survey. Our butterfly surveys were the most successful, in that we actually found what we were looking for – a highlight was being surrounded by hundreds of Marbled whites in Chatham. Back in March I would have told you I know almost nothing about butterflies, I have learnt so much through doing these surveys.



Small Skipper, Marbled White, and Small Copper from our Medway Butterfly Surveys.

One part of my traineeship that I'm surprised I enjoyed so much was the community engagement aspect. My first experience of conservation community engagement came in June, with a lovely day spent helping Reece deliver a drop in river dipping experience for children at a park in Westerham. It was lovely to see how excited the children got when they managed to catch something in their nets, particularly when they caught something big, like a crayfish! This was just the start of a summer packed full of events, just the next day I was helping at a Jubilee event at Leybourne Lakes. I was assisting a willow weaver. I had a quick lesson on how to make a dragonfly out of willow in the morning, and spent the rest of the day teaching kids how to do it. Safe to say I'll never forget how to do it now! August was where the community engagement events came thick and fast. Reece and I set up two nature trails in Camer Park using nature trails that I designed, it was lovely to see the children enjoying something I had made. Sweep netting and pond dipping were frequent events. The hot weather made this difficult, but we normally managed to get something interesting for the children to see. Bat walks are one of my favourite forms of community engagement. I was able to attend some wonderful bat walks led by Lucy and Andrea, which helped me feel prepared for when I delivered my own. That I can now deliver my own bat walks is a clear indicator of how much my confidence has grown over my traineeship.



Crayfish found at a river dipping event on the River Darent.

This traineeship has given me a thorough understanding and appreciation of the work involved in countryside management and habitat creation. I have gained a variety of experience carrying out practical conservation tasks including building leaky dams in Ashdown Forest, constructing a boardwalk, pond digging, scrub clearance and invasive species management to name just a few. I have been fortunate enough to work in a wide range of habitats in my time with the countryside partnerships. Including chalk grasslands, woodlands and an SSSI. This has given me experience and knowledge of a diverse range of habitats.



This traineeship has brought some great opportunities for learning. I attended two fantastic talks on the ecology of chalk rivers and Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) delivered by NWKCP's Mark. I also attended some great courses paid for by my training budget; I learnt how to use the UK Habitat Classification System, I attended an excellent two-day course on how to write interpretation boards and engage people in conservation. To supplement the dormouse surveys, I had been doing I took a course by The Mammal Society about dormouse ecology and conservation. As well as many other workshops and training sessions. My traineeship finished with one of the most useful training you can have in conservation – a brushcutter training course.



Great crested newt found while taking a break from scrub clearance at Yalding Fen.

My traineeship may have officially ended but I have enjoyed it so much I will continue to volunteer for as long as I am able. I couldn't imagine a better group of people to work with than the staff and volunteers of the North West Kent and Medway Valley Countryside Partnerships.