



My name is Sophia and I was a Long-Term Volunteer on Skomer Island for an amazing two and a half months. I was the people engagement volunteer; this involved helping with the hostel change overs, so cleaning and getting the luggage up the steps and across the island to the farm. Most mornings this involved driving the tractor across the island. On the occasional day we had to use wheel barrows. Other tasks included doing welcome talks to the day visitors and helping to get everyone off the island at the end of the day and learning to deal with confrontational situations when people don't get the bat they want. Some days I was stationed at the Wick which is where the puffin colony is closest to the path and the Puffins seem to have no fear of humans, so this was a hot spot for visitor activity. I really enjoyed talking to people and answering their questions, seeing how excited most people get when a puffin runs across the path in front of them and when a photographer gets the shot they have been waiting for is brilliant!



*Me on the morning tractor run*

The field worker had given me a guillemot plot to monitor. This involved getting heckled by the Short Eared Owl and being dive bombed by Lesser Black Backed Gulls on the way to the cliff then scrambling half way down a cliff to a very tiny hide which looked out onto a lovely secluded bay with the occasional seal with a ledge of guillemots opposite and a few razorbills dotted around. At this site I had to measure productivity, this consisted of working out active sites, which guillemots were incubating, which were in a pair, and the date the eggs hatched. I was very surprised at how large and turquoise the eggs were when I spotted my first egg. It got very difficult trying to work out which chick belonged to which adult when the chicks started to move around on the ledge between birds.



*Short Eared owl on my way to the hide*

As well as meeting lots of brilliant people and learning to live in a small island community I also had some spectacular wildlife experiences such as having very close encounters with seals while swimming in the sea, sitting at the Wick and being surrounded by Puffins and going out in the rib and being surrounded by a pod of common dolphins and watching the amazing sunsets while listening to the constant bird songs.



*Sunset on Skomer*

Another plus of being on Skomer for the time period I was there, is that you see how the vegetation dramatically changes the island, from seemingly grassy and barren, to being covered in a carpet of bluebells, to being waste deep in pink champion and bracken.

The main job in June was the annual island seabird counts. This involves counting all of the Guillemots, Razorbills, Fulmars and Kittiwakes both from land and sea (on the rib). Binoculars in one hand and a clicker in the other, two people

count and have to get within 10% of each other's count or else you re-count the colony. I will never again take steady land for granted! Trying to count densely packed Guillemots and spotting Razorbills in crevices by looking through binoculars while bobbing up and down on a boat is one of the most frustrating tasks I have ever done, however also highly rewarding as when you look back on the huge long cliff faces you have successfully counted it is pretty impressive!

I was also involved in other bird surveys; one of these was the Gull count, this involved walking in a line an arm's length apart and counting all the empty scrapes and full nests (nest with eggs/chicks in), as we got to nearing the end of these gull counts the chicks had started to hatch so you had to be extra careful not to tread on any that had gone wandering!

I also helped out doing the Manx Shearwater Census, this involved very delicately crawling around on your hands and knees playing a Manx Shearwater call down every burrow in the marked area and noting down if there was a call back from a bird.



*Gull chicks we came across*

During my last week I helped one of the researchers with some Razorbill color ringing and retrieving the chicks from the nest to take measurements and weight, this was a fantastic end to my time on Skomer as it meant being able to hold the fluffy chicks and seeing the adults close up was brilliant, watching the researcher clamber into rock crevices so just her feet were sticking out was a bit nerve racking wondering if she was going to be able to reverse out of this small space again.



*Squeezing into crevices*

*Razorbill Chick*

The project I chose to do while I was on Skomer was measuring how disturbance by visitors affects Puffin productivity, I was studying the disturbed area at the Wick and the undisturbed area was on the Neck was being studied by a researcher. I started off doing evening watches at the Wick after dinner to try and determine burrows which were occupied, and then with help from the assistant officer we put 51 numbered posts next to potentially occupied burrows. My job for a couple of weeks was to sit at the Wick every evening after dinner and work out which of these 51 burrows were actually occupied. Two weeks after the first Sand Eels were being bought in I organized the first of 24 hour feeding watch which started with an early 4:30AM start with a beautiful sunrise and finished at last light with an equally beautiful sunset. I also helped out with the 24 hour watch at the undisturbed sites. I have left instructions for the next long term volunteer about the next two 24hour watches and I hope to get the results of



*No. 11 was occupied*



*Beautiful sunrise*

these to analyse and compare Puffin productivity in these two areas.

I have gained invaluable life skills after living on Skomer for 3 months and living in a small community. I have improved my surveying techniques and identification of wildlife as well as gaining experience doing ornithological surveys. Also learning to be incredibly patient when it comes to inputting pages of data onto spreadsheets, and learning to live a very sustainable life where resources are extremely limited.