

## Island Living

My name is Catherine Blower and I have just completed my long-term placement on Skomer Island as the Conservation Volunteer. Living and working on Skomer was a fantastic experience and gave me the opportunity to develop my knowledge and skills and meet like-minded people. I have gained experience in seabird monitoring techniques and practical wardening of a National Nature Reserve, alongside life experience such as communal island living within a small team of people. I have also had some incredible wildlife moments, including swimming with a seal in North Haven and watching dolphins breach the water right next to our RIB boat in the middle of the Celtic Deep.

My main responsibility as the Conservation volunteer was to monitor the Razorbill and Guillemot colonies at Bull Hole in order to collect accurate data for the productivity study. The field worker had already mapped out Apparently Occupied Territories (AOTs) on a picture of the study plot by the time I had arrived. The first time I visited the Bull Hole study plot with the field worker, I was confronted by a rock face teeming with noisy guillemots and I was shown how I should go about monitoring them. The guillemots were in a small but tightly packed plot, whereas the Razorbills were dotted across the whole cliff, and thus they each provided different challenges. With the guillemots, it took time to work out which bird corresponded to which number on the photograph, whilst navigating my way across the cliff to find the AOTs of Razorbills was a nightmare! I thought I would never be able to work the whole thing out. However, as with everything, practice makes perfect and after about two weeks I had finally got my eye in. I spent either a morning or an afternoon at Bull Hole nearly every day and made a note of which birds were present and incubating. It was great to see an egg that you hadn't previously spotted, and they were hard to miss as the eggs are turquoise and enormous! Towards the end of my placement, the eggs were hatching and you could see the little fluffy chicks. Nothing looks funnier than a Razorbill chick sticking its head out from behind its parent's wing as there is such a contrast in colour. However, it was a heart wrench when you have watched a bird

incubate an egg for weeks and seen the egg hatch, only for the chick to have disappeared the next day. The gulls are very active once the guillemots and razorbills have chicks, scanning the cliffs and swooping down to see if they can scare any parent birds away. Saying that, I had two greater black backed gull chicks, named Marcy and Marvin, who kept me company at Bull Hole, and they could possibly have been the cutest chicks ever! Before I left, I was



asked to train the new volunteer up at Bull Hole so she would be able to complete the monitoring. I felt such a sense of achievement when I was able to answer all of her questions and point out which bird corresponded to which AOT. It was proof to myself that I can do something, even if at first it looks daunting.

Whilst on placement, I also assisted the field worker and wardens with the all island seabird counts and manx shearwater census. The counts could be frustrating at times as you needed to be within 10% accuracy with your counting partner or the count would have to be redone. However, they were also really enjoyable when the sun was shining and you were sitting amongst the puffins, and it is valuable experience to put on my CV. The manx shearwater census was also good fun, as it involved crawling around the burrows in a marked area and playing the manx shearwater call down each burrow to see whether there was a response. I also gave the introductory talk to day-visitors every Friday, which allowed me to dabble in the people engagement side of a warden's role.

I undertook a personal project whilst volunteering to survey the macro moth communities in two different vegetation types. This was to see whether one habitat is more valuable than the other and to check the abundance of several rare moths associated with the coastal thrift community, including Barrett's marbled coronet, Devonshire Wainscot and the Black Banded moth. I started out using two heath light traps to attract the moths. These are portable traps that use an actinic bulb and can be run from a twelve volt motorcycle battery, meaning it is far more practical for use in the field. I started my project by putting both traps out on the same night; one trap was placed in the thrift vegetation on the coastal cliffs of South Plateau, whilst the other trap was placed in bracken vegetation close to the farm. These were mostly put out every other night (weather permitting) around 21:00h and were collected at approx. 05:30h after identification was undertaken on site. However, one of the traps became faulty and so I continued to run just the one trap in the Thrift vegetation with the aim of catching the rare coastal moths associated with Thrift. My catches were very small, and included common species such as pod lover, white ermine, buff ermine, lychnis, bright-line brown-eye, marbled coronet and broom. The only species that was typically associated with the thrift community was a Crescent Dart. In addition to the light trapping, I also undertook daytime visual searches for Thrift Clearwing on South Plateau during its flight period in June to determine its abundance. Two transects were placed through the Thrift vegetation and I scanned the vegetation within arm's length of each side of the transects. I also recorded casual sightings. I had confirmed sightings of Thrift Clearwing on all four visits, although only in small numbers as many possible sightings were too quick to catch!

I know that this placement has improved my chances of gaining full time employment within the conservation sector and I have made some friends for life. Living on Skomer was an experience like no other and one which will be hard to beat!

