

Norway placement 2017

The (Bcs) Ecology & Wildlife Conservation degree at Bournemouth University requires a five-week placement after the first year. The placement is to include 175 hours of work that is relevant to the course. I applied to participate on a research trip to Norway and was chosen as one of seven research assistants. The job was to aid in data collection for a masters students' (Magnhild Sletten) dissertation.

The aim of the trip was data collection for two different purposes, for the dissertation and the on going research by Hedmark University. The aim of the dissertation was to see if moose (*Alces alces*) habitat selection can be predicted by environmental variables. We (the group of undergraduate research assistants) also had our own project. We were studying the relation of tree canopy cover and the abundance of bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*), to see whether there is a correlation. We produced a scientific report, a presentation and a poster about our research. This was a good way of learning about all the work involved with producing valuable scientific reports. The knowledge of how data collection works and how reports are produced will be valuable for my career. If the work hours didn't get filled, we also had to make a personal project such as a daily blog or a write up on our experiences.

The trip took place 5.6.2017-30.6.2017. The research team, consisting of nine people, flew from Stansted airport to Oslo airport. We met Magnhild's supervisor Karen and picked up two cars, provided by the collaborating university (Hedmark University).

The first location for fieldwork was Ljördalen. The day after arriving, we had an introductory meeting where we were briefed on the method and other details for the fieldwork. We then went together with the whole group to practice doing a quadrat with supervision. The research was divided into 3 sites, which included 20-22 quadrats. Each quadrat was divided into 16 plots. Each plot was to be studied.

During the first week we experimented with the logistics, trying to figure out the most efficient way of doing quadrats. This was a process of trial and error that taught me and the team patience as well as overcoming unforeseen challenges. Not everything goes as planned in practice. We concluded that the best way was for each pair to do one quadrat by themselves, this cut down travel time and risk of missing a plot or unnecessary work by counting it twice due to miscommunication.

The work was done in pairs for health and safety reasons. Each pair had a GPS navigator, a map, and a compass in order to avoid getting lost. Each pair also had a return time for which they had to make it back to a pre-designated meeting point. This was the most responsible way of going out into the woods. Being prepared for anything, such as accidents or encounters with large animals, is important. A useful skill that we'd also been taught was how to act in case of certain dangerous wildlife encounters, such as a bear or a wolf.

The fieldwork was physically straining and many of the participants were exhausted by the end of each workday. Rainy days and difficult terrain during the first week made the experience extra tough in the beginning. The rest of the time the weather was better.

The second study site was called Gravberget. The accommodation was a small cabin that lacked flowing water or an indoor toilet. All our bathing had to be done in the adjacent lake. I personally enjoyed the experience of the relaxing cabin mentality. Living together in such close proximity meant that teamwork and cooperation was invaluable. The quadrats we're all conveniently located close by and the work went well, without any troubles. We started doing two quadrats per pair per day in order to get more free days later on in the week. It was tough but worth it in the end. The team had a good mentality for hard work and getting everything done.

Nil and Callum (the group leaders) organized a quiz night for the group one evening. It was an exciting and intense test of Disney, pop culture, sport and ecological knowledge. It ended in a scavenger hunt for a moose antler and a thrilling swim race. Nights such as these were among the best things on the trip, great for bonding and team building.

The final location was called Plassen. We were housed in an old, museum like, traditional Scandinavian log house. It did however have the comfort of a modern kitchen and toilet. Here we had adapted the two quadrats per pair method so the workdays were intense, but it gave us more free time later in the week. During the week our problem solving skills were tested by car troubles, inconvenient routes to the quadrats and some other small logistical problems. Nil and Callum both did well in leading the group and planning most of the logistics.

When the last quadrats were done, everyone worked on their part of the report and their personal projects. We had almost a week after finishing the quadrats for processing the data and making educational trips. We went to Bjorneparken, a zoo with local Nordic fauna. A friend of Nil's worked there and gave us an in depth tour of certain areas of the park. It was a good way of learning about Nordic animals and their ecosystems. This information is very valuable for me, as an individual from one of the Nordic countries with career aspirations within ecology.

When all of the work was done, we had a little treat to celebrate the end of the trip. We did a 14 km hike called Bessegen in the Norwegian mountains. It was located by a lake called Gjende. This had value both for entertainment purposes as well as it gave the team a more wholesome image of the country and local environments.

I led the team that was responsible for creating the presentation of our work. I coordinated and worked together with my colleagues in order to make a clear and understandable summary of the work and results. I and some others from the team aspire to present our work in undergraduate conferences (such as BCUR) in the future. This would be massively beneficial for our communication skills and the beginnings of our careers as scientists.

In conclusion, the trip was worthwhile and I learned a lot. There were aspects of the trip that I want to have in my future career, such as spending time outside and learning about wildlife. There were also aspects of the trip that were unpleasant but necessary, which is how working life sometimes is. I learned new things in regards to teamwork and living together with co-workers, leadership, as well as safety and survival in wilderness areas. These are all skills that will be useful in my professional life.