

Student Report – Archipelagos Institute of Marine Conservation

One of my roles was to collect bird data from three different wetland areas, Psili Amos, Mesokampos and Potokakki. This ended up in me taking a leadership role and leading the surveys, which gave me the opportunity to help improve my colleague's bird skills, as well as my own. I also had the opportunity to teach three groups of Czech students about the different bird species. This involved taking the students out on the usual survey routes, whilst making regular stops to explain different bird calls and to point out what to look out for to identify different species. I feel this was beneficial to me as gave me confidence in teaching what I had learnt and improved my communication skills.

Whilst out on bird surveys one other side role was to look out for bird trappers. These are people who trap song birds to be sold for ornamental purposes. I feel this role gave me more of an insight into what working for a conservation organisation is really like and what achievements can be made. Whilst on the placement my team managed to prosecute two of the main bird trappers on Samos, I took charge of both of these cases which involved communicating with the local wildlife authorities, going undercover to gain photographic evidence and writing up documents, to be used by the authorities in court. In the end we managed to release over 90 song birds, which was one of my biggest achievements on the placement. From this I had a taste of the more activist part of conservation which was exciting and challenging. I can see myself doing more of this in the future if the opportunity arises, however as a career option, activist work is not financially viable.

One role was to assess the Golden Jackal population at the local airport, as Jackals were disrupting air traffic by crossing the runway to find food. This involved creating a strategic partnership with the airport officers to allow us to monitor the Jackals freely. Our role was to find out if Jackals were in the airport and if so what route they were using to enter Potokakki salt marsh which was situated next to the airport. We placed camera traps in the channels that ran through the airport to transfer water from the salt marsh to the sea. These channels had no obstructions to prevent wildlife from travelling in and out of the airport, thus we suspected that the Jackals will be using these channels. The results found that Jackals were using the channels to come in and out of the airport, confirming that there were dens in the long grass situated in the airport. This was a valuable experience as in conservation, relationships between wildlife organisations and local authorities are vital to be able to protect the species you want to conserve. This project also involved working with Dr Rob James who was part of the OPWALL team (another conservation organisation). Dr Rob was a Jackal specialist that had done his PhD on Jackals in South Africa. Whilst working with Rob I had the opportunity to learn new field techniques which I could not have learnt at university and had first-hand experience of research in the field. From this I have more of an understanding of what is expected when working with authorities and the technicalities involved in research. This placement also allowed me to network with other scientists which is fundamental in forwarding my career in conservation.

Another responsibility I had during my placement was to be in charge of the rehabilitation of many swifts as well as other birds including two tawny owls and a seagull. Archipelagos was ill equipped to actually look after these birds, so first I had to research how to rehabilitate and care for each species and then work with the little equipment we had to the best of my ability. I found that I was able to cope with this pressure well and realised I can be quite resourceful when needs must. For example to feed the swifts, I and a few of the team used sweep nets to catch crickets. To be responsible for another species life was challenging and on a number of occasions the swifts was too poorly, so had to be put down, which was a decision usually made by me or one of my colleges. Even though this was not an enjoyable process, I realised I could be practical and realistic in this situation to stop the swifts suffering. There were some successes in this project as we managed to release two swifts and

two owls. I was also involved in releasing birds, mainly buzzards that had been cared for in Athens and were then returned to where they had been found in Samos. One release included a primary school who came to learn and watch us release a buzzard. Seeing these birds being released was a real highlight and definitely made the many hours of feeding worthwhile.

Another project I was involved in included collecting data for an ecological census to assess and compare the total biodiversity of habitat surrounding ancient olive trees and young olive trees. This involved many surveying techniques and so was good practical experience. I also helped in teaching these techniques to the visiting Czech students which again improved my confidence.

To conclude I feel this placement has given me good practical experience in what a non-government conservation organisation is like. The projects were not as professionally run as I expected, however due to the lack of leadership, I found that naturally I began to create my own goals and tasks which I could then motivate myself and others to achieve. Therefore this placement allowed me to gain experience in many sectors of conservation and gain many employable traits, which I can now use to forward my career. Through working in many different projects I managed to gain new skills and most importantly network with many scientists that specialise in different areas of conservation.