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Harnessing Natural Talent

Jeanne Robinson, Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery

The naturalist - well-rounded and industrious character with a deep understanding of the natural world, exceptional identification skills and unrivalled field craft. Naturalists that are spotted in the wild are mostly older beasts with a grey pelage (or no pelage at all). Many lament the demise of the naturalist and rightly so, the most effective conservation practice is dependent on the skills they bring to the sector. Whilst universities generate a mass of biologists and ecologists each year, they often graduate with few field skills and little field experience. BTCV is attempting to bridge this practical skills gap with the help of a diverse array of partner organisations.

With help from the Heritage Lottery Fund, BTCV launched their Natural Talent Apprenticeship scheme in 2006. Like traditional apprenticeships and many good naturalists, the apprentice learns by working alongside an established expert. The apprenticeships last 12-18 months and each apprentice receives an annual bursary and some funds for equipment and additional training. The focus during recruitment has been on enthusiasm and commitment to conservation rather than formal qualifications. The hunt has been for recruits who are motivated and committed, as in addition to spending time with various mentors, they must spend a considerable amount on self-directed study and carry out a conservation project of their own design.

Each apprentice focuses on a specific taxonomic group or a conservation area. In 2006 apprentices were taken on to study Coleoptera, lichens, bryophytes, grassland and freshwater conservation. In 2007 a Hymenoptera and a mycology apprentice were recruited. The number and the quality of the applicants have been impressive. There were over 200 applicants for just 6 posts the year the scheme was launched, many of whom were volunteers in museums and conservation bodies. The scheme is set to grow further still in coming years. In 2008/9 a further ten naturally talented apprentices need to be found.

The apprenticeships rely on the good will of the training institutions and mentors. The Hunterian Museum (Glasgow) and Glasgow Museums (Culture and Sport Glasgow) were consulted when BTCV was developing the scheme. We agreed to mentor an apprentice coleopterist and Moya Burns was recruited in the launch year. It has been very satisfying to have someone motivated and capable working with our natural history collections (Fig. 1). It has been more satisfying still to see her applying her identification skills and using the collections to complete her project. Moya is already doing her bit for invertebrate conservation; investigating the efficacy of different trapping methods for monitoring beetles in Scottish woodlands. It is hoped that she and the other apprentices will go on to share their natural talents and develop that of others; it is intended that they will be tomorrow's mentors.



Fig. 1. Coleoptera apprentice, Moya Burns, at the Hunterian Museum, University of Glasgow.

Following the success of our first apprenticeship, we were delighted to offer the new hymenopterist, Cathy Fiedler our support and time (Fig. 2).

BTCV has tried to develop apprenticeships in those areas with the greatest skill gaps but unsurprisingly these are the trickiest to find suitable mentors for. In addition to ourselves, the Centre for Environmental Data and Recording (CEDaR), the Environment and Heritage Service, the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, Liverpool Museums, the National Trust for Northern Ireland, the Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh, the Scottish Wildlife Trust, the Scottish Agricultural College, the Natural History Museum, London, the Ulster Wildlife Trust and the National Trust for Northern Ireland. Agri-Food and Biosciences

Institute (AFBI) and the Ulster Wildlife Trust have given their time and support to the scheme. Currently the apprenticeships are based in Scotland and Northern Ireland but with sufficient interest and backing it may be possible to extend the scheme around the UK.

To find out more about the scheme and the new apprenticeships please visit www.btcv.org/naturaltalent. BTCV would be particularly keen to hear from you if you have skills and time you're willing to share with future apprentices.

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Fig. 2. Mentors and apprentice: (left to right) Jeanne Robinson (Glasgow Museums), Geoff Hancock (Hungarian Museum, Glasgow) and Moya Burns (BTCV apprentice).

12-13th May 2008 Exploiting geoscience collections

Geological Society, Burlington House, Piccadilly London.

A joint meeting between the Geoscience Information Group and the Geological Curators' Group.

Geoscience collections (records, samples and digital data) are a key resource for research of all types. The compilation, management and exploitation of these resources are fundamental to a wide range of work.

The conference aims to bring together the users and custodians of geoscience collections of all types to;

- Explore in detail the nature of the material being collected
- How it is selected for long-term preservation
- How collections are documented using metadata (collection-level descriptions)
- The way in which potential users can discover the information
- The ways in which this information is exploited and reused to advance science

Check GCG website for booking form.

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