

Transcript – Lizzie Bruce

Hello,

I'm Emily Seccombe, and I'm the Mentoring Officer for A Focus on Nature. This recording is part of our careers advice resources, through which we hope to provide young people with advice and support for getting into the conservation sector and building their careers. In this recording, I'm talking to Lizzie Bruce, who is a reserves warden for the RSPB. Lizzie is also one of the mentors on the AFON Mentoring Scheme, through which professionals volunteer their time to support young people with an interest in conservation. If you'd like to learn more about the scheme and how you can sign up as a mentee please do have a look at our website.

I really enjoyed chatting to Lizzie about her experiences in practical conservation and hearing her advice for others interested in on-the-ground species protection and habitat management. I hope you enjoy listening!

Emily: Thank you so much for joining us! It's great to chat to you about your career. To sort of start us off, would you mind telling us a bit about your career path and what led you to the role you're now in?

Lizzie: So I actually didn't know what I wanted to do even through university, and actually even after university I still didn't really know what I wanted to do. I originally went to university to study psychology, so I went to St Andrews University, and what was great about that course was that in our first year we got to do lots of different subjects. So, I could do biology and so I chose biology, geography and psychology and sort of really discovered my love for geography and biology. So I changed my degree actually three times.

Emily: Oh wow!

Lizzie: While I was there, but we had the flexibility to do that and so it's allowed me to sort of tailor my degree in the end based on what I was interested in. So I switched to zoology after psychology, but didn't like the third year modules but preferred the modules for ecology, so I ended up graduating with an ecology degree. And then I still didn't really know what I wanted to do, however, while I was at university I got really interested in events and I also had done my dissertation in the impacts of tourism on lion behaviour, and so I started getting a real interest in to the human wildlife conflict, and sort of the way, sort of, yeah that human wildlife interaction. So while I was trying to decide what I wanted to do with my life, I started looking at masters courses, just because I didn't really know what else to do and kind of fell a bit down the academic route. And actually Edinburgh Napier were doing courses in festival and event management, and I was looking at that going, oh that's interesting, I quite like doing all the events stuff because I got involved with RAGweek and things like that at university. But then decided I didn't really want to do events, but I did notice that they were running a course in eco-tourism.

It also had a course in wildlife biology and they ran in parallel with each other, so I went for wildlife biology instead of eco-tourism because I thought eco-tourism might be a bit too niche and I didn't really want to commit to anything. So, I did that which was great fun learnt a lot and again got to sort of develop my interests but then I realised that I now actually had to decide what to do with my life, and so I started volunteering essentially, so I volunteered for Scottish Wildlife Trust and had a week on Handa Island which was brilliant.

So that was my first foray in to kind of what conservation, like actually conservation work was all about. Because up until that point I didn't really have a clue. And I also volunteered with BirdLife Malta on their Raptor Camps in the autumn, which was again seeing another aspect of conservation. And then I applied for some internships, so I actually got offered two in the end, so one with BirdLife Malta and then the other one with the RSPB. And it took me quite a while to decide which one I wanted to do, because having gone to Malta I was like, oh maybe I want to go down wildlife crime but then I wasn't really sure, so I thought the RSPB one would give me more options. So I took an internship with the RSPB and so I spent the first six months at Old Hall Marshes down in Essex, and the second six months at Minsmere, which was brilliant it was actually my first real experience of what nature reserves were all about. And I was really fortunate to be like sort of part of some really great teams and I got quite a lot of experience there, so we had loads of bird surveys, and at Old Hall and then at Minsmere just loads of habitat management work, also got involved in species protection work at Old Hall. So we had Little Tern colony there, and yeah, so I just sort of really enjoyed all that work so I ended up becoming a Little Tern warden for Spurn Bird Observatory and that was my first paid role. Did that for six months which was brilliant and then obviously back in the whole cycle of trying to apply for jobs and there's never enough jobs really for everybody, so in the end I decided to go back to residential volunteering because I didn't have a job, and spent six months at Old Hall which was great again it was just building that experience. We spent most of that winter doing a lot of fencing and other things like that. And then I finally got an Assistant Warden role which was seasonal, well it was a six month contract, so that was with the RSPB at Fen Drayton but I actually only stayed there for three months mainly because I just happened to apply for a permanent contract and got it with Norfolk Wildlife Trust. So I went there for two years in Norfolk on the heaths so that was brilliant, again it was another completely different experience. We didn't have an office and we were out five days a week on the reserves and we had about six reserves, just doing practical conservation. And then I, then a job came up with the RSPB at the Lodge as a Reserve Warden there, so this is also the headquarters and spent two and a half years there and then the job that I'm in now came up and I was basically kind of asked to apply for it, I applied for it and here I am. So I'm now yeah, Warden for North West Norfolk reserves, so we have four reserves that we manage.

Emily: Wow, that sounds very exciting, lots of interesting bits of experience. Perhaps we could talk a little bit more about where you started with the degrees you did. I was wondering whether you found that they were very helpful in terms of conservations careers because it sounds like you were quite unsure about where to go. Did you have anyone, did they give any good careers advice, did they talk about conservation much or was it more sort of pure academic ecology?

Lizzie: So, yeah I would say careers advice at university wasn't that great to be brutally honest, or not for what I wanted to do. It's fine I think if you want to go academic, so my experience was it's fine if you wanted to go the academic route but other, like in terms of working with NGOs, that was the area that was lacking. Potentially because of the type of university I was at, but it was also about trying to be different whereas actually, now I would say actually you need to be, just get the basics it's not necessarily about being different it's about getting the experience and learning the basics. Which is probably partly why I struggled a bit and took a while to work out what I wanted to do, because I just didn't know what the options were, so I ended up kind of having to discover it myself, which was also a bit harder because I was also living in the north of Scotland at the time. So just trying to get on to join like a work party was impossible because the nearest work party was like two hours away. Well, it would have been like ten miles on a boat but to get there it was like a 50 mile round trip so yeah, you just kind of end up having to discover stuff yourself.

Emily: Yeah, that's very interesting I think I would say the same thing about my experience doing a degree and the careers advice definitely being tailored towards more academic roles or I think more business-type roles I think.

Lizzie: Yeah, absolutely.

Emily: Yeah, that's really interesting. And then I was going to ask as well about the Malta Raptor Camps, that's something quite unusual, I was wondering how that was, how that experience was? It sounds really interesting but also maybe stressful!

Lizzie: It was really interesting, so when I was a Raptor Camp volunteer and sort of at that age at university, I was actually clueless about birds, and I was kind of like a bit clueless, I was like this naive student that had no idea what was going on in the world. So it was quite an eye opener going to Malta to see, 'A' see loads of amazing birds, but 'B' also just to see the depths of sort of raptor persecution that existed in the country. But having gone back for several years it was really interesting because you could start to see some progress, so although it's still present and it's still quite horrific, there definitely in the time I went there was some progress.

Emily: That's good!

Lizzie: But, there's still a long way to go. But it was interesting to see, you know, the birding there was incredible and the Maltese people that we worked with were incredibly passionate, and even some of the locals you know, they were quite horrified by what was happening. But even holiday makers like we stayed in a hotel, and the holiday makers there have absolutely no idea what's going on, they just think we're a bit weird going out with binoculars every evening and all sitting on a roof on a building. And then when they heard about it they were quite mortified about what was happening, even though Malta is quite a small island, but yeah so it was an interesting experience.

Emily: Yeah, very interesting. And then I suppose so you came back and had some other voluntary roles and then some short-term contracts. Do you think that now with the hindsight of, or like knowing a bit more about the options available in the sector, do you think that going down the sort of degree route is something you'd advise people to do, or do you think you can get into a sort of ranger/warden type role without that, just by doing voluntary things, or do you think a mixture of both is sort of necessary?

Lizzie: I think it depends on the person, but I would say that you don't need a degree and you shouldn't feel like you have to do a degree if that's not what you want to do. If you want to do a degree that's great, but if you're not that sort of person then don't feel like you have to do a degree. So I've got one of my residential volunteers last year, he's twenty, he's never been to university and him going to university it's not for him, but he's had a seasonal contract this year as an Assistant Warden for the RSPB. He spent the winter with us as like a volunteer and he'd obviously got some work experience like paid work experience working in landscape gardening, but he's also a mad keen passionate birder and he will be able to develop his career without the need for going to university. So I think if you know that you want to become like a reserve Warden, and you don't really feel like university is for you, then just skip it because, and go and do like, spend that year, spend a year being like an intern or on a placement and get all those skills and you've probably got just as good a chance to get in to a job. And also, so RSPB role profiles, our jobs, for Assistant Warden don't even require a degree, so it's trying to break this stigma I suppose that you need a degree. And you know my partner as well, he's the same, he started getting into conservation and then he ended up getting work with a tree surgeon and was a tree surgeon for ten, fifteen years and he's now left that and he's now got a job in conservation as a Reserve Assistant. And again, he's another one, university is

not for him at all, he's not academic, he'll admit it he's not academic at all you know he's a, someone on the tools and yeah he's got this job without going to university so I think there's definitely alternatives to university to become a Warden. So yeah if it's not for you, just pick, find placements and get the experience that way and actually go for volunteering experience because that's actually a lot more important and relevant when it comes to applications and interviews and just being able to do your job. I think I learnt, what I learnt at university I haven't really used, whereas all the stuff I did on my internship, that's what I've used and that's what I need to do my job.

Emily: I was going to ask as well about you mentioned you'd worked on some species and habitat specific projects like the Little Tern role and then working on, I think you said heathland in Norfolk, and I was wondering whether you thought that having like really specific knowledge of like a species or habitat was important, or do you think it's more about transferable skills? So whether people should really try and master a particular area or whether it's more about gaining the experience in whatever project or site you can work on in the first place?

Lizzie: Yeah good question, so I think it's having that basic broad understanding but you will naturally find that if you've got experience in a specific habitat or area you're more likely to end up going down that route. So I was quite fortunate that Minsmere has got both habitats, so heathland and wetland so I could go either way. I went wetland to begin with but then ironically actually, I thought I was going to go wetland and then got the job on Norfolk heathlands and then spent another two years of heathlands, but I've actually come back to wetland now. So you can do both, but you'll probably find that naturally you'll end up, if you start working on a wetland you'll probably always go wetland, or uplands you'll always go uplands because there's a really specific, there's transferable skills but there's also some really specific skills for all those relevant habitats and the wildlife associated with them and some of the skills that you need. So I'd be absolutely hopeless working in the uplands but I can do lowland stuff, and again I'm not that great in woodland stuff so I probably wouldn't make a good woodland warden either. So you'll find that when you go through the career, like going through interviews because they start asking you questions about specific habitats and ecology, it'll start drawing out which route you're going to go in because you can answer those questions. I think to begin with, start broad and try and get loads of different experiences, but you'll then naturally go down a certain route if that's where your expertise are.

Emily: Yeah I suppose if you start broad as well then you can find out what you're really passionate about if you're not sure yet you can try lots of things.

Lizzie: Exactly!

Emily: Yeah, brilliant. I was going to ask what does a sort of typical work day looks like, but perhaps it's not very typical and you have lots of very different work days, but if you could give an insight into a sort of typical day as a Warden or a Reserve Manager, that would be really useful.

Lizzie: I would say there are no two days the same. And, it's incredibly varied, which is partly why I love it. So we have a lot of like planned work, but then we also have, particularly on my site at the moment, we have a lot of reactive work. So we do spend a lot of time just changing our plans and having to deal with what's right in front of us. But essentially, we I suppose we could break it down into like the winter: autumn-winter, we're mainly doing all the habitat work on the reserves. So for Titchwell that would be reed cutting, scrub clearance, bit of tree felling. And then in the spring-summer, we have all the breeding bird surveys, also spend a lot of time clearing paths of vegetation so that they're accessible for everybody, we'll try and do most of the building maintenance and hide maintenance during the summer months when everything's breeding. And we'll also have - so at

Titchwell and Snettisham, we've got birds that nest on the beaches, so ringed plovers and oystercatchers. So we then spend a lot of the time then doing like erecting cordons, engaging with the public, and that sort of thing. But then throughout the year, we also have all the other stuff that happens; so all the health and safety stuff we have to do, like tree safety, trail checks; we can be doing writing annual reports and project management; and then of course, managing volunteers. And I'd also at Titchwell particularly we also spend a lot of time, some of our time, supporting the visitor operations team, so I have occasionally ended up in the cafe selling coffee or in the shop selling optics, or leading guided walks or things like that. So yeah, it's pretty, it's pretty varied.

Emily: Yeah, definitely. Yeah. Lots of lots of variety and lots of different skills that you have to draw upon, I guess. This sort of leads on to next question about what are the misconceptions about working as a warden in terms of the tasks that you do and the skills that you need? I think perhaps some people who haven't worked in the sector yet might think that it's just about chopping down trees or something. And, also building on that, is being a warden any different from being a ranger or is that just a terminology thing?

Lizzie: I think warden v ranger is probably terminology, so I think National Trust seem to use ranger more and then RSPB tend to use wardens, and then Wildlife Trusts use, like reserve officers or reserve assistants, so yeah, I think it's just different organisations appear to use different names.

Lizzie:

So misconceptions is we definitely don't watch the birds all day, or go bird watching all day long - I wish: that generally happens on my day off. But yeah, I think to be a warden we are basically a jack of all trades, and master of none, that's what it can feel like. So we'll do everything from breeding birds surveys, habitat management, and vehicle maintenance, cleaning toilets, and project management, budgets, managing or leading volunteers, and people engagement. Yeah, so literally anything - leading with stakeholders - yeah, pretty much anything, it's really broad. And it also very much depends on the reserve. So some reserves don't have much physical pressure or don't really have visitors. So most of their work is purely ecological focused, whereas the site I work on - well the two sites, main sites, I work on are big visitor reserves. So we then have a lot of additional or different stuff to fit in, because we've got buildings and hides a lot more infrastructure to maintain. And also having to deal with the email inquiries and the phone calls that come in as well so a little bit of everything.

Emily: Yeah. And do you think that warden and ranger roles are very different from place to place?

Lizzie: Yeah, definitely. So I think every reserve is different, or every team - so we have four reserves that we manage, to the private sites, and then to public sites. And some sites will only have like one big reserve to manage, but when I was with Norfolk Wildlife Trust, we had about six different sites to manage. And all the team dynamics are different as well. So you've got different size teams, and different emphases on different things, whether it's more survey work or more working with contractors. So some sites will spend a lot of time mainly managing contractors, and other sites might be spending a lot more time in the winter doing the actual physical stuff. Whereas some sites, they haven't actually got that much physical habitat management to do. But they're doing other things instead. So yeah, every reserve is different, and every team is different, and every individual is different. So I've kind of tweaked my role a little bit because I not only enjoy the warden side, I quite like the visitor operation side of things and I like engaging with the public, so I support the visitor operations at Titchwell in ways that some people wouldn't. But that's because I enjoy it. We're a

team that kind of help, we can do that in our team. So what I would say is try, when people are trying to start out, is get that experience of different reserves, because yeah, not every reserve is going to suit you. And also in terms of the size so Titchwell we're quite a big team, when we include our visitor operations team, there's like 16 staff, whereas at Old Hall, which has like no visitor facilities, and it's a lot quieter site, there's only three members of staff. So again, you know, every personality is different, so, you know, I like working in a big team, whereas, you know, I might not, I didn't necessarily enjoy the smaller teams, for example. So yeah, everyone's different.

Emily: Yes. Like not just a diverse job in itself, but diverse between all the different roles and sites that you could work on. That's very interesting. And building on from that in terms of, because there are so many different things involved, if you're a young person starting out, what do you think is like the key skills that would be most useful in sort of any ranger role to try and develop those skills?

Lizzie: Get a driving licence is probably the key thing, because no matter where you are, or whatever site you're on, you're gonna need to be able to drive a vehicle or be able to just get from one site to the site or get to work even. So I'd say yeah, get your driving licence and then just learn basic wildlife knowledge as well. Just go out and build that skill set of knowing what like common garden birds are, common wetland birds, common woodland, birds, butterflies, or dragonflies, that sort of stuff and just start to learn their basic ecology. But then also, you know, we've got quite a lot of practical skills, so learning to maintain a vehicle as well, so learn how to change a tire on a car and those sort of basic carpentry skills, those sorts of skills are also really important. And I think they are the key things to focus on and then you can sort of build on that.

Emily: Yeah, yes. Especially with like wildlife ID is something that you'll always be learning on. But I guess the sooner you start, the better really?

Lizzie: Absolutely. And I still I still need to learn, I need to go rock pooling. So, the past couple weeks, people keep bringing in objects that they find on the beach and I've no idea what half of them are because it'd be like some random bit of part of a skeleton of sea creature and I'm yeah, obviously, everyone always looks to the warden to know everything. Yeah. And I certainly don't so I think I need to go rockpooling at the moment.

Emily: That's quite quite a fun task. Yeah, that's great. And so there are lots of fun things about being a ranger or a warden, but I was wondering what you thought was maybe the most challenging part of your career, either like the job itself, or the sort of working in the sector and trying to find a role.

Lizzie: I think, the hardest bit of starting out, because there aren't that many jobs and there's a lot of people that want the jobs. So just getting your foot in the door is probably the hardest thing to do. And, then getting a really good - once you've got that foot in the door is then really building on those experiences and make the most of that opportunity, and just get involved and get stuck in. Because then it's this thing of - we always want to be everyone to be judged on merits, but also, it's as much about who you know, to help you sort of progress or develop in other areas, and getting that support around you to help you progress. So it's showing that enthusiasm, and just take any opportunity, not any opportunity, but take the opportunities that come along and have that flexibility. So for example, I lived in the north of Scotland when I graduated university, and I took the into the internship down in Essex, so basically moved 500 miles away, to be able to progress my career. So I think, you know, if you don't have any commitments, you just need to go and take it and take those opportunities. Because otherwise you're gonna get like really restricted in what way you may or may not go, and I always say to myself, and nothing is ever permanent. And you can always,

if you don't like something you can always leave, or there's always something that you could maybe move on to.

Emily: Yeah, yeah, and it'll be like learning experiences along the way to work out what you do want to do sort of thing.

Lizzie: Yeah, exactly.

Emily: Cool, and in terms of so people who are starting out, do you have any advice for interviews or doing applications? I think you said, that you have been involved with recruitment, so if you've got any advice for how to how to do a really good application and interview.

Lizzie: So I'd say read the really read the job description, and a lot of them will come with a role profile or something like that. So really read it and work out what they actually want. And then when you do the application, so for example, in RSPB, we don't use it, we don't accept CVs, it's an application form, and they don't have a word limit. So you have a great opportunity to really sell yourself, and without giving us War and Peace. So it's getting that balance, but really make it easy for the interviewer to read your application form because potentially, they could be reading 100 applications, and they've only got half a day to go through it. So you want to really make it clear how you meet each of those criterias. So think about how you format it, and how you give an example, but also show your enthusiasm for that role and look as if you've done a bit of research on that role as well, so try to bring some of that into it. And don't just say you have a passion for wildlife, like end it at that, we want to know a bit more - like, what is it, and why do you have it. Like "I'm really passionate about birds, and I go out birding every weekend, and I do some surveys for the BTO" because we presume that everyone who's applying for these jobs has an interest in wildlife. So it's just taking it to that next level. And I'd also say if you don't necessarily have the hands on experience, demonstrate your knowledge. So particularly with our RSPB applications, we have a section on experience and skills, and there's a section on knowledge, which I would think is a great way for you to demonstrate your knowledge if you don't have the experience. So you might not have worked on a heathland, for example, and got the hands on experience of managing for woodlark. But you've read on the internet, what woodlark like, so just put that in it and it shows that you've actually researched that role and got a bit of something rather than just leaving it blank, because that one or few points could make a difference between having an interview and not having an interview. And don't be afraid to drop a piece of an email, or pick up the phone to just ask if they've got any information to send you. And with the beauty of the internet, nowadays, there's so much information, out there as well. So do your research, and make sure you sell yourself. You've got to really big yourself up, which can be a horrid and a bit of a weird thing to do. But you do have to just really sell yourself. And hey, if you haven't got all the experience, don't worry - unless it's like really specific to that role that they really need. But essentially, if you don't have everything, just give it a go as well.

Emily: Yeah, sometimes the sort of enthusiasm can be really important, especially maybe for entry level roles, especially. I just gonna pick up on one thing you said about the length - this is something I always am unsure about, if it's got like an open section to sort of describe your experience and skills. How long is too long? If it is unlimited, do you ever think "Oh God, they've written five pages, that's too much".

Lizzie: I wouldn't say there's a right or wrong length, particularly as you progress. So I say it's about quality. So thinking about whether you've answered the points. So for example, if, -I'm to use RSPB roll protocols, because that's what I know - so far example assistant warden or a wWarden might

have like 13 criteria, and if you write a paragraph for each one of them, it doesn't take long for it to become like four or five pages. So mine are about six pages long, by now, and but then I've got like eight years experience that I'm trying to put into it. So it's a really hard thing because you can't necessarily say, oh, six pages too long or too short. It's thinking about the quality of what you're putting in there. So if you can write really good application in three pages, brilliant. If it's probably a page it's probably going to be too short, for like an RSPB application, so to speak. So it's making sure, I think as long as you've got a succinct paragraph for each of those points, you should be ok.

Emily: That's really helpful.

Lizzie: But always get someone to read it as well. Even if they don't know anything about about it, they can at least read it and see if you're waffling or, if you've said something twice, or the grammar doesn't quite make sense. But yeah, if you can send it to somebody - even better if you know somebody in the sector who could look at it for you. But if not just get someone else to cast an eye over it.

Emily: Yes, sounds like really good advice for us to bear in mind. And, of course, there are no sort of hard and fast rules. But yes, good to get an indication from someone with a bit more experience. Talking about interviews, if you are successful with an application, what does the sort of typical warden interview involve? At a sort of entry level?

Lizzie: So I would say there's some of the toughest. So yeah, I think assistant warden interviews that I've been to have probably been way harder than my warden interviews. But they are tough - actually even my ward interviews were tough, just because there's going to be either a lot of people that they've had to narrow it down to six, who are all really similar in experience, or there's a couple of you that are equally as good as each other. And trying to decide who to give it to can literally come down to half a point or who's going to get on better in the team. So essentially, there's normally going to be an element, particularly for assistant warden interviews, a practical element. So I've known people build a nest box in their interview, and I've done things like put a brush cutter together, with knocking nails in a post, and various things like that. And I've also had like identification section, whether it's identifying birds on call or sound, which is really hard in an interview because you have no habitat. And there's nothing to put it in context. Or there could be like bird IDs, or general wildlife photos to identify. And then of course, of course have press quite a lot of presentations, even if it's just a five minute presentation at the beginning, so that's generally been a feature, I think, for all my interviews, and then you've got the standard interview questions, exploring more about your experience. So it's going back to that role profile, and then testing your knowledge on the species or the ecology of the sites, that you're gonna work on your practical skills, a bit more health and safety, how you manage or work with people, and that sort of stuff. And so that can be like scenario based questions as well. But it's also a two way thing as well. So do make sure that you ask questions as well. Because it's much as about you trying to work out whether you want to work with them, as whether they want to work with you. And so I have gone to interviews, and I've not really enjoyed the people on the panel or felt like I wouldn't really work well with them and I've hoped that they don't then offer me the job. And so it's okay to say like, if you don't don't feel like you gel with the people on the interview panel, don't feel like you have to say yes. So it's as much about you trying to work out what they are like, as much as whether they want you.

Emily: Yeah, definitely. It sounds like there's so many different things going on in a ranger interview to prepare for can be quite stressful.

Lizzie: They are, they are tough. Yeah, they only do last like an hour, but they can be quite a grilling. And then in the past previous two year roles have gone to second interviews as well. So just to add an extra element of it, to make it even harder. Yeah, we've had second interviews for the past as well, just to make sure that well, whether it was me or the other person with the right people for the role.

Emily: Yeah, yeah. And we've talked quite a bit about volunteering and internships and that sort of thing. But obviously, that's like sort of not an option for everybody. And I was wondering if you have any advice for people who are working full time, or like caring for others full time or something like that, where they're not able to do a sort of long term volunteering role, or put a lot of time into that, if they say, I only have like, a few hours, spare a week, what you'd recommend for people in that situation.

Lizzie: So yeah, it's tough, it's probably going to get even tougher, particularly with COVID because it's going to be with us for a long time, and it's going to make everything so much harder. So all the normal advice I'd give, I don't know, it's really even hard to give even the normal advice right now. So I would think about what skills you have - again, going back to looking at all the roles that are out there, or that you're interested in, and really looking at what they want, and what skills that you already have and identifying all the gaps. And then, you might have to get a bit creative in how you want to do it and work out where you are going to have to compromise on the line. Just because the sector, particularly in my sector, being a warden, it is so competitive, and you do have to have a certain amount of experience, but it's trying to work out whether you could get that slightly differently to spending six months on the reserve, which is hard, it's going to be a lot harder, so you might have to be a bit more creative about how you get that experience. But also don't be afraid to if you are near reserves, to drop them an email, or somehow get in contact and offer them that you want to help but also maybe think about what skills you've already got that they may benefit from, that they might not have realised. So we don't necessarily advertise - so although we try and advertise all our roles, you know, there may be times when you go along and go "oh, I've got these skills, can I use them with you?" And we could go "ah, they've really thought of that actually, we can really do it with someone", and then you can maybe be able to get things a different way. So it is going to be hard, really hard and it's just trying to work out where you can compromise.

Emily: And maybe get sort of transferable skills from if you are working full time, maybe that gives you the sort of people skills or project management skills, and then you just need to like work on their wildlife things in your free time.

Lizzie: Exactly. And there's so many not to say don't become a warden, either. But there's also so many more roles out there that like I didn't even realise what half the roles were. And I still didn't even know what half the roles are and what they do. But there are so many roles in the conservation sector that we don't necessarily automatically think of either. So you know, we've got the whole support network that keep the RSPB, you know, keep these organisations running or there's fundraisers or like, even if our visitor operations, you know, they're great roles to be in as well and like communication or digital, and particularly digital in a digital world, there's going to be a lot more things like that, as well. So it may be that if you just can't get that experience to do practical stuff, and which you essentially do need to become a warden think about other sectors or other areas within conservation, you might actually be able to really enjoy. And people could be completely surprised about what they actually may enjoy. So also just speaking to different people, actually, and finding out different roles or just trying something different, and try lots of different things, because you may get surprised.

Emily: I definitely didn't know about the other options for sort of conservation careers when I first started out, so yeah, I definitely think that's a really important thing to talk about. It's not just the hands on roles, there are lots of other options as well, I guess. The other thing to say is that I think it does seem that there are more a few paid traineeships appearing, but usually they're usually quite limited numbers, or only in specific places but hopefully over time that will become more of a mainstream options for people to get entry level experience, hopefully we'll see, depends how much funding the sector has.

Lizzie: And that's it – that's what's going to be what's really tough over the next 6, 12 months, is the funding, because it's limited and are probably going to become even harder so yeah I personally glad I'm not in that position right now of trying to get experience because it's so tough, so all the normal things of "oh try some residential volunteering for a week" or three weeks or four weeks or six weeks – it's not an option at the moment. For example, in RSPB, we haven't even restarted our weekly residential volunteering, and probably aren't going to be restarting that until some time next year, and even the residential volunteering that we do have on our reserves, we're severely restricted in what we can do because we've got to make sure that everyone's kept safe.

Emily: Yeah of course.

Lizzie: So, yeah it's tough, and everyone's going to have to be more creative, which is a shame, and it's going to be difficult.

Emily: Yeah – just thinking, outside of the sort of current restrictions, do you often have people on university work placements, or doing year in industry type things?

Lizzie: Yeah we do – so we take – we've had a few, and I would definitely say that if you can do that at university, make the most of that. Also there are a couple of colleges that are doing apprenticeships which are linked to – which involve so many hours of practical experience alongside their apprenticeship or their course or whatever, so we have a few of them on our sites. We're a bit further away from colleges or universities, but we've had a couple who do happen to live locally, come in once a week, through their college course. And then we've had a couple of people who do want to do residential volunteering as a placement year, so there are opportunities, and it's something that we keep – when I have some time, that I want to work on a bit more as well, as to how we get it more accessible. That is one of the biggest barriers is the accessibility and inclusivity I suppose, into the sector, which is why I'm trying to say, yeah don't feel like you have to go to university, and try and go for the more practical route straight after school. And then that might help a little bit.

Emily: Yeah definitely. Great well, we had a few quick fire questions just to finish off, and some sort of light hearted ones. To start off with - what's your favourite animal or plant, or maybe bird, in this case.

Lizzie: It changes quite a lot, but a couple of favourite birds – so they would be little terns and marsh harriers.

Emily: Cool, and then I was going to ask what's a sort of highlight of your career or best memory of working in conservation.

Lizzie: Ooh tough one - I have lots of different ones. So little terns when I was the little tern warden – trying to look after little terns, or doing any species protection work like that – you kind of throw

your heart into it, and then they all get predated, and then you get upset, but then when they do fly and you get some chicks off. Its really rewarding to see that, although a bit later, they have finally made it, so having a successful breeding season. When I was at Spurn, I did get a good number off considering that so many chicks pretty much got eaten. And then same this year, although our ringed plovers at Titchwell really suffered with high tide. We did finally get some chicks to fledge, and just watching them fly after their parents have gone through three attempts to raise some chicks makes it all that bit worth it, but even this week just seeing the reaction of the children on our reserve to the wildlife, the beach, or even just seeing us going around birding kind of gives you a smile across your face. So even just seeing people connect with nature and have an amazing time, whether its watching all the knots at Snettisham, doing their acrobatic display, and just hearing the “wow”s, that’s also incredible, so I kind of get the pay off whether it’s a successful fledging or whether its people having a great time, they both make me really happy.

Emily: They both sound really great. Well its been really interesting talking to you and lots of really useful advice, so thank you so much for your time and chatting to us.

Lizzie: That’s not a problem, I hope it helps other.

Emily: I’m sure it will – lots of people will be interested in rangering and alternatives to rangering if they don’t know about them. Thank you.

Emily: I hope you found that interview interesting and informative. We’d like to say a big thank you to our mentors for offering their time for us, both in these interviews and in the mentoring scheme. If you’d like to get in touch with us, or to sign up as a mentee, please do have a look at our website or social media, and you can contact me via email at mentors@afocusonnature.org . We’re very open to feedback and discussion, so I’d be very happy to hear from you. Thanks for listening!