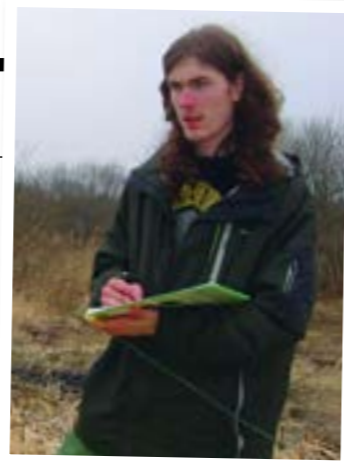


COMMUNITY

THE MAKING OF AN AMPHIBIAN CONSERVATION BIOLOGIST



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I'm sure that everyone remembers the days of their youth when they spent hours scrambling around the undergrowth, searching for insects, amphibians and other wildlife.



Fortunately these memories are still quite strong within my mind as it is something that I regularly do as part of my research. I'm an amphibian conservation biologist with a particular interest in disease dynamics and population monitoring. I often get asked how I got involved in what I do and the simple answer is that I really never grew up. I'm happy to share my story with a larger audience to show that if I can do it, anyone can!

I grew up in south Essex, not far from the Thames and luckily within my 'local patch' I could easily find

nine out of the thirteen native reptile and amphibian species. This is probably one of the main reasons why I clutched hold of the science of herpetology as tightly as I have but I like to think that if there hadn't have been such a high diversity, that I still would have walked down the same path. After hectic days at school I used to love watching wildlife documentaries as a way to unwind, with two of my biggest influences being Steve Irwin and Nigel Marven. If you're not familiar with either of them, they often filmed large and charismatic reptile species in far flung lands and bought them to a wider audience.

The Australian outback is a very different environment to the wilds of Essex but I still had to give it a go right?

Very quickly I learned where to find certain species in my local area and did a very loose version of monitoring, just going back regularly to ensure they were still there. At this point in my early teens I was completely unaware of habitat management or most of the fundamentals of biology other than what school had taught me. Aside from photographing the animals I found, I got involved with some volunteer groups and even completed my work experience with the Essex Wildlife Trust. This helped to establish the foundations of a true conservationist within me. I'd always been fascinated by the natural world and now I was developing the skills to apply the knowledge I'd slowly been building from TV shows and books I'd read. Although this was only a small step, it was a key turning point in my life. I had found my future purpose.

Fast forward to when I applied for my A-levels, I was dead-set on applying for a Zoology degree to take things to the next level. The

institution I'd chosen for this was Anglia Ruskin University and I studied at their Cambridge campus. I'm sure there could have been many more universities to choose from, but after attending an open day at the Chelmsford campus, I was sure it was the university for me. I started my degree in 2012 and graduated in 2015, during those 3 years I went through a great transformation. When I first entered the doors I was an amateur enthusiast and by the time I left, I was a fully practised local authority on the conservation of amphibians and reptiles. The reason being is that whilst at university, opportunities arise that allow you to specialise and follow your passions.

One of the first things I did when I started my course was to contact the local Amphibian and Reptile Group. I was acutely aware that Cambridgeshire contained a large portion of the country's great crested newts (*Triturus cristatus*) and I was interested in being involved with their conservation. The then Chairman of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Amphibian and Reptile Group took me under his wing and after his training, I lead my own project with a colleague looking

at great crested newts at the local crematorium. This is still ongoing five years later and will hopefully continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Shortly afterwards I was voted in as the chairman of the group and it's a position I still hold.

From the wet nights looking for great crested newts in Peterborough and Cambridge came more opportunities. My most recent of which (before I started my Masters Degree at Imperial College London) was spent in Sabah, Malaysia investigating the amphibian fauna of Mount Kinabalu. I took two gap years between the end of my Bachelors and further education in order to build up a portfolio of published research and to increase my experience. My research has taken me all across the globe and I'm now focusing on amphibian disease dynamics with the hope of starting a PhD on the topic in the next year or two. Now as part of my Masters I'm focussing on the disease dynamics of amphibians in Madagascar which promises to be both an important and exciting project!

It wasn't always plain sailing; there were a number of challenges I had to overcome. The biggest of which

was believing in both my abilities and judgement. Once I'd gained the confidence to do that, everything became that little bit easier. The one thing that helped most with this was attending scientific conferences and meeting fellow scientists of all walks of life, discussing conservation issues and speaking about our experiences. I'd thoroughly recommend attending conferences relevant to your area of interest and the sooner you start, the sooner they will start to benefit you!

I would like to take this opportunity to ask each of the readers to do me one favour from the 2018 field season onwards, that is to record any amphibians and reptiles you see. Please send these records to your local biological records centre or record them on the Record Pool website (<http://www.recordpool.org.uk/>). Even for widespread species, data is lacking to detect long-term trends in population declines. Most importantly if you find any dead amphibians then please report them to Garden Wildlife Health (www.gardenwildlifehealth.org). If you've got any questions or would like to know more then please feel free to find me on Twitter: @stevoallain.

