

Of Mice and Mentors



Following the success of the 2nd BES Undergraduate Summer School, we hear from the six mentors what their biggest lessons, favourite moments, and take-away impressions were from leading their students through five days of ecology, careers, and most importantly: pipecleaner animal crafts.

Lewis –

We were lucky this year to have a cohort of In2Science students, half-way through their A-levels, joining us on the summer school, which served to bring about a shock of my suddenly-apparent adulthood. One of the biggest impressions left on me this year was by these incredibly engaged and intimidatingly intelligent, students, who by virtue of poor fortune and circumstance had no experience of what ecology in higher education is. Go back 10 years, and these excellent candidates would likely not have looked to go to university to study the natural world. Yet here they were, not just keeping up with content aimed at current ecology undergraduates, but jumping further to ask questions which betrayed such a fundamental understanding of the topics, that I couldn't help relax a little to think the future of our field is in good hands.

Catie –

I came to help teach but I undoubtedly left having learnt. It was great to be able to assist the undergraduates on a wide range of ecological topics from cave ecology to luminescent tracking of beetles. It was also a very reflective experience as we were asked to give talks on our PhD pathway, or our careers so far, obviously a topic which is very personal to each individual. Listening to the other PhD pathways I appreciated all the many ways one can end up doing a PhD, with some bee-lining straight for it and others meandering through several careers before landing there. It definitely made me reflect on what work-experience I had carried out that was a stepping stone in my career and those that just kept me in the flow for a little longer. I have no doubt that a large number of the undergraduate students on the course will go on to carry out PhD research and I wish them the best of luck, whichever routes they may take.

Cass –

The BES summer school wasn't all about learning. There was also the chance for the students to socialise... ahem... I mean network! As well as being on hand to support the students and provide the odd word of wisdom, the downtime schedule was down to us PhD mentors. I took great pleasure in this as my usual fieldwork leaves me little freedom to be social (with humans, rather than monkeys).

We devoted time in the run up to the School to planning pub quizzes; stock piling as many egg boxes and craft items as we could (shout out to Catie and her insane craft supplies); and decorating photo frames for photography competitions. I expected undergraduates to shy away from these childish games we had concocted. Instead I was delighted to find that not only were their minds sharp and engaged they were hilariously funny too.

Scott –

I was really looking forward to being a PhD mentor at the BES summer school this year as I thought it would be an excellent opportunity to improve my teaching and outreach skills. However, the whole event completely surpassed all my expectations. It was a brilliant week, with every student being incredibly engaged and passionate about ecology. I would have loved to have an opportunity like this when I was in my undergraduate but I relished the chance to take part as a PhD mentor. The feedback we received was beyond lovely. I have often worried that ecology and the natural world are often overlooked by the youth of today (I sound old...!) but seeing how passionate everyone was really was inspiring and I left with such a huge sense of achievement to be involved with such an awesome occasion.

Simon –

This was the first outreach activity I have been part of since starting my PhD and I thoroughly enjoyed every moment of it. The enthusiasm on show from all students (even when they were shattered!) was fantastic to see. Particular praise has to go to the In2Science students who demonstrated a real willingness to get involved in all the activities on offer and to ask intelligent and thought-provoking questions. I got the impression that many students left the summer school with a greater desire to attend university at the end of their A-Levels.

Melanie –

What can I say about the undergraduates and In2Science students from this year's BES Summer School? I know the PhD mentors are supposed to inspire the students but I was truly inspired by them. The passion they had for their subject (no matter what time of the day or night), their boundless energy (despite late nights watching bats, early mornings watching sheep, and some accidentally long hikes that might have been the fault of my map reading skills or lack thereof), and their willingness to get involved with everything asked of them (whether it meant being attacked by midges exploring Malham Tarn or covered in glitter making craft animals) was remarkable. These students have made me excited about the future of ecological research and I look forward to seeing what they get up to in future.