

Young Darwin Scholarship

I didn't know much about the Young Darwin Scholarship before I applied for one; name-dropping arguably the most important naturalist who ever lived, it certainly sounded like something special, but in the week-long residential that followed my receipt of the scholarship, all my expectations were exceeded.

Set up by the Field Studies Council (FSC) in 2012, and having accepted 15 new applicants every year since, the Young Darwin Scholarship is an initiative with the goal of encouraging and supporting the next generation of 'Darwins' - young people aged from 16 to 17 with an interest in the natural world, and a desire to pursue this interest further. Beyond the advice and support afforded by an ever-expanding network of fellow scholars, I had the chance to go on a weeklong residential course at the FSC-owned Preston Montford Estate in Shrewsbury - the very same town that Darwin himself was born and grew up in.

With the fourteen other scholars, I took part in activities ranging from moth and mammal trapping to canoeing along the River Severn in search of wildlife. We explored a disused lead mine in Snailbeach Rocks (oddly enough, a place which was neither a beach nor particularly renowned for its snails), which proved to be both fascinating from a geological point of view and darkly atmospheric in its own right. Some days we would spend hours simply walking through Shrewsbury's most impressive landscapes, including the vast, craggy Stiperstones (a stretch of rocky heath moorland whose name unsurprisingly means, in the local dialect, the sharp stones), in search of rare species like red grouse or kites - the rain, of course, was unrelenting, but the heavy banks of mist only added to the land's remote beauty. The last day was given over entirely to a BioBlitz - an intense series of sessions focused on identifying as many species on the estate as possible, with assistance from a range of environmental experts. Excitingly, the results we recorded were then uploaded by us onto an international database, meaning we had contributed to vital biodiversity statistics.

I've taken away a lot from that week: I've learnt that I'm terrible at identifying bird calls, but not too bad at bats; I've realised that moths are far more diverse than I previously imagined, and (at least to me) have an unusual beauty that far outshines the ever-popular butterflies; that otters never show up when you want them to, and a few twigs cracking is all it takes to scare away a family of badgers after waiting an hour to see a single shining eye; I've learnt that every species is fascinating in its own way, from the worms we surveyed on the first day to the barn owl that flew within a few metres of my face on the last night. The Young Darwin Scholarship taught me all this and more, and I can't wait to see what it teaches me next.

Zak