

Feeding behaviour in wheatears

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Background

This project was a research-based practical for Year 2 Psychology students: a week-long residential field trip to Lundy Island in the Bristol Channel to observe the feeding behaviour of wheatears. There were three learning outcomes of this trip:

- It substantially increased the students' knowledge of how animals behave. In a week of intensive work, they acquired a surprising level of expertise in the behaviour of one species, in one habitat.
- It gave the students an insight into the methods of fieldwork. Some of those methods are specific to the study of animal behaviour, but many of them are just as relevant to fieldwork in social psychology, market research, and other areas. This will greatly enhance their employability.
- It gave the students the chance to do a real research project, from proposal to final write-up, under the close guidance of their lecturer, and away from their usual study environment.

Approach/methodology

The students prepared their research proposal during the Michaelmas term. This included, apart from background research, the detailed methodology, risk assessments and equipment use. This enabled them to start with their data collection as soon as they arrived on the island.

The students were interviewed on the bus to Devon about their expectations, what they thought they would learn and anything they were apprehensive about. On the journey back they passed the video camera around and talked about what they had experienced and learned and what could be improved for future students.



The students on the field trip

Outcomes

In addition to a detailed data collection on the feeding behaviours of wheatears, the outcomes for the students were amazing. Not only did they all hand in work that was in the upper second class range or better (despite scoring much lower on previous assessments), their newly learned skills influenced their attitude to and the structuring of their final year research project.

The whole trip was very successful. All the student feedback was positive, their overall marks improved, and they can still be seen in groups on campus, although they did not know each other before the trip.

The students were very apprehensive to begin with and it was clear that most of them were out of their comfort zone – only two claimed to have any outdoor experience. The majority came from a Widening Participation background. As well as improving their research skills they improved their life skills, and formed friendships for life.

Here are some quotes from the interviews:

I am quite a reserved person, so normally I wouldn't really do anything like this, but I think if I don't take this opportunity I would never get it again so I think it's really important to grasp it while you have got the chance.

I enjoyed everything; I had a lot of fun. I was apprehensive, I thought I wouldn't have fun, and improvement, well I am proud that I did something like this. I actually really enjoyed myself.

Personally, I learnt that I can make myself a low maintenance person and I can just throw myself in a bush.

Everything was amazing, everything was fun, cool.

I learnt that I can walk a lot further than I thought I could and academically I learnt how to collect data. I learnt how to bake scones.

The project co-ordinator commented that it is much more work for teaching staff to involve students in research rather than just doing it yourself but it is very rewarding. Also the time invested pays back in the supervision of their final year research as these students need far less input than others. Although the running of this practical involves a full week of round-the-clock teaching and supervision (not just research, but cooking, outdoor skills and interpersonal skills), it is an amazing experience and helps to maintain my enthusiasm for teaching for the rest of the year.

Enhancing RIT

The students learned to take responsibility for their own research. In contrast to many in-class activities, nothing was predictable and there was no 'spoon-feeding' of learning materials. It enabled the students to evaluate field research more realistically. Reports of research can make everything seem very straightforward and simple. Fieldwork is rarely either. Only by carrying out such work themselves can they get a true appreciation both of the achievements of researchers, and of the limitations of their conclusions. Also, the students were taught by example, another experience that is rather uncommon on campus.

Advice for others

Do not be put off by risk assessments, funding problems and other obstacles – students value it immensely when staff let them take part in their actual research.

Reflections and any future plans

It would be good to be able to do this field trip every year despite the relatively high costs per student. The value gained is immeasurable.

Some of the project funding was used to buy hoodies with 'CCCU, Lundy 2009'. Not only did they help the students to keep warm, they also made a real difference to group cohesion.

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