



From June – September 2022 I took a break from my PhD at the University of Sheffield to perform an internship with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB): an opportunity which arose through my fellow ACCE PhD student Finn McCully at the British Ecological Society conference in 2021. I was looking for a placement project focused on data analysis with direct conservation applications as I believed it would aid my development as a researcher and bolster my early career research portfolio, and this one seemed to fit the bill!

I contacted [David Douglas](#) and [Malcolm Burgess](#) who would be by liaisons and *de facto* supervisors for the duration of the project. I knew prior to starting the project that the focus would be determining the relative influence of key factors on Whinchat (*Saxicola rubetra*) reproductive success. Whinchats are a red-listed migratory bird which historically bred on lowland sites throughout the UK, but due to habitat destruction had been increasingly breeding on upland sites, such as the RSPB reserve in Geltsdale, Cumbria. During our first meeting David, Malcolm and I talked about Whinchat breeding ecology, field site data collection protocol, and made plans for potential analyses.

The early part of my project involved a lot of literature reading and data curation. I needed to familiarise myself with the appropriate literature to give the project the best chance of success. Often, data were collected by multiple observers over several years, so much effort was needed to standardise these data and get them into a format suitable for our intended analysis. After a few meetings and some preliminary investigations, I began applying our analytical frame to these data. The other members of the project, Amanda, Martin and Stephen, were very helpful in providing me with appropriate data and information when necessary.

As the placement progressed, I found some interesting results. After discussion with the others, I began writing a manuscript. The focus of the study was how life history traits (e.g. brood size), vegetation around nest sites and local weather conditions influenced Whinchat chicks' chances of surviving to fledging and ultimately of recruiting into the breeding population. Though the manuscript was not ready for publication by the end of the allotted three months I continued work on the project, in collaboration with the others, and several months later we submitted our manuscript to *Journal of Animal Ecology*. After some tough but fair reviews our manuscript was unfortunately rejected, but with recommendation to submit a revised manuscript to their sister journal *Ecology and Evolution*. Being new to scientific publication at the time, this rejection was tough to take, but I learnt a lot from it, and I believe the manuscript was improved as a result. Eventually our paper was published in *Ecology and Evolution* and on the 20th July 2023, exactly 13 months after the beginning the placement (<https://doi.org/10.1002/ece3.10346>). I learnt and developed many new skills during this placement, particularly those of data management, analysis and scientific publication, and made some great personal connections at the RSPB. Thank you to David, Malcolm, Amanda, Martin and Stephen for all you did for this project before, during and after my placement period, and to Finn for bringing this project to my attention. I would recommend these fabulous people and the RSPB generally to any keen ACCE student with a passion for bird conservation, data analysis and/or scientific publication.

Chay Halliwell – ACCE DTP



Male Whinchat



RSPB Geltsdale nature reserve

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David Douglas (left), Malcolm Burgess (middle), and Chay Halliwell (myself, right)