

Fionnuala McCully – ACCE DTP

Doing a PhD as part of a NERC DTP can lead to many career opportunities, both inside and outside of academia. One of the great things about a PhD is that alongside gaining specialist research skills, you also pick up a multitude of transferable skills. Placements are a great opportunity to gain further experience alongside your PhD project.

My PhD focuses on parental care in seabirds. These make for very charismatic study species, especially for someone with an interest in science communication, like myself. I found in my third year that I needed a break from staring at statistics all day (not my strong suit!) and an ACCE placement sounded like the perfect framework for me to experiment with something new. How might I be able to use my PhD skills in the ‘real world’ of science communication?



*Fionnuala’s PhD focuses on the parental care of Arctic seabirds (Photo: Eve Merrill)*

During my placement, I joined the science communications team at the [British Trust for Ornithology](#) (BTO): a charity dedicated to the monitoring of the UK’s bird populations. A previous ACCE student, Dr Sophie Bennett, had conducted [her own placement with BTO](#) the year before, and so I had heard great things about the organisation. When I contacted the BTO communications team directly, they were extremely receptive and keen to have me on board!

Together, BTO and I developed a project for my placement. BTO wanted to gather more information on how their communication materials were perceived by target audiences. I was excited by this idea, as it was essential to me (and to the ACCE committee that awarded me the funding!) that my time at BTO produce something valuable for my hosts. My project involved interviewing representatives of BTO’s target audiences and reporting back to the communications team on what they felt BTO are doing well, and what could be improved. I spoke to a huge range of people such as wind farm developers, farmers and journalists. What a great opportunity for networking!

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*Fionnuala (bottom left) attended the BTO youth summit in Autumn 2022 (Photo: Alicia Hayden/BTO)*

I also took part in the day to day running of the BTO communications team: writing blogs, press releases and social media posts about BTO's activities. Highlights of my placement included attending the BTO Youth Summit and appearing on BBC Radio Suffolk. These experiences definitely cemented my interest in science communication, and my placement showed me that this doesn't mean moving away from research entirely. If I choose the right employer, I will still be able to talk about birds all day long!

BTO is an incredibly welcoming place to work and I made some terrific friends during my placement. Other opportunities have arisen through these connections, such as getting more bird ringing experience, so I'm very glad to have expanded my professional network.



*Fionnuala was able to get more bird ringing experience thanks to friends she made during her placement (Photo: Dr Justin Walker/BTO)*



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PhDs are a long and often rocky road, but so much can be gained from taking a detour. To this end, I believe, there is little to lose by doing an ACCE placement. If you love it, it might be the gateway to a whole new career path. If not, it will enable to you rule out that option with confidence. No matter what you do, you are sure to pick up experience and skills which last well beyond your PhD!

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