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Stuffed animals are still in fashion! (Well for kids in museums anyway)
- Ed Drewitt, Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives

It's true! While adults may be wary and sometimes pulsate or even scream at the sight of a stuffed animal, children can't get enough of them. And it is this wonderful fascination that they have for animals that enables me, in my job, to offer children the opportunity to learn more about British and Global wildlife, both past and present.

I have been at Bristol's Museums, Galleries and Archives now for two and a half years working as a museum learning officer specialising in natural history and geology. I have a degree in zoology and worked previously for the RSPB and the Recycling Consortium, delivering assemblies and workshops to schools in the Bristol region. As far as I am aware I am in a very unique position in the Southwest and across many parts of the country, working as a learning officer covering specifically natural science subjects.

My position here at Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery is dynamic and diverse and provides a very satisfying and enjoyable work life, one that I wouldn't swap for any other job. I use a vast handling collection of high quality taxidermied birds, mammals and reptiles as well as rocks, fossils and minerals for delivery of my work programme. Most of these artefacts are left over from the loan service that ceased to exist around 7 or 8 years ago. We are still adding to the collection and filling in gaps where older specimens have been damaged, faded or are absent. Latest additions include an otter and little egret.

I work with everyone from school groups to families visiting on Sunday Fundays and holiday activities, to the media and TV and other museum professionals. My latest project is developing new family trails based on recent evaluation I have done with our visitors. I am also involved with numerous other projects and initiatives that are helping to both increase awareness of natural sciences within the museum and link it with all the other subjects that are covered here such as Egyptology, archaeology, fine art, applied art, conservation, eastern art and much more.

To give you an idea of what I get up to, let's look at one week of my life at work earlier in May this year.

Monday

I was at a team working training course having an enjoyable time; the outcomes have put me in good stead for team projects coming up very soon.

Tuesday

On Tuesday I was at a primary school giving an assembly on Peregrine Falcons using images, taxidermy and someone dressed up as a Peregrine! This was followed by a workshop during the morning where the children handled, drew and measured birds of prey, as well as cutting out their flight silhouettes. This was then followed up by a visit to a local quarry to see the 'real' Peregrines. I had a quick drive back to the museum where I was then straight into facilitating two classes in our British Birds and Mammals Gallery, allowing them to learn about the animals for a project they are working on with ACTA, a community theatre group. We have a grant of £50,000 to work with ACTA and schools to provide live interpretation (drama in costume) for a big day in July.

Wednesday

The next day I was working with another school, also related to ACTA, this time in our South West Natural History Gallery – their part of the project involved producing unusual sculptures and models of animals related to wetland habitats in the south-west. With a quick turn around I was then with another school for another part of the project, this time in our World Wildlife Gallery. Here I was helping the children to explore the senses, sounds and movements of animals from around the world. The children were pretending to be gorillas at one point (many imitating them very well!!!) and thinking about the sounds and movements of different animals that they could imitate for the project.

Thursday

On Thursday I was presenting a workshop about rocks to home-educated children who came along with their parents. They were discovering more about local rocks and minerals, taking observational drawings and looking at artefacts under microscopes. We then went up to the Severn Estuary to visit Aust Cliff and see rocks for 'real' and discover fossils and minerals. Some even found some coprolites and fish teeth as well as the snow-like gypsum scattered on the beach. It was then a quick journey to a City Learning Centre in Bristol where computers and other forms of ICT are available in suites for secondary and primary aged children. We were briefing teachers for fieldwork they are doing in June where their children are using laptops and data loggers to learn more about the stream, woodland and local history on Blaise Estate. This is where one of our museums, Blaise Castle House Museum is also based, which presents information about Blaise and the local area in a social history context to our visitors. I was then down to BBC Bristol to go on BBC Points West to talk about a blue tit nestbox linked up to a webcam that the BBC is showing viewers to help advertise the BBC's Springwatch campaign.

Friday

Finally, on Friday I was working with three classes from one school, giving workshops related to wildlife conservation and focussing on the Somerset Levels. This trip was complimented by a follow up trip to Ham Wall RSPB reserve on the Somerset Levels and is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund for the RSPB. This was a great opportunity to use many of our handling objects such as Bittern, Hobby, Swallow, Barn Owl and Peregrine. A week or so later I took a different school group out to the Somerset Levels where they were able to experience the sights and sounds of the reed beds in between the rain showers! Highlights included discovering a water stick insect (a first for the field teachers!) and a brood of seven cygnets, some jostling to get on the back of the female swan. Interestingly, some of the children thought they would be coming to a place where the animals would be inside a dome rather like the Eden Project or @Bristol. They were taken aback when they realised the Somerset Levels was all for real and that the birds such as Swifts came all the way from Africa by themselves!

So, as you can probably see from this 'week in the life of...' my work is very varied and continually changing and dynamic, meeting new people and using different handling objects on a constant basis.

After having recently helped to complete a new family resource area in our World Wildlife Gallery, providing things for families to touch, play, match up and draw, with lots of ideas for thinking and playing creatively, I am now working on producing new family trails. After consultation with families that visit the museum we are in the process of producing coloured, user friendly trails that include notes for parents to help families make the most of all our galleries. Consultation with audiences, and evaluation of our work is integral to the planning and delivery. With this in mind we are using Inspiring Learning for All, a framework enabling us to evaluate and plan projects with greater accuracy and discover more about what our audiences are gaining from their museum experience.

Recently I have been working with Horfield Prison, Bristol, where we have the opportunity to be a larger part of the inmates' learning programme. On one occasion I took in a selection of common garden birds for two art workshops. The response was very encouraging and I must admit was one of the most amazing things I have ever done. With so many preconceptions of what prisons are like it was great to experience it for real! We had a meeting with the senior prison managers including the director who were very encouraging and supportive of our work.

Every two months or so I arrange a meeting with other learning officers from other organisations in Bristol such as Bristol Zoo, SS Great Britain, English Heritage, @Bristol, The Empire and Commonwealth Museum, the Arnolfini, and Clifton Suspension Bridge and meet as an education forum to help share ideas and good practise from evaluation to presentation. I am also a committee member for the South Western Federation of Museums and Art Galleries, organising bi-annual meetings for members of museums, art galleries, former museum staff and related organisations. This body helps to represent and support museums, etc. and enables me to relate better to the wider museum community and have a greater awareness of the projects, people, and issues concerning other parts of the region beyond Bristol.

As a museum we are heavily involved with projects related to the BBC's Natural History Unit and the Bristol Festival of Nature, an annual celebration of Britain's wildlife. It is a great opportunity for us meet the

public and put across important conservation messages both at the City Museum and at the festival itself. This year the BBC has been encouraging viewers to look out for frogspawn, swifts, hawthorn, 7-spot ladybirds, peacock butterflies and red-tailed bumblebees. We will be displaying some of these animals and providing the public with information on how to tell them apart from similar species, for example house martins, swallows and swifts will be on display for comparison. Meanwhile I will be giving two afternoon boat tours to visitors showing the wildlife around the Bristol Docks and making birdcake with BBC Points West viewers.

My job here at Bristol's Museums, Galleries and Archives has opened up huge opportunities for both myself and the service with museums in the country and many other organisations. Audiences are able to relate very easily to animals and indeed our natural science galleries are one of the most popular in the City Museum & Art Gallery. I hope that natural science subjects will become increasingly integrated with the other subjects represented at Bristol, and that people will continue to associate our service as a place to see, learn and become excited about local wildlife and fossils.

If you would like to know more about how the natural history and geology collections are used by our audiences or how integral my work is to Bristol's Museums, Galleries and Archives and the wider community, both museum and beyond, then please drop me a line on 0117 922 3016 or ed_drewitt@bristol-city.gov.uk.



Ed Drewitt and the Ivory-billed Woodpecker
Photo by Neil Phillips (2005)