

Underappreciated Animals

Saskia McCracken – Project Report

I was awarded an Alice McCosh Trust grant to support my research field trips across Britain to meet conservationists, wildlife experts, rangers and most importantly, the underappreciated animals they have expertise on – from slugs and wasps to ravens and bats. I'm completing my nature writing book, *Awful Creatures: Encounters with Britain's Unlovable Animals*, on why we should care about creatures like those I encountered on my field trips. This grant provided invaluable support for my book research, so I can engage readers with environmental issues.



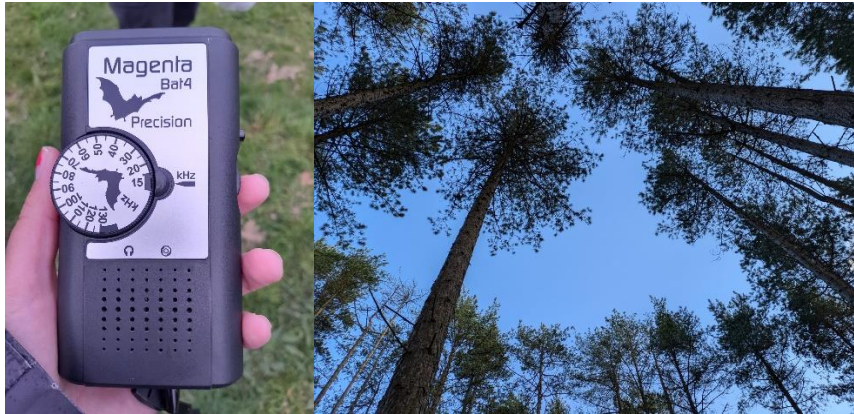
Wasp in amber.

I visited the **Natural History Museum** in London, which holds one of the world's largest mollusc libraries and extensive **slug and wasp collections**. I spoke with an expert wasp taxonomist and malacologist about why people dislike wasps and slugs, and why we should appreciate them. The taxonomist showed me the stunning, tiny wasp trapped in amber, above. It turns out wasps are pollinators and an organic insecticide saving the agricultural industry millions of dollars each year, while slug slime inspired surgical glue being trialled for major heart surgery! I also spoke to staff at Chelsea Physic Garden about ethical slug control. I wrote a short piece about my wasps trip here: <https://www.caughtbytheriver.net/2024/06/the-museum-of-invisible-wasps/>



The Natural History Museum Mollusc Library and slug collection.

I went on **bat walks** guided by expert rangers across Scotland, where I used a bat detector (a bit like a radio) which translates bat echolocation normally at a frequency too high for humans to hear, into sounds we could listen to. The variety was extraordinary: some species sounded like tap dancers, others like bubbles and one like a like sabre. Bats are protected by law, thwarting major building and road planning permission and so frustrate developers. They are also in decline and it's essential that these protections are respected, and their fragmented habitats restored.



My bat detector. The raven roost.

I also made a research trip to see **Britain's largest raven roost** in Anglesey. At its height in 1999, the roost was occupied by over 2,000 ravens. Some have dispersed, but there are still several hundred who use the roost for safety in numbers and to share information about feeding sites. I spoke with RSPB staff who gave me the coordinates for the centre of the roost. Then I watched the ravens circling and coming in to roost, and listened to their heavy wingbeats and mysterious croaking, until it was too dark to see. Ravens were long considered ill omens and feature heavily in Welsh folklore. Observing them, it was easy to see why – they are so big, eat carrion, sound strange. But they play important roles in our ecosystems, as my book will show. During the project I secured a book deal, so this research will be out in the world soon!



A pine cone nibbled by a red squirrel. Puffins on the Isle of May.

In my bid to learn more about **grey squirrels** (blamed for the decline of Britain's red squirrels), I spoke with a ranger while spotting red squirrels near Dunkeld. The grey vs red squirrel debate is so controversial I was asked not to mention it during a project writing residency. In my epilogue, I'll be contrasting the underappreciated animals discussed in the book with the kinds of wildlife people often seek in Scotland, where I'm based: seabirds including gannets, terns, and everyone's favourite – **puffins**. So I went to the **Isle of May**, off Scotland's east coast, to see how the nature reserve there compared to my bat walks and other trips. It was spectacular, as anticipated, but I've become passionate about the other creatures I've seen, and would recommend a bat walk, trip to the Natural History Museum collections, or an evening amongst ravens to anyone interested in learning more about the natural world. Next up, I'll be attending a **moth walk** and joining a **toad patrol** (they rescue toads from cars at toad crossings during the mass migration from hibernation spots back to the breeding ponds)!