



# A FOCUS ON NATURE CAREERS HUB

## NATURE RESERVE MANAGER

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### FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

#### **What is your role, and how long have you been doing it?**

I'm Senior Sites Manager for RSPB's Dorset Reserves (nine reserves covering 1350ha and including reedbeds, wet grassland, intertidal, heathland and woodland and with two visitor centres), a job I've been doing for the past four years.

#### **What are your main responsibilities?**

I'm responsible for ensuring that the RSPB's Dorset reserves deliver against their potential, whether that be for their direct nature conservation importance or as part of a wider landscape; for the potential to engage and inspire visitors (and increasingly online visitors); to win support to address the ecological and climate crisis; and to generate income to pay for more conservation work. This involves leading a team of staff (30) and volunteers (200+), managing a budget, and developing and delivering plans and projects.

#### **Who are the main people you have to work with?**

My direct team of staff and volunteers in a variety of disciplines, internal expert advisers in ecology, rural surveying, visitor experience, local partner organisations including statutory and NGO conservation bodies.

#### **What does your day-to-day look like?**

This week alone has included cringing as I watch myself on Sunday's episode of Countryfile, stacking sandbags and unblocking drains in the face of a massive flash flood, working with my team on finalising a business plan for the next 3 years, joining an evening Zoom call with local community stakeholders of a large managed realignment scheme on one of the reserves and finalising the brief for expert input into a Sustainable Tourism Plan for the super National Nature Reserve which encompasses a number of the reserves. Quite varied!

## What was your pathway into your role?

My pathway was not a straightforward one! I decided I wanted to work in conservation as a Young Ornithologists' Club member, reading an article about research on Dartford Warblers - an idea that was further reinforced when I started residential volunteering on RSPB reserves at 16. I did an Ecology degree and went on to do a PhD paid for by the RSPB. After my PhD I got my first real conservation job, working on a rainforest conservation project in Sierra Leone (I had been on an expedition to Gola Forest at the end of my undergraduate degree). I went on to work in Ethiopia and Madagascar (employed by BirdLife International), before returning to the UK where I got a job as Conservation Manager at Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust. From there I moved back to the RSPB with a job as Head of their Conservation Advice Team, before becoming a Regional Conservation Manager and then Regional Director in Northern England. Coming down to Dorset as Senior Sites Manager was something of a return to my roots in conservation (I had been a residential volunteer at Arne when I was 16 and again when I left school) and a return to a more front-line role.



A more traditional route to site manager/senior site manager on an RSPB nature reserve would start as a volunteer or intern warden role - gaining experience in habitat management, ecological surveys, managing volunteer work parties and gaining practical skills such as chainsaw use, brushcutter use, tractor driving etc. These qualifications and experiences provide a route into a first job as an Estate Worker or Assistant Warden, which in turn develop more experience in these areas to allow a move on to a Warden role. Additional skills and experience in managing a team of people, appointing and managing contractors, practical problem-solving to deal with the many issues and challenges that can arise in the management of a nature reserve, writing Management Plans and agri-environment agreements and dealing with neighbours and local residents provide the foundation to a move into the role of Site Manager. Breadth and depth of experience in a range of habitats, bigger reserves, or clusters of reserves and in managing visitor operations are the stepping stones towards the role of Senior Site Manager - but this certainly isn't the only route!

## What is the salary range for this type of role?

Salaries for this type of role usually range from £35000 to £50000 per year.

## Is a degree essential to your role?

A good foundation in natural history and ecology is really important, but this doesn't have to come from a degree - it could be developed through practical experience.

### **What are the most useful skills to have for this role?**

The biggest part of this role is leading others and so leadership skills are really important. Project management, ecological understanding and business skills are also really crucial. People are sometimes surprised to learn that I don't have practical skills and qualifications (e.g. chainsaws, brushcutters, tractor driving etc), and although I sometimes think I should gain some it really isn't necessary for my role - when I go out with one of our warden teams they usually just give me something to carry or a fire to play with!

## CAREER PATHWAYS

### **What GCSEs could someone study to help get into this career?**

Anything with a focus on natural science, such as biology or geography.

### **What A-Levels or BTEC could someone study to help get into this career?**

Again, a focus on natural sciences like biology and geography can be really important for a career like this; but English can also be really useful if you're interested in a communications role.

### **What could someone do after they leave school to help develop their skills for this career?**

A grounding in ecology at a degree level will give you credibility and an important insight, but natural history skills are equally valid and important. If you feel like university isn't for you then you could start volunteering, if this is an option for you, and start applying for entry-level roles in whatever aspects of conservation most interest you.

### **If someone has graduated university, what next steps could they take to develop their skills for this career?**

A post-graduate degree, such as a Master's may help when trying to get a job in this sector, but it isn't necessary in most roles, and experience is just as valuable. The only exception is if you're looking for a role with an emphasis on research, where a PhD is almost always essential to have.