

## Transcript – Luke Barley

*Emily:* Hello, my name is Emily Seccombe, and I'm the Mentoring Officer for A Focus on Nature. This recording is part of our careers advice resources, through which we hope to provide young people with advice and support for getting into the conservation sector and building their careers. In this recording, I'm talking to Luke Barley, who is ranger for the National Trust. Luke is one of the mentors on the AFON Mentoring Scheme, through which professionals volunteer their time to support young people with an interest in conservation. If you'd like to learn more about the scheme and how you can get involved please do have a look at our website. It was great to chat to Luke about his career path, and hear his advice for working in practical conservation. I hope you enjoy listening!

*Emily:* Okay, great. Well, thank you so much for joining us, Luke. And yeah, it's really exciting to talk to you today about your career in conservation. And we might as well start at the beginning, so if you wanted to tell us sort of how you got into conservation, and what sort of led to you getting the role you're in now? That'd be great.

*Luke:* Yeah, so I suppose to start with where I am now, I'm a tree and woodland advisor for the National Trust, and I've been doing this role for a little bit over a year. So this is a sort of national role working, you know, across everything the National Trust looks after. Prior to this, I was a ranger for about 15 years and I've worked in a number of places. So yeah, I suppose I got into it - yeah, I did something completely different at university. So I studied American Studies at university and was particularly interested in American literature.

All my life before that, I'd loved spending time outdoors, particularly in the woods, and, you know, always had a little idea in the back of my mind that being a ranger would be a great job, but it never seemed very relevant to my day to day life, or something that I really pursued realistically, I suppose. And then as my degree went on, I was reading more and more about the outdoors and conservation, and, you know, that sort of thing. And started to sort of think, "Oh, you know what, I want to, I want to stop reading about this and start doing it" and really sort of thought "yeah, I really want to give this a go". But it felt like quite a left turn, if I'm honest, to come out of a very academic degree and start trying to get into conservation, and it wasn't easy at first, because it felt like such a radical change.

I started volunteering with the National Trust sort of at the office closest to my parents' house where I sort of moved back after university. Then they had the training position come up quite quickly, and I sort of, you know, had that like way in from being a volunteer and knowing the team there. And having developed a little bit of experience, I was able to get on that training programme. So that was very fortunate, really. And I spent a couple years on the training course, it used to be called the careership. More recently, it's been called the Ranger Academy, and it's quite a well known Ranger training scheme in the National Trust. Sadly, it's on a bit of hiatus at the moment, but I think it will be back at some point.

And then yeah, then I got my first full time role at a place called Dunham Massey, which is near Manchester. And that's when I really sort of really started to get into the sort of tree work side of things, lots of ancient trees, and started to do climbing tree work and that kind of thing, and really got into that aspect of Rangering. Then moved down to the City of London Corporation for about six years, again mainly focusing on woodland management and management of ancient trees. And then did a couple years in the Lake District back with the National Trust as a ranger, and then a few years

in the Peak District as a lead ranger, so managing a ranger team in part of the Peak District, and then into this role. So yeah, been around a bit, but it's been great. It's been a brilliant journey.

*Emily:* Yeah. Do you think going back to when you sort of first realised you wanted to go down this route, and sort of when you finishing your degree, did you sort of know what roles were available, or did you have any contacts? Or did you say, "I'll just try volunteering here see what happens", sort of thing?

*Luke:* Yeah, the latter. I didn't have a clue if I'm honest, I sort of had a very, very vague idea of what it was all about. If I'm really honest, I didn't think I was cut out for the practical work. I thought I'd probably more go down the route of the education, outdoor education kind of route, but I knew I wanted to do something, by that point, I knew I wanted to do something that was environmentally focused, I knew I wanted to be outdoors. And you know, knew I wanted to work in the sort of charitable or NGO sector. And that was really about all I knew about it, and I just went and gave it a go. And actually, to my great surprise, when I was volunteering, I found out that I really, really enjoyed the practical work. That was a massive revelation to me. And then, but still wasn't, to be honest, quite sure that it was something I would want to do forever. But you know, was enjoying it at the time. But then the more I got to learn all this amazing new stuff, and got into more ecology and the theoretical side of things, and then, you know, got into roles where I was using my brain as much as practical skills realised, you know, I'm in it for the long haul. I really really love it, yeah.

*Emily:* Yeah, brilliant. No, I actually did the National Trust Academy Ranger scheme as well. And I think when I started it, I sort of didn't really realise there were so many different conservation roles. I sort of thought it was only practical side. But there are obviously lots of other roles in conservation, and which I thought we could maybe talk a bit about some of the misconceptions about working as a ranger. To an outsider, or people who don't work in sector, sometimes I think, I found certainly when I was a trainee that people didn't really know what I did. They thought maybe I was sort of a gardener or something. And so I thought, maybe you could help shine some light on what actually the reality of working as a ranger is?

*Luke:* Yeah, that's really interesting. And it is, I mean, it's, as you know, it's a very, very broad role. And it varies enormously by the location you're working, and the objectives of that particular place, that site, team, culture, history, so many different aspects to it. So a ranger working even for the National Trust, a ranger working on the Formby coast, dealing with, you know, hundreds of 1000s of people coming out from Liverpool to have parties in the sand dunes, and managing the sand dune habitat is doing a completely different role really, to, I don't know, my roles in the Peak District, or the Lake District working with tenant farmers, or, you know, and that's a completely different role to my roles where I've been more involved with tree work, you know, doing tree surgery for weeks on end every winter, you know. So it is a hugely broad church, and it encompasses a huge manner of skills. So a lot, obviously, a lot of the skills that people use are transferable; stuff about, you know, ecology, albeit that you have to understand the specific habitats you're looking after, and visitor engagement, access and dealing with people, but then there's so much variety, as well, then, as you rightly say, just the range of roles. Even within that ranger job title, some people are out doing practical work, nine to five, five days a week, and other people might still be a ranger, might be in the same team, but might spend almost their whole time in the office, doing spreadsheets, you know, accessing funding, writing reports, doing ecological monitoring, whatever it is.

So yeah, it's hugely varied. And I think within reason, you can find your niche in it. You know, if you're more interested in species monitoring and the management planning side, you can find that niche, if you just want to go and build fences and drive tractors all day, you can find you can find that

niche as well. I suppose the important thing is to be self aware of what you do want out of it, so that you're able to find the role that suits you. I think the peak time that I've noticed people getting frustrated, is when they're, you know, they think they want to be a ranger, they might want to be a ranger - but that particular ranger role isn't what they imagined the role would be about, and they're trying to, you know, it's the sort of square peg in a round hole kind of thing.

*Emily:* Yeah, so maybe if you're thinking about being a ranger or looking into the sort of different options or really thinking about, yeah, whether the roles you're going for are exactly the sort of the sort that you would suit you, I suppose based on your skill.

*Luke:* Exactly. Yeah. Yeah.

*Emily:* I think another thing that when you talk to some people about being a ranger, it's a very exciting job. There's loads of fantastic aspects of being a ranger, I imagine you agree. But there are like some challenges as well, and I was wondering if you could maybe talk about what you find the most challenging part of your line of work.

*Luke:* Yeah, that's really interesting. Yeah, a couple of things, I suppose. I think the first one purely in terms of the practicalities of doing conservation work., one of the challenges is the geography. And that, you know, you can't necessarily choose where you want to live and get the perfect role, which, you know, in some professions, you could say, "Okay, well, I'm going to be a teacher, and I want to live in Sheffield, where I live", and you find a teaching job in Sheffield. But it's not like that in conservation, obviously, you know, if you want to be a ranger, you have to go to where the place is, and it can be quite remote, it can take you away from your friends, you might not have the option, you might just think, okay, to get my foot on the ladder, I have to move to Cornwall, because that's where the only job I'm successfully applying to is.

The flip side of that, obviously, is often the places are really amazing places where you have a great experience, and it's just wonderful to live in those places. So it's not all downside. I've definitely had to follow the jobs around the country, more than I probably would, if I had chosen locations myself. As I say, that's not to complain about that - I've worked and lived in amazing places. Yeah, you know, that's a challenge, for instance, if you have a family or you're in a, you know, in a relationship with someone who's tied to a place, for instance, you don't necessarily have that flexibility to move around quite a challenge.

*Emily:* Yeah, definitely.

*Luke:* The other challenge, I would say is that, you know, and I think this is probably true, well I know it's true, of all professions where you really care and you're driven by passion: that's the biggest challenge, actually, you know, even if you're caring so much about something - the flip side of that is stress. Because you want to make a difference. You care, you really care about your projects being right. Climate change, the crisis in biodiversity, all this stuff can sort of weigh quite heavily, I suppose. And sometimes being involved with it, as much as it's nice to feel that you're making a positive contribution, you know, having that much passion in your job? You've got to manage that I suppose.

*Emily:* Yeah, yeah. And sort of, I guess, be realistic about what you can achieve in a certain amount of time. That's really interesting.

And I was wondering if we could talk a bit about sort of practical advice for people who have decided "Okay, I think I want to be a Ranger, this sounds great", and say they are quite at the start of that

journey, whether you had sort of advice on what skills, you think people should start to try and build up, to sort of help them land a role in the first place?

*Luke:* Yeah, I think, I suppose the first thing to say is, you know, just to recognise that, that breadth of the ranger role that we talked about, and think about which bits you'd be best suited to, because you're never going to build up the skills to be able to do it all, and be successful for any ranger role that you apply for. That's too broad an ask really. But in terms of the more general ranger roles, so some of the types of roles, for instance, I was involved in recruiting in the Peak District, or the Lake District, which were pretty general, countryside ranger roles in those sort of landscapes. I think, nowadays, what we want to see is a pretty decent theoretical background. So that might be that you've done any one of a wide range of degrees that can set you up quite nicely for this work, whether it's geography, environmental science, ecology, countryside management, you know, there's a lot of them out there that give you a good enough theoretical basis, I think, for what we're doing. And you don't need a degree, you know, that's the other thing to say, you know, for lots of ranger roles, just having purely the practical background is perfectly appropriate.

But then for almost all roles, you do need to at least be able to demonstrate that you've got some sort of aptitude and common sense around the practical skills. So you know, you'll often find that there's an hour or two sort of practical assessment, and they're not often very challenging tasks. But what people do want to be able to see is that you can pick up a hammer and nails with confidence or, you know, a saw, just those basic hand-tools, that you're not fazed by that. That's just something you're comfortable with. And that's obviously where your volunteering comes in, really key in developing at least the basics of practical work, I suppose. I think it really is a sort of quite an intangible balance of those two things, normally. When we're recruiting entry level positions, a bit of theoretical background.

I suppose aligned with that, just a really good handle on the current state of affairs and, you know, real relevant topics, so whether that's the rewilding debate, you know, or a little bit of understanding of the ecology of that particular site. You know, you're switched on to the realities of dealing with this stuff day in, day out.

But then yeah, just those broad practical skills, but what I always sort of reassure people is that you don't, I would say, certainly, if I was recruiting people, I'm not looking necessarily for the chainsaw ticket or the tractor ticket - we can get those, if you need them for this job, we'll put you through them. What we want to know is that, you know, you understand what's going on, you're gonna work really well in a team, you're gonna be self motivated. And you know, you're good enough with the basics of practical work that when we put you on the chainsaw ticket, you're gonna be able to do it. And you know, it's not going to be completely overwhelming.

*Emily:* Yeah. And for people who maybe aren't involved that much yet, a ticket is like a sort of practical qualification certification thing. Yeah. Brilliant. And so you touched a bit on interviews, and how sometimes that will include like a practical element? Are there any other things that is sort of typical for ranger interview that people could expect for a sort of entry position, so you might have a practical task - are there any other elements aside from sort of formal question and answer section?

*Luke:* It just depends. So a few teams, a couple of teams that I've worked in, we've done quite lengthy interviews, actually, which is as much about ensuring people fit well in the team and that they've got the right attitude, I suppose, as anything else. And that is, you know, incredibly important. And so yeah, you might expect to have like, you know, a half day or full day, with a couple

of different practical exercises, just so that you get to meet more of the existing team, because it is so important, how you get on with them. And again, how you learn, how you adapt to a new task, that sort of stuff is so important, because you're never going to know how to do all the practical things. It's how you approach picking them up and learning them, that's the key thing. And then yeah, for always, you know, an hour or so, a formal interview, almost always. There's not necessarily anything else very common, it would just be the length of the practical bit that might vary, I suppose.

I mean, the one thing I would say about interviews is, and, again, coming back to thinking about, like, you know, the most generic ranger role and the sort of transferable skills that are the same between all roles, there's probably half a dozen questions that you're always going to get asked in one form or another, and you can prepare really good answers. You're always going to get asked about safety, you're always going to get asked about being self-motivated, you're always going to get asked about working in a team. So you can prepare absolutely brilliant answers on those themes. And whatever angle the interviewer chooses to come at it, you've got a brilliant answer. I would think about the basics.

*Emily:* Yeah, yeah. But yeah, that's great. I think something you've touched on a bit that's really important is how they are roles where you are sort of continually learning skills and sort of species ID and that sort of thing. So it's okay to not know how to do everything at the start, it's a learn as you go along thing.

*Luke:* Oh, absolutely. And any of us, anyone sensible, working in this kind of role would say that they're always learning. And that's one of the brilliant things about it as well, you know, we learn new things every day. And certainly the best sort of new candidates or new entrants into the sector that we find are definitely people who are just like, most embrace that learning element of it, I suppose. Yeah.

*Emily:* Okay, so another question I was going to ask was about if you have managed to land like an entry level role, or like a traineeship? How can you make the most of that? And I suppose that would be one of the things is to like, try and learn as many different things as possible.

*Luke:* Definitely, yeah, I would just really recommend that people throw themselves into it, learn all the skills they can. I mean, it's a really interesting balance there actually. I was thinking about this, off the back of seeing your written questions, between, you know, there are some things where you've just got to put the time in and sometimes it gets a bit boring, if I'm honest. But that's how you get really good at something, whether that's building a fence or chainsawing or species ident, you know, just devoting time to it will get you really good at it.

But then equally, you want to, you always want to do the new thing. And you want to sort of have that breadth of skills and breadth of interests. So there's definitely a balance to be found between just sort of getting stuck into the day job, so that you become really, really competent, with keeping an eye out for the interesting opportunities or where you might say to your line manager or others "Oh, can I spend a bit of time with that person or bit of time with this person?" Or "Could I take on the lead for this project where I think I could develop my skills?" Yeah, like that latter bit about just taking on extra stuff is also important. You know, that's the way you'll develop into the next role.

*Emily:* Yeah. And I guess, early on, like work out what you really enjoy and what you'd like as well, I suppose. Yeah, we touched a bit on volunteering and how that can be a helpful way to build up skills, when you're just starting out. And, of course, some volunteering options are sort of not very accessible in terms of if they require a lot of time. So I was wondering if you had any recommendations for people who are working or studying or caring for others, sort of full time, and

they might only have, say, a couple of hours on the weekend, if you had any suggestions, what they could do to build skills and experience, so it'd be useful.

*Luke:* Yeah, it's, you know, it's a real challenge that, and I do, I definitely recognise and I think the sector has recognised it now that we're not very accessible in terms of inclusivity, unless you're fortunate enough to be in a situation like I was where I was living at my folks, and, you know, even then, you know, I'm very privileged, white middle class man. And, you know, staying at my folks when I was volunteering, but I was juggling part time work in a shop with part time volunteering, but I know some people can't, can't do that. So I really recognise it.

And actually what I would say is that volunteer opportunities have got less flexible since I did that, to the current time. I think people expect a more formal commitment, like whole days, or whatever it might be. So I really recognise the challenge. That's a long way of saying that, but there are ways and means to do it. So obviously, there's lots of volunteer groups that run on the weekend or that run one day a week where people can come and join a group for one day a week.

I think the other little thing I would say about people joining a volunteer group that might run on a weekend, if they're trying to get into the sector, is that often the skills that you learn at those groups aren't the skills that a ranger actually needs. So for instance, if you're going out with a load of, with the best will in the world, sort of retired folk, or people who volunteer for a hobby, on a Sunday afternoon, you're going to be clearing scrub or planting trees, whatever it might be. But you probably won't get the true ranger experience in a way as if you were able to go and be a full time volunteer, for a number of weeks, or a residential volunteer, which I recognise is really challenging to do.

So I think the key would be to, it would still be brilliant experience to only volunteer one day a week, it's much better than nothing. And if you can demonstrate that you've learned the practical skills, it doesn't really matter how much time it's taking you to do that, you know, but I would try and get alongside the rangers rather than as part of a group so that you're working with either one ranger or a small team of rangers, learning what they really do day in day out, rather than being just another volunteer and yeah, that would be the key to it, however much time you have to devote to it.

*Emily:* Do you think maybe also trying to take on any projects that you can sort of plan or things that, where you're not just sort of following the instructions for the whole group, but you're saying, "oh, could I try this project or survey something maybe?"

*Luke:* Definitely, yeah, yes, that's a really good point. So you know, lots of volunteer groups have a volunteer group leader, so you can take on that responsibility. And if you sort of, you know, make sure that the rangers know, early on, that you're keen and that, that's, you know, great. And definitely just lay it on the table that you're interested in getting into the profession with the rangers, and they'll typically have good ideas as well. And then as you said, there are ways to create projects that you can do really flexibly. So if you were interested in a species monitoring, for instance, you know, there might be existing opportunities on that site, or there might be a species group that you're interested in that they have no plans to monitor, but it might still be really useful. And you might be able to do that completely flexibly when you have the free time in the evening or on a Sunday afternoon, or whenever it is. So yeah, the more things you can do like that, the better.

*Emily:* Yeah, yeah. And hopefully this sort of sector is, I think, getting a bit better at offering a few more sort of paid traineeship type roles. So hopefully, that sort of continues to become more available in the future. And that is something that we're looking into at A Focus on Nature, so we're

going to do some sort of research to see how we can sort of support that move to have more accessible options for people starting out. Yeah, so hopefully, hopefully something good will come out as well and we'll share that with our audience in due course. But a few quickfire questions to just finish things off. So I wondered, if you had one thing you recommend you do, and one thing you recommend you really don't do if you're doing applicate job application or writing a CV, if you ever see something and you're like, "Oh, no, that's not a good idea", or something that's really useful.

*Luke:* Yeah. CVs, I would just say, just make them look professional, just go online, get a template, you know, and make it look good. You'd be surprised how many people don't just follow the basic guidelines that you can get off Google. So make it look professional, make it look really clear. Don't leave gaps, you know, that we know that that's like a really obvious one that you'll see in any CV guidance. But as soon as you see a gap, you do just think, well, what have you been doing? And I have, you know, I have pursued those in a couple of interviews and found out, you know, not necessarily really bad things, but just like, you know, things that didn't help that person's case. I suppose, so yeah just follow the guidance.

*Emily:* Yeah. Yeah. Okay, so similar to sort of other sectors; advice for the same kind of thing. So yeah, I wonder if you had a favourite animal or plant that you're particularly passionate about? Or a tree maybe?

*Luke:* Yeah, it's a tree, I'm afraid. But yeah, I'm a massive nerd about this. I really like the native lime trees, particularly small leaved lime. And yeah I find that they've got a particularly interesting ecology, which you might know, where they don't really reproduce readily in the north of England, at least by seed because of the climate. And they only reproduce by vegetative reproduction. So they lay a branch down, or they fall over and grow again, what that means is where we find one, it's been there potentially hundreds or 1000s of years, just slowly transforming in its shape and sort of meandering through the landscape. And they're also you know, very beautiful, but have that amazing link back through, you know, many hundreds of years, if not 1000s.

*Emily:* Yeah. Yeah, like a historical legacy. And sort of to end on a positive note, whether you had a highlight of your career that you wanted to share with us.

*Luke:* Yeah. There's a couple, really, so I think the first thing to say is in terms of pure enjoyment, it definitely is practical work days that stand out, you know, and I've got so many memorable ones, and that is the beauty of being a ranger. But you know, times when I was involved in coppice restoration projects in ancient woodland, and it's just a beautiful, crispy, clear, winter's day, and you're out felling trees, but you know, it's got a brilliant conservation benefit, you know, there's just nothing like that. And likewise, some of the climbing work I did to conserve ancient trees, you know, it was an incredibly fortunate position to be in up these amazing old oak pollards, and it was the hardest work I've ever done by a long way. But it was an amazing privilege, so they really stand out.

But then I think the interesting thing is that, you know, in terms of satisfaction, having got into this because I really wanted to make a difference to nature conservation, actually, you make the biggest benefit by pushing pens and, you know, doing spreadsheets and grant applications, ironically. And yeah, certainly the most satisfying moment that I've had to date was actually early on in this job, when, you know, along with a team of other people, I was able to design the National Trust ambition for new woodland cover by 2030. And we got it much bigger than we ever thought we'd be able to, and that was, you know, an amazing feeling really to be able to, yeah, define this ambition, and to really try to drive such an improvement on a wide scale.

*Emily:* Oh, that's brilliant. Yeah, very inspiring things for people to sort of look forward to in their careers to having the same sort of impact. And it's been really interesting talking to you about careers and stuff. I was wondering if there's anything you wanted to mention that you work on or sort of promote?

*Luke:* Oh, I did yeah. So the only thing I do want to promote really other than the National Trust is I do occasionally blog about nature conservation, and particularly about you know, some of the more interesting days practical work. So a couple of those things I mentioned, climbing old oak trees and coppice restoration projects, I have written little bits and bobs about. So if you go to medium.com, and search my name, Luke Barley, you can read those pieces of writing.

*Emily:* Brilliant. I will put a link in the description for this so people can find that really easily. Its probably worth saying as well, that you're one of our mentors on the A Focus on Nature mentoring scheme. So if people are interested in sort of going down this line of work, they can get in touch, via our website and potentially talk to you a bit more and get some more advice from you, directly. Yeah, it's been really great to talk to you, and thank you so much for sharing all your experience and information.

*Luke:* It's been my pleasure. Thank you.

*Emily:* I hope you found the interview interesting and informative. We'd like to say a big thank you to our mentors for offering their time for us, both in these interviews and in the mentoring scheme. If you'd like to get in touch with us or to sign up as a mentee, please do have a look at our website or social media. And you can contact me via email at [mentors@afocusonnature.org](mailto:mentors@afocusonnature.org) We're very open to feedback and discussion, I'd be very happy to hear from you. Thank you for listening.

....[transcript from interview to be added...



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