

The Scientists



Sarah Lovibond

What interested you in science as a child?

One of the first birds I got to know was an orphaned duckling which slept under my bed, swam in the bath, and rode in the car, and another was a Tawny Frogmouth with an injured wing. Most of my injured birds didn't pull through, a raven died in my jumper, and cleaning exploded mouse off the microwave after I tried to defrost the frogmouth's dinner was not nice, but I wasn't put off.

During college, I spent a year in the Faroe Islands on a student exchange. I realised that some people's favourite seabird meant the one they liked eating best, and joined in catching puffins and harvesting seagull eggs. I began to look at the world and my own background from the perspective of a different culture, make parallels between the two islands I'd lived on, and feel at home surrounded by birds.

What did you study at university?

At college I became worried that I couldn't be an ecologist if I was better at English Literature than maths, so in my first year at Uni, I studied Geography, Zoology, History and Political Science. Over the next four years I gradually turned what started as an Arts degree into a Science degree. Studying zoology and geography together helped me to understand how achieving species conservation doesn't just

depend on understanding an animal's physiology, behaviour, and ecology; cultural, political and economic factors determine how scientific knowledge is put into use. I am now applying cultural understanding, research, and communication skills I learnt in English and history to my research in environmental studies, and catching up on the statistics I avoided all through Uni. I'm finding that statistics and Geographic Information Systems are a lot easier to understand when you have watched your 'data' fend off a predator or lay an egg.

What is your current research/career?

After Uni I worked as a volunteer field assistant in Alaska, spending five months living in remote field camps close to the Arctic circle. I saw the secret life of migratory shorebirds during their breeding season and finally watched them migrate south again, some back to Tasmania. I learnt heaps about being a scientist, about shorebirds, and about the threats they face as they lose more habitat to human use, and I came home feeling as though I wanted to study shorebirds for the rest of my life. (This was a good feeling to have as I started working on the Honours project I'd enrolled in before I left for Alaska.) During the past summer, I walked the coastline of King Island to count and map shorebirds, and interview islanders. I aim to identify which beaches could be prioritised for protection from disturbance and degradation so that shorebirds can have the peace, quiet, and healthy habitat they need, while people can continue to enjoy the beach.

What are your future aspirations?

I will work for Birds Tasmania this summer, surveying shorebirds on Flinders Island. I then hope to publish some of my findings so I can contribute to shorebird management. As soon as possible, I want to go back to the Arctic, and I hope to start a PhD next year on the behaviour, ecology, and conservation of shorebirds on islands, while following them on their migrations around the world, and helping change the way we treat the environment so they continue to survive.

What do you love about science?

I love the moment when something suddenly makes sense, and the moment when finding an answer raises new questions. I love seeing something in detail, and then seeing how that detail fits into bigger pictures. The first time I really felt like a scientist, I was standing on a mud flat, wearing muddy gumboots and a down jacket instead of a lab coat. I feel like a scientist when I am listening to people talking about what it's like to live on an island, and when I'm listening to a bird calling to its chicks. It is possible to combine what you are good at with what you are interested in, and not feel like a square peg in a round hole! Now I'm combining my love of islands, beaches, birds, and animal and human behaviour, and I've realised that people and jobs are more complex and changeable shapes than square or round anyway. My perceptions of what science is keep on changing and the scientists I meet keep on inspiring me in different ways. If I can keep exploring remote islands, walking ocean beaches or living in a tent on the Arctic tundra for a living, I will keep loving science