

IOSF STUDENT RESEARCH GRANT REPORT

The IOSF Student Research Grant was finally launched in 2022 (following Covid delays) to help students carry out an otter field survey under the guidance of a trained and experienced ecological surveyor, Andrew Rothwell. Two students (*Ron Pasiieczna* from Sheffield University, and *Rachel Wick* from Brighton University) were selected for the project on the Isle of Barra with the aim of learning the various techniques involved, including post-survey work such as diet analysis.

The training survey took place in June 2022 and accommodation was provided so that the students just had to arrange their travel to the island and food.

The group arrived on Barra in beautiful weather – “*that surreal tropical island feel*”. An excellent ferry crossing brought “*a multitude of common dolphin pods, eight minke whales and five basking sharks*”.

In the first few good days, they were able to observe otters in their natural habitat; mothers bringing fish to feed the cubs, grooming and swimming. Unfortunately, the weather then changed which reduced opportunities to look for otters directly, but the field survey work continued, finding and mapping signs of otter activity within several habitat types found on the Island.



Ron and Rachel examining a sprainting site © Andrew Rothwell

During the time available the team were able to complete approximately 25km of coastline (about 30% of the Island’s coastline), and a further 5km of inland freshwater lochs. With an average of nine hour days, over 12 days this approximated to 108 hours of field time. Over 550 data points were recorded and 442 spraints were collected for further analysis. Eight otters were

observed in the field, which included a mother with two cubs, ardently fishing and bringing back fish for the cubs to eat on land. In addition, two otters were caught on a camera trap.

A full report on the training programme will be produced in due course.

The biggest expense was the accommodation, and the funding provided enabled the two university students and the lead surveyor to carry out this project.

IOSF will be repeating this training project in 2023 elsewhere in the Hebrides for students of zoology, biology and ecology.



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