

A Week in the Life of a Natural History Museum Volunteer
By Alex Panagiotopoulos
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Back at school after Easter, once again as usual my teachers heralded the beginning of a new term with the time-honoured phrase: 'And what did *you* do for your holidays?' But this time, I had an extremely interesting answer.

At my school, I am a volunteer in a community services programme where students commit to spending a certain amount of volunteer work for a registered charity. Organising this is a lot harder than it sounds. Considering that you are offering to work for them for free, most organisations seem surprisingly reluctant to accept you without a great deal of fuss, especially if you are under 16, so I was quite surprised when the Natural History Museum (which *is* a registered charity) accepted my application. I was also thrilled. The Natural History Museum was willing to let me do all my work during the school holidays, and science has always been one of my favourite subjects. Though nearly all their placement offers had been filled, there was one department which was happy to take me: The International Commission of Zoological Nomenclature. The *what?* I hear you cry? The ICZN is a semi-legal body which settles arguments over the correct names of animals. For example, if a species has been named twice, the ICZN has to decide which was the oldest, and therefore correct, name. I was given the job of helping prepare the online edition of the BZN (Bulletin of Zoological Nomenclature), a big series of books containing every single dispute the ICZN has been involved in. You can see the results of my work on the internet now.

My next job after working on the website was a complete change. A few days later, I was busy stacking boxes in Palaeontology or Entomology! I am proud to say that I am now responsible for the arrangement of more than 50 heavy insect cases (the type used for nailing bugs to in little rows), laid out in neat columns of ten on top of the filing cabinets. The truth is that although like everyone I thought carefully in the application form about which department I was applying for, once you're in, you just get involved in any jobs that need doing regardless of whether it's sorting shells or stacking boxes. And sure enough, more excitement remained in store. Next I was sent forth from the secret world that lies behind the doors marked STAFF ONLY and asked to – gulp – *interact with the public*. Working with the Learning Volunteers Department, I would have to stand in front of exhibits and explain, say, the difference between a cat skull and a hippo tooth to anyone interested. I have a younger brother and fearing that I would be torn apart by wild six-year olds before I could get a word in edgeways, I gratefully accepting the task of *shadowing*. This is the technical term for standing around watching somebody else do the work and joining in if you feel like it. After a bit, I did. It's a lot easier than you might think and for most people's questions, there are only about four or five facts you need to remember. There were a few tricky moments though including the little girl who said 'I hope I don't scream' while perusing a real crocodile skin..... *Please, please don't scream*, I think to myself. *Neither of us will enjoy being trampled to death by panicking crowds. Just put the crocodile skin down and go look at the boring, non-scream inducing stuffed animals behind you.....*

My final day was great as I spent my time in the Museum's special summer Butterfly Exhibition. This task was much less daunting than the previous one. I simply had to make sure that no butterflies were trodden on or escaped. Butterflies are very short lived creatures, living for about four to five weeks, and during my stint with the Butterfly Explorers, I counted 4 butterflies dead from old age (their wings decompose while they are still alive, until eventually they cannot fly); 3 emerging from cocoons; 1 unfortunate incident of squishing and 8 separate escape attempts (6 by what I swear was the same butterfly). The adventurous creatures kept landing on peoples clothing just as they were about to leave.

Getting rid of them without plucking their wings off is a complex manoeuvre. It looks a little like picking up a discus with your index and middle finger.

One splendid thing about that job was that for the first time, I got a uniform! It's an orange T-shirt which I have kept and which bestows upon the wearer the magical ability to use the staff doors and to protect the visitors from the tricks of the escapee butterflies: "Excuse me sir! Yes *you!* Watch out for that *Morpho Achilles* specimen right now!"; or (checking for stowaways before leaving the building) "Have you used the provided mirrors, madam? No? Well if you look here! You can't be too careful you see!" I could even say when my brother and friends turned up: "Don't do that boys! See? STAFF ONLY! That's because behind this door we store the carnivorous ones. Although if you *really* want to, you could save us the cost of today's feeding time...."

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