

## Media Fellow Report 2007

### Michael Wilson, Biologist, University of Aberdeen The Scotsman

I moved from Aberdeen to Edinburgh on a sunny Sunday afternoon in August with mixed emotions. Spending three weeks away from my office in Aberdeen University with its constant stream of student's questions, emails and telephone calls seemed like a dream come true. This was made even more pleasurable because I would catch the last two weeks of the Edinburgh International Festival. But what would working at *The Scotsman* entail? Could I write in the style of a journalist? Would I publish anything?

Preparation for my placement consisted of the very useful and informative briefing day organised by the BA in London two months earlier and reading David Randall's *The Universal Journalist* (Pluto Press). This is a very easy, informative and entertaining read, describing all aspects of journalism that I would thoroughly recommend to any future BA Media Fellow who is to be placed with a newspaper. However, as a middle aged academic, I am used to being the busy expert being pestered by keen, but naïve students. I knew that at *The Scotsman* "the shoe would be on the other foot".

I started my first day with the obligatory health and safety talk – a very slow one hour and a quarter, before I was introduced to my host, Ian Johnston, the environment correspondent (and deputy on the foreign desk) at *The Scotsman*.

It was a very busy day for Ian - a golden eagle that had lived in the Scottish borders for over a decade, had been killed. The bird had consumed carbofuran, a banned pesticide lethal to other animals and humans, and put out by game keepers to deliberately kill birds preying on their grouse. The impact of the poisoning was huge, because this bird was one half of the only breeding pair of eagles left in this part of Scotland.

This was certainly a story, but where were the details? The story had been released by the Lothian and Borders police, but the location was kept secret to protect the surviving adult and developing chick. It was a great opportunity for me to see a real journalist at work as I watched Ian track down the location (which of course was not published) so he could interview people close to the scene. It took the best part of the day. I helped by contacting the RSPB and the Scottish Agricultural Services Agency to collate data on numbers of raptor poisonings over the past few years in Scotland. The data sets from these two sources were quite different, which should I use? The higher numbers of course – it makes a better story.

The following day I was intrigued to read the story, and was very proud of the small "scientific" table that I had produced, containing the numbers of raptors and golden eagles killed over the previous five years.

However, from that day onwards Ian was working predominantly in his other role on the foreign desk and I had to fend for myself. On weekdays, *The Scotsman* only includes science if it is newsworthy and of interest to the general public, but on Saturday there is a one and half page Science and Environment spread with feature articles. Thus, I could take my choice; news articles or feature articles. Of course news articles are shorter, and my minimal training had focused on this medium so I threw myself into producing them– at least one and sometimes two a day. I had access to press releases on Alpha-Galileo, the internet site for European science, medicine and technology, and access to embargoed press releases from top journals including *Science* and *Nature*. I picked the stories that I thought would be of most interest to the public (least scientific!) and produced news items on dolphins, make-up, windfarms and several other topics, all of which were spiked (journalist jargon for binned). The greatest success was the windfarm story, which stayed on the newsdesk for several days before being spiked.

On my third day, I was introduced to Paul Riddell who edits the Saturday feature page. Since I am an “expert” on slugs, and the public understand slugs, it was suggested that I could write a feature on my favourite animals. I am also involved in a research project to control insect pests of forestry in Scotland, and Paul thought that would make a good feature too. Ian suggested an article on animal intelligence may go down well.

After a week of “spikes” I abandoned news stories and concentrated on feature articles for Saturdays. By Friday in my second week, with nothing published I was starting to feel glum, but late in the afternoon, I was told my slug story would be published the next day.

I went out and bought a copy of the Scotsman the following day, and was delighted to find not only the slug article, but also an article on dolphins that had started as a news story, and I had bulked up into a feature. This made everything seem better.

Phoning people up and introducing myself as a journalist from *The Scotsman* was great fun, and despite my lack of shorthand or recording equipment, I don't think I misquoted anybody. However, I thought I would feel more like a real reporter if I could get out of the office to interview somebody. Scotland's Chief Scientific Adviser is Professor Anne Glover, also at Aberdeen University. While her Aberdeen office is based on a different campus from mine, I knew her vaguely, because we had both been involved in a scheme to give guest lectures at the University of Nairobi, Kenya. I thought I would use my contacts to get a story on the state of science in Scotland. Prof Glover kindly agreed to meet me, and this interview also became a Saturday feature.

On my last day, having finished the seven features I had worked on, I tried one last news story – controversial biologist and businessman, Craig Venter, had sequenced his own genome. Alas, this too was to be spiked.

Unlike most Media Fellows who do their placement immediately before the Festival of Science, I had a week's break between my placement and the Festival. During this

week, I was teaching a field class in France. Because I got lost and had a puncture midway between the field centre and Lyon airport, I missed the first day and orientation session. However, when I did arrive I soon found my bearings and it was really great to meet up with the other Media Fellows and discuss the highs and lows of our placements – they really were very nice people.

In terms of media activity, the Festival was slightly disappointing. *The Scotsman* did not send any staff to report on the event, but relied on a freelance science journalist who was also reporting for many other papers. While I was steered in the general direction of some “lesser” stories in the first few days, I soon realised these news stories were no more likely to get published than my previous attempts, and my freelance colleague was too busy to spend time with me. I chose to enjoy the rest of the Festival by attending talks that appealed to me as a scientist, rather than a journalist.

I am very pleased I took part in the BA Media Fellowships scheme and will remember it all my life. Some of my colleagues were jealous, whereas others thought I was mad. I feel I learned a lot, and particularly I learned how bad so many scientific press releases are. As a result, my line manager is trying to arrange a deal by which I could dispense with some of my more arduous administrative duties, in exchange for writing press releases for the University's College of Life Sciences and Medicine. Past experience suggests that the deal's outcome will be that I do both jobs, but we shall see.

I would recommend the BA Media Fellowship to anybody with a desire for new experiences, an independent character and a flair for communication.

## Articles

*Marine experts are puzzled by the rise in dolphin attacks on local porpoises*

MICHAEL WILSON. The Scotsman, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2007.

<http://thescotzman.scotsman.com/scitech.cfm?id=1351752007>

*Slug population booms in damp, cool conditions*

MICHAEL WILSON. The Scotsman, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2007.

<http://thescotzman.scotsman.com/scitech.cfm?id=1350492007>

*Final Frontier*

MICHAEL WILSON. The Scotsman, 1<sup>st</sup> September 2007, 34-35.

<http://thescotzman.scotsman.com/scitech.cfm?id=1391232007>

*Fumes from open-fire cooking pose serious threat for millions of people*

MICHAEL WILSON. The Scotsman, 1<sup>st</sup> September 2007, 34-35.

<http://thescotzman.scotsman.com/scitech.cfm?id=1390732007>

*Nature shows way to tackle pests in Scotland's forests*

MICHAEL WILSON. The Scotsman, 8<sup>th</sup> September 2007, 30-31.

<http://thescotzman.scotsman.com/scitech.cfm?id=1434772007>

*Talking parrots, crafty crows and logical meerkats*

MICHAEL WILSON. The Scotsman, 8<sup>th</sup> September 2007, 32-33.

<http://thescotzman.scotsman.com/scitech.cfm?id=1476102007>

*A fridge powered by sound waves or magnets is a really cool idea*

MICHAEL WILSON. The Scotsman, 8<sup>th</sup> September 2007, 32-33.

<http://thescotzman.scotsman.com/scitech.cfm?id=1476252007>