

All in a Day's Work

Christopher Barry – Freshwater Ecologist

Christopher Barry works as a freshwater ecology research assistant at the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, Queens University Belfast .



What does your work involve?

My work involves studying animals and plants in rivers and lakes and looking at how they respond to things like pollution and climate change.

Have you always been interested in what you do?

I've been fascinated with the natural world since I was a youngster and was lucky enough to spend much of my childhood in Africa surrounded by all sorts of creatures. My love of the outdoors and an awareness of the pressures that we are putting on our natural spaces cemented my decision to pursue a career in the environmental sector.

What training did you do to get where you are today?

My training started outside of the classroom as I spent a lot of time chasing butterflies, reading books about animals and I learnt a lot by keeping aquarium fishes as a hobby. At school I studied the sciences and then went to university to study a degree in marine and freshwater biology. After university I wanted to get more practical experience and spent a fascinating year at the Sherkin Island Marine Station as a volunteer recording aquatic insects and monitoring butterflies and moths.

What is a day in your life like?

The thing I like most about my job is that there's almost no such thing as a typical day. I spend days out in the field collecting insects, microscopic life and samples of water. Then back at the lab I get a closer look, where we measure things like nutrients and record and count planktonic plants and animals using a microscope. Like almost everyone I spend more time than I'd like at the computer putting results together, but overall it's a very healthy balance that doesn't often feel like work.

What's the worst thing about your job?

Often we find out what needs to be done to improve and preserve habitats but translating this

information into the necessary action on the ground can be a huge challenge and very frustrating.

Where does your work take you and what equipment do you use?

At the moment I'm studying some beautiful lakes and rivers in counties Fermanagh and Leitrim, looking at the effects that forestry and agriculture can have. Last year I had the great opportunity to visit Greenland to study the lakes, which the land is peppered with. We use devices to take samples of water and nets to collect aquatic insects and plankton as well as probes to measure things important to aquatic life like oxygen and temperature. In the lab we use many different analysers to measure the chemistry of water.

Do you work alone or as part of a team?

I work as part of a team both within broader projects and within the specific parts of my work. It would be almost impossible to get my job done well without the support and encouragement of colleagues and experts.

What advice would you give someone wanting to do your job?

Get as much practical experience as you can and demonstrate your enthusiasm. Join clubs and societies as they are a great way to keep up to date with what's going on and to meet people interested in the same field.



Photos © Christopher Barry



Above: Chris collecting water samples with a colleague.

Top left: Stonefly nymph. (It is called a nymph when in its immature form.)

Bottom left: The mayfly (*Ephemera danica*).