

Wirral Autistic Society Volunteers help rewild a local Country Park

Adult volunteers from the Wirral Autistic Society have been working with the Wirral Coastal Rangers towards their John Muir Award. Members of the group have a common interest in conserving the countryside and represent a mix of abilities and ages, from 25 to well over retirement age.



“We use the John Muir Award to help develop new life skills, and build confidence and independence for our service users. It’s a hugely practical and beneficial framework for our group.” Michael Howard, group leader

Connecting with a Wild Place

The 16 volunteers and 6 group leaders chose the grassland areas and pond system located in Thurstaston Country Park as the focus for their Award. This area was classified by Natural England as ‘unfavourable’ in 2012 – giving plenty of scope for making a difference. The Wirral Coastal Rangers subsequently put forward a proposal to improve the area by:

- Restoring lost plant diversity
- Reducing scrubland encroachment
- Hedgerow restoration
- Implementing a management strategy

To begin with, the Rangers led the volunteers around the Park and the pond system, explaining why this particular environment is important, why it wasn’t as effective as it should be for the local wildlife and people, and what needed doing to improve the area. The volunteers then visited the Park over a whole year, often walking round the site noticing the differences due to the seasonal changes, and noting the importance of co-ordinating their activities with the time of year.

“Over the spring we found the tadpoles in the pond. We also found some birds’ nests in the surrounding plants. Towards the end of the summer, lots of horseflies took up residence in the scrub land making working there difficult. Sloe berries started growing and we found a few small patches of blackberries.”

Peter Butler, volunteer and John Muir Award participant



Caring for nature

The volunteers worked closely with the Rangers to implement the management plan for the Park. They began by cutting down hedges and removing gorse and brambles so that a manageable hedge barrier was preserved around the edges of the pond system. Pathways were widened for better access, allowing exploration of the area whilst keeping at a distance from the ponds so that wildlife can be appreciated without being disturbed.

Working to re-establish the surrounding fields, the group raked and piled freshly flailed hay into a trailer for removal from the site. Wildlife investigations in the fields uncovered frogs and a rabbit with myxomatosis – which sparked a whole series of interesting discussions.



“We have been using this area for many years so it is a familiar location. We use the John Muir Award to help expand our knowledge and find different ways of conserving and protecting this local environment.”

Michael Howard

Sharing the Experience

Many members of the public approached the volunteers whilst engaged in the project to ask what they were doing. There was overwhelmingly positive feedback for their efforts to open up access to the area, particularly from locals who commented that they never even knew the ponds were there!

Throughout the year, a common thread has been open discussion about activities, experiences and learning. A collectively-written article has been published on the Wirral Autistic Society’s website (www.bit.ly/1KUil8y) and a video and photo displays were produced for a special John Muir Award presentation to family, friends and Councillor Les Rowlands, Mayor of Wirral.

“We are already discussing how to maintain the paths and ponds in the future...Working towards my John Muir Award has been really exciting and it is a really big achievement for me to get it.”

Chris Wood, volunteer and John Muir Award participant



“Our team is here to help adults with autism engage with the community through partnerships and creative activities. The service users themselves decided that they wanted to take on this project and then they completed it with great determination. We’re incredibly proud of them.” Kevin Mulligan, head of the Community Development team