

“A natural boost: health, wellbeing and friendship”



Dave and Gam spent 2 years participating in Without Walls, a conservation course in Hastings, East Sussex, during which they grew a new friendship, developed practical skills, and transformed their outlooks on life. The time was framed by a progression through all three John Muir Award levels, culminating in the presentation of their Conserver Awards at a celebration in July 2017.



Without Walls

Delivered by local organisation Education Futures Trust (EFT), Without Walls aims to build resilience and self-confidence, helping participants into volunteering and work, whilst promoting connection to the local natural environment. Shar Brown, outdoor learning lead for EFT, says the structure of the John Muir Award fits well with their flexible approach, giving participants time and space to find their own relationship with the natural world. “For me it’s about connection. We live our lives skimming the surface of things because of the speed we’re forced to exist at. Being outside with other people gives a chance for reconnection. To stop, and just be in nature.”

Volunteering support

Volunteering can be life-enhancing and Without Walls supports people to identify placements after their participation in other EFT programmes. For Dave and Gam, this opened up new opportunities. They supported new Without Walls participants, with Dave sharing practical conservation skills and his new-found fascination in John Muir. Gam drew on a lifelong interest in birds. “I got kicked out of school in 1982,” he reminisced. “Birds were my passion. Now, age 50, I’m more passionate about them every year. I love sharing my experience with people, to see the joy on someone’s face. It’s really humbling to see grown adults and children listening to what I have to say.” This dedication to supporting others was recognised in November 2017 when they were presented with a prestigious ‘Volunteering Against the Odds’ award from Hastings Voluntary Action.

Lifetime stewards of nature

Gam and Dave have no intention of ceasing in their commitment to wild places. “We’ve got this far - we’re not going to stop! The more we go down to the glade at the Firs [EFT Headquarters] and work on it, the more the wildlife benefits. We have plans for the winter and next spring already. We’ll get more people involved and more voices, looking at the space, deciding what to do.”

A journey through the seasons

In 2017, Gam and Dave kept diaries as a way of capturing and sharing their Conserver Award journeys, noting the wildlife they observed and their experiences along the way. Here are some extracts:

March "The leaf piles look good, so does the wood pile. After lunch we planted a yew tree we salvaged. I took a photo of yellow brain fungus. What a place, the birdsong is brilliant." Dave

April "The area we have cleared is already coming back with foxgloves, purple loose-strife and others...also across the stream we see bluebells!! Never call someone simple for taking pleasure in these little things!" Gam

May "What a brilliant start to the morning, on the seafront at the bottom of London Road I saw 6 cormorants fishing in the flat, calm sea. I felt as if I'd been plugged into the mains I was buzzing that much. I took more photos so we can see changes in nature which is slow and imperceptible. You can miss the blossoming of flowers or subtle changes of the leaves. I can't wait for next week. It is just fantastic to have something like this to do." Dave

June "It is very quiet, the birds don't need to sing, they have nested and more than likely brought up two broods and are just waiting to head back to Africa. We still heard starlings, blackbirds, robins, jays, magpies, nuthatches, crows, rooks, great tits, blue tits and bullfinches and saw most of the species we heard. I am sure the work we have both done has increased the number of species we see and hear. So this time next year it will be even better, it's fantastic, I love it." Dave

July "Around about 3.30am, in semi-light, a Tawny Owl passed silently across our field of vision, no more than 3 metres away!! Dave is still going on about it now, a brilliant experience! Our dawn chorus, after the Tawny, was blackbird, song thrush, robin, wren, jay and magpie. Then, around 6am a fox circuted our clearing, probably to drink from our bathing pool!! Plan on doing this at least once per season to keep an eye on things, though next time Dave requires more coffee and I require insect repellent. 48 hours later I had mozzie bites all over me. But worth it!" Gam



"This time last year I was starting on my journey. I am a lot more confident, my self-esteem is good, I feel totally different. It's lovely to see how people grow week on week. It gives me such a buzz. I am so proud, honoured and privileged to be a volunteer with EFT."

"It's the best thing I've ever done in my whole life and it just gets better and better. My medication is half what it was. I just love it. I could do it 24/7, 365 days."

