Unlocking National Nature Reserves with the John Muir Award

Opening up experiences of Scotland's National Parks – Summer 2022

There are 43 National Nature Reserves (NNRs) in Scotland with many being in or close to our National Parks. These inspiring wild places are protected for wildlife and people. Here, the John Muir Trust showcases how the John Muir Award can help people benefit from and take action for our wild places in NNRs

Cairngorms National Nature Reserves

Empowering future ambassadors for the Cairngorms National Park is at the heart of its Junior Ranger programme, encouraging the active citizenship of young people through environmental education and the development of positive cooperation and employability skills.

Glenmore Forest, Insh Marshes, Glen Tanar, Abernethy, Mar Lodge Estate and Muir of Dinnet NNRs are all being explored by the Trainee (18-25) and Junior (11-18) Rangers during their Discovery Award.

> "For those that enjoy outdoor spaces and wildlife, NNRs tend to incur plenty of 'wow· moments, helping participants to grow in their understanding and care for the National Park."
>
> Pete Short, Cairngorms National Park Ranger.

Led by National Park Rangers according to the ethos of 'learning by doing', the open Four Challenge structure of the John Muir Award allows participants to explore activities meaningful to them and relevant to the NNR. One such activity is Taskmaster, in which each participant leads the group in an activity, building teamworking and leadership skills through active learning and interaction with the special qualities of the NNR.

Trainee rangers explore Abernethy NNR

Personal responsibility for wild places is encouraged through self-discovery and exploration of native wildlife and habitats within the NNRs.

This heightens participants' awareness of their own impact and why it is important to protect NNRs for future generations.

As part of their Conserve Challenge the trainee rangers help plant 3,000 montane willow saplings around Loch A'an, in the Abernethy NNR, as part of a Cairngorms Connect rewilding project. NNR site staff provide them with site-based information and an opportunity for the group to meet industry professionals.

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"It feels good to contribute to protecting nature - the junior ranger project is enhancing my understanding."

Cairngorms National Park Junior Ranger.

During the Award, space is made to share personal reflections about NNRs with family and friends through group work and online presentations. By communicating these environmental issues to others, they are taking the first steps in advocating for wild places.

The Loch Lomond & The Trossachs NNRs

The Polar Academy Juniors are taking youth facing a variety of challenges in life into The Great Trossachs Forest and Loch Lomond NNRs. Both St. Madan's Autism Provision and Easter Carmuirs Primary pupils are discovering NNRs within the National Park for their John Muir Award.

During the Discovery Challenge, they are introduced to the tranquil shores of Loch Venachar, bordering the Great Trossachs NNR. This secluded and safe wild place provides a perfect introduction to adventure, offering young people the chance to get familiar with new ways of spending time outdoors.

"Some children have never gone to the beach, let alone built a shelter in the middle of a forest. It can be a very exciting but daunting experience, challenging them to work together and build social skills, which their teachers say has shown lasting improvements in school"

Kenny Noble, Polar Academy Juniors Manager.

Every child has different needs which the NNRs cater for; some love to canoe while others identify critters on the shore or perfect their bushcraft in the woodland. Working with vulnerable young people requires flexibility in activities or location at short notice. The nearby facilities such as Balmaha and Glen Finglas Visitor Centre along with more remote areas suit a diverse mix, from hillwalking and kayaking to leave no trace, outdoor access and mindfulness practice.

Mission:Explore books and footprint ID guides are used by National Park staff to deliver a nature scavenger hunt session for the Explore Challenge. The natural curiosities collected are then used to make sensory art symbolising what they see: a panoramic view, buzzards, ospreys or even a red squirrel. This exercise encourages students to ponder the different species of plants and animals inhabiting NNRs and the threats they face.

The inspiration and influence of their NNR visits help gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for their own work in restoring and conserving a community woodland during their Conserve Challenge.

St. Modan's Autism provision and the Polar Juniors were shortlisted for a TES Award in recognition of their John Muir Award work. While a few of the Easter Carmuirs group have been chosen as Young Leaders, taking on responsibility to support younger schoolmates during their Award journey.

This recognition and increased ownership demonstrate the impact the John Muir Award has had on their confidence and skillset. Overwhelmed and completely out of their comfort zone on their first day in the NNRs; now they are adapting and overcoming challenges, helping each other, and taking action for the climate and nature crisis.

Find out more about Scotland's NNRs

Find out more about the John Muir Award at johnmuirtrust.org/award