

“Our Local Wild Places” – Bonhill Primary School pupils take a fresh look at nature



Primary 6 pupils from Bonhill Primary School in West Dunbartonshire have a lot to be proud of after spending a full school year achieving their John Muir Discovery Award. The school used the Award to guide their outdoor learning progression from the school grounds to Bonhill’s local greenspaces, to Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park. Pupils embraced the challenge to gain a fresh perspective on their local community through a range of cross-curricular activities. It all made for positive and meaningful learning experiences beyond the school gate.



“It gave pupils an opportunity to make bug hotels, to sit outside in different places, to chat and listen. They were mostly sharing stories about being outdoors, in a very calm way. This is one of the biggest benefits I’ve noticed. School days are so busy, there’s often not enough time to chat about interests and really listen to each other. They’ve absolutely loved it.”
Sarah Riach, Class Teacher

From school grounds to National Park and beyond

A key theme throughout was to encourage familiarity with the varied wild places in the local community. The school grounds, local woodlands and parks all offered exciting opportunities for the class to get hands-on with nature and learn about local birdlife and minibeasts.

A partnership with Forestry Commission Scotland led to the class participating in the official opening of the Kilpatrick Hills section of the [John Muir Way](#) – an accessible long distance walking route across central Scotland. Pupils learned more about John Muir’s life and the relevance of his conservation messages today, planting trees along the route. At school, pupils used their imaginations and creativity to share stories and design their own comics about John Muir, inspired by the Scottish Book Trust’s graphic novel [John Muir: Earth – Planet, Universe](#).



“The pupils were excited to be out on the John Muir Way. Through meeting walkers and cyclists, they’ve realised it’s a local route that people do actually use and enjoy.” Sarah Riach

Making use of the National Park’s [educational travel grant](#) enabled the school to take pupils on two visits to Loch Lomond & The Trossachs. These trips allowed an appreciation of landscapes on a different scale from wild places in and around the school. The National Park Ranger Service supported the visits, helping pupils learn about local flora and fauna whilst passing on valuable messages about biodiversity, respecting nature and responsible behaviour outdoors.

“We want pupils within and close to Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park to visit, to see what’s here, and to enjoy it. It’s important to give them a chance to find out for themselves what’s special about the Park. Getting hands-on with nature is the best way to appreciate why it’s important to respect and look after it.”

Alison Cush, Education and Inclusion Adviser, Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park

A cross-curricular approach

Class teachers Sarah Riach and Fiona Mitchell used the John Muir Award to help them deliver the Curriculum for Excellence outdoors. The Four Challenges of the Award were used as a framework for engaging different curriculum areas whilst also providing a common thread linking diverse activities. By working across the school year, pupils experienced the changes in nature through the seasons and developed their skills and knowledge across a range of subjects.

Making links across the Curriculum

Social Science – Human impacts on birdlife; taking responsibility by making bird boxes and bug hotels

Literacy – Writing instructions for making bird boxes and creating displays

Numeracy – Surveys, data collection and comparison

Science – Citizen Science, learning about lifecycles, habitats and food chains

Technology – Examining and recreating bird nests

Time for nature, time for each other

Pupils demonstrated ownership - and wider benefits - throughout their year-long experience. They’ve been eager to share and implement their ideas for enhancing the local community. Improvements have also been seen in team building and communication skills as pupils have worked well together to complete different tasks.

Pupils themselves noted how much they have enjoyed working with people outside of their usual friendship groups. Sarah recognises that pupils having their hands occupied with practical tasks - such as repetitively stripping elder to build wildlife habitats - created a relaxed and sociable atmosphere for pupils to engage with both nature and each other.



Wider school community

Alongside their John Muir Award involvement, both Sarah and Fiona have participated in [Teaching in Nature](#), a collaborative programme which supports professional development in outdoor learning run by Scottish Natural Heritage and Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park. Through this course, participants are supported in planning visits and outdoor learning experiences within the National Park, and have opportunities to share good practice with educators from other organisations.

Benefits have also been realised within the school. Taking classes outdoors frequently over the school year has attracted interest, sparking questions about outdoor learning and helping other teachers to think about how they could take their classes outside more often. Inspiring these conversations is seen as a positive step towards the school community continuing to make the most of the varied wildlife and habitats in their local area.