

Commons across Cumbria

JOHN
MUIR
AWARD

wild places:
DISCOVER
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SHARE

A Case Study for Commons are for All – Engaging with Upland Commons and Commoning through the John Muir Award

Commons are for All is a development project of **Our Common Cause: Our Upland Commons** - using the John Muir Award as a framework to enable more people to engage with Upland Commons and commoning, to recognise the contribution of these areas to the public good and to encourage us to value, care for and celebrate common land.

Two schools set out to discover and explore their local upland commons on opposite sides of the Lake District, and share their experiences.

As part of the Commons are for All project Ennerdale and Patterdale Schools working with various partners, used the John Muir Award to engage with the upland commons of the Lake District. Visits took place to Ennerdale and Kinniside, Stair Knott (in Ennerdale), and Glenridding (in the Ullswater valley) Commons, for a wide variety of activities; exploring habitats, biodiversity, peat bogs and butterflies, as well as considering how people work and make a living from the land.



What is special about Upland Commons and Commoning?

Commons are areas on which a number of 'Commoners' share rights to use the land or take resources from it, such as grazing for livestock or collecting bracken, wood or peat. The grazing rights are usually linked to farms and often passed down through generations of the same family.

Common land is not owned by the Commoners but by someone else – an individual or organisation. What makes Upland Commons and commoning uniquely different from other upland farming is this shared use of the land and the collaboration required between the commoners and the land owner or manager.

‘Variety is the spice of life’ – and of upland commons around Ennerdale!

Ennerdale School’s theme for the term was learning about their locality, so they set out to compare and contrast different commons near their school. They wanted to find out if a different emphasis on use changes the wildlife found on them. They decided to conduct a biodiversity survey on Stair Knott, a common within Wild Ennerdale with an element of rewilding, and on Kinniside, a common primarily used for grazing livestock.

With the help of the National Trust at Stair Knott common they found some exciting wildlife including Bee Orchid, a Cuckoo Bee which lays its eggs in another bumblebee’s nest, a rare species of leafcutter which required some expert help to identify, amongst many other flowers and bugs. They were very excited to learn the leafcutter was a [Planaphrodes bifasciata \(form tricinctus\)](#), only the 33rd record in Cumbria and one of only 8 since 1938! They also learnt that Stair Knott is only very lightly grazed by the hardy breed of Galloway cattle kept both for food and conservation reasons.

Again with the help of the National Trust, in contrast, their biodiversity survey on Kinniside Common found fewer flowers and bugs. However, they learnt that the main use of this common was grazing sheep with a few ponies as well, which formed the livelihood of the 17 graziers who share this very extensive upland common.



For their final visit Ennerdale School are looking forward to visiting Longmoor common. With help from Butterfly Conservation volunteers they will complete another biodiversity survey and ask about how the common is managed to care for the Marsh Fritillary butterfly.

MICCI and the Peat Bog Faeries!

No, not the name of a Band, but a band of school children learning about climate change and biodiversity!

Patterdale School is situated in the Ullswater Valley, below the mountain of Helvellyn and [Glenridding Common](#). Their term theme was Climate Change and Biodiversity so they were keen to explore how they could learn about these in their local area, and how they are linked.

They joined John Muir Trust staff to walk up on to the common and to complete the Moorland Indicators of Climate Change Initiative peat bog survey (MICCI).¹

The day involved a mountain walk, but at every rest stop there was something to see – flowers to identify, regenerating juniper, lead mine archaeology, footpath drains to prevent erosion from the many people who walk here and magnificent views across the valley and neighbouring mountains. Once at the peat bog survey site, they could see no bare peat and used a 2 metre quadrat to identify what vegetation was growing, finding a wide variety of plants including heather, bog cotton, and the mysterious, carnivorous sundew which captures small flies on its sticky leaves to supplement its food. They measured soil pH using a testing kit, and the dissolved organic carbon in the ground water and nearby stream using a Hazen chart. In short they found a healthy wet peat bog with a good covering and variety of plant life, and learnt that this showed a good level of biodiversity, which is using up carbon dioxide from the air and therefore working to slow down climate change.

They also learnt that there are only two graziers whose sheep graze the common moderately, but they also take the sheep off the common in the winter to help the vegetation thrive.

“The Patterdale pupils had a lovely day out and took on board and learnt lots. It was fantastic to see how they all care so much for the fells they live amongst collecting any litter they found without any prompting from any of the adults”

Ed Docwra - Patterdale School parent and volunteer.

Shared stories

To meet the Share challenge of the John Muir Award, the schools agreed to meet each other once they had completed their exploring to share their adventures face to face.

Considering all different aspects of their local upland commons allowed these children to see how the land is important to many different people, from those who live and work locally on the land, the visitors from far and wide, and even to people who may never visit but benefit from the clean water and air, the mitigation of climate change and the protection of our biodiversity. They hope that everyone involved will continue to work together so that this continues to get better during their lifetimes. Both schools shared their stories using the John Muir Award Record eBook - [Patterdale School](#) and [Ennerdale School](#). Why not share your Award experiences this way too?

To find out more about commoning take a look at the John Muir Award Upland Commons Resource Guide: <https://tinyurl.com/y24dvokr>



¹ If you are visiting a National Park ask their Education team if you can get involved with MICCI on an upland common. See the [National Parks UK MICCI project page](#) for details.