

Project report: Youth in Woods

May 2019 to January 2020



Objectives

The AONB works to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, landscape and the wildlife of the Shropshire Hills AONB. In addition to this it aims to raise the awareness of people to appreciating the environment they live in, and in particular young people who will inherit the area. Our project has contributed towards both of these aims. A further AONB objective is to raise awareness and conservation activity, particularly amongst young people in the area. There is a need to conserve the character and quality of the Shropshire Hills landscape as they are under increasing pressure, and the condition of a number of the special qualities of the AONB is declining, partly through changes in land management but also through neglect. In explaining how sustainable management can diversify ecosystems such as natural woodlands, we demonstrated how these areas can be improved and in so doing also grow woodland products for local people. Furthermore, we gave young people the opportunity to appreciate and enjoy the woodlands, whilst learning useful skills and learning about the environment.

Achievements

We brought young people into woodlands to demonstrate the richness and diversity of the environment, whilst helping them to understand and conserve the landscape and to learn about managing and utilising woodland sustainably. We provided a series of training and awareness raising events that introduced participants to the woodland environment and the theory and practice of woodland management.

The project was managed by Gary Cowell, and delivered by him and a number of other enrichment session leaders (detailed below), with help from Lightfoot volunteers. Gary also works for Knighton Tree Allotments Trust, thus incorporating specific woodland management expertise into the project.

There were 2 different activities:

1. A full day taster session held in the grounds of the Community College, Bishop's Castle and the neighbouring SpArC centre in order to promote the enrichment sessions.
2. "Enrichment" afternoons in the autumn term 2019 with up to 12 students, one teacher and one teaching assistant of the Community College, Bishop's Castle.

Full Day Taster Session

The programme started on 9th July 2019 with a taster day where around 90 pupils - all of Year 7 - were busy doing woodland activities on the school grounds and in the grounds of the SpArC centre.

One activity was learning 'How to Safely Fell and Tidy' a small tree using bow-saws and loppers. The pupils worked in small teams and were instructed by Gary Cowell. Another activity was 'Wildlife Roleplay' with Jenny Ogden where young people took on the identity of pollinating insects with large and very beautiful models. The third activity was 'An Eye for Detail' with Toni Pettitt who sent the young people searching for specific trees and plants she had given clues for in mysterious little paper bags.

The feedback from the pupils was really positive with comments including:

"The most fun thing was going in to the forest and looking for specific plants. It was good when we were told about bees and their jobs. I learnt about different trees and their ages."

"I learnt about bees and how to cut trees down safely. I liked cutting down the trees and using the equipment."

"I enjoyed using the tools and investigating leaves. I liked the role play because we got to dress up and learn about the birds and insects."

"The most fun thing was printing flowers onto fabric. I also learnt that the queen bee lays up to 2000 eggs every day in the summer."

Bishop's Castle Community College Enrichment Sessions

We utilised all seven Friday afternoon enrichment sessions made available to us by the Community College over the Autumn Term 2019. The sessions delivered were:

1. **Introduction to Woodlands and Woodland Management**, Friday 6th September 2019 on site from 1.45pm to 3pm

Session Lead: Gary Cowell Lightfoot assistant: Dave Thomlinson

Location: The Hurst, Clunton, Craven Arms, Shropshire, SY7 0JA

This was an introduction to woodlands in a landscape context and how we manage them both historically and today. During this visit we walked through the wood and carried out some tree identification work. The pupils were also challenged to find photos distributed along the path that showed both extinct and introduced woodland species; this led to a discussion around how we interact with our environment and human impacts on biodiversity.

2. **Wildlife Roleplay – *The Hawthorn***, Friday 20th September 2019 1.30pm to 3.15pm

Session Lead: Jenny Ogden Lightfoot assistant: Dave Thomlinson

Location: Grounds of Bishop's Castle Community College, Bishop's Castle, SY9 5AY

In this interactive take on wildlife we learnt about the role of the Hawthorn tree and the species that rely on it. The pupils scripted, and then acted out, interviews with insects, birds and mammals. This encouraged empathy with the flora and fauna and raised awareness of their importance in the grand scheme of things. The children really enjoyed acting out the different roles and learnt how many creatures rely on hedgerows as a home.

3. **Visit to the National Trust's Walcot Wood**, Friday 4th October 2019 on site from 1.30pm to 3pm

Session Lead: Peter Carty, National Trust Lightfoot assistant: Alison Weeks

Location: Walcot Wood, near Kempston.

Owned by the National Trust, Walcot wood is remnant of ancient pasture woodland, once part of a large Elizabethan Deer Park. It is dominated by unusually shaped 400-year-old veteran oak trees which are home to rare lichens and beetles. Peter Carty introduced us to these veteran trees, showed us some of the invertebrates that live on rotting wood and told us about the grazing patterns in this wood pasture. The children were very impressed by the age of the trees.



Illustration 1: "An Eye for Detail" at Bury Ditches

4. **An Eye for Detail**, Friday 18th October 2019 on site from 1.45pm to 3pm

Session Lead: Antonia Pettitt Lightfoot assistant: Alison Weeks

Location: Bury Ditches, Lower Down, Lydbury North, SY7 8BD

This activity encouraged independent exploring of the natural environment through guided tasks. The participants were divided into small groups and given a bag of curiosities – samples of leaves, petals, flowers, etc. from the site. They matched up their samples with the natural environment to try and identify where the sample came from and guessed what that species was. The children were really impressed by the mushrooms they saw and especially the fact that they found a purple one!

5. Woodland Wildlife, Friday 8th November 2019 on site from 1.45pm to 3pm

Session Lead: Sara Pearce, Forestry Commission Lightfoot assistant: Alison Weeks

Location: Bury Ditches, Lower Down, Lydbury North, SY7 8BD

Sara Pearce, Community Ranger for the Forestry Commission, showed the kind of evidence to look for in woodlands to see what wildlife is present. She showed various droppings, bones/skulls, fur and owl pellets before leading the group through the woodland to look for signs of the animals that live there. The children were particularly struck by the section on how to track an animal.

6. Visit to the sawmill of Charles Ransford & Son Ltd, Friday 22nd November 2019 on site from 1.45pm to 3pm

Session Lead: Alistair Evans and Norman Maitland of Ransford & Son Ltd Lightfoot assistant: Alison Weeks

Location: Station Street, Bishops Castle, Shropshire SY9 5AQ

We visited this local timber mill for a presentation that told us about what the company do and how they do it. Safety requirements do not allow public access to the working mill, so a full site tour is not available, but the pupils did visit the recently completed timber treatment centre. The children were very impressed by the machinery and the process of converting sawlogs into wooden products.

7. Practical Tool Use and Den Building, Friday 6th December 2019 on site from 12.30pm to 3pm

Session Lead: Gary Cowell Lightfoot assistants: Dave Thomlinson, Alison Weeks, Helen Fairweather

Location: The Hurst, Clunton, Craven Arms, Shropshire, SY7 0JA

In this extended session there was a tree-felling demonstration, followed by the participants cutting the felled tree to provide materials for the den building session. The felling demonstration unintentionally showed how to fell a hung-up tree which added an unexpected feature to the day. The real focus of the session was on how to safely and efficiently use hand tools and the selection of a good site and useful building materials for the den. Working in groups of 3, the participants built dens using found materials and wood from trees felled just before the session. The challenge was to build a den large enough for the builders to shelter in and the dens were subject to peer review and discussions around what makes a good shelter. Helen Plastow, the Community College lead on the enrichment sessions, judged the dens and declared that the competition was a draw and that everyone was a winner.



Illustration 3: Building dens at The Hurst

Each session, apart from the last one, was for 1.25 to 1.5 hours on site. Teacher, Helen Plastow drove the college minibus to each site. The students enjoyed the visits, being out in woodlands. They looked, listened and learnt about trees, woodlands, flora and fauna and woodland skills. They gained practical experience of using various hand tools to cut timber.

Feedback forms were issued for each of the sessions. These showed that the students enjoyed the practical activities and generally rated the sessions good to very good. When asked if anything was missing from the day the answer was often “nothing”; when asked if anything could be added to the day, again the answer was often “no” with a couple of comments on how the sessions could have been longer. The pupils were asked:

How would you rate today’s activity? (please put an “X” anywhere on the dashed line)



Not at all good

Somewhat good

Very good

The line was 10cm long, giving us an easy way to convert the answers into marks out of ten for the activity. The results were:

	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4	Session 5	Session 6	Session 7
	Introduction to Woodlands with Gary Cowell	Wildlife Roleplay with Jenny Ogden	Walcot Wood with National Trust	An Eye for Detail with Toni Pettitt	Woodland Wildlife with Forestry England	Visit to Ransfords sawmill	Tree Felling / Tool Use / Den Building with Gary Cowell
Scores	9	2.5	5	10	3.5	5	10
	7.5	5	9.5	8.5	2.5	10	10
	6	5.5	9	3	10	8	10
	5	5	10	10	8	10	10
		7.5	4.5	8.5	8	9.5	10
		4	5.5	5	10	10	10
		8.5	7.5	8		1.5	10
		5.5		5		9	10
				10			10
Average	6.9	5.4	7.3	7.6	7.0	7.9	10.0
Sample size	4	8	7	9	6	8	9

The scores and the written feedback did not always match so these scores only give a flavour of the pupils' views. For example, the written feedback given for the wildlife roleplay with Jenny Ogden was very positive, despite the low score given.

Special conditions

We provided information about the AONB to all participants in the form of a leaflet supplied by the AONB office. The support of AONB was acknowledged on all publicity (supplied).

Health and Safety Risk Assessments were written for all activities.

What we learnt

The last sessions was extended which actually worked very well as it allowed the participants more time in the wood. The activity with Bishops Castle Community College was well received by students and staff, to the extent that the college have asked us to offer further enrichment sessions in 2020.



Illustration 4: A finished den at The Hurst