**Outdoor Woodland & learning North East Group Meeting**

**Meeting via Zoom**

**28th September 2020 at 10am- 12 noon.**

**Minutes**

**1. Welcome & Apologies**

**Present:** Joanne Evans, Ian Talboys (Aberdeen City Council Ranger

Service), Neil Taylor (Forestry & Land Scotland Ranger), Julia MacKay (acting

Chair), Jill Birch, Lindsey Duncan, Claire Livingstone (Treasurer),

Stephen Reeves (Dorenell Ranger Service), John Malster, Vanessa Prichard, Elaine Crawford, Caroline Hay-Crawford, Rowan Douglas, Alex Stuart, Fiona Moore, Doug Gooday.

**Apologies:** Tim Gordon-Roberts, Dawn Ewan, Susi McLarty, Juliet Robertson.

**2. Minutes of previous meeting 8th June 2020, matters arising**

* Previous actions will be covered in this meeting.
* JM updated on NTS rangers’ situation. Roddy Hamilton is now in post as ranger at NTS Crathes. A further is being advertised for. Toni and Judy have taken redundancy.
* No other matters arising. Approved John Malster, seconded Lindsey Duncan.

**3. OWL chair meeting update on 16th September via Zoom**

* JM chaired the meeting instead of Bonnie and it is well attended by groups from all over Scotland.
* **Action:** JE to include Zoom link on minutes <https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/w4zzAAUe0VpOfgB6cuMGh9Pkx1POmNRevkFCsx2fDd5qx6uHaZITaC1uGLERSO0_.XUiSQcZjjP7RiOkL?startTime=1600265528000>
* OWLNEG was the only group to hands on activities over the summer since COVID restrictions came in. Lots of groups doing activities online.
* Early Years Networking Event is being organised. This was put out to tender and OWLNEG were asked to take part but we decided not to take it any further. 1 event likely to take place in East Scotland and 1 in West Scotland.
* Funding was also discussed going forward for OWLS Groups.
* September bulletin was issued <https://www.owlscotland.org/news/owl-scotland-june-bulletin-out-now>
* OWLNEG now has over 1000 members on its Facebook Group. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/855966777765790>

**4. Outdoor Learning and Play CPD events update**

* CH reported that 5 events over 4 weeks were delivered over the summer holidays in Huntly, Aberdeen and Haddo. (9 were originally planned)
* Each workshop followed different levels of Curriculum for Excellence – Early Years, First Level and Second Level.
* 4 themed workshops – Play Outside with COVID restrictions, Nurture and Play, Sense of Space and Outdoor Numeracy and Literacy.
* Lots of positive feedback from participants
* Groups worked in small bubbles as there was an exception for education and training under Covid restrictions. 6 participants in each group who stayed together throughout the day. Deeper relationships and friendships formed by participants as a result.
* Special thanks to Jill Birch for all of her research and work in making the sessions Covid secure
* Thanks to Ian Talboys and Susi McLarty for organising venues in Aberdeen City and Shire
* Vanessa Prichard said she thoroughly enjoyed the sessions.

**5. Branching Out South Aberdeenshire (BOSA)**

* Successful with lottery funding for 6 programmes over 3 years (2 programmes per year)
* JM/JB working on a phased plan for delivery
* BOSA sessions started back 24th September at NTS Crathes. A small group as there is less referrals due to lack of GP face-to-face consultations due to COVID restrictions.
* Branching Out Plus (BOP) being worked on to deliver sessions for graduates of all BOSA cohorts. This will be a chance for past clients to meet up and support one another going forward.
* Thanks to George Henderson, NTS Crathes for his support for getting BOSA sessions restarted.
* Bryan Duncan, ADP is being funded by ADAP so that he can be released 1.5 days per week to support Branching Out. They are also supporting transport for clients.
* Dumfries and Galloway OWLS are also starting a Branching Out programme.

**6. Willow Workshop**

* 8 participants have already signed up for the workshop at Muirfield School in Aberdeen City on Saturday 7th November being delivered by John Malster and Ian Talboys.
* **Action:** Training day with Aberdeen City rangers to be organised
* **Action:** JM/IT to check with school that they are happy before workshop takes place.
* 1 space available. Action: Julia promoting
* Possibility of holding in Aberdeenshire in the future – Oyne School?
* **Action:** John to liaise with CH over access to shed for tools.

**7. First Aid Course**

* CH is organising a 2-day Outdoor First Aid Course - 14th / 21st Nov at Mucky Boots, Maryculter Woods.
* Working with Duncan/course deliverer to ensure it is Covid secure.
* 9 hours long for each day to cover 18 hours required – 9 to 6pm.
* CH meeting Duncan on 1st October 2020.
* Lots of interest.

**8. W4L grants (JE)**

* 6 application forms have been sent out for 2020-21.
* 2 grants awarded to Flowerpots Childcare and Dunecht School.
* Scottish Forestry have received the OWLNEG’s Woodlands for Learning grant application through our Community Fund and confirm they will be able to award a grant. The total amount will be confirmed soon.

**9. OWLNEG Finance/Accounts (statement from CH)**

* £25,574.89p is current balance as of 26th August. Invoices from the CPD are still coming in and will be debited. Outgoings for CPD event were £8,352.72 and income was £2725.00p.
* Thank you to Stephen and Mark who provided their time in kind.
* Thank you to Denise Bowie who provided her site and time in kind.
* CH working on separating BOSA finance from OWLNEG’s. Grants received for BOSA are £2k from Foundation Scotland, £11,462.00 for the 1 year of lottery funding (incl. BOP), £500 from ADAP South for transport.
* £20k to work with in OWLNEG balance.
1. **AOCB**
* NT stated FLS has restarted bookings on its sites with a COVID risk assessment needing to be submitted. So could use Dunottar Woods for CPD delivery in the new financial year.
* **Action:** JM asked everyone for suggestions of events for 2021-22
* CHC used The Grove at Hazlehead to deliver events with vulnerable families together with Creative Learning over the summer 3 days per week with a total of 30 sessions. CHC has also secured coastal funding for a project for family learning with under 5s and for a residential course at Cullen (currently on hold). CHC is also working with adults under the Healthy Minds project to deliver John Muir Awards for 5 adults. Other groups include Syrian women, criminal justice and general adult learners. CHC is also going on coastal habitat training delivered by Wild Things at Findhorn. Total £8K received from coastal funding.
* AS said that the NESBiP awards which were postponed will be going online featured videos for each award winner including BOSA.
* VP gave an overview of what’s happening in Lochside Academy and the lack of outdoor learning.
* This led to a discussion on how OWLNEG can deliver training to academies and teachers. JM said that OWLNEG would need to talk to heads of education in Aberdeen City and Shire to get buy in before approaching head teachers.
* CH suggested holding CPD events in different academies with subject themes so that faculty teachers could attend their relevant teaching subject.
* AS update re Banchory Academy - Richard Mullen who does a lot ofwork on the golf course for biodiversity was making new interpretation boards for wildlife on the course. He got the S2 pupils (at the time) from the academy as part of their course work to create artwork on one of ten specific species found on site and I helped him judge the winners/runners up of the submissions recently. The winning artwork is being worked into the interpretation panels and the panels will be going up next year on the site.

They had planned on making a bit more of an event of the artwork on site, but I don’t think that’s happening anymore with current restrictions in place. <https://www.facebook.com/NorthEastScotlandBiodiversityPartnership/posts/2212183722258908>

* It was decided to put a subgroup together to investigate this further. Subgroup to include, IT, John Malster, JM, VP, LD and JE. CH, SR and RD said they could be available on the day for delivery. Action: JM to organise a zoom call for subgroup at 10am on Friday 30th October.

**11. Date for next meeting**

Next meeting Monday 7th December 2020 at 1pm via Zoom.

**12. Update from constituent organisations**

**Ian Talboys**

**Aberdeen City Council Countryside Ranger Service Update Sept 2020**

Since the previous update in early March the ACC Countryside Ranger Service has been working in a very different way. From the end of March to the start of June the whole team was working from home with no work on site or in the office base permitted.

In August some work with the Branching Out clients re-started as it was felt that as they already had mental health issues, engaging with them as soon as possible would be of great benefit. As we couldn’t operate in the usual way with a group of 12 people the Rangers led small guided walks near where the clients lived, groups of one or two at a time, socially distanced. Some clients were reluctant but once they had been out found it beneficial to have some social contact and be out in nature again.

During the lockdown period we have been working with John Malster and OWLNEG to develop a CPD session for teachers around maintaining and managing willow structures in school grounds planned for early November.

We had started a safe use of fire training for teachers before lockdown but had to postpone the last two sessions due to Covid-19 restrictions. These are now being planned to resume in smaller groups in September and October.

No school groups or public events have been held though some volunteering activity is planned to start in September with small groups of volunteers to comply with the Covid-19 restrictions, with no shared tools, no refreshments provided etc.

Some schools have been in contact regarding using some local greenspaces for outdoor learning and for ideas for activities etc. More nurseries are looking to do more outdoor learning too which is all helping get young people engaged with nature on a regular basis.

The Countryside Ranger Service e-newsletter continues to be popular. The latest edition was circulated to a mailing list of over 2000 people. The popularity of the Countryside Ranger Service Facebook page continues to grow with 3013 followers and 2941 likes. Some posts during lockdown achieved a massive response with a reach over 80,000 and over 25,000 engagements for a quiz.

The team filmed their own videos on a wildlife theme based around activities people could do in their own gardens or local places they could visit during lockdown. These were put together by the Council photographer to give a professional look and to add captions and music etc. Subjects included garden birds, building minibeast homes and hotels, minibeast finding, and spring wildflower id. These were shared on the Council YouTube channel, Facebook and Twitter pages along with the Ranger Service Facebook page and achieved 3000 or more likes each.

No indoor work from the office base has been sanctioned yet.

I have been working with the Friends of Westfield Park and Brighter Bucksburn Group to develop wildflower areas. The Friends of Westfield Park are working with myself and Alex Stuart to improve an existing wildflower area by introducing more yellow rattle from seed and planting in plants grown from seed provided by NESBiP. Originally Scotstown School pupils were going to grow the seed on but with Covid-19 this was not possible. Some of the Friends grew some seed on instead and planted them out during the summer. The group is also looking to establish another two wildflower areas, but this has been on hold due to the Covid-19 restrictions. The Brighter Bucksburn Group are working with the Countryside Ranger Service, Grounds Maintenance Teams and Bucksburn Academy to convert an area of Cloverfield Park in Bucksburn into wildflower areas. Ground prep was started pre Covid-19 but the seed wasn’t sown due to the lockdown. Over the summer a good range of wildflowers have developed and now the area is under review, possibly to be mown very short, harrowed and then oversown with the seed mix that the school had already purchased through a grant application.

Breaking news! Two nominations from the Countryside Ranger Service in the RSPB Nature of Scotland Awards have been shortlisted as finalists. In the Climate Action category we have the Working Wetlands, Working with Wildlife and Nature which was about the East Tullos Burn project, Seaton Park Wetland and Maidencraig flood alleviation project and how the sustainable management of the surface water systems were benefiting wildlife and people as well as mitigating climate change. In the Forest and Woodland Category, the Return of Red Squirrels to Aberdeen (in partnership with Saving Scotland’s Red Squirrel Project) is also a finalist. The winners are announced at an online ceremony on 25 November.

**Jill Birch**

Branching Out South Aberdeenshire - with funding from The National Lottery, we have just begun the first of six Branching Out programmes scheduled to take place over the next three years. We are really lucky once again to base our programmes at NTS Crathes and to work in partnership with Alcohol Drugs Action, Scottish Association of Mental Health and Community Mental Health Team, Banchory. Funding from Alcohol Drugs Partnership has allowed Bryan Duncan (ADA) to join Julia and on a formal basis. Just prior to the events of this year, and with assistance from Toni Watt at NTS Crathes, we launched a second programme Branching Out PLUS which aims to co-produce monthly activities with 'graduates' of Branching Out programmes and provide an ongoing forum for outdoor engagement (e.g. conservation tasks) and much-valued peer support. Although this was interrupted by COVID it's been great to see a growing Branching Out community getting to know each other via our What's App group. We trialled Branching Out PLUS walks in August with more dates currently being set for the autumn.

FOLA training - supporting Aileen Salway in the delivery of the Woodland Ecology Unit; CPD training in the summer - researching and developing the COVID workshop with delivery at Huntly.

**Tim Gordon-Roberts**

We have received the OWLS Woodlands for Learning grant application through our Community Fund and will be able to award a grant, I am just waiting to see how much of the requested £2,500 I can offer - hopefully I should be able to let you know next week.

In total, 10,860 hectares of new woodland were planted, the second highest level since 2001. That means that nearly 22 million more trees were planted in Scotland last year.

As part of the green recovery plan from COVID, Scottish Forestry is making over £2 million available to tree nurseries, small forestry businesses and farmers to help them gear up and play their part in creating more woodland across Scotland. The support is part of Scottish Forestry’s Harvesting and Processing Grant, which will help farmers and foresters to buy specialist forestry equipment ranging from poly tunnels, seed trays through to mounding equipment, work site welfare units and small scale sawmills for wood processing.

Announcing the funding, Rural Economy Secretary Fergus Ewing said:

“Forestry has a key role to play in helping the rural economy recover from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. I am also determined to see tree planting increased in Scotland to help meet our climate change targets.

 And finally - our Woodland Creation target has been increased to 18,000 ha / year from 2024.

**Caroline Hay-Crawford**

GERONIMO AT THE GROVE

This was a joint piece of work between Creative Learning, who had accessed funding from the Fairer Scotland Fund and Family Learning.

The project provided Creative Outdoor Learning sessions for families at a forest location within the Grove Nursery site at Hazlehead. Creative learning employed an artist, Jessica Fernandez and together with Caroline Hay- Crawford, a Forest School qualified Leader who is part of the Family Learning team planned and delivered 30 2 hours sessions over a five week period.

The families who took part were identified by family learning and were families who they were actively working with. The families came from across the city and if they did not have access to transport we organised and provided taxis to take them to and from the forest site. Family Learning also provided waterproofs and wellingtons for families to remove any barriers to taking part.

We had over 20 families taking part and most participated in 3 consecutive session and some only managed 1 or 2 but everyone who took part enjoyed the activities.

The kind of things we provided included, Outdoor nature related games, family flag making using natural materials scavenger hunts and transient art, Den building, which became quite competitive among some families, bug hunts, creating obstacle courses ,campfire cooking and using clay to create new members of their family. We also spent time playing games such as hide and seek, creating and telling stories and exploring the forest site. The families encountered a range of wildlife and saw red squirrels, dear and a range of birds, insects and toads. We encouraged children to use their imaginations and be creative when in the forest.

The project has been a great success and the feedback we received was very positive and included from all: “Great could not wait to come back” All the activities we offered were given 5 stars by families in the feedback sheets, most enjoyed spending time playing together with their children, and having fun with Jessica and Caroline and being outdoors.

Many of the families learnt new things such as “how to make a fire,” making a flag”” learning about secret hideout places,” “how to make marshmallow smores and bananas with chocolate in them” “I had never been in the forest before but will go more now”, “All the children working together” “ more ideas of things to do outdoors”

The project had been a great success and helped families spend time together and enjoy being in nature.

**Dawn Ewan**

Update from Mucky Boots - Just entering the fourth year of our outdoor nursery. A few challenges in relation to the Government's 1140 policy and COVID but overall we are not nearly as affected as indoor settings. Our staff numbers are increasing now that we are on a more stable footing financially, with us employing a Depute Manager last year and now an additional practitioner this year. We have 20 children on the roll right now, with most of our children attending the full three days per week with us. This is very different from our first couple of years when most children only had a day or two with us and the rest of their nursery hours elsewhere. We have 40+ on our waiting list for places this and next year. We have also been approached by a local school enquiring as to whether we can expand and offer after school and breakfast club.

**Lindsey Duncan**

Started back working with Dunecht School on 10th September. Visitors are not allowed in the school buildings but we can meet in the school grounds before heading to the woodland site.

Forest School session dates confirmed with Tough school on the 2nd and 9th October and then continuing after the October holidays.

Outdoor learning sessions due to start with Clatt School after the October holidays.

**Julia MacKay**

Apart from focusing most of my attention on the new BOSA programme I am also trying to complete this year’s Forest School training course, which has been a blend of on-line tutorials & face to face delivery.

We have our last 2 tutorials planned on 3rd October & 1st November covering reflective practice and behaviour.

The practical assessment for the whole group will be delivered at Crathes Castle on 31st October in 3 bubble groups.

We had to cancel one of the woodland ecology days due to covid, but this will be rescheduled.

**Stephen Reeves**

I’ve been working with St Thomas RC School in Keith after they attended the OWLNEG training, helping them to find some outdoor spaces to use and we’re soon going to walk to some woods with a class to see how viable it is for regular trips.

· Myself and Mark have been recording quite some short videos about the work that we do for a rewilding project with Speyside High in Aberlour. I never thought I’d own a selfie stick but it has been surprisingly useful and we’re considering doing more videos for general release.

· Mark has been busy with windfarm surveys and I’ve been busy following up on practical tasks after trail audits at the start of the year.

· Otherwise we’ve been putting a lot of time into a 2 year vision for the Ranger Service and Visitor centre.

**Doug Gooday**

Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service.

• During the pandemic the Rangers have not been allowed to undertake site visits or face to face work with schools, volunteers or community groups. This has meant that site monitoring work and invasive species monitoring and control did not take place this season.

• Several of the team were re-deployed to deliver food parcels and medicines to people shielding in rural communities.

• The whole team were re-deployed to patrol visitor hotspots across Aberdeenshire and the CNP to monitor public behaviour and access. Many issues related to irresponsible firelighting, irresponsible car parking, littering and camping.

• Education activities and awareness events went online with promotion of wild plants in verges and greenspaces, biodiversity quizzes, posts for National Insect Week including virtual minibeast hunts, rock posts and online event for National Geology Week, videos of coastal walks, virtual bat and moth events.

• We have been writing an updated biodiversity education pack aimed at showcasing the region’s natural heritage and highlighting those aspects of ecology which can be most easily taught in our various habitats.

• Updating a series of posters and leaflets on SOAC aspects and responsible behaviour in the countryside.

• Writing a promotional leaflet about greenspace management, which explains the need for altered management regimes to promote biodiversity.

• Providing advice on improving biodiversity and guidance on variety of nature conservation and SOAC queries including invasive plant identification.

• As of 7/9/20, we have been notified that site visits and outdoor work can now go ahead.

**Alex Stuart**

NESBiP September 2020 Awareness and Involvement Group Member Update

NESBiP A&I Chair – Ewen Cameron

1. Info on Brown Bordered Lacewing to EGCP for their Discoverer Maps.

2. Visited both Green Bridges (Kirkhill and Kingcausie) on the AWPR for first impressions of effectiveness etc. More signs of human rather than wildlife movement at Kirkhill. Clear signs of Roe Deer and Black Slugs (!) using Kingcausie and otter spraint at west side. Still trying to get info on where we can see results of post construction monitoring.

3. Progress on creating Habitats & Species Group is slow - any suggestions on purpose of group and potential members, please send to Ewen caleypine@btinternet.com

4. Examine Scottish Translocation Code and identify potentially suitable sites as first step in considering potential for Small Blue Butterfly Translocation to suitable embankment/cutting sites on AWPR.

5. Input to JHI SHERPA Project for both Scotland wide and Dee Catchment MAPs

6. Ongoing input to JHI UNISECO Project (Agroecological Farming Systems).

7. Personal NPF4 Consultation Response submitted, but with significant biodiversity content relevant to NESBiP.

8. 2020 NESBiP Seminar/Awards - Plan for 2020 Award Winner recognition - we have 11 winners and awaiting photos for 2. Done in a PowerPoint presentation which will be converted to video with voiceover and placed on our website.

9. Drafted ToR for A&I Group for approval of NESBiP Management Group. Once approved, I will use it as template for same for Steering and Management Groups.

10. In response to questions/concerns raised at last A&I Group and ongoing discussion/review of NESBiP governance, membership lists have been produced for all 3 groups for placing in the documents section of the website.

11. Make regular contributions to the monthly DeeWatch. Alex Stuart & Helen Rowe are also regular contributors.

12. Proposal to SNH that they organise controlled collection of wild flower seed from NNRs as part of a national drive to encourage individuals, community groups etc. to use native species in “wildflower mixes” rather than species like Californian Poppies. It will be considered for 2021.

13. Letter written in support of JHI funding bids for their EU Rural Development Priorities Project and their project on engagement of rural communities in developing research and policy under Horizon Europe.

14. Drafted articles now on website - East Tullos Burn Project & Seaton Wetland Project.

15. Check and input to our Wildlife Gardening Group on Facebook at least twice a week and aim to check partners’ pages for items we can share/re-post.

16. Comments/suggestions to Dee Catchment Partnership for consideration/incorporation on their Easter Beltie Burn Restoration Project.

17. With Alex & Helen Young, contributing to biodiversity project at Newtonhill Primary.

EGCP – Ian Hay

• Working on a key issues report for Marine Scotland identifying the main areas that a regional marine plan would be addressed in the North East of Scotland.

• Sent out a report looking at Marine Invasive Species and what EGCP could do to help in the region in place of the planned INN seminar. No responses to questions.

• New EGCP website and EGCP Coastal Connects Facebook page

• New EGCP project administrator now in place, strong background in communication

• EGCP Newsletter being prepared, planning on 4 issues a year

• EGCP Turning the Plastic Tide is tentatively trying to start doing beach cleans and virtual school workshops

• Litter hubs now in place at 4 locations so people can borrow gear to run own beach clean.

CIEEM – Annie Robinson

CIEEM You can sign up for weekly e-news here https://cieem.net/enews-sign-up/

Policy

- CIEEM has produced a briefing paper on Using Nature-Based Solutions to Tackle the Climate Emergency and Biodiversity Crisis

- Response to National Planning Framework 4: Call for Ideas

- Response to the recent ECCLR Committee’s Call for Views on a Green Recovery

- Response the UK Withdrawal from The European Union (Continuity) (Scotland) Bill in regards to environmental governance post-Brexit

- Response to SEPA consultation - Significant Water Management Issues in Scotland

Also had meetings with RTPI Scotland, SNH, SEPA, Architecture and Design Scotland and the Scottish Land Commission.

Conference

This year's Scottish conference is on Land Use in Scotland: Changes, Challenges and Solutions and will be held on the 27th October as a virtual event. Bookings are OPEN. The keynote speaker is David Hetherington of CNPA who will discuss "Delivering landscape-scale afforestation in the UK’s largest national park". First speakers are announced on the website and please do help spread the word on Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook

Selected events

Held a joint event with the BES Scottish Policy Group on "Opportunities for Implementing Biodiversity Net Gain in Scotland". Speakers included David Burslem, Aberdeen University, Vikki Patton, Ramboll, Paul Sizeland, NatureScot, Andy Tharme, Scottish Borders Council and Francis Williams, Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks.

The Future of Biological Records in Scotland - Have Your Say! 29th Sept 16:00-18:00

Joint workshop with SBIF to understand what ‘quick wins’ can be progressed to ensure consultants get maximum benefit from transforming the recording infrastructure. Book here.

Webinar - Biodiversity and Planning on the Forth including talks covering Licensing on the Scottish coast, Queensferry Crossing and St Margaret’s Marsh, Inner Forth landscape projects and Humber Estuary projects. 2 October Book now!

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Uni of Aberdeen projects

X-Polli:Nation - www.xpollination.org

Twitter: @XPolliProject #xpolli

Citizen science project on pollinators led by Open University. Online course on pollinators

https://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/course/view.php?id=5471#

Interactive species identification tools with AI support on bumblebees and butterflies

Giant Hogweed

Monitoring trial using sheep as a form of chemical-free, low-intensity hogweed control with SISI

Updates and reports at https://www.invasivespecies.scot/giant-hogweed-and-sheep-trial

NESBReC – Glenn Roberts

1. Continued NESBReC service since the lockdown – data searches, record submissions and identification queries. All staff working from home. But no public events have taken place.

2. Input into the B-Lines project to select routes in NE Scotland at a Buglife workshop.

3. Support for the Grassland Watch project in partnership with Aberdeenshire Council Greenspace Officers, Aberdeenshire Council Rangers Service and NESBiP. Highlighting grassland wildflowers that can be seen in unmown grassland and encouraging recording of these species.

4. Two articles in the P&J covering local distribution of Tree Bumblebee – a new species to our area and encouraging public sightings around the North of Scotland.

5. Another article in the Evening Express early in lockdown about how people might relate more to wildlife in their gardens or while taking daily exercise and how they could start sending records to NESBReC about the species that they see.

SISI – Karen Muller

During lockdown project officers were working from home, with a focus on the ‘Alien Detectives’ online education pack, available here: https://www.invasivespecies.scot/alien-detectives

This features lots of games and activities at your fingertips, from cross word puzzles to crafts, with the overarching theme of invasive species and rivers. The resource pack generated a lot of interest (51% increase in website views from April to May).

Across the project area, mink monitoring and trapping were reduced by 41% and 51%, respectively, carrying on only if the volunteer was willing and able to check their rafts within guidelines or capable of dispatching themselves. Since June we have been setting our volunteers up to continue with their vital work and we’ve been pushing to make up for lost time before juveniles head off in search of their own territory and have gradually started to pick up mink since then, with 14 having been trapped in the Deveron, Ythan and Ugie catchments.

For plant control, we also worked with less volunteers (61% decrease from last year), resulting in 53% less hours volunteers were able to spend with us. Our training courses are also cancelled for the foreseeable future. On the bright side, project officers were able to head back out at the beginning of June to get started with Giant hogweed control, get contractors on the ground and gradually resume working with smaller volunteer numbers under social distancing measures. A massive thanks is due for all the work land managers did on hogweed while we weren’t able to - we couldn’t have done it without them this year. In the north-east corner (Deveron, Ythan, Ugie catchments) all (known) hogweed control was completed, in worse affected catchments within the project area we pushed to ensure that priority control was completed until plants began to set seeds. This also wouldn’t have been possible without our dedicated volunteers that have been trained up as part of SISI in the past. In the Deveron catchment another year of sheep grazing trials for Giant hogweed have gone ahead.

With hogweed taking priority, working with volunteers still being limited and a lot of catch up to play, Himalayan balsam took a bit of a back seat this year - but we were still able to work with some volunteers to tackle a reduced number of balsam sites. Knotweed control is now in full swing and we are working with volunteers to get on top of it.

Outreach, group and training events, as well as school visits have not been possible this year, but in some instances we have adapted to deliver more virtual talks, until we can meet again.

Our focus for next year, if the situation allows, is to get back to our usual work with volunteers, outreach events and education visits. With our eyes cast to the future, we want to make a focused push to get land managers, local community groups and individual volunteers trained and set up to hopefully continue invasive species control going forward, after our project ends.

River Dee Trust – Jane Lilley

• New education officer Jane Lilley was appointed in April.

• Education has obviously been tricky of late, so I began by making nature fact files for people to use during lock down walks.

• Primary school River Dee topic was made and published on the website. The idea is that it is ready to deliver, with PowerPoint lessons for teachers and activities to go with them each week. Uptake is tricky to gauge, but the website traffic has been great so hopefully there are plenty of classes using it.

• The education program has begun to visit schools. Rather than our previous system of going into classrooms and taking classes out to the river we now work in school playgrounds. We bring everything the class needs and then run a session there. Schools have been very welcoming and keen to have us in and I’m now booked up until the end of the holidays. If any other organisations want to consider this approach to primary school engagement, get in touch and I’ll happily share my COVID risk assessments etc.

• Developing a community engagement talk that can be delivered to clubs and groups.

• Developing plans for family days on the river once regulations allow. Children and parents can come and play nature appreciation games on the river in their family bubbles.

• The million trees project continues with a focus on fundraising as well as lobbying the government to make the grant application process function for this sort of conservation work rather than forestry. I’m looking at the idea of children planting seeds in the classroom to contribute to the million trees project. The only real stumbling block is collecting enough appropriate seed and stratifying over winter.

Ury Riverside Park – Ian Talboys

The Ury Riverside Park (URP) continues to be exceptionally popular with local visitors with plenty of people using the path networks for walks, dog walking, jogging, and cycling, including wheelchair and electric disability buggy users. During the Covid-19 lockdown many users say it was a life saver having such a place on their doorstep.

Unfortunately, the Covid-19 restrictions meant that much of the work planned for 2020 was not able to happen. We had plans to tackle the extensive giant hogweed stands along the River Ury within the park and working in partnership with the NE Non-native Invasive Species Project for areas upstream. Aberdeenshire Council had offered to fund contractors to undertake a mix of mowing the young plants to reduce the flower production, along with spraying in areas where machinery couldn’t get to. They are a couple of the URP volunteers are qualified to use knapsack sprayers near water who were also going to spray off some of the outlying plants that would be harder to find.

The URP volunteers have managed to spray or cut some giant hogweed plants below ground level that were found away from the main infestations near paths to reduce the risk to visitors. These were mostly small first year plants that were unlikely to seed. Hopefully this will keep the wider park areas free of giant hogweed.

The wildflower meadows sown and planted last year have established well and have added colour to the park which is appreciated by people and pollinators. These wildflower areas have been cut now that most of the flowers have seeded. An area dominated by birds-foot trefoil has been left uncut as these plants had not set seed. Photographs of these areas can be found at www.uryriversidepark.com or on the groups Facebook page. An area dominated by rosebay willowherb, spear thistles and ragwort has also been left as cover and a seed source for the many seed eating birds that are found in the area.

Over 200 goldfinches have been counted in a flock feeding on the thistles, accompanied by linnets and redpolls. At least two pairs of grey partridge have also been recorded breeding on site. Over the winter around 8 grey partridges had been seen so more may have bred. Sand martins nested successfully in the riverbanks. There have been kingfishers, osprey, otter and roe deer also recorded on site along with many other common species. An active badger sett is also present on the edge of the park. An American mink was also picked up on a camera trap and we are looking at deploying a mink raft in collaboration with the SISI project to detect and hopefully trap this animal.

Some vegetation clearance around the trees planted last winter to reduce competition has been done by volunteers in late July as part of the ongoing management works required to establish the trees. Some of the earlier plantings from late 2018 are now well out of their protective tubes and doing well.

A series of interpretation panels are being finalised for installation around the site. There will be orientation panels at the main entrances, along with habitat panels for the young woodlands, wildflower meadows, wetlands and the river. These should be installed this autumn but have been delayed by the company doing the design and manufacturing being closed during lockdown.

I have just made a short video around the URP to show it in early September time which you can see at https://youtu.be/Iglw9bQeYPc or on our Facebook page. I am aiming to do seasonal videos highlighting things of interest during the year.

The URP has also been nominated in the Community Initiative category of the RSPB Nature of Scotland awards. It was announced on 9 September that we were on the shortlist of finalists. The winner will be announced at an online ceremony on 25 September. Fingers crossed!

Aberdeen City Council Countryside Ranger Service – Ian Talboys

Since the previous update in early March the ACC Countryside Ranger Service has been working in a very different way. From the end of March to the start of June the whole team was working from home with no work on site or in the office base permitted.

At the start of June the team was given permission to restart some outdoor work mainly around control of giant hogweed as a public safety issue and undertaking site patrols to make sure sites were safe and people were using them responsibly. Over time this has continued with control of Himalayan balsam, Japanese knotweed, American skunk cabbage and Himalayan knotweed. I recently been given the lead role for Invasive Non-native Species work within Environmental Services and will be looking to plan an improved and better coordinated approach for future years in what ACC does in this area.

When not undertaking site patrols, minor on-site maintenance or invasive control works the team has been working on management plans for many of our 25 sites. Some being revised and others created for the first time. Many of the existing plans were long overdue review so this was a great opportunity to do this!

In August some work with the Branching Out clients re-started as it was felt that as they already had mental health issues, engaging with them as soon as possible would be of great benefit. As we couldn’t operate in the usual way with a group of 12 people the Rangers led small guided walks near where the clients lived, groups of one or two at a time, socially distanced. Some clients were reluctant but once they had been out found it beneficial to have some social contact and be out in nature again.

During the lockdown period we have been working with John Malster and OWLNEG to develop a CPD session for teachers around maintaining and managing willow structures in school grounds planned for early November.

We had started a safe use of fire training for teachers before lockdown but had to postpone the last two sessions due to Covid-19 restrictions. These are now being planned to resume in smaller groups in September and October.

No school groups or public events have been held though some volunteering activity is planned to start in September with small groups of volunteers to comply with the Covid-19 restrictions, with no shared tools, no refreshments provided etc.

Some schools have been in contact regarding using some local greenspaces for outdoor learning and for ideas for activities etc. More nurseries are looking to do more outdoor learning too which is all helping get young people engaged with nature on a regular basis.

The Countryside Ranger Service e-newsletter continues to be popular. The latest edition was circulated to a mailing list of over 2000 people. The popularity of the Countryside Ranger Service Facebook page continues to grow with 3013 followers and 2941 likes. Some posts during lockdown achieved a massive response with a reach over 80,000 and over 25,000 engagements for a quiz.

The team filmed their own videos on a wildlife theme based around activities people could do in their own gardens or local places they could visit during lockdown. These were put together by the Council photographer to give a professional look and to add captions and music etc. Subjects included garden birds, building minibeast homes and hotels, minibeast finding, and spring wildflower id. These were shared on the Council YouTube channel, Facebook and Twitter pages along with the Ranger Service Facebook page and achieved 3000 or more likes each.

No indoor work from the office base has been sanctioned yet

I have been working with the Friends of Westfield Park and Brighter Bucksburn Group to develop wildflower areas. The Friends of Westfield Park are working with myself and Alex Stuart to improve an existing wildflower area by introducing more yellow rattle from seed and planting in plants grown from seed provided by NESBiP. Originally Scotstown School pupils were going to grow the seed on but with Covid-19 this was not possible. Some of the Friends grew some seed on instead and planted them out during the summer. The group is also looking to establish another two wildflower areas, but this has been on hold due to the Covid-19 restrictions. The Brighter Bucksburn Group are working with the Countryside Ranger Service, Grounds Maintenance Teams and Bucksburn Academy to convert an area of Cloverfield Park in Bucksburn into wildflower areas. Ground prep was started pre Covid-19 but the seed wasn’t sown due to the lockdown. Over the summer a good range of wildflowers have developed and now the area is under review, possibly to be mown very short, harrowed and then oversown with the seed mix that the school had already purchased through a grant application.

A new Friends of Carnie Woods is starting to develop to work in partnership with the Countryside Ranger Service to help manage the woodland and develop small projects within the woodland which may include updating the interpretation panels, replacement boardwalks, benches, reduction in red squirrel feeding etc. This group is the brainchild of a local resident who is a former ecologist with SEPA and Cllr Iris Walker from Aberdeenshire Council along with the Westhill Community Council. There may be opportunities to work with the Friends of Arnhall Moss as a long-established group in the area.

Breaking news! Two nominations from the Countryside Ranger Service in the RSPB Nature of Scotland Awards have been shortlisted as finalists. In the Climate Action category we have the Working Wetlands, Working with Wildlife and Nature which was about the East Tullos Burn project, Seaton Park Wetland and Maidencraig flood alleviation project and how the sustainable management of the surface water systems were benefiting wildlife and people as well as mitigating climate change. In the Forest and Woodland Category, the Return of Red Squirrels to Aberdeen (in partnership with Saving Scotland’s Red Squirrel Project) is also a finalist. The winners are announced at an online ceremony on 25 November.

Dorenell Ranger Service – Mark Johnston

• Firstly, some not so good news. Our wildflower meadow had been coming on great in its first year and we had even created some nice signs highlighting it. Unfortunately, due to local issues we had to have it cut close in July. It now seems unlikely that we will be able to resolve these issues and return to proper management here. On the plus side we are in advanced discussions regarding another area where we would replace the meadow and hopefully have additional habitat creation too.

• We continue to collect records for NESBREC (over 330 to date this year) and have had interesting finds such as Red-footed Falcon and Black Redstart.

• Our Visitor Centre remains closed due to Covid and all our school outreach and events were cancelled this year. However, we are currently working virtually with Speyside High on a Year One rewilding project as part of Developing Young Workforce. We have created a series of videos about our ranger roles, habitat projects and about land use on the estate which the teacher will incorporate into the project.

• In partnership with Owlneg and other outdoor providers we helped deliver training to improve confidence in outdoor learning for teachers and other educators.

• Another five Golden Eagles were satellite tagged this year as part of our ongoing project. This means there are now eight birds providing data and we are in the process of finalising a press release to officially launch the project.

• We again worked closely with the Scottish Raptor Study Group particularly around Hen Harrier nesting season

• We have continued to establish a good working relationship with the estate head keeper who shares sightings of key species with us.

SRUC – Colin Hardacre

A mixed report from those in Education at SRUC. Like everyone, back in March we felt the effects of the C19 pandemic reaching Scotland in quick and dramatic form. Pretty much all campus-based operations ceased except Lab work, property maintenance and some trials. The impact is still being assessed, but we are tentatively devising plans for a return to campus – for staff at least. For the time being (up until January 2021 that is), lectures and learning materials will be online, with practicals restricted to only the essential (i.e. qualification dependant) ones.

Unfortunately, this also curtails our beloved field trips, but a recent BES conference for Enhancing Fieldwork Learning (#FieldworkFix) provided inspiration for some useful online/virtual alternatives to develop the skills our students will need in practice.

On the more positive side, SQA approved the HNC and HND Wildlife and Conservation Management. Also, University of Glasgow have accepted the BSc (Hons) and MSc Wildlife and Conservation Management. These courses will begin from September 2020 and replace the former Countryside Management programmes.

Finally, I am delighted to report two SRUC alumni appointments. Simon Ritchie (BSc grad 2018) is the new Nature Reserve Officer at Loch Leven National Nature Reserve, and Chris Walker (BSc (Hons) grad 2020) just told me he’s been accepted as Conservation Project Officer for the Fife Coast and Countryside Trust. Good to see the next gen doing well despite these difficult times.

Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service – Doug Gooday

• During the pandemic the Rangers have not been allowed to undertake site visits or face to face work with schools, volunteers or community groups. This has meant that site monitoring work and invasive species monitoring and control did not take place this season.

• Several of the team were re-deployed to deliver food parcels and medicines to people shielding in rural communities.

• The whole team were re-deployed to patrol visitor hotspots across Aberdeenshire and the CNP to monitor public behaviour and access. Many issues related to irresponsible firelighting, irresponsible car parking, littering and camping.

• Education activities and awareness events went online with promotion of wild plants in verges and greenspaces, biodiversity quizzes, posts for National Insect Week including virtual minibeast hunts, rock posts and online event for National Geology Week, videos of coastal walks, virtual bat and moth events.

• We have been writing an updated biodiversity education pack aimed at showcasing the region’s natural heritage and highlighting those aspects of ecology which can be most easily taught in our various habitats.

• Updating a series of posters and leaflets on SOAC aspects and responsible behaviour in the countryside.

• Writing a promotional leaflet about greenspace management, which explains the need for altered management regimes to promote biodiversity.

• Providing advice on improving biodiversity and guidance on variety of nature conservation and SOAC queries including invasive plant identification.

• As of today. 7/9/20, we have been notified that site visits and outdoor work can now go ahead.

Outdoor & Woodland Learning Scotland – Doug Gooday

• A series of 5 CPD events for teachers to develop confidence and skills in outdoor learning were run in Huntly, Aberdeen and Haddo. Over 100 teachers and educators from across the region attended these workshops. Several NESBiP members delivered workshops.

• Branching Out sessions are resuming on September 24th.

• FOLA Training: cohort 10 training resumed in August with training in tool use and woodland ecology. A training programme for cohort 11 is being prepared for 2021.

• An Early Years in Nature course id being delivered to 12 nursery practitioners in partnership with Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service.

Dee Catchment Partnership – Susan Cooksley

- The Easter Beltie river restoration is underway (2km new river channel, 10ha new wetlands) – DCP led, funded by NatureScot BCF

- DCP has a new website deepartnership.org, including …

- DeeWatch nature diary

**Elaine Crawford**

The relief post I was supposed to take on at Monymusk After School Club did not go ahead, due to the schools closing during lockdown. They have been unable to re-open due to issues with the LET, as a result of Covid19 restrictions. Demand has also fallen, due to parents either on furlough, unemployed or working from home, so at the moment, the future of the club is uncertain.

I have therefore pursued alternative employment opportunities, updated my Child Protection training and brushed up on self-employment skills through ‘Business Gateway’.

**Joanne Evans**

* Gardening4Kids 2020 has not been running this year due to COVID current restrictions.
* Working 1 to 1 on learning pathways plus with a pupil at Turriff School.
* Probable work with 1 to 1 on learning pathways plus with a pupil at Elrick School after the October holidays.
* Beechgrove Garden has stopped filming at the garden at present. Programme is being filmed from presenters’ gardens for the rest of the season.
* Gerbera Designs – garden design is very busy with lots of projects.
* Working with NESOLG and Julia to plan for the next cohort for FOLA 8 training in 2021.
* Writing outdoor learning factsheets for Trellis (therapeutic gardening charity)
* Doing the Award in Social and Therapeutic Horticulture with Thrive through distance learning.
* Preparing 2nd project for Society of Garden Designs adjudication.
* Daviot Oldmeldrum Scout Group sessions have started back up outdoors in small groups.