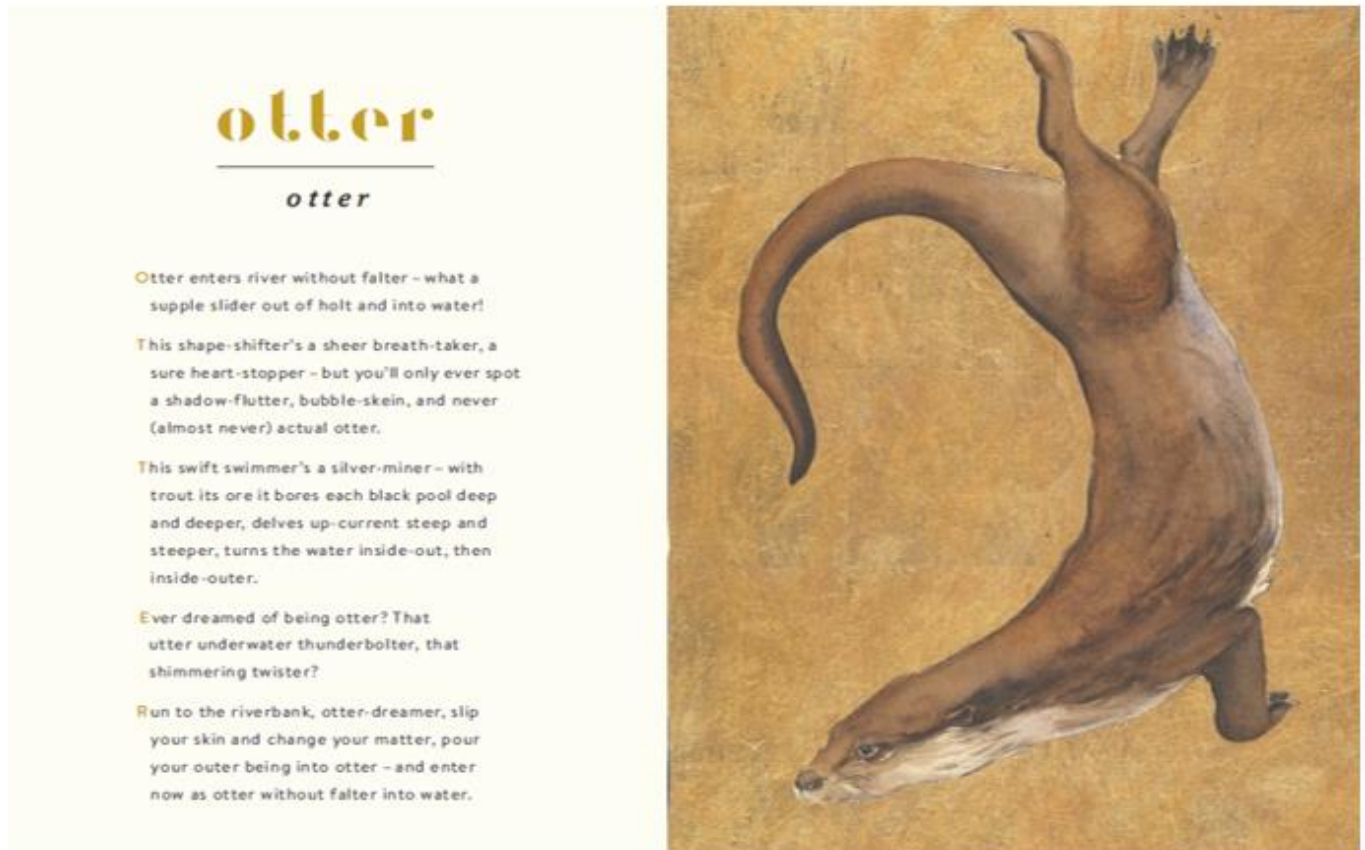


Literacy and nature



Credit: Robert Macfarlane & Jackie Morris, *the Lost Words*

“Language is written deeply and richly into our relationships with landscape and with nature: there as the place-names on our maps, and the many names of species, common and rare, with which we share our lives.” Robert Macfarlane

What is literacy?

Literacy is traditionally understood to be the ability to read and write. In practice, it’s a far wider concept based on communication skills, including speaking and listening. The ability to use language effectively lies at the centre of development and expression of our emotions, our thinking, our learning, our wellbeing, and our sense of personal identity. Literacy skills are therefore of great social, emotional and economic importance to each individual as well as to society as a whole.

In an education context, literacy is recognised as a key foundation for learning. It’s fundamental to all areas of formal learning as it often unlocks access to the wider curriculum. Being literate increases opportunities in all aspects of life, laying foundations for lifelong learning, employment and social interactions.

“Literacy is about loving life and expressing it in different ways.” Juliet Robertson, Creative Star

Opportunities abound for reading and writing in wild places, whether in different locations or using a variety of natural media such as stones, sand, mud etc. The natural world offers inspiration and stimulation. It provides rich, multi-sensory experiences that can be a springboard for creative writing. Learning about the natural world can help build new vocabulary and knowledge. This real-life context helps information to be retained. From spending solo time in quiet reflective spaces to engaging in high impact adventurous activities as part of a group, there are opportunities to process and communicate thoughts and feelings.

Writing activities such as planning and reviewing, as well as personal reflections in journals, contributions to school displays, poetry and sharing online can all contribute to achieving a John Muir Award. Celebration events, guided tours of wild places, presentations at school assemblies or community events can help to develop vocabulary and confidence.

[John Muir Award Record Books](#)^[AB1]^[CT2]^[CT3]^[AB4]: available in English, Welsh and as a downloadable eBook. Participants can record their experiences - write quotes, stories, songs, names of things, poetry

[Curriculum maps for Scotland and England](#): how literacy outcomes can be achieved through the John Muir Award across the curriculum.^[AB5]

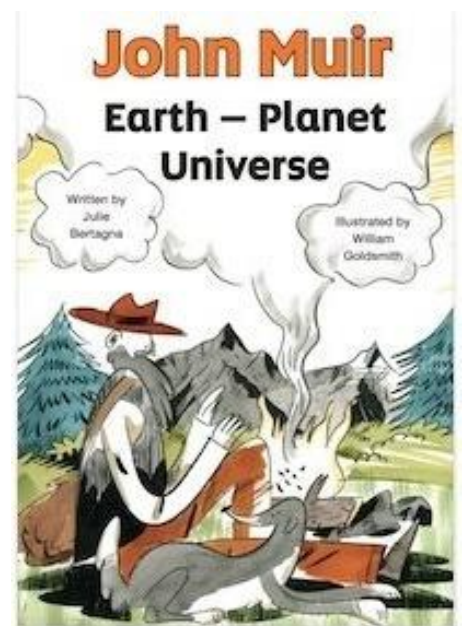
[John Muir, Earth-Planet, Universe graphic novel](#): based on Muir’s life, produced by the Scottish Book Trust – download a free pdf and teachers notes

[Larbert High School](#): a [creative writing and values exercise](#) ^[AB6] by a whole school year group.

[Creating Gaelic names for lichens](#): Citizen Science & literacy - giving new Gaelic names to lichens that had lost theirs captures the enthusiasm of Breadalbane Academy pupils.

[Creativity, Nature and Mental Health](#): a collection of poems and reflections from Branching Out participants

[Growing in the Outdoors](#): Linda Cracknell’s blog on wild places and creative writing, featuring George Watson’s College residential activity



“Here’s a question,’ the geography teacher said. ‘How many words can we think of for the sound a burn makes?’

After five minutes we had captured some of the burn’s many moods and nuances in words: *Rattle roar slither bubble rumble splash clap tinkle lap... and so on.*”

Websites, books and teaching notes

This is by no means an exhaustive list - just a starting point. Create your own! You may like to share your own recommendations on our Award Facebook group. (You'll be invited to join once your proposal is accepted).

Many classroom-based literacy resources can be adapted for use outdoors. The resources listed below have a natural theme or are specifically adapted for the outdoors.

[Literacy & Nature](#) – Ideas, resources and examples of the John Muir Award in action

[I'm a Teacher Get Me Outside of Here](#) Juliet Robertson's excellent blog, with everything from ideas on writing, reading, talking and listening outdoors, to letter awareness, nature reference apps, Literacy blogs...See Index.

[Outdoor Learning Pack](#) The Woodland Trust Scotland's pack for primary teachers with a literacy section.

[Developing Literacy Skills in the Outdoors](#) Natural Connections resource on storytelling.

[Learning on your Doorstep: Ideas for developing writing outdoors](#) 6 topics based on outdoor exploration with example lesson plans, resource lists and writing outcomes.

[Tree Stories](#) 12 trees with a story, one for each month of the year. Includes background facts on each tree and its folklore, plus an introduction to using storytelling for education.

[Putting Walks into Words](#) Linda Cracknell's blog on using outdoor experiences to generate language and creativity with a sequence of steps from the inspiration of the outdoors to the production of a finished piece.

[My Life with Nature](#) Joseph Cornell – a unique autobiography of John Muir told in his own words, brimming with spirit and adventure.

[The Lost Words](#) and [The Lost Spells](#), Robert Macfarlane & Jackie Morris - beautifully illustrated books capturing nature words that have been slipping out of common usage with children. A joyful celebration of nature words and the natural world they invoke. Explorers Guides with resources and ideas are available for each book. See also [Spell Songs](#) – a musical companion to the creatures, art and language of the books.

[Skyhawk](#) Gill Lewis - teaching notes on book about caring for an osprey and taking responsibility for nature.

[The Wilderness Wars](#) Jane Green – an adventure story that celebrates the outdoors and the freedom to explore it.

[Wolf Brother's Wildwoods](#) Designed to support teachers who are reading the novel Wolf Brother by Michelle Paver with their classes, including Curriculum for Excellence links and themed outdoor learning activities.

Visit & search websites such as [The Scottish Book Trust](#) and find [books, activities and resources to help you enjoy reading and writing outdoors](#).

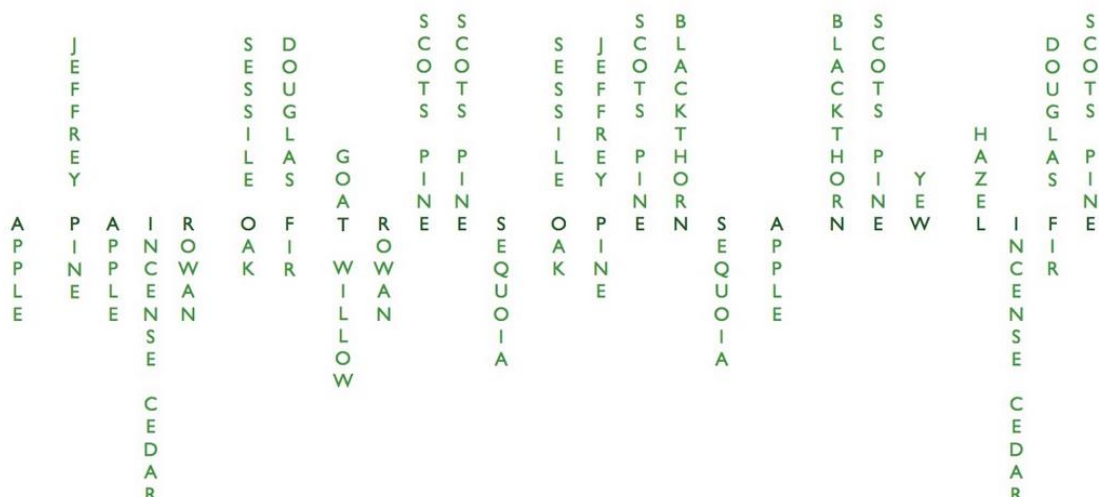
[Literacy at school / at home outdoors](#) – Activities from East Ayrshire's Learning Outdoors Support Team.

Gaelic^[AB7] & Welsh

[Faclan Nàdair](#) - dictionary of Gaelic Nature Words.

[Journeys through Welsh literary landscapes](#) – Famous Welsh writers and the places that inspired them.

Poetry



[I am the Universe: writing climate change](#) Young Poets Society resource to prompt young people to write poetry responding to environmental issues and climate change.

[No Map Could Show Them](#) Helen Mort collection focused on the earliest female mountaineers.

[Walking the John Muir Way](#) Alec Finlay.

[Robinson Jeffers](#) American poet, described as an icon of the environmental movement.

[Death of a Naturalist](#) Seamus Heaney collection.

[Favorite Flower Poems](#) National Trust collection of traditional and new voices of verse inspired by flowers.

Higher literacy

Some non-fiction inspiration...just for starters

Feeling inspired, but not sure where to start? [The Nan Shepherd Prize](#) – a new literary prize for underrepresented voices in nature writing – has fantastic resources and tips to help everyone get started, including an [introduction to nature writing](#) and a list of inspiring [authors and books](#)

[The Willowherb Review](#) – a platform celebrating and bolstering nature writing by emerging and established writers of colour.

[Nature Library x Black Lives Matter](#) – online reading group created to combat anti-Black racism in the outdoors

[Women writing about the Wild](#) - 25 essential authors

[Waymaking](#) - An anthology of women's adventure writing, poetry and art

[Writers in the Forest Residency](#) – Forestry England's Centenary initiative

[Robert Macfarlane's](#) books, including Landmarks and the Wild Places.

[Kathleen Jamie's](#) essay collections on nature and landscapes: Findings, Sightlines and Surfacing.

[The Living Mountain](#) Nan Shepherd's masterpiece of nature writing describing journeys in the Cairngorms Mountains.

[Fingers in the Sparkle Jar](#) Chris Packham's memoir of growing up, life, death, love and nature.

[Silent Spring](#) Rachel Carson – an expose of the destruction of wildlife through the widespread use of pesticides.

[Ring of Bright Water](#) Gavin Maxwell – story of about the author's life in remote coastal Scotland living with otters.

[A Sting in the Tale](#) Dave Goulson - one man's quest to save bumblebees.