

# Building bridges and connections at Place Woodland

Summer 2022

The John Muir Trust's work aims to ensure that individuals can benefit from wild places and are encouraged to take action for their protection. Covering 62 acres in Kilbirnie, North Ayrshire, Place Woodland is home to both a variety of wildlife and a team of volunteers dedicated to caring for their local wild place. Supported by North Ayrshire Council's Connected Communities programme, volunteers aged 16+ help to manage the woodland through activities designed to improve individuals' mental health and wellbeing, develop new transferable skills and build a sense of belonging through becoming part of a team.

Come rain or shine and throughout the pandemic's challenges, volunteers Mark and Stuart have contributed over 2,000 hours of conservation activity at the site whilst working towards the goal of achieving their Conserver Level John Muir Award.

Regular volunteering over several years has led to deep connections, tuning into the abundance of birds, stoats, field mice, butterflies, deer and other woodland creatures throughout the seasons.

Building a new pond allowed them to watch a habitat flourish, with frogs and newts quick to move in.

The volunteer's skillsets have been a considerable asset. Utilising Stuart's previous expertise in mechanics enabled the construction and maintenance of three timber bridges spanning natural watercourses, as well as building numerous seating areas and benches to encourage woodland visitors to linger and enjoy the natural environment.

Other activities included planting over 2,000 tree saplings, various wildflowers and shrubs; helping remove ash dieback; and

maintaining, creating and adapting pathways to alleviate natural gradients which were causing barriers to accessibility.

"There's something special about the creation of natural beauty and helping to conserve it, it makes me feel good."

Mark, Place Woodland volunteer

Encouraging the wider community to develop connections with their local wild place has been an important part of their Award activities, finding opportunities to chat with members of the public and highlight the features and wildlife that makes the place so special.

Numerous bird feeders and nesting boxes have been built, sited locally and with dozens more distributed to local primary schools, helping foster wider connections to nature. Community events have encouraged awareness of the woods as a natural resource for all, including providing the local community and schools with seeds and saplings to grow on, before welcoming the

groups to the site to plant them out and experience Place Woodland for themselves.



John Muir Award leader Andy notes that throughout it all, confidence levels, communication and skills have grown with the volunteers forging strong bonds and following their interests as their relationship with the woodland deepened.

Below, Mark and Stuart share reflections on what the woodland means to them and the impact of working towards their Conserver Award.

### **Mark**

*"The John Muir Award has given me a purpose. I've had issues in the past and this Award has given me a goal, something to participate in, hold on to, learn new skills, improve my communication skills and feel like I've become a better person for it."*

*"I do really feel part of the site, passionate about maintaining and promoting it, taking care of it and nurturing it. I may not have been the most responsible person in the past, but, through working with the other volunteers & [towards] the John Muir Award, I feel I've become part of the responsibility of conserving nature in all its glory here at Place Woodland."*

*The biggest thing for me though, is that I could get a qualification, for the first time ever, without any pressure or having to sit an exam. Can I just say, please never change that, it makes such a difference to people like me,*

*overlooked by society, but I can learn, participate and contribute in my own way and feel an equal."*

*"How do wild places make me feel? At peace. The tranquillity helps me clear my mind, relaxes me and makes me feel like I belong. As part of this project, I've learnt so many new skills, experienced so many things, it's been brilliant. I've just applied to participate in NQ Gardening & Horticulture at college in August. Not something I'd have thought about before participating in the John Muir Award."*

### **Stuart**

*"I found out the importance of maintaining and conserving natural habitats and that in fact, our woodland was 'home' to a variety of species - and I was helping to safeguard their home. That makes me feel good. I also noted that you can never fully explore a natural habitat the same way twice."*

*Nature changes so quickly, as do the weather conditions. You can go back to an area you discovered, say a month ago and its changed completely from your last visit. That's nature for you, it adapts so quickly."*

*How does it make me feel? - Proud, I'm a better person for doing the John Muir Award."*

With both volunteers now moving on to their next steps in education and employment, gaining their Conserver Awards has provided a welcome opportunity to celebrate everything they've achieved for themselves, their wild place and the local community.

**Content and images provided by Place Woodland leaders and volunteers**

**Find out more about the John Muir Award at [johnmuirtrust.org/award](http://johnmuirtrust.org/award)**