

# Catching the bug!

Introducing the local teenagers determined to be our next conservation leaders – and the Wildlife Trust initiative that’s helping them get there.

**W**ho will look after nature in the future? Some of the biggest threats facing our wildlife need long-term solutions – and we need a new generation of conservationists to take up the challenge. In our quest to find these future conservationists, we set up a new ‘Wildlife Rangers’ group for 12-18-year-olds at our Blashford Lakes nature reserve in April 2015. This pilot scheme offers monthly sessions for teenagers to give them the chance to learn practical conservation tasks and help with the management of the reserve, improve their identification skills and, importantly, spend time having fun outdoors. While a one-off visit to a natural place

yields benefits in the short term, children and young people need repeated wild experiences to help develop a connection with wildlife and wild places. Wildlife Rangers gives them this opportunity, plus they are learning skills that could encourage and support them to work or volunteer in the conservation field in the future. Dawn O’Malley, the Trust’s Education Development Officer, explains: “There is something very special about working with teenagers in the outdoors. There are challenges too and reconnection with nature does not happen overnight. But to spark off a passion for nature or an interest in wildlife and the environment that could last a lifetime, perhaps even leading to a future career, is incredibly worthwhile.”

**“All things to do with nature are usually aimed at young children, but this is really cool.”**

MAIN PHOTO: LIANNE DELLO

We also run a Wildlife Rangers group at Testwood Lakes nature reserve in Totton, Southampton. For details about upcoming sessions, please see the *What’s On* guide enclosed with your magazine.



LIANNE DELLO

Above: Poppy finds a young newt hiding in the undergrowth.

Below: One of our Wildlife Rangers James gets up close with a snail at Blashford Lakes.



CAROLINE MEECH

Guidance: Dawn O’Malley talks Wildlife Ranger Jackson through the catch from the pond.

## A day with the Rangers

This summer *Wildlife* magazine editor Caroline Meech visited Blashford Lakes nature reserve to meet our Wildlife Rangers.

Led by Assistant Education Officer Tracy Standish, we start the day by rummaging through the light trap and practising our moth identification. Some species were excitedly recognised and named by the group, having been seen in the trap the previous month. It’s the perfect ice-breaker for new members as we work together to identify the catch; from the delicate small emerald that fluttered around us, to the aptly-named snout and a large yellow underwing. The star of the show is a striking canary shouldered thorn whose neon yellow body is hard to miss!

The joy of being up close to wildlife is clear to see in the smiles on everyone’s faces. James and Cameron, both 12, laugh with each other as they work together to identify each species and everyone tells me that this is one of their favourite tasks.

It is also clear that Wildlife Rangers provides a brilliant time to socialise too. As Edie, 14, comments: “Everyone is really nice and welcoming. It’s fun, I like socialising with different people

and it gives me a lot of experience with nature and different activities.”

Next we try our hand at scrub clearance, tackling some bramble and tree saplings that have begun to encroach on the reserve’s wildlife pond. As we work, I get chatting to newcomer Poppy, 13, who tells me about her passion for birds of prey. When we visit the bird hide Poppy (*below*) quickly



LIANNE DELLO

identifies all of the birds darting in front of us, demonstrating her incredible knowledge that will surely serve her well in her aspirations to become an ornithologist.

In fact, all members of the group are keen to be involved in wildlife conservation when they are older. Bella, 13, wants to study Biology at the University of Cambridge and explains how Rangers is giving her a brilliant opportunity to gain experience: “I enjoy Rangers because I love nature and this provides me with experience and education. All things to do with nature are usually aimed at young children and can be really childish but this is really cool.

“Last time, we tried river dipping and stood in the river and caught things in nets, and like today, you can find cool little creatures in the bushes. It is really fun and it also feels good to contribute.”

Jackson, 13, is keen to be a wildlife cameraman and study for a degree in Zoology or similar at university. His passion and knowledge of wildlife is truly inspirational.

Next we try pond dipping and are astonished by how much wildlife we find lurking beneath the surface of the water. Dawn O’Malley guides us through the many species we discover. Personally, I am delighted to find juvenile newts, which takes me back to my own childhood, and is almost certainly one of the activities that kick-started my own love for nature. For me, this highlights just how important it is to give every young person an opportunity to experience and enjoy wildlife first-hand.

The group has a wide range of interests from guitar playing and drama, to swimming and sailing, but it’s a keen interest in wildlife that brings them together.

Spending the day with the Rangers was an inspiring and rewarding experience. Like all of us, teenagers benefit greatly from time to de-stress in fresh air and green space. More importantly, Wildlife Rangers is providing a unique experience for teenagers to engage with nature at an important time where they’ve grown out of kids’ activities and are thinking about their future studies or careers. As Jackson, 13, explains: “I enjoy wildlife and nature and want to look after it and when I first heard about Rangers I thought it looked like a fun way to be involved.”

The future of our countryside and its wildlife depends on these young people and we hope that groups like Wildlife Rangers will help to inspire the next generation of conservationists to care and protect wildlife in the future.

Below (left to right): James, Cameron, Jackson and Poppy with Tracy Standish.



## Project gets go ahead

We’re delighted to announce that our pilot Wildlife Rangers programme has been so successful that with the generous support of the Cameron Bepolka Trust ([www.cameronbepolkatrust.com](http://www.cameronbepolkatrust.com)), we are launching a permanent Young Naturalists group for 13-17-year-olds at Blashford Lakes nature reserve in the New Year. We hope this new project will inspire many more teenage enthusiasts in all things wild! For further details, please contact Tracy.Standish@hiwwt.org.uk or call 01425 472760.

**Cameron Bepolka**