

How volunteers are helping to restore ancient woodlands

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NEXT Thursday sees the return of National Volunteers' Week (1st to 7th June), which celebrates the good work done by 1.76 million volunteers across Scotland. The aims of the week are to recognise volunteers' contribution to society, reward those who already give their time, and recruit new volunteers.

This year, Volunteer Action Dumfries and Galloway arranged for Stranraer and Wigtownshire Free Press reporter Andrew Hamilton to join a local trust in the Cree Valley, north of Newton Stewart, which is working to restore and maintain some of the country's most diverse woodland habitats.



FOR the past year, a group of hardy souls have been working in all weathers to restore the once extensive ancient broadleaf woodlands of the Cree Valley. With the aim of establishing a Forest Habitat Network from "source to sea" of native broadleaf woodland, the Cree Valley Community Woodlands Trust (CVCWT) has achieved much since it came into being.

In its efforts to link up sites of international significance for the public to enjoy, the trust has undertaken the felling and extraction of conifers, selective felling of broadleaves, broadleaf planting, creation of wetlands, and the provision of easy access paths and interpretation boards.

This work is seen as valuable not only in protecting and enhancing the remarkable biodiversity of the area, but in the potential benefits for the local tourism industry. The CVCWT is a registered charity which evolved from the Forest Environment Panel in 1998, and was set on course by community meetings and a feasibility study, but it is only within the past year that local volunteers have become heavily involved in the project.



For Project Manager Peter Hopkins, their input has benefited the cause hugely, not least because they unsurprisingly tend to take more care in their green-fingered tasks than did the contractors who previously worked at the site. “We have a strong core of volunteers who can be relied upon to turn up every week, but we also get various groups coming in from the community,” said Dr Hopkins.

Those groups have included the Activity and Resource Centre in Newton Stewart, the

Stranraer campus of Dumfries and Galloway College, Turning Point, and schools, whether local or from further afield.

Trust Administrator Linda Moorhouse agreed that the project had benefited since the Forestry Commission established a volunteer base last August.

She said: “Having volunteers on board made a great difference to the amount of maintenance that could be carried out and, because they come along weekly, it helps to ensure we don’t get stuck in the office.”

For the regulars, the project generally involves meeting at 10 a.m. every Wednesday and getting down to work for the next five hours, with a break for lunch. That work can range from tasks such as planting, to removing tree protectors, making bird and bat boxes, and monitoring numbers of mammals, birds and butterflies. I found out for myself the kind of challenges facing the volunteers when I joined them at Low Camer Wood last Wednesday.



Any notion I had of just pruning a couple of branches was dispelled when I was handed a photocopied map of 1851 and asked to join a group in the hunt for an old corn kiln.

Given the fact I’d already got lost once that morning on the way to Low Camer, I didn’t fancy my chances much with a 150-year-old map, but I admit the others’ enthusiasm was infectious as we made our way through the undergrowth in search of the site.

The search proved hard going, but if or when the kiln is eventually found – just as one was at Knockman Wood a couple of miles south – it will be tidied up and signposted as a site of historical interest for visitors.

This archaeological activity is just part of the trust's business, and at last Wednesday's get-together everyone was asked to make records of adder sightings, while the job of pruning roadside branches as always had to be attended to.

For Dr Hopkins, every task that his volunteers undertake is crucial to the project. He said: "This is probably the largest community woodlands project in the UK. Others are new, or large ones being enhanced, but this is both: we are enhancing the ancient woodlands and carrying out new planting to link up species in the Forest Habitat Network.

"We are very fortunate to have sites like the Wood of Cree which are really important on an international scale — to have them means we are not starting from scratch."

As the trust go about linking woods such as Knockman, Cree and Buchan all the way up the Cree Valley, there is a continual recording of species, whether simply to protect them or to learn something about the woodland they inhabit.

And while the project is "driven by biodiversity", said Dr Hopkins, there is also the archeological aspect, such as the excavating of old ferme touns which, once found, would be important in terms of the local economy. With around 750 hectares of land to cover, there is no shortage of hard graft, especially when the elements are against you, so what motivates the volunteers to give up their time week after week?



For Chris Barratt, who is semi-retired and joined the project last June after answering an advertisement, the attraction lies in "meeting like minded people out in the fresh air, and doing something good for the area".

Kirsty Robertson, of Minnigaff, got involved shortly before Christmas after seeing a poster in the Kirroughtree Visitors' Centre appealing for volunteers. "I liked the idea of being out in the fresh

air and getting exercise," she said. "You also feel as if you are doing something useful."

Ken Muir, who responded to a Forestry Commission appeal for volunteers, said: "I have always had an interest in nature conservation, and the idea of creating new woodland appealed very much.

"Even though you are part of a group, you can work at your own pace – everyone makes a useful contribution, no matter how fast or slow they work.

"It is very rewarding to see your trees take root and develop, and taking down the tree supports you see the results of your labours."

The beauty of the surroundings was not lost on Kelly Hunter, of Kirkcowan, an Australian who has lived locally for eight years.

She said: "People ask me how I could have moved from Australia to here, but apart from the lack of sun this place has everything. "You only have to look around to see how beautiful the surroundings are, and I think locally a lot of people don't realise it."

I must admit that, up until last Wednesday, I had to count myself amongst those people.

Despite having spent six years at school in Newton Stewart, I had no idea of the stunning woodland and rich diversity of life within the Cree Valley.

Even to those as ecologically ignorant as me, the variety of life within short distances is obvious, and there is plenty of evidence of re-planting of species such as oak, rowan, willow and hazel, which I am told once flourished in the area.

And as one of the volunteers pointed out, it is not just the natural surroundings that keep the group coming back, but the joking and camaraderie, which continues throughout the day.

This spirit is extended to visitors, who are quickly made to feel part of this small-knit group, as I found last week, and no doubt many others will in the future.

Anyone interested in volunteering locally can find more information at www.volunteerscotland.info.

For more information on the work of the CVCWT, visit www.creevalley.com or telephone 01671 401423.

During Volunteers' Week 2006 a number of events will be held across the country to celebrate the achievements of volunteers and thank them for the vital contribution they make to community life. As in previous years, Volunteer Action is hosting certificate ceremonies throughout the region during Volunteers' Week to pay tribute to volunteers.

This year, the Wigtownshire ceremony will be held on Friday 2nd June at the Stranraer F.C. Social Club on the town's North Strand Street from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m.

Last year over 200 volunteers from 25 Wigtownshire volunteer-involving organisations received certificates.

"There is no such thing as a typical volunteer," says Volunteer Action

Wigtownshire's project worker Christine Clarke. "Every year we see a wide range of people volunteering, of all ages and from all backgrounds.

"Many volunteers have disabilities or impairments and still play an active part in their community and get a lot of satisfaction and enjoyment from being a volunteer.

"Volunteering can have a positive impact on your life. Depending upon the type of volunteering undertaken, it can improve health, provide an active social life or present new challenges. It can also improve career prospects and is a great way to develop new skills, build confidence and demonstrate drive and initiative."

Pictures

1 - Volunteers gather at Low Camer Wood last week before getting to work.

2 - Stuart McHarg, Fritz Pukies, Adam McAndrew and Christian Tillyer take on some pruning.

3 - Setting off in search of the old corn kiln.

4 - Free Press reporter Andrew Hamilton, with Adam McAndrew, Kelly Hunter and Chris Jewitt.