

ABRIACHAN FOREST TRUST : BIRCHWOOD HIGHLAND & NEW CRAIGS FOREST SCHOOL



INVOLVING PEOPLE - This project, supported by Scottish Natural Heritage, Forestry Commission Scotland, NHS New Craigs and Birchwood Highland, has been a great success. Simon Harry and Roni Smith have organised Forest School every Tuesday throughout the winter months from October 2010 until the end of March 2011. Average attendance has been 19 with 27 different individuals as regular attendees.

It was designed to be a logical progression from the pilot project in the spring and concentrated on encouraging the participants to develop their confidence, improve their health, wellbeing and general fitness, and rediscover their skills for life through achievable transitional activities.



Those who took part had poor mental health so were either patients in New Craigs Hospital, residents of the Birchwood Recovery Centre or the Birchwood community. The participants who had been involved in the earlier project demonstrated marked improvements in various aspects of their lives—particularly their sociability. This phase built on that, so newcomers benefited from the mentoring and encouragement of the “old hands.”

Most of the sessions were held at Abriachan Forest but some included a walk in the hazel / oak Woodland Trust woods lower down the hill. On two occasions when the snow was too thick the group met at the Floral Hall and walked round the Ness Islands instead. As an encouragement to participants and their support staff a visit was also made to Dunain woods, where Amy Clarkson gave the walkers a brief introduction to the plant and animal species and path networks in their local area.



ENJOYING SCOTLAND'S OUTDOORS - When they arrive each Tuesday morning the group all go out for a brisk 3km walk. This is timed and an element of competition is introduced by having some stride round in one direction and the others go round the opposite way. For the majority of participants this physical activity outdoors is a remarkable achievement because most of them live very sedentary, sometimes solitary, indoor lives.

An extra element of learning has also been some navigation skills and then using them to explore the path network and find hidden clues, dominoes or hidden treasure.

The climb to the top of the Carn na Leitire is now taken in most of the group's strides. The planning of the walk route is becoming a discussion feature. The sense of support and looking out for each other is very obvious throughout.

There have been regular requests to include more learning opportunities— knowledge sharing is encouraged so there are now more experts on tree species and animal tracks. All participants will achieve John Muir Discovery Awards.

Campfire cookery menus have been varied and unanimously declared delicious. Menus are agreed on, planned out, cooked and devoured by all those involved. Appetites are whetted by the physical activity of walking and also by working at the new site. Tasks have included drainage, building a fire pit, firewood collection, creating a path and planting trees.



Nick "Look forward to it."

Ann "Enlightening, invigorating and very enjoyable'.

Sarah-Jane "It's a godsend."

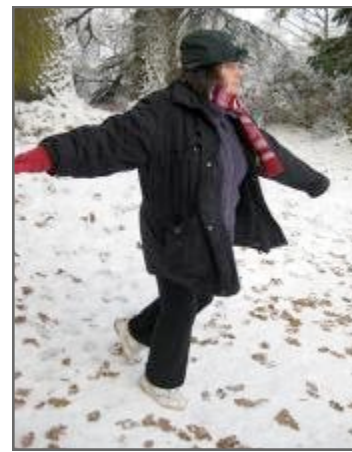
Being out there and seeing the hills covered in snow, and walking and talking to the staff has rescued me from a bout of depression more than once.'

'It's a lifeline to get away from the Recovery Centre to a supportive environment with practical activities and fresh air.'

Ken - 'Unmissable, fantastic. I feel lucky to get the chance of doing it. It's fun learning about the forest with a great bunch of people who are friendly and keen to help.



Colin built a fantastic woodshed nest box using hazel twigs collected on a walk



SUPPORTING BIODIVERSITY— Raising awareness of the woodland environment has been an easy outcome to achieve because there are several participants who are already interested. The end of day review sessions usually lead to some new environmental facts, figures and tales to be told .

As a result of Colin's nest box design the whole group built and camouflaged a whole suite of boxes which will be erected once the trees have been thinned. The raised levels of confidence and new-found ability to participate in team work are clear in these images. The group have become so involved and have such a sense of ownership of their woodland ,they are making decisions on where the boxes would be most successful or where it would be best to plant new trees.

The beautiful watercolours were painted by Deborah on a week she was unable to come to Abriachan. Their detail and explanatory notes say it all and highlight the enjoyment and mutual benefits this programme of activities has developed. Thanks to all who made it happen from all who have participated in it.

