

Centre News

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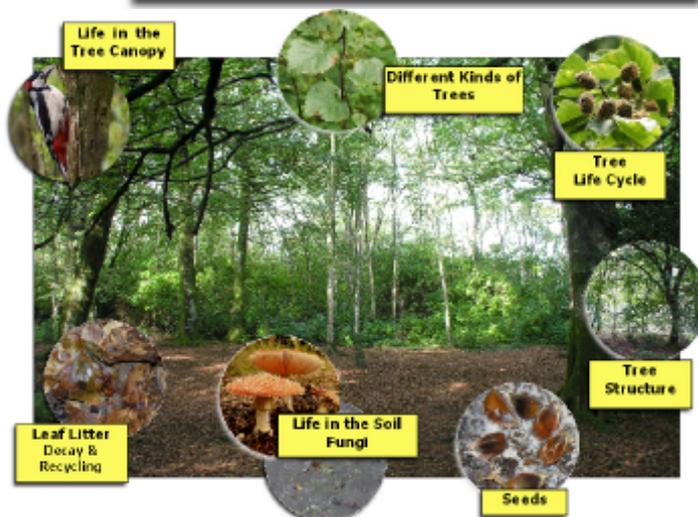
Centre Director's Report - July 2007

"Fascination, Fun & Discovery"

Offwell Woodland & Wildlife Trust

The fieldwork season kicked off with great weather and a new crop of wildly excited youngsters visiting the Centre. Unfortunately, the good weather did not last, but pupils have still been having great fun finding out about the world around them, while dodging the worst of the showers. (As adults, we tend to forget the simple pleasures offered by a pair of Wellington boots, lots of puddles to splash in, glorious, squishy mud and the freedom to get dirty in old clothes!)

Many of the school groups visiting this summer have participated in the Woodland Discovery Trail (outlined in the last Centre News) using the new hand-held Q3 Ranger computers. This has proved to be extremely effective as a learning activity, as well as very enjoyable for the children.



Follow-up resources are now available for the Trail.

New internet follow-up resources based on the WDT are also being made available exclusively to school groups taking part in the WDT activity. One teacher emailed these comments after receiving the first installment of the new resources. "I just wanted to take this opportunity to thank you once again for our amazing day out. It was at just the right level for the children and we have been able to take their learning on so much further due to having so much to draw on after our visit. I will definitely see you next year."

We have also received several packages of colourful 'thank you' letters from pupils who have visited. These have made very interesting reading because it is obvious that they have really enjoyed doing the Woodland Discovery Trail. It has ranked as an equal favourite with pond dipping, which, with its array of amazing creatures, is usually the clear winner. One child wrote "Thank you for letting us use your NEW woodland trail. It was really cool." Another teacher in an accompanying letter commented "It seems that every time we go there (to the Centre) there is always something new!".



Using Q3 Rangers to identify invertebrates in a log pile.

The only school groups which have not done the Woodland Discovery Trail (WDT) have been groups with children too young to benefit from the current version. Future plans for further educational activities on the Q3 Rangers therefore include the development of a version suitable for the youngest children.

It is a really quite remarkable achievement, that people from all walks of life have been able to follow the trail, successfully imparting learning to the children, with no prior training or familiarisation on the Q3 Rangers. Even confirmed technophobes, have been able to lead the WDT activity and appreciate its value for the children in their groups.

The new sitting out area adjacent to the Lake Classroom (funded by the East Devon AONB Sustainable Development Fund and OELink) has been much in use and has provided valuable extra seating. It is rapidly greening up and offers a wonderfully scenic location to enjoy a picnic lunch, while watching out for Kingfishers and dragonflies.

Facilities at the Centre will shortly be improving even further with the building of the cabin extension and provision of toilet facilities for the disabled. This is being funded courtesy of a large grant from the Alcoa Foundation.

The Alcoa Foundation has also made another subsequent grant of £1,500 to the Centre, this time through their community small grants scheme. This is thanks, once again, to Howmet Castings, in Exeter (which is owned by Alcoa). Under this scheme, the offer of company volunteers to help for a day comes along with the donation. As a result, a large group of Howmet volunteers plus family members visited at the end of April. They helped to trial various aspects of providing corporate days for businesses.



Corporate days - a new venture for the Trust.

Volunteers are much on the Trust's agenda at the moment. A major campaign to recruit volunteers to help with conservation and wildlife survey work at the Centre, will soon be under way. This recruitment drive will be started as soon as the Trust's planned 'Action for Biodiversity' project gets the green light. This will hopefully be within the next month.

There is a great variety of tasks at the Centre which could use volunteer help. For example, the Environment Agency are planning a visit with a group of staff volunteers later on in the year, to exercise their muscles in a day of 'rhododendron bashing'. However, rhododendron clearance is not the only task needing volunteer help. There is a wide range of jobs requiring different levels of fitness and inclination, where volunteer input would really make a difference.

For example, if you have a particular interest in wildlife of any kind (e.g. birds, butterflies, mammals) and would like to contribute towards the knowledge of species found at the Centre, then your help would be greatly appreciated. Training in conservation and

survey techniques will be provided, so don't let lack of knowledge put you off! Volunteers will also be able to gain recognition for their input by taking part in the John Muir Environmental Award scheme, which is a sort of environmental equivalent of the Duke of Edinburgh's award scheme. This is a good chance to get involved, perhaps learn some new skills and benefit wildlife at the Centre at the same time.

One of the areas which will be included in the new volunteer programme will be the Heathland Restoration Project site. This continues to be one of the most varied and interesting habitats at the Centre. Despite the awful weather of the last few weeks, there were many beautifully marked, newly emerged Marbled White butterflies flying about in Section 8 the other day.

Marbled Whites have an interesting life cycle, with the caterpillars feeding on a succession of different grasses as they grow. Section 8, which is cut in the autumn, is one of the grassier strips on the heathland. It is therefore no surprise that the Marbled Whites concentrate in this strip. Although the male and female butterflies are quite hard to tell apart, with only slight colour differences between them, you can usually pick out the females flying about, dropping their eggs randomly in amongst the vegetation. As soon as the eggs hatch, the caterpillar goes into hibernation, only reappearing the following spring to begin feeding and growing.



Marbled White butterfly perched on grass, sunbathing.

If you have time to spare and feel you would like to get involved in promoting wildlife at the Centre in any way whatsoever, your input would be much appreciated. News of the start of the 'Action for Biodiversity' project will be posted on the Trust's website (www.countryside.info). You can also contact the Trust directly by telephone (01404 831373) or email (offwell1@aol.com).