

LOOKING FOR A DIFFERENT KIND OF BREAK THIS SUMMER? A WEEK, WEEKEND, OR JUST A DAY OF CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERING CAN MAKE FOR AN INVIGORATING ESCAPE FROM THE DESK JOB, AS IDA MASPERO DISCOVERS

A BLUSTERY SUNDAY MORNING in April: posies of primroses dot the banks of the burn we have crossed to scale the windswept hillside opposite. From a distance, it seemed bare, but climbing up now, spades in hand and aspen saplings in our backpacks, we pick our way between spindly young trees planted a season ago. I pause for a moment and look down the valley to where clusters of sturdy birch, well established after several years' growth, give a flavour of what Carrifran Wildwood might look like one day.

Nine of us have gathered to plant trees at Carrifran valley in the Moffat Hills. "Now remember where you've planted, so you can come back and see how they're getting on," Volunteer Co-ordinator Peter Dreghorn tells us after our first batch of the day.

And as he had warned, the day's planting is strenuous but rewarding, with dramatic views and a tremendous sense of satisfaction. "What I find truly inspiring about this project," says fellow volunteer Leslie Wood, "is imagining the scene in 10, 20, or 100 years' time."

"The aim is to restore the valley to native woodland as it was around 6,000 years ago," explains Project Officer Hugh Chalmers. Since the 1,600-acre property was bought by Borders Forest Trust in 2000, nearly 500,000 trees have been planted, around 10% of them by volunteers who meet once a month on a Sunday. A small crew of regulars is usually joined by a mix of couples, families and student and local conservation groups.

Carrifran Wildwood is just one of scores of conservation initiatives in Scotland that enlist the help of volunteers to get essential work done. From urban green spaces in the Central Belt to remote, pristine islands and peaks of the northern Highlands, trusts and charities rely heavily on work parties of volunteers to give freely of their time.

MOUNTAINS OF WORK

"There is an awful lot of practical work to be done on our reserves up north, which include Ben Mor Coigach, Handa Island, Rahoy Hills and Hill of White Hamars on Orkney," explains Glen Campbell, Northern Reserves Coordinator at Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT). "Each reserve has a management plan to be put in practice on the ground, but limited resources and the remoteness of properties make it impossible to cover all essential work with paid contractors or staff."

So, Campbell started up a series of voluntary work parties for SWT's northern reserves just two years ago. In 2007, volunteers on 33 organised trips contributed a staggering 750 working days in total. "Nowhere near the amount of work would have been done if it weren't for the willingness of volunteers," he comments.

Participants on Campbell's trips could find themselves doing anything from building and repairing board walks, bridges and paths, rigging or dismantling deer fences and



PHOTOGRAPHY: NTS / IDA MASPERO / BTCV / JMT / SWT

digging in steps, to planting trees and coppicing woodlands. Work parties range from three days to a week and accommodation is provided by SWT.

"The habitats and wildlife of the reserves are very special; it's definitely a chance to have a working holiday in magnificent surroundings," Campbell continues. "We've had pharmacists, dentists and foresters; folk of all ages right up to 70. And we are often joined by students in land management, conservation, or related fields hoping to build up work experience."

One such volunteer is zoology student Kate Thomson, who joined a five-day work party to Handa Island last year to gain some practical conservation experience. "It was an amazing insight into how much work goes on behind the scenes on a reserve," she recalls. "We built a board walk – on the face of it a simple thing, but it made me appreciate how much effort goes into basic infrastructure for visitors."

And Handa is not the only island where armies of volunteers provide the muscle for maintenance work. Britain's most remote island group, the St Kilda archipelago, was inhabited until the 1930s and has been in the care of the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) since 1957. From May to July every year, voluntary parties spend two weeks on the



ORKNEY WILD

Work and play: all smiles on an NTS Thistle Camp

island performing essential maintenance work on its historic stone buildings, as well as helping with visitor management and seabird surveys.

Joining an NTS work party is the only way to stay on dramatic St Kilda – a World Heritage Site – so it is little wonder that work parties are fully subscribed months in advance. “Volunteers bring a huge enthusiasm to the island,” explains Susan Bain, NTS Western Isles Manager. “For many, coming to St Kilda has been a lifelong ambition. It’s a unique opportunity to stay over and contribute to a very special place.”

Fair Isle, midway between Orkney and Shetland, seems equally remote, but is most definitely inhabited. Here, volunteers on the hugely popular NTS Thistle Camps dip their toes into island life. “You team up and work with the crofters, doing all sorts of weird and wonderful tasks like shearing sheep with old-fashioned shears,” explains Ayr-based air traffic controller and regular Thistle Camp participant Andi Pressler.

The inner isles of Iona, Canna and Arran are among the other varied destinations where Thistle Campers assist in the maintenance of NTS properties. “A tremendous amount of work can be done on these week-long residential breaks,

especially tasks like path building and dry stone dyking,” says NTS Outdoor Action Coordinator Kim Safianoff.

COMMUNAL LIVING

Volunteer life on St Kilda or a Thistle Camp is a truly communal affair – meals are eaten together and sleeping quarters are often shared. Though the social aspect makes it attractive to many, others might find it all a bit too close for comfort. “Life-long friendships have been forged on St Kilda, but you need to be easy-going and have a sense of humour,” remarks Bain.

Meanwhile, working breaks with the John Muir Trust (JMT) offer a very different proposition – it’s a case of book a bed of your choice, arrange your own meals and be as social or solitary as you like. “We leave a certain amount of independence to the volunteer,” explains Sandy Maxwell, JMT’s Conservation Activities Coordinator. “There’s no charge for coming along because we don’t lay on food, accommodation or travel. So, in a work party there might be people going home to a hot shower in a hotel, while others retire to a tent.”

Families are welcome too, says Maxwell: “The youngest we had along last year was about six months.”

The principle behind JMT’s voluntary programme is



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the same as for those of SWT and NTS – to support the stretched resources of the conservation charity, while offering outdoor enthusiasts a shot at hands-on involvement in the management of wild places. “It is incredibly important to us to connect people with wild places,” declares Maxwell. “We like to get folk involved so they can see how and why we manage these properties and what the benefits are.”

JMT’s own mountain and coastal estates – Ben Nevis, East Schiehallion, Quinag and Sandwood Bay, plus land on Skye and at Knoydart – include some of Scotland’s most spectacular and iconic scenery. Maxwell also leads his work parties to properties of community partners such as North Harris Trust. “Last year, 16 work parties involving 122 people gave over 460 work days,” he estimates.

For those signing up, a stint of hands-on conservation work brings a new way of experiencing and understanding the outdoors – plus a chance to learn new skills and meet like-minded people. Edinburgh Nursery teacher Louise Blair joined a spring work party to Sandwood doing path repairs and beach cleans: “I wanted to experience this special place not just as a tourist; working there gives you a much bigger and broader experience of it. It’s wonderful working alongside the people who look after the land – the rangers and crofters – you really feel part of the place.”

For Gillian Watt, a primary teacher from Aberdeenshire, the same trip to Sandwood seemed a fun way of “giving something back” after years of hill walking. “It sounds a funny thing to say, but I now feel a sense of ownership of the path,” she says. “It has also made me appreciate even more all those well-maintained paths I’ve used down the years.”

LOCAL HEROES

A Tuesday morning, north Edinburgh: inside, a group of local ladies are line dancing while out in the grounds of Drylaw neighbourhood centre, 12 of us are cutting new beds

Digging in: tree planting in the Carrifran valley high in the Moffat Hills (above); a JMT work party repairs the path into Sròn Uladal on North Harris (opposite top)



Patient care: BTCV volunteers construct an accessible garden for residents at Murraypark Nursing Home in Edinburgh (above); BTCV volunteer Gemma Richards at work in Meadow’s Yard Local Nature Reserve, north Edinburgh (opposite right); board walk construction on Handa Island (right)





SIGNING UP



and digging drainage ditches. It's a scene of industrious calm as barrows of cut turf are carted back and forth.

Over the last few months, the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) has helped transform this community garden from bland lawn to stimulating outdoor amenity, with newly planted fruit trees and berry canes, a sensory bed and living willow structure.

"Most of our work is in everyday green spaces within the city limits – local nature reserves, parks and the grounds of hospitals and schools," says BTCV Edinburgh Coordinator Chris Peach. "This means our volunteers have a real chance to make a hands-on difference for the enjoyment of the local community."

Though it began as a conservation organisation, BTCV's current agenda is predominantly a social one, outlines Scotland Director Russell Hampton. The focus is on providing routes to health, social inclusion, employability and new skills, with improvement of the urban environment as a springboard.

"Though our actual delivery is taking groups of volunteers out to do environmental work, our aims are broader than conservation," he says.

BTCV does not manage its own land, so works with a range of public and private sector partners instead. It also runs conservation holidays worldwide, including popular Action Breaks in Scotland – typically seven to 10 days working on the properties of partner organisations and private clients. This year's forthcoming Breaks include work at Knoydart Forest and Ardrross Castle.

Back in Drylaw, retired teacher Rob Hainsworth leans on his spade and sums up what many of us are thinking. "Though we are all from different backgrounds, everyone is here because they enjoy working outdoors. And we are making an improvement to spaces we all use daily, like cycle tracks and parks. As a group, we can stand back and say 'Hey, we did that!'" ■

Why not roll your sleeves up and get your hands dirty this summer – be it on your doorstep for a day or two, or a week in the wilderness. Conservation volunteering need not require a regular, ongoing commitment.

BTCV – BRITISH TRUST FOR CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS

Regular one-day activities with local groups around the country; residential Action Breaks in Scotland (contribution payable). www.btcv.org

CARRIFRAN WILDWOOD

Tree planting in the Borders every third Sunday of the month and more hardcore, higher-altitude weekends. www.carrifran.org.uk

JOHN MUIR TRUST

Regular one- to five-day work parties until end-September; some require wild camping. www.jmt.org

THE NATIONAL TRUST FOR SCOTLAND

- Week-long Thistle Camps and Trailblazers for under-18s. Contribution payable; waiting list for this year. www.thistlecamps.org.uk
- Two-week work parties to St Kilda, May to July. Fully booked this year. www.kilda.org.uk
- Four local conservation volunteer groups – Grampian, Tayside, Lothian and Glasgow – doing day and weekend projects. www.nts.org.uk/volunteering

SCOTTISH WILDLIFE TRUST

Three- to five-day northern work parties from March to September. www.swt.org.uk