

People's Postcode Lottery Grant 2017

Bennachie Wildlife - Training Courses

One of the objectives of the Bailies is to study the plants and animals on the hill. This year we have been fortunate to have a grant from the People's Postcode Lottery which is funding wildlife training courses on Bennachie. We are using the money to pay local experts to show local people the mammals, birds and plants living on Bennachie and teach them how to record wildlife. Each course has places for ten adults; we advertised the courses on our website and on facebook page early in the year and gave the places to the first ten people who applied.

Mammals

The mammals' course was the first to get started, and in March and April the group was introduced to art of tracking.

Willow Lohr and Lizzie Bacon inspired everyone with their deep knowledge and expertise – both have an international tracking qualification that can only be obtained by mastering advanced tracking skills. The group learned to distinguish the tracks of a wary fox from a blustering badger by thinking how each animal moves. Lizzie's 'what is this mystery track?' emails proved very popular, with some people pausing their work to solve the puzzle. We now know how to tell whether a hazel nut was eaten by a mouse, a squirrel or a woodpecker. Our hardy nature detectives spent half an hour in a woodland on a wet afternoon in March deducing that a long scat on a log belonged to a large pine marten. One person has commented that he now knows an awful lot about poo and never expected to be so fascinated by it regardless of whether it is called spraints, scats, dung or simply poo.

In May Eric Jensen explained how he and Hella work with badgers all over NE Scotland. They are very proficient at locating badger setts. For many years Eric has provided advice about what action can be taken when badgers are found living in places that people want to 'develop'. We had a good look at a couple of setts in the woods on Bennachie and followed their tracks into the nearby fields where they feed at night, and inevitably we looked at their latrines. Eric, a pensioner for a few years, also impressed us with his ability to do headstands in the woods – this has nothing to do with badgers and we don't recommend it for all pensioners!

Aileen Salway shed light on the nocturnal life of bats one dull, drizzly, midge evening in July. The pipistrelle bats who sleep in the Bennachie Centre prefer to stay warm and dry inside when it rains, but a few ventured out to devour the midges despite the drizzle. Did you know one tiny pipistrelle can eat 3,000 midges in one night? Aileen, a member of the NE Scotland bat group, brought a variety of bat detectors for people to try. Most people know bats use echo-location to navigate and hunt for food; a bat detector simply converts the noises made by bats into sounds that we can hear. One of Aileen's detectors had recorded both common and soprano pipistrelles by the Bennachie Centre the previous night. One young boy was particularly fascinated to learn that bats communicate with one another using a noise sounding like a fart!

One member of the group commented, "We have had inspirational, knowledgeable tutors and the course has really re-sparked my interest in the natural world and enabled me to be able to identify and observe what is on our doorstep."

Trail Cameras

Rose Toney and Nick Littlewood from the NE Scotland Biodiversity Partnership provided training on using trail cameras to record wildlife. Trail cameras are an important tool for recording the lives of mammals and we have a number set up around Bennachie and we have amassed a good collection of mammal images, both photos and videos. These include red squirrel, pine marten, wild cat (hybrid?), otter, roe deer, fox, badger, small mammals and various birds. We have posted the best images on our

facebook page; we haven't shared the numerous images (without mammals) of grasses waving in the wind, unfurling bracken fronds, wave's on a loch, cloud shadows and moths.

Birds

John Wills, a local surveyor for the British Trust for Ornithology, is leading a series of bird walks around and over Bennachie - through the woods, over the hill and along the river. People have been learning to identify the birds resident on Bennachie all year round, as well as the summer visitors which come here to breed and winter far away. So far, the group has identified 53 different species on their walks on Bennachie.

John is helping people identify birds by listening to their songs and calls as well as by sight. Initially the group found it daunting to distinguish chiffchaffs from willow warblers but under John's tutelage recognising their songs has become much easier. It is mind-boggling that a willow warbler, weighing the same as a box of matches, flies 5,000 miles between Scotland and Africa every year.

John has shown the group how to count birds while walking straight lines (called transects) through a one kilometre square. This is a standard method to survey breeding birds in spring and summer which enables national organisations to add the numbers of birds from recorders nationwide and estimate the number of birds in the country and population trends year on year.

The series of bird walks will continue through autumn and winter, even as most birds have now finished breeding and many young birds prepare for their first migration to their African quarters; John hopes to include a couple of night sessions listening for owls later in the season.

Plants

David Bale is a local botanist who worked for Scottish Natural Heritage for many years. He introduced his group of budding botanists to the complex structure of flowers, using hand lenses to examine simple flowers and understand the difference between petals and sepals, stamens and stigmas. David, with his impish sense of humour, suggested his group could use their new botanical vocabulary at parties! But seriously this knowledge allows people to identify flowers more accurately using a key rather than picture books. The group have looked at grasses, sedges and ferns too, all of which are common on Bennachie. Examining plants in such detail has given a greater appreciation of their beauty as well as their complexity.

David showed the group how to classify vegetation to fit the National Vegetation Classification (NVC). Group members estimated the abundance of different plants in one square metre (called a quadrat) and used the information to decide which NVC vegetation communities occur on Bennachie.

There were several discussions about the Latin names of flowers, leading one participant to quip 'Who'd have thought learning Latin names could be fun?' We are more than half way through the courses and we are planning an open event in late September to show everyone what we have been up to.

We hope the courses are making more people aware of the wonderful wildlife that lives on the hill. It has been a treat for me to meet so many local people who are so enthusiastic about local wildlife. Bennachie is home to many wild creatures – mammals and birds - residents and migrants – living in a variety of habitats.

Like us, these wild creatures need food, water, shelter and space to raise their families. A few people are lucky enough to live around Bennachie, but many more people visit the hill every year. If humans respect wildlife we can live together and share Bennachie with our fellow creatures.

Jill Matthews, Project Co-ordinator