

Craigroyston Nature Connections: when youth work, outdoor learning and nature-based youth awards merge



A [teenage dip](#) in nature connection is widespread, a global phenomenon. More time spent indoors and online, with often high pressure secondary education systems, means less time outside in nature – something [shown to boost physical and mental wellbeing of adolescents](#).

So how do you nurture nature interest in Edinburgh’s less-green, less-advantaged communities? What helps teens tune in to the wildness around them?

A partnership between Awards Plus, Craigroyston Community High School and City of Edinburgh Council’s youth work service set out in September 2023 to steer a path towards nature-based youth awards participation, with a blend of youth work and outdoor learning approaches. Expertise, equipment and expedition training were supplied by Awards Plus staff, neighbourhood knowledge and pupil pastoral insights by local youth worker Jackie.



CRAIGROYSTON
Community High School, Edinburgh



The S3 and S4 pupils identified had no experience of the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award, they didn’t know what was involved and weren’t aware of friends or family who had participated in it or similar awards. Familiarity with local greenspace was limited too. School grounds activities – cooking on Trangia stoves, orienteering games, rounders (always popular!) – gave a basis for linking student interests with DofE Sections (Skills, Volunteering, Physical), for further-flung outings, and as preparation for Expeditions. The John Muir Award tied things together with an overall nature context, and the tree focus of a Junior Forester Award meant that a wide range of activities and achievement opportunities were available.

It’s a progressive, integrated approach to [achieving awards in, through, about and for nature](#) that’s been well set out by Awards Network and John Muir Award colleagues.

Achieving awards in, through and for nature.

Examples of nature-based learner journeys, pathways and progression.



Early Years & Primary School

RSPB Wild Challenge Award

Suitable for early years, primary schools and also for families to do at home.

Progress through Bronze, Silver & Gold Awards.
[more information](#) →



Ages 4-14 years

Scottish Junior Forester Award

Suitable for schools, community organisations and home educating families.

[more information](#) →



Ages 11-18 years

SCRA Junior Ranger Award

Junior Ranger programme is the first step in professional development with the Scottish Countryside Rangers Association.

[more information](#) →



Primary & Secondary School

John Muir Award

Suitable for families, upper primary, secondary and adults.

Progress through Discovery, Explorer and Conserver Awards.
[more information](#) →



Ages 14-25 years

Duke of Edinburgh's Award

Suitable for ages 14 – 25 years.

Progress through Bronze, Silver & Gold Awards.
[more information](#) →



A snapshot of national awards available in Scotland. For an overview of awards opportunities see Awards Network.

“It’s been lovely getting to know the S3 and S4 students. My role has been to offer 1:1 support where needed – reassurance and extra input - whilst helping both groups to achieve a range of youth awards.

This experience has helped them discover natural areas from school grounds to places within walking distance and easy bus rides they’ve never even thought of exploring before. Despite, in some cases, low confidence and additional support needs, it’s obvious how much their preference for spending time outdoors has increased – and not just because it’s no longer cold and wet!

They have enjoyed learning and using valuable outdoor skills, such as cooking on a camping stove and building up fitness levels. Some are already planning to do walks as a group in the future as a result of this newfound confidence and nature connectedness.”

Amber Williams, Awards Plus 1:1 Mentor & Support Worker

Discovering Edinburgh’s wild places

We identified several wild places to spend time outdoors, starting in the Craigoyston Community High School grounds – convenient if limited in inspiration. As soon as bureaucracy allowed, walking excursions from the school to Cramond foreshore uncovered a local coastal area that few had been to. Walks then extended to the 16th century Lauriston Castle and its grounds, with views across the Forth Estuary to Fife. A skills training day involved a bus ride to Cramond for a walk through the Dalmeny Estate to South Queensferry and the Forth Rail Bridge. The expedition was set in The Pentlands, a range of rolling hills – or imposing mountains if you rarely venture beyond Muirhouse - southwest of Edinburgh.



These were largely unfamiliar places, and being outdoors during winter months especially was disliked due to rain and cold. With regular and repeated outings, however, an appreciation of the wild places in their local area grew. Pupils recognised their accessibility and spoke of arranging further trips amongst them to similar places.

“We love it when we go outside!” S3 pupil

“I never knew we’d be able to make pancakes – it feels like we’ve achieved something. And they taste ok as well.” S4 pupil

Exploring wild places

Weaved into 9 months of progression – in distances walked and cooking skills, for example – common threads included looking at surroundings, birds and trees. Using stoves safely in outdoor settings was enjoyed by all, especially (relatively) successful pancakes, pasta, and hotdogs sessions. Bird surveys and wildlife identification took place at Cramond and Lauriston. Research on birds local to the Edinburgh/East Lothian Coast informed fact sheets about physical attributes, migration habits, food, nesting habits and egg characteristics. Members of the public were complimentary: “it’s great to see young folk making the effort to learn about their community”.

The Dalmeny day walk – with 100% attendance of 19 S3 and S4 pupils - was a big challenge for many, being the longest distance and most time they’d spent walking in a wild place. A 2-day expedition in the Pentlands with an overnight camp (again, a first for many) at Bonaly followed training in use of maps, Trangias, tents, walking poles, and walking boots.

We also found out about wilderness pioneer John Muir by watching and discussing a YouTube video about his life and completed a John Muir quiz.

Adventure and fun, tuning in across different seasons, at different times of day, and a sense of achievement at completing their expedition all contributed to 9 months of shared experiences rooted in getting to know wild places.

“Pupils have confidently recognised and surveyed birds along the Cramond foreshore, stimulating curiosity about nature. They didn’t realise how much wildlife was on their doorstep. One was amazed that deer live in the woods.” Debbie Riley, Awards Plus

Caring for nature and community

A sense of responsibility was encouraged by embracing active travel, walking to local areas and using public transport. Minimising impact and the importance of leaving wild places unspoiled was increasingly understood, with littering minimised and even some rubbish collecting.

The Coastal Bird Quiz and bird information signs demonstrated to local families why Cramond is an important part of bird species’ lifecycles. Pupils made 8 bird boxes and, with the help of City of Edinburgh Council Rangers, installed them in Lauriston Castle grounds, planted trees over 4 weeks and hung bird feeders.

“The CEC Rangers were very impressed with their engagement. They worked really well together. Staff at Lauriston Farm have been pleased with how pupils got stuck in with mulching around the new hedge tree planting, helping contribute to the local community food provision and wildlife habitats.” Debbie Riley, Awards Plus



Sharing experiences

From informal chats to photo sharing amongst friends and family to more structured sessions, sharing played a big part in awards achievement.



Knowledge of local bird wildlife was shared by designing a Coastal Bird Quiz – drawing birds, cutting the bird-shapes out of wood, painting, adding facts and questions – installed throughout Lauriston Castle grounds for families to explore over the 2024 Easter Holidays.

A school grounds event hosted Pirniehall Primary School P5 students, with knowledge and skills-sharing and designed and coordinated activities such as outdoor cooking, orienteering, football, and paracord keychains.

Attendance and Awards Achieved

13 S3 pupils and 14 S4 pupils regularly attended 3-hour sessions over the 11-week winter term, with a 96% and 78% attendance record.

By May 2024, 14 pupils had achieved their Bronze Duke of Edinburgh's Award (with 26 enrolments and 80 DofE Section achievements). The 14 Discovery Level John Muir Awards included 3 staff (it's an award for all ages; "I'm delighted, it's years since I got a certificate" said one); and 9 pupils gained a Junior Forester Award.

From a standing start, these personal achievements are testament to the open-minded way students have committed themselves, week in week out, to new experiences and to getting to know the nearby nature around them.

"It was a real privilege and pleasure having the opportunity to work alongside young people from Craigoyston CHS in completing their DofE Bronze Award and their range of achievements. 14 young people were delighted to achieve this, with a number keen to explore undertaking the DofE Silver Award. Thank you for this opportunity."

Jackie Barr, CEC Youth Worker

Approaches to engagement

In a team of 4 staff, Expeditions and Youth Awards Support Worker Cameron Armstrong's role focused on young people with greater behavioural support needs. He outlines a range of positive tactics used to encourage pupils who often don't participate. Key to this approach is building positive relationships with trust, understanding and rapport at their heart.

- Speak to young people in a calm manner regardless of how they are engaging with me. Over time their manner with me, colleagues, and within group settings, has changed to be responsive and has toned down disruptive behaviour.
- Modelling this approach – listening, setting standards and expectations – means there's a clearer understanding of acceptable behaviour and increased willingness to engage in activities once a disruption has passed.
- Co-design and co-production approaches are used wherever possible. Allowing pupils to take a degree of ownership of activities, inviting and listening to their suggestions, involving them in decisions all definitely has an impact. It's evident in levels of enjoyment and helps keep them calm and engaged. Examples include outdoor cooking and inviting ideas for new recipes for next time; gauging when to take a break; heading outside at the suggestion of pupils.
- Work with more challenging young people in smaller groups; take them away from the main class when their behaviour is escalating.
- Use outdoor settings - including interactions with members of the public and with nature - to promote better behaviour to people and respect for things around us.
- Discuss impact of behaviour on others.

It's been great to see their barriers come down and engagement with nature, DofE and other awards grow over this short time. They should all be incredibly proud of what they've accomplished over the past 9 months.

Cameron Armstrong, Youth Awards & Expeditions Support Worker





John Muir Award Four Challenge Review

Craigroyston Community High School S4 Group

To gain a John Muir Award everyone meets Four Challenges – **Discover, Explore, Conserve, Share**. This Four Challenge Review can help Award participants review and demonstrate that they have understood and successfully met the Award Challenges. Capture informally through group and individual discussion. Use pictures and drawings, write on flip chart, or a combination of these. Or just have a chat.

<p>Discover a wild place</p> <p>What wild places have you discovered?</p> <p>What did you like or not like about the wild places you visited?</p> <p>What's special about them?</p>	<p>Craigroyston Community High School grounds, Cramond Foreshore, Lauriston Castle, Lauriston Farm Dalmeny Estate to South Queensferry, Pentland Hills including Swanston and Bonaly</p> <p>Dislike: rain and cold Like: appreciating local nature Special: accessibility, birdlife, shared experiences</p> <p>John Muir: his life, YouTube video and discussion, group quiz.</p>	<p>School grounds: orienteering games, outdoor cooking.</p> <p>Walking: to and along Cramond foreshore, bird survey, identifying wildlife. Walking: day walk from Cramond to South Queensferry via Dalmeny Estate, with S3 pupils (for Bronze DofE Practice).</p> <p>Research: which birds are local to the Edinburgh/East Lothian coast, fact sheets about bird physical attributes, migration habits, food, nesting habits and egg characteristics.</p> <p>Expedition: 2-day walk and overnight camp in the Pentland hills.</p> <p>Overall: sense of adventure and fun, across different seasons, different times of the day, and spend different lengths of time exploring.</p>	<p>Explore its wildness</p> <p>What have you done to get to know wild places?</p> <p>How have you experienced them?</p> <p>What things have you found out?</p>
<p>Conserve take Responsibility</p> <p>How have you taken responsibility?</p> <p>What have you done to make a difference and put something back for wild places?</p>	<p>Active travel, sustainable travel approaches: walking, public transport.</p> <p>Litter: behaviour management, removing rubbish found in natural areas.</p> <p>Bird survey: connected to BTO survey and Coastal Bird Quiz.</p>	<p>Local bird wildlife: Coastal Bird Quiz designed, created and installed at Lauriston Castle grounds.</p> <p>Photos: shared amongst each other, family.</p> <p>Event: Pirniehall Primary School P5 students invited to Craigroyston to hear about knowledge and skills gained, plus pupil-led, designed and coordinated activities (outdoor cooking, orienteering, football, paracord keychains).</p>	<p>Share your experiences</p> <p>Who have you shared with?</p> <p>How have you shared your experiences of wild places?</p> <p>What things have you thought about?</p> <p>How do wild places make you feel?</p>