

The Dirty Weekenders
Edinburgh University Conservation Volunteers
Young Roots Project Report for Academic Year 16/17

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1 Introduction

1.1 RSPB General Ethos

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) champions ‘Working with Nature’ to ensure a better future for the environment and wildlife in the UK and beyond. As education is the root of all conservation, the involvement of the public is crucial to aid the conservation of vital habitats and species.

There is an urgent need to continue conservation work due to shifting populations as a result of climate change. This is already evident in bird species such as cattle egrets, smooth ibis and bee eaters, which have breeding pairs as far north as the Isle of Man. Insects are also mobile, and have begun to widen their range into the UK. Therefore, making adequate homes for nature is all the more important.

The core message that the RSPB desire to convey is that the general public is the greatest force for practicing conservation. This means that anyone can make a home for nature, anyone can get involved and anyone can champion environmental causes. Outreach, education and involving people are the most important, and sometimes the most difficult, aspect of conservation, and the Young Roots Project in collaboration with Edinburgh University’s conservation volunteers, the Dirty Weekenders, aims to do just that.

1.2 Young Roots Project

Developed and financed by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Young Roots Project aims to give young people the means to explore, document and engage with their heritage. Through such outreach programs, young people across the UK are becoming more involved in nature, understanding and appreciating what the natural world can offer them. However, the project is not limited to green spaces and also includes culture, language, art and history.

The RSPB began collaborating with the Dirty Weekenders as part of the Young Roots Project at the start of the academic year 2016/17, supplying coordination, advice, guidance and funding of £2,000 over a two-year period. During this time, the Dirty Weekenders will work with four community green space projects in the Edinburgh area, assisting them with maintaining and developing the green spaces as well as documenting the heritage and public perception of the sites. The funding is to cover the costs of eight projects during each year; providing transport, food and materials to make the activities free and accessible to all. A portion of the budget was also allotted for tools,

recording equipment and other sundries to help the society carry out these and future projects in an effective, safe and well documented manner. A full list of projects, including dates and attendance, can be found in the Appendix (Table 1).

The principles of the Dirty Weekenders are similar to that of the RSPB, acting as a connection between students and nature, giving opportunities to work with and be out in the environment, which they may otherwise not have access to. As the Dirty Weekenders are a volunteering society, membership is free and all costs are covered through funding from the University and organisations they work with. All are welcome to attend projects and social events, and the society is wholly inclusive and committed to involving new people. Therefore, this partnership makes sense, giving the Dirty Weekenders even more opportunities to work in the name of conservation and wildlife.

2 The Sites

2.1 Calders Community Garden

Located in Wester Hailes and run by the Wester Hailes Health Agency, Calders Community Garden is an open and welcoming site consisting of raised beds, wild areas, willow, and a fire pit. The storage unit used to be a shipping container but a new indoor area is being constructed for potting, classes and more outreach projects. The garden sits on the banks of the Union Canal, thereby adding to the ‘green corridor’ which is essential in urban environments. The site is close to sheltered housing in what is generally considered a deprived area, making the site a rare and precious opportunity for encounters with nature where there would otherwise be few. The overall aim of the site is to act as a Green Gym, encouraging people in the local area to spend time outdoors and appreciate wildlife and gardening while improving their physical health.



Figure 1: Willow weaving

On our first project at Calders Community Garden in September, the number of volunteers was so great that an excursion to watch birds along the canal was added to keep everyone busy. The remainder of the group pruned, weaved and planted cuttings of willow (Fig. 1), improving an already impressive natural structure of willow surrounding a picnic area. Other volunteers began digging a pond (Fig. 2), which would encourage aquatic wildlife and extend the habitat of the Union Canal laying just past a hedgerow. The pond was dug in three tiers in order to allow a range of habitats at different water depths. Additionally, volunteers helped with general maintenance of

the garden by weeding, moving compost and removing litter. On the same day, the RSPB had arranged a 'Bioblitz' with the resident volunteers, during which children and adults alike searched through undergrowth, hedgerows and raised beds to collect insects and small animals.



Figure 2: Digging a pond at Calders Community Garden

2.2 Bridgend Farmhouse (Bridgend Inspiring Growth)

The site sits on Old Dalkeith Road, just outside the city, and is easily accessible by public transport, walking and cycling, meaning the workshops and activities are accessible to all. The Bridgend Inspiring Growth project aims to convert an old farmhouse into a community centre and garden where workshops, classes and other inclusive events will take place. The site is currently being renovated with all this in mind and the Dirty Weekenders have already been working with the site since 2014 to help with this and maintain the garden.

During the first project in 2016/17, the volunteers were split into several groups to complete a range of tasks. These included clearing buddleia and other overgrown vegetation from a disused area so that renovation and other planting could take place (Fig. 3a), weeding raised beds and moving large stones so that a dry-stone wall could be fully restored (Fig. 3b). Time was also spent preparing the ground for and sowing wildflower seeds along a strip of waste land adjacent to the public right of way (Fig. 3c and 3d) which would help connect the garden to the nearby Craigmillar Park. During the second project, in March, a number of tasks required completing. The group assembled a number of bird boxes which were to be installed around the site (Fig. 3f). Waste ground was cleared of weeds and debris in order to tidy an area due to be renewed and planted up (Fig. 3e). This also included shifting bricks so that restoration masonry work can be completed with original stones.



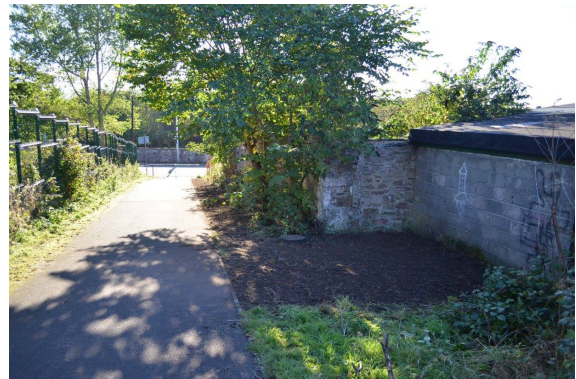
(a) Clearing Buddleia at Bridgend



(b) Stones dug and moved at Bridgend



(c) Prep before sowing wildflower seeds



(d) Wildflower seeds sown and raked



(e) Building bird boxes



(f) Clearing rubbish and debris

Figure 3: Projects at Bridgend Farmhouse

2.3 Balgreen Triangle

Next to the Water of Leith, this area is at the end of a road and used as a turning circle, and required a revival desperately. The objective of this project was to address a neglected corner and bring it to life with the involvement of the local community. Turning an otherwise empty space into a valuable resource would change how people view their local area and engender respect for nature on their doorstep. Only one project was organised as this area was in such dire need of rejuvenation that work had been commenced by other community groups,



Figure 4: Path and gravel laid at Balgreen

including building a dry-stone wall and raised beds made from sleepers. The Dirty Weekenders broke up soil in areas desired for planting and prepared the ground for other work, such as wildflower planting. Gravel paths were also laid to improve the surface, and improve accessibility and aesthetics (Fig. 4). The finishing touches were applied and the work was completed so no follow up project was necessary. We have found a replacement site for the partnership (see Reflection and Outlook) but may return to Balgreen if further assistance is required.

2.4 Duddingston Community Garden and The Field

This site lies just outside the city centre in Duddingston, backing onto Holyrood Park. The Field includes a green expanse formerly used for grazing, a former tennis court and a community garden. Local residents and volunteers have now planted the Field with a willow grove and beyond that deciduous saplings. Half the field is reclaimed meadow, mowed once or twice a year, and towards the bottom of the hill, there is an orchard of Scottish apple varieties. The Duddingston community garden is open, accessible and welcoming and the site is served by dedicated members of the community. They often invite school groups to teach and offer gardening experience. The site borders Holyrood Park, and by planting new saplings, the community hope to extend the woodland for residents and wildlife species such as woodpeckers, tawny owls and nuthatches. By encouraging a wild meadow area, they are encouraging species of moth, butterfly and other pollinators which are consistently lacking habitat across the UK.

The encompassing aim of the Duddingston committee is to provide recreational resources where nature can be enjoyed and all are welcome as well as to inform and inspire the next generation to garden and care about the natural world, bringing in schools to attend workshops. Furthermore, the

community garden represents a sustainable source of food, including several bee hives just off site which no doubt pollinate the Scottish Heritage Apple Varieties in the orchard. The committee also aims to give nature a home through the afforestation of an area of the Field with deciduous species. This will help to encourage and support a greater range of wildlife as well as improve the areas' capacity as a carbon sink.

On the first project at this site in Semester 1, the Duddingston Community Garden was preparing for winter and so the work consisted of weeding potted saplings, clearing garden beds of weeds and turning mulch and compost into the soil so that nutrients were not all leached over the next few rainy months (Fig. 5a) A large group of volunteers raked the cut grass from the meadow to remove nutrients from the soil and encourage more diverse meadow plants to grow. Maintenance work was also carried out on a number of gravel paths to make sure the area remains accessible.

During the second project, potted saplings were weeded and some transferred up the hill to subsequently be planted as part of the new woodland (Fig. 5b). The tree planting was the bulk of the work completed in order to develop this new habitat and drastically alter the landscape from a near fallow field. As the project took place in January, the garden lay dormant and the only other task was to turn over the soil in multiple areas so it would be suitable for planting in the coming months (Fig. 5c).

During the third and final project of the year, various tasks were completed: Compost was shifted to ready the garden beds for the upcoming growing season and to counter the effects of soil creep and leaching. A delicate touch was required to transplant seedlings from their small plug to larger pots, to become better established before being planted directly into the soil. Old, tough brambles were removed from around greenhouses as a tidy up before new spring growth. Meanwhile, a large wooden table, base and the accompanying benches were built and placed to provide a new seating area for picnic goers and larger events which require a table (Fig. 5d).

In addition to the scheduled projects, a number of Dirty Weekenders occasionally attend social events organised by the Duddingston committee, such as their lantern festival and bonfire night event.



(a) Beds replenished with compost



(b) Tree planting all over the Field



(c) Turning soil to prepare for spring



(d) Finished (huge) table and Dirty Weekenders

Figure 5: Projects at Duddingston Community Garden and the Field

2.5 Water of Leith Walkway

Due to the small size of the site, Balgreen Triangle could only take a limited number of volunteers and therefore a simultaneous project along the Water of Leith Walkway was scheduled to allow all interested volunteers to participate. We joined a team of local volunteers for a river cleanup session organised by the Water of Leith Conservation Trust along a section of the river near Juniper Green. The volunteers weeded along the walkway, and helped with path maintenance. Some volunteers used waders to remove litter and debris from the Water of Leith itself and removed many objects - including a metal trolley firmly wedged into the river bed (Fig. 6).



(a) Removing a metal trolley



(b) Picking litter from the river

Figure 6: River cleanup at the Water of Leith

2.6 Clovenstone Community Growing Hub

For our final RSPB project we were scheduled to go to Calders Community Garden for a second time; however, due to some complications it was rearranged for us to visit Clovenstone Community Growing Hub instead. This is a fenced allotment garden a short walk from Calders. It is part of the Wester Hailes Edible Estates initiative and gives members of the local community an allotment plot on which they can grow food and flowers.

On arriving we were met by Amber and the garden coordinator and were organised into a number of groups to help with the upkeep and development of the project. The volunteers performed general maintenance tasks such as weeding the paths and removing a compost heap to make space for a “wildlife corner” which was to include a pond. Another group of volunteers helped in spreading “zoo poo” (compost from Edinburgh Zoo) on a bed and covering it with sheeting. We also assisted in the assembling and installation of a hinged mini-poly tunnel to increase the range of plants that could be grown in the garden.

We worked alongside the local volunteers to carry out these jobs and had a chance to talk to them about the garden and how they appreciate having their own outside space in which to grow food and flowers. This made being able to help in the upkeep of such a project very rewarding.

3 Training Sessions

In addition to eight projects at the community green space sites, the Dirty Weekenders also organised two RSPB-led training sessions. These sessions offer the opportunity for volunteers to learn new skills and expand their knowledge of the natural world.

3.1 Winter Tree Identification

The first training session took place in February in Craigmillar Park (near Bridgend Farmhouse) and focused on identifying trees in winter. Led by Amber Jenkins from the RSPB, the group learned to identify common British tree species by their bark, buds and fruit, and also tested their skills on a few more exotic species left over from the park's time as a private garden.

3.2 Small Mammal Tracking

For the second training session, we went to Dalkeith Country Park and spent the day looking for animal tracks. We found evidence of deer, learned the difference between a badger hole and a foxhole, and learned about minks.



Figure 7: Roe deer nest and print (left) and mink print (right)

4 Reflection and Outlook

As a university society, the Dirty Weekenders - in collaboration with the RSPB - have led to the engagement of many more individuals than would otherwise have knowledge of, or access to, these projects. In June 2017, the Dirty Weekenders used part of the Young Roots funding to buy additional tools and equipment that will help to carry out projects more effectively and safely. In addition, we invested in a camera to record interviews and our work at the four RSPB sites (see

Table 2 in the Appendix for a full list of tools and equipment bought).

Furthermore, we have found a new site to replace Balgreen, as we finished the planned work there during one project. Figgate Park, situated in eastern Edinburgh between Duddingston and Portobello, is a wildlife haven and maintained by an active community of volunteers, the Friends of Figgate Park. The Dirty Weekenders have already carried out two projects in Figgate Park in 2016/17, helping with weeding and clearing ground for planting saplings. More projects are scheduled for the academic year 2017/18.

Looking forward, the Young Roots Project will be able to develop and continue to bring people closer to nature through these RSPB-supported community programmes and, of course, the Dirty Weekenders.

5 Additional Information and Acknowledgements

For more information about the RSPB and the Young Roots project, see rspb.org.uk and hlf.org.uk.

Most of the community groups also have more information online:

- Calders Community Garden: evocredbook.org.uk
- Duddingston Community Garden and the Field: thefieldduddingston.wordpress.com and their Facebook group
- Bridgend Farmhouse: bridgendfarmhouse.org.uk
- Figgate Park: figgatepark.org.uk

For more information about the Dirty Weekenders, see our blog at dirties.wordpress.com.

The Dirty Weekenders would like to thank the Heritage Lottery Fund for their funding and for the opportunity to work with the Young Roots project. We would also like to thank the RSPB for their generosity, advice and guidance throughout the year. All photo credit to Cameron Kenworthy, except Fig. 1 & 2 (credit to William Grantham), Fig. 6 (credit to Michael Inman) and Fig. 5d (credit to Field Group Duddingston). William Grantham wrote the Clovenstone Community Garden section, Emma Graf wrote the Water of Leith Walkway, Winter Tree ID and Figgate Park sections, and Cameron Kenworthy wrote the Mammal Tracking section. Martha Cronin suggested adding the Appendix. Emma Graf, William Grantham and Lizzie Rhoades edited the report.

6 Appendix

Date	Location	Attendance
18/09/2016	Calders Community Garden	38
02/10/2016	Bridgend Inspiring Growth	28
16/10/2016	Balgreen Triangle/Water of Leith	25
23/10/2016	Duddingston Community Garden	22
22/01/2017	Duddingston Community Garden	40
19/02/2017	Bridgend Inspiring Growth	10
19/03/2017	Duddingston Community Garden	22
02/04/2017	Bridgend Inspiring Growth	17
09/04/2017	Clovenstone Community Garden	18

Table 1: List of projects co-organised with the RSPB in 2016/17 with number of volunteers for each project. Note that the projects on 19/02 and 19/03 were replacements for other sites and did not form part of the original schedule. Also note that the project on 09/04 was originally scheduled for Calderys Community Garden, and the location was changed later.

Item	Quantity	Price (£)
Extendable saws	2	55.98
Mini mattocks	5	50.40
Go Pro and mount	1	164.99
Go Pro Memory Card	1	12.99
Cool bag	2	49.98
Chopping board	2	33.98
Total		368.32

Table 2: List of tools and equipment purchased in June 2017 with the funding allocated to the Dirty Weekenders by the RSPB.