



A group enjoying connecting with nature and like-minded people on one of the Trust's monthly nature walks

The feelgood factor

New research by the University of Leeds Beckett shows that people feel healthier and happier when they are connected to wildlife and wild places. We take a look at three Trust projects which are having a positive impact on the mental health of those taking part.

Over the past eighteen months, the Trust's senior community engagement officer Shaun Rimmer has been taking groups out for monthly wildlife walks around Stafford Borough. Shaun leads the walkers on a gentle meander around a local nature reserve, showing them interesting natural features as they go. Reserves such as Doxey Marshes, a bird-rich wetland in Stafford, have been visited, with walkers enjoying learning about wetland wildlife along the way. In addition to the obvious physical health benefits of undertaking a regular walk, Shaun has noticed the positive impact that the sessions have on the mental wellbeing of participants. He explained: "From the very first

walk it became apparent that these sessions were having a positive impact on the walkers in terms of their mental wellbeing. The walks offer a chance to meet new people, enjoy the great outdoors and be active.

The relaxed and friendly atmosphere is a welcome therapy for those of us who have suffered some physical or emotional setback in life.



SUSAN FREEMAN

Yoga squirrels

Yoga Squirrels is aimed at children aged two - five and takes place in a woodland setting, combining the many benefits of being outdoors in nature with those of yoga. Each week children learn yoga poses through the use of stories, games and songs and also have time for relaxation activities such as breathing techniques and listening to calming stories while snuggling up with their parent or carer.

Learning assistant Laura Thomas, who is one of the leaders of Yoga Squirrels, said: "We have been delighted with how much the children have been enjoying and benefiting from the classes and the time they are spending outdoors. By working with the same children for four weeks at a time, we have seen them really developing their confidence and having more belief in themselves by wanting to try new things

and show others in the group their poses. "The parents have been really positive about the relaxation time, saying how much they enjoy this time with their child and that they have used the techniques at home."

At the sessions, children also have free time to explore the woodland and go on a mindful nature trail, which includes activities such as hugging a tree, counting sounds in nature, looking for shapes in the clouds or finding different textures outdoors.

Laura added: "It is wonderful to see parents and their children truly enjoying this time in nature."



Want to try Yoga Squirrels?

From the end of November, classes will run at the Wolsley Centre, with other venues being added after February half term. www.staffs-wildlife.org.uk/events

"The walks are low impact, but I think the shorter distances and slower pace leads to more discussions and a chance to take time to enjoy the setting and take a step back from our busy lives."

Jeremy Wheeler sponsors the walks programme in memory of his late wife Anne, who enjoyed attending wildlife walks with the Trust.

He said: "Each monthly walk provides a stimulating morning of social interaction with like-minded nature lovers, complemented by interesting tutorials on the wildlife. The relaxed and friendly atmosphere is a welcome therapy for those of us who have suffered some physical or emotional setback in life."

Want to join in? The walks will be starting again in the new year. Email s.rimmer@staffs-wildlife.org.uk

Find out more about Leeds Beckett University's research at staffs-wildlife.org.uk/news



Strong roots, better futures

Another project that focussed on mental health, contact with nature and life skills was the Strong Roots, Better Futures project, which ran from September 2018 to August 2019. The Trust was granted £150,000 from the Department for Education's 'Essential Life Skills' programme, with the aim of connecting school children in Stoke aged between five and 16 with nature and giving them essential life skills that would better prepare them for the future.

Over the year, three of the Trust's Forest School Officers delivered Forest School sessions in 44 primary and secondary schools, SEND schools, alternative education providers and pupil referral units.

Sessions included shelter building, cooking over a fire, team building games, flora and fauna identification, tool use and natural crafts.

Forest School officer Vicky Broad said: "One of the most pleasing outcomes of the project was the children's improved confidence and feelings of wellbeing when outdoors – this was seen in all age groups. As children had time to relax in the fresh air and choose activities that they enjoyed, they reported feelings of increased calm and enjoyment."

Here is some of the feedback from students who took part in the project: "I enjoyed it because it was peaceful." "Forest School ... helps me with my stress."

