

ENCOUNTERS WITH ELUSIVE WILDLIFE

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Pupils, teachers and environmental educators have recently participated in a Mammal Challenge Week, using different equipment and resources to learn about the mammals living in and around their school grounds. The week was part of the BES Connecting Schools to Nature project.

MAMMAL ENCOUNTERS

Mammals are shy, elusive and often nocturnal which can make them difficult to see in the wild and connect with directly. However, equipment such as camera traps and footprint tunnels can give us insights into what mammals may be around!

Camera traps set up during class workshops have allowed pupils to see what mammals are visiting their school grounds at night, whilst footprint tunnels and identification guides for tracks have been used to identify small visitors. Schools have also been improving their local habitat, carrying out group litter picking exercises and learning about the ways in which litter is harmful to wildlife.

Pupils have been introduced to the world of citizen science by submitting their camera trap findings to the MammalWeb project, directly contributing towards real-time species data collection. As demonstrated in previous projects, by participating in citizen science, pupils and teachers can develop a deeper sense of connection to nature, playing an active role in the protection of their local environment.

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

Although in-person workshops could not be carried out in schools due to COVID-19 restrictions we ran a series of online co-design workshops with teachers and volunteer environmental educators. These sessions provided a chance for teachers to plan their 'mammal challenge week', with our volunteers from across the North-East region helping to create resources and lead digital assemblies to maintain that connection. Importantly, following pupils activities within their challenge week, staff and volunteers provided recorded responses to pupils to share in and celebrate their achievements.

Our co-design workshop sessions also acted as an opportunity to receive feedback from teachers and environmental educators with their input helping shape the design and delivery of the school's workshops, resources, and development of a new digital 'Encounters' platform.

The Encounters platform has been designed primarily for pupils to engage in a variety of teacher-led individual and group activities. It also connects individual schools with their wider community where teachers, pupils and environmental educators can see others progress and pictures of their school transformations. The platform operates as an incentivised badge system, where pupils can unlock a series of animal badges after completing nature-based activities (ranging from digital wildlife identification quizzes, creative art projects, and group nature activities outside like setting up hedgehog highways). These activities also allow pupils to earn points to count towards their school's total and to unlock awards and prizes, helping to maintain engagement between project challenge weeks.

The digital platform vitally includes a resources hub where teachers and volunteers are able to access and upload their educational resource, from pre-recorded assemblies to lesson plans and equipment how-to guides. This resource bank will be built throughout the project for all to benefit from.

NEXT STEPS

Some schools have already begun transforming their grounds in preparation for the next module in our project. Schools will be introduced to the world of invertebrates and take part in a series of 'green transformation' workshops to bring more nature into their school grounds such as through wildflower planting and habitat creation for small animals. In the meantime, we will be creating

additional resources that will be available to the wider public and aspiring educators in the future, so keep monitoring our progress on BES social media for what's to come! ✨

CONNECTING SCHOOLS TO NATURE IN NORTH EAST ENGLAND PROJECT

Working with partners MammalWeb Ltd and SMASH-UK, we will improve school children's connection with nature, deliver a green transformation to 50 schools in disadvantaged areas, and help create the 'Environmental Educators of tomorrow' through the training and codesign of the project with teachers and ecologist volunteers. The project runs from July 2021 to March 2023.

This project is funded by the Government's Green Recovery Challenge Fund. The fund was developed by Defra and its Arm's-Length Bodies. It is being delivered by The National Lottery Heritage Fund in partnership with Natural England and the Environment Agency.

If you would like to take part or support the project in any way, please get in touch with either: Sammy (sammy@britishecologicalsociety.org) or Alexa (alexa@britishecologicalsociety.org)

