

# Scottish Natural Heritage

## Teaching in Nature

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### Battleby

Battleby is one of the main offices of Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), located about 5 miles north of Perth. It has beautiful grounds with many highlights, including a 200 year old oak wood and the third largest wildflower meadow in Perthshire. Habitats range from old lawn to standing deadwood and unusual, exotic trees and shrubs from around the world. Over the years a number of schools and groups have been interested in visiting Battleby but, with no SNH staff with the capacity to support school visits, many schools chose to go elsewhere. Convinced of Battleby's potential as a learning resource and keen to support teachers in their professional development in outdoor learning, we looked to the Teaching in Nature project. It promised to generate pupil visits to Battleby with minimal impact on staff time.

Six teachers from 4 primary schools and 1 secondary school in Perth and Kinross visited Battleby as part of their Teaching in Nature professional development. This enabled 147 P3—S1 pupils to visit on two separate occasions, engaging in a wide range of curriculum linked learning activities, most spending the whole day there.

The teachers spent a day together collaboratively planning and learning about Battleby from Jim, the Head Gardener, who had worked there for around 20 years. At Battleby there is potential to explore a huge range of topics, yet SNH staff were surprised by the variety of learning activities the teachers devised. In the resulting pupil visits, children engaged with the wildlife and habitats via hands on activities such as den building, colour hunts and other sensory activities and got creative via activities such as story telling; report writing and art. The secondary teacher, a Geography specialist, focused on interdisciplinary learning via the 'Outdoor Journeys' approach, building in skills such as map reading, orienteering and field sketching.

Battleby's biomass boilers, solar panels and the wind farm on the horizon generated much interest with one group and learning extended back to the classroom with the provision of some data from the solar panels. Two groups were interested in the young orchard, having recently been gifted some fruit trees of their own. Some groups were lucky that their visit coincided with a research project taking place in the grounds so they were able to see bird ringing and look at birds close up.



**“I'm glad to be able to get involved and make the most of a really rich local learning environment. I know we will continue to develop this link with Battleby”**

**“I feel that my enthusiasm has been rekindled and I look forward to our next school's step in outdoor learning.”**



One year on, 5 of the teachers had continued to take learning outdoors, yet none had returned to Battleby. All teachers mentioned transport costs as a major factor, even when their school is just 3 miles away. One teacher said she was keeping Battleby in mind for the future and two said they were looking to create a car pool with parents so that the whole school could access Battleby on a regular basis. Teachers had used the school grounds or visited places they could walk to or that had provided free transport. The secondary teacher's focus had been on moving to her new school, but she noted that she is now near Loch Leven National Nature Reserve, where she plans to try out her new skills and confidence next year.



In thinking of how Teaching in Nature had influenced the way they now plan and deliver outdoor learning, 4 of the teachers say they are less worried about planning for set Experiences and Outcomes, feel more able to adapt to things that happen on the day and are more able to justify or push for outdoor learning. Three now see the value in making repeat visits to the same site and plan for a wider range of curriculum areas outdoors.



All teachers said that the experience had also influenced their indoor practice, 5 noting that they are more creative in the learning experiences they offer their pupils, 4 now setting outdoor homework and 4 more confident to follow through with learning opportunities brought in from the outdoors by pupils. Three now look for different ways to review or assess learning.



Four of the teachers had supported colleagues to take learning outdoors in the year that followed their Teaching in Nature experience. The Pitcairn Primary teachers, including the head teacher, had been able to support and inspire colleagues the most: delivering workshops; leading collaborative planning sessions; team teaching and influencing the School Improvement Plan.

All teachers agreed or agreed strongly that Teaching in Nature had been a positive professional learning experience and all said they had gained in confidence in taking learning outdoors.

[Teaching in Nature](#) combines a collaborative and practical approach to professional development in outdoor learning. It supports groups of teachers to work together to use a nearby place that is special for nature to plan, implement and evaluate challenging and fun outdoor learning experiences for their pupils. An evaluation of the 2012/13 Teaching in Nature project found that 80% of respondents had continued to take learning outdoors in the year that followed and 73% had supported a colleague to take their class outdoors.

**“Personally, I achieved a lot from the experience. It gave me the freedom to use new outdoor learning strategies and practise geographical skills with pupils that I would not have previously had the opportunity to do so with.”**

If you'd like more information on *Teaching in Nature* or advice on how to use the approach in your context, contact:

