

# Scottish Natural Heritage

## Teaching in Nature

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### Toronto Primary, West Lothian

#### Ross Graham, Kirsty Muir & Lorna Steel

Three teachers from Toronto Primary School took their P5/6, 6 & 7 classes on 2 visits to Blawhorn Moss National Nature Reserve (NNR) as part of their Teaching in Nature professional development. Ross had a personal interest in the outdoors and had been involved in some residential visits with pupils. Kirsty had always been aware of the value of interaction with the outdoors from her own experiences yet hadn't taken her pupils out very often. Lorna had been teaching for 17 years and used to take learning outdoors more often. She was also keen to share Blawhorn with her pupils, as it had been a favourite childhood haunt of hers. All looked to broaden their experiences and gain some more confidence in taking pupils outdoors.

On their collaborative planning visit, the reserve manager introduced the teachers to the site and answered their questions about taking their pupils there. Despite the knowledgeable and passionate introduction, the bog environment can sometimes be hard to 'sell' and the cold, blustery collaborative planning visit left some of the teachers apprehensive about their pupil visits. Ross said "The Bog itself is interesting but I wonder how much the children will appreciate it. I think they'll have limited capacity for the nature of the Bog."

Ross needn't have worried though. After the pupil visit he noted "the level of enjoyment was far higher than expected. I thought they'd think 'there's nothing there'". One of Lorna's pupils remarked "The moss is magical with all that cotton [grass]; it's so soft to touch, it's like fairies dancing!"

All the classes used photography to capture, interpret or record their experiences. Lorna's P7s used their photos to create nature trails for Ross's class to follow. Ross's class also took their own landscape and macro photography, and Kirsty's class worked with a grandparent on kite photography. Her class' areal photographs won first prize in the West Lothian Archaeological Trust photography competition and were made in to postage stamps.



**"I thoroughly enjoyed my experience and am no longer afraid to visit or plan trips to nature sites. The children I am currently teaching visited Blawhorn during P6 and still talk about how much they enjoyed it and are keen to go again."**



Back in school, a whole host of activities developed as a result of the visits to the NNR including, Ross' class using their photographs to annotate maps, Kirsty's class' designing and making kites and Lorna's class creating their own mini sculptures, inspired by the art around the boardwalk at the reserve.

The reserve manager had told the teachers of a proposed wind farm which, if approved, would change the skyline from the reserve dramatically. This also captured the children's interest, leading to persuasive writing, debates and the construction of model wind turbines.

One year on, none have returned to Blawhorn, citing travel costs as the main issue. Lorna and Kirsty have taken their classes on a residential trip and Ross regularly takes his new P1/2s out into local woodland. He plans and makes these visits collaboratively with the other P2 teacher, covering areas like Social Subjects, Expressive Arts and Literacy, as well as learning names in nature and exploring the sensory environment. Two of the teachers say that they now plan for a wider range of curricular areas outdoors. Two feel more confident about adapting their plans to things that happen on the day and are less worried about planning for set Experiences and Outcomes. The teachers have also shared their experiences of Teaching in Nature with colleagues.

All 3 also agreed that Teaching in Nature had changed the way they taught indoors, for example, two said they are more confident to follow through with learning opportunities brought by pupils from the outdoors and two set more outdoor homework.

[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.

If you'd like more information on [Teaching in Nature](#) or advice on how to use the approach in your context, contact: [sharon.cunningham@snh.gov.uk](mailto:sharon.cunningham@snh.gov.uk)



**“I thoroughly enjoyed the Teaching in Nature project at Blawhorn Moss... it's a super area and lends itself to so many positive experiences”**

