Nature Restoration and Forest School - March Newsletter

There are two programmes of activities taking place at Blacknest – nature restoration and the Forest School. It is a wonderful symbiotic relationship between the two where the children are out experiencing the land enrichment work and finding so many more wildflowers and other species. They bring sharp eyes, fresh curiosity and helping hands to enable me to continually "rewild" the woods and field.

Just as I have gradually learnt how to increase biodiversity and habitats, so too the children learn to love nature, to get involved and thrive in the woods.

A field left fallow for four years, previously overgrazed and stripped of fertility by horses, has now been restored into a rich wildlife meadow. Last summer it was incredible to see the four acres teeming with a variety of wildflowers enriching the soil, attracting butterflies and grasshoppers. It was thrilling to be out there exploring with the children, naming wildflowers and trying to catch crickets, while red kites and buzzards circled overhead.

Around the edge of the meadow the young hedging plants are at last beginning to look like a hedge. It was very challenging to keep these alive in the dry summer, but compost and mulch was put all around the base of every single one. Most of them survived and now we have multi-layers of biodiverse plant and insect life. More than 100 trees were also planted and they too are maturing with clumps of early flowering cherry trees visited by our pollinators and birds.

Within our woodland, the pond was planted with oxygenated plants and cleared to improve the water quality and encourage wildlife. It now attracts common lizards, frogs and dragonfly which encourages pond dipping by the children coming to forest school.

While adding a variety of plants and trees to the woodland, two exclusion ‘no graze’ zones have been created to keep out foraging deer and rabbits and allow the understorey to grow. A large area of rhododendron has been cleared as it provides poor habitat for nesting birds or mammals, and a poor source of food for most species. At the same time, an area of heathland heathers and gorses has been restored, on which several rare species live, remembering that 85% of UK heathlands have been lost over the last 100 years.

Birds are an important part of the restoration story. With some 30 bird boxes adding to natural nesting, at least 20 species of birds are known to breed here while many more are visitors. It is such a delight to watch the birds feeding and thriving here. That required continually keeping the squirrel numbers down to stop predating nesting birds.

Forest School sessions continued throughout the holidays allowing children to build a symbiotic relationship with nature. They learn to love and protect nature, and to soak in the health and joy of being in the woods. This winter the numbers and variety of fungi has been astonishing. Our forest school leaders produced a brilliant resource with photographs of 35 varieties found by the children on the land. New groups used it to foray for fungi and got excited at how many types they found. Subsequently, leaders helped them to understand what an amazing function fungi perform for enriching the soil; feeding plants and trees while creating an important food source for many mammals and insect species as well.

It is good to consider the impact of our diet on the planet. So, we were especially pleased to have a bumper harvest of plums while our vegetable garden produced beans, courgettes and potatoes to share. Indeed, a great Forest School morning was spent digging potatoes and building a fire to cook them.

Land – and the soil on that land – is precious. It sustains life. It is God's wonderful gift to us so I accept my responsibility to steward the land. Slowly we are learning what it takes to make it richer for wildlife and to see ourselves as part of a much bigger life-enhancing picture. We play our part in the restoration of land and habitats. We live in a moment in history where we see species and habitat loss at shocking rates; humans – particularly in richer contexts – are too often living disconnected from nature and where crucial carbon sinks that naturally capture carbon are disappearing. We can do something about it.

I am so grateful to A Rocha UK, the Christian conservation organisation, which made me a Partner in Action as a land manager and which has encouraged and supported me on this journey.

https://www.blacknestforestschool.co.uk/events