Changing lives: Calum finds his path on the Great

Seeing a TV advert for the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch 12 years ago was a turning point for Calum Urquhart, then aged six. He already loved being outside, but taking part sparked an all-consuming love of birds.

It was really no surprise that when the chance of volunteering for the HLF-supported Great Fen project came along Calum was there, helping to build a straw bale bird hide.

His enthusiasm shone through and he was asked by the project team to run minibeast hunts for families during the summer of 2012. He was then invited to attend some wildlife identification workshops, normally reserved for adults.

Then came the chance to be a volunteer ranger on the project, so Calum and his dad stepped up. Calum, now 18, has been acting as a volunteer one day a month ever since, engaging with the public, clearing paths, cleaning hides and signs and recording wildlife sightings.

> "I really feel that I've been part of an innovative long-term project thanks to the National Lottery and I wouldn't mind having a larger part in the development of the project in the future."
>
> - Calum Urquhart

“I have also helped out on a few plant surveys, a water vole survey and a ground beetle survey and last year I ran a guided dawn chorus walk at Woodwalton Fen,” says Calum, who lives in nearby Huntingdon.

As a volunteer he can attend five free workshops per year and this has helped him to mug up on general ecology and botany as well as invertebrate identification. “I now have my own microscope and a great deal more knowledge,” he says. “I also have a better understanding of how to conduct ecological surveys.”

The Great Fen restoration project has run for a total of eight years, supported by over £9million from HLF. Alongside environmental improvements, community involvement and wide public engagement and understanding are key.

Calum is in no doubt that he personally has reaped considerable benefits from his ongoing commitment to the project. “I’ve been told by professionals in the field of ecology that many graduates need one or two years’ volunteering experience before they can enter a paid role. My volunteering with the Great Fen project, Wildlife Trust workshops and my built-up knowledge is likely to make me much more employable after university,” he says. He is in no doubt that this contributed to his being offered a place at Exeter University to read biology and ecology from this September.

“I have really enjoyed being involved with the Great Fen project,” he says. “I have met some lovely people and made

Volunteers working on the Great Fen landscape

Changing lives: how park life helped Matt, Pat and Tom