Changing lives: Leo flies high as volunteer at



Leo Kokoszko's life took a bright new path on a misty day at the RSPB's Bempton Cliffs reserve in Yorkshire when he began chatting to a member of staff about his love of seabirds.

Leo, who has autism, was drifting through college at the time. He struggled at school, where he was considered 'the naughty kid' because of his difficulty concentrating in lessons.

At first, just saying "hello" to a stranger was a bewildering prospect.

But all that changed amid the pock-marked chalk cliffs and swaying grasslands of the nature reserve near Bridlington, where the 20-year-old is now an enthusiastic and knowledgeable volunteer.

Passion for wildlife

"I can stand on the viewing platforms hundreds of times and it never gets boring," he says.

Leo, who has autism, struggled at school, where he was considered 'the naughty kid' because of his difficulty concentrating in lessons.

“I absolutely love it, each time there is something different to point out, whether it’s a chick making its first flight or a minke whale passing by in the sea. There are also so many different people to talk to every time I come here and I really enjoy sharing my passion for wildlife."

The bird-watcher has been visiting the stretch of coast with his family since the age of 10, but it was on the day of poor visibility two years ago when he retreated to the visitor centre and first began chatting to the RSPB team. Having impressed with his knowledge of seabirds, he was encouraged to join as a volunteer during a later visit.

Thanks to the National Lottery-supported project, Leo now helps out with virtually all aspects of the five-kilometre site. He previously avoided social situations, found it difficult to make eye contact and left school with a smattering of GCSEs.

“I was labelled the naughty kid in the class,” Leo says. “I did have support in the classroom but I had a few teachers I didn’t get on with who said I was going to get kicked out of college and not amount to much. They didn’t understand autism I suppose but I never wanted to give up and I always wanted to make the most of my skills. Now that’s exactly what I’m doing.”

Leo began by talking to visitors and has grown in responsibility, with his duties now including leading workshops and tours with school groups and staff reception areas.

He has also taken part in rescues of seabirds that have become disorientated near the pathways on top of the cliffs, learning how to handle and release them safely.

The wildlife enthusiast is a font of knowledge on the 250,000 birds nesting in the nooks and crannies by the North Sea – and can help schoolchildren spot a puffin at 50 paces.

Gaining confidence

His confidence has increased to the point where he also acts as a mentor to another volunteer with autism, who he is showing the ropes.

“Even getting the confidence to say ‘hello’ to someone as they walk past is a massive thing at first,” Leo says. “It makes me so happy that he has crossed that hurdle and I am watching him grow in confidence, just like I did.”

> “Volunteering has made me jump straight in and while it was a massive step at first I like getting my passion across.”
>
> - Leo

Leo’s own new-found confidence has spread to every part of his life and away from the beauty spot he enjoys golf, bird-watching, walking and plays drums in a rock band.

“Before I would never have talked to a stranger,” he says. “If I walked into a room of people I didn’t know I would have walked straight back out again. I was very socially awkward. Volunteering has made me jump straight in and while it was a massive step at first I like getting my passion across, even when I talk to visitors who don’t speak English as a first language.

"My family and friends have all said how much my confidence has improved and my parents are very proud of me. It’s only in the past few years I have got real mates outside the classroom and now I feel I could walk down the street and say hello to anyone.

"It all came from nothing really after I visited the cliffs one day but it’s massively changed my life.”

Becoming part of the team

Leo combines his part-time volunteering role with a land conservation course at Derby College and hopes to work in marine conservation.

The student, from Heanor in Derbyshire, has had his CV enhanced and is now being paid for formal duties at the reserve.

As he helps visitors appreciate the thousands of birds swirling around below a cliff-edge viewing platform, he is anything but the socially awkward schoolboy who was predicted to struggle in the outside world.

> “It all came from nothing really after I visited the cliffs one day but it’s massively changed my life.”

“The team here has been really good and it's also thanks to the National Lottery players,” he says. "The volunteering has helped me massively with my social and communication skills and I don’t know where I’d be without it. I’ve done a



Leo chats to fellow birdwatchers



Leo and another Bempton Cliffs volunteer

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