

Minding Yourself, Minding Nature



A 'Mind Your Selfie' nature-based mental health promotion resource for secondary school students

What is 'Walk in My Shoes'?

Walk in My Shoes (WIMS) is the flagship awareness-raising and education campaign of St Patrick's Mental Health Services (SPMHS). WIMS runs a number of campaigns and events throughout the year, and it works to promote positive mental health and wellbeing; to tackle mental health stigma; and to change how people, particularly young people, think about mental health.

What is the workbook about?

This nature and wellbeing workbook is brought to you by Walk in My Shoes, in collaboration with BirdWatch Ireland, Biodiversity in Schools and Leave No Trace Ireland, as part of the #MindYourSelfie Day campaign.

This is a workbook that explores the links between nature and our mental health. It looks at why and how the natural world is important for our health and wellbeing. It suggests ways we can connect with nature in daily life to support our wellbeing. It also looks in turn at ways we can look after the natural world, and some of the reasons why this is important.



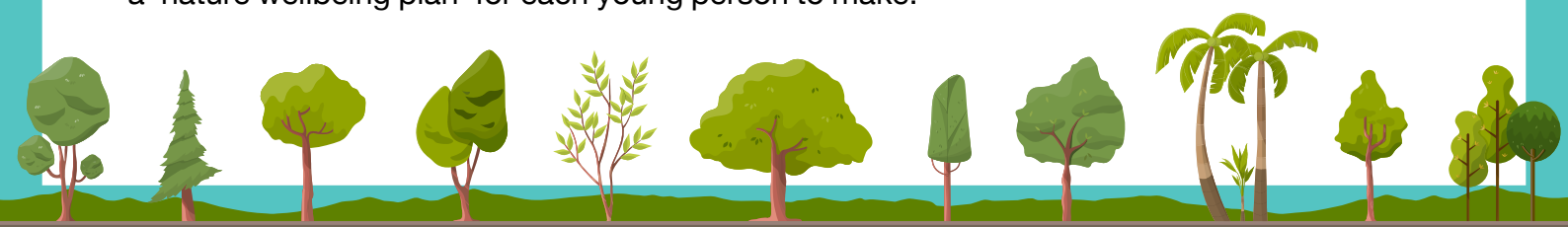
Who is it for?

It is intended for secondary school students and for use in the classroom but includes resources and suggestions for young people to try beyond the classroom.

What is in it?

The workbook contains:

- information about some of the different ways that connecting with nature can support our mental health
- ideas for nature-based activities that young people can do in the classroom or at home
- information about how we can help to look after the natural world
- links to where you can find more information and ideas
- a 'nature wellbeing plan' for each young person to make.



How do I use it?

The workbook is laid out with an introduction and four sections focusing on different nature-based activities. It also includes a 'nature wellbeing plan' for each young person to complete. We suggest that the 'nature wellbeing plan' is used alongside each activity so that ideas that come up can be kept in one place.

It's designed to be used over the year, with activities suggested for each season. The workbook also gives links to where people can find more information and ideas if they'd like to learn and do more.



Introduction

What do we mean by mental health?

Mental health means a state of wellbeing that helps us to cope with the normal stresses of life; to take part in the things that are important to us; to contribute to our communities; and to develop as people.

Good mental health supports how we:

- think, feel and behave
- interact with other people
- look after ourselves and others
- take part in and enjoy our lives.

Our mental health isn't fixed. It can be helpful to think about mental health as a spectrum. Over the course of life, our mental health may move back and forth on this spectrum at different times and depending on what's happening in our lives.

There are lots of things we can do to support our mental health in daily life.

How does the natural world influence our mental health?

The environments we live in and spend time in, and the way we spend our time, can affect how we feel and function day-to-day. There are multiple ways that the natural world positively impacts our mental health. And this includes within urban settings - towns and cities - as well as in the countryside.

What do we mean by the 'natural world'?

The natural world is all those elements of the world around us that exist in nature, and that are not created or caused by humans - for example the seas and mountains, plant-life and trees, and all the animals we share the planet with. **Biodiversity** is a vital part of the natural world and means all the variety of life that can be found on earth, from micro-organisms to fungi, plants, trees and all species of animals.



Why is nature so important for our mental health?

Why is nature important for our mental health? List any reasons you can think of.

There are different and interlinked theories as to why nature is so important for our mental health. One is that as humans we're a part of the natural world - we evolved in wild and natural surroundings so we have an innate motivation to connect with nature. This concept is called **biophilia**. Another reason relates to the calming effect the natural environment has on our nervous system, which can help reduce stress levels and promote relaxation. It's also thought that when we're mentally tired and finding it hard to pay attention, taking a break in nature or even just looking at images of nature helps to 'restore' us and improve our ability to concentrate.

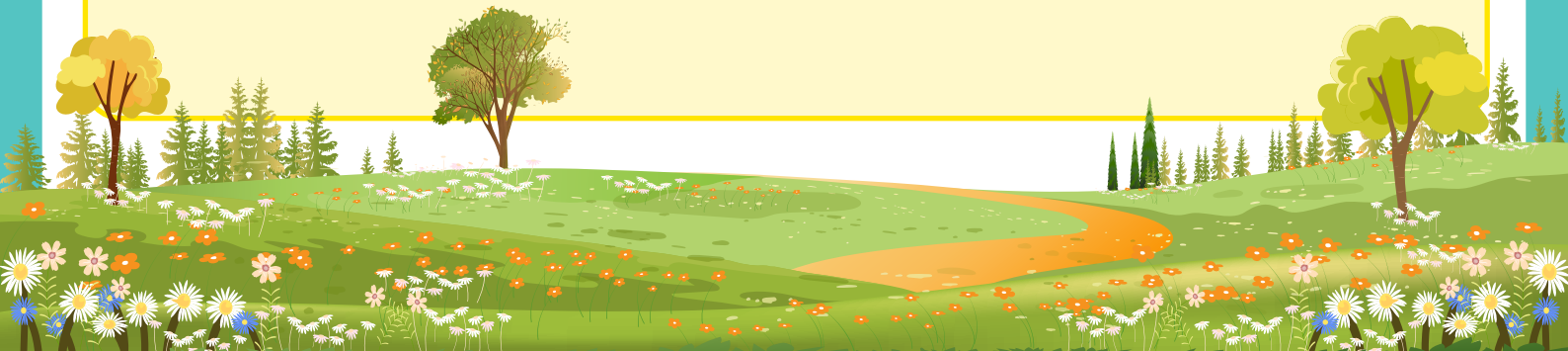
Lots of studies have shown the different ways that connecting with nature can make us healthier and happier.

For example, did you know....?



- Doctors in Scotland and Canada have been giving people 'nature prescriptions' - like listening to birdsong or finding a favourite nature spot locally to help their health and wellbeing
- Being close to green spaces in cities and towns is linked with lower stress and higher wellbeing
- Even being able to see plants and trees from our homes can help us concentrate
- Being around animals can help boost our mood and help us relax
- Regularly spending at least 30 minutes in a park, forest or other green space lowers people's blood pressure, helps us feel more connected with others, and may help protect against low mood.

What ways can you think of that nature helps you and your mental health?



Helping nature, helping ourselves

We know that the natural world faces a lot of very serious risks at present from climate change and different forms of human activity. Spending time connecting with nature in different ways can also help us to deal with worries we might have, including about climate change. Hearing about the implications of climate change can be worrying and upsetting. This is an understandable and logical response to a serious situation. Caring about others and having compassion about what's happening in the world is also an important part of being human.

If you ever feel worried or anxious about climate change, it's important to know you're not alone in feeling like this. It's also important to know what can help. As with anything that's weighing on your mind, if you find you're worrying a lot, it's important to talk about this - with your parents or guardian, or another trusted adult for example.



Remember however that there are many reasons to be hopeful, and many people around the world are working together to tackle these issues. For example:

- A huge amount of knowledge has been gathered and shared about climate change, including what the solutions are to problems we face
- There are huge amounts of people committed to affecting positive change in the world, from activists and scientists, to community groups and organisations. Some of these groups working in Ireland have kindly helped us make this toolkit
- More governments are listening to young people's urgent concerns, and are even being demanded by the courts in some cases to make stronger commitments to climate action
- Historic agreements are being made by countries around the world to help protect the natural world. For example, in 2022, 175 countries signed up to end plastic pollution, with laws planned for this by the end of 2024.

Something else that can help us all, is doing the things that we know are good for the environment and the animals we share the planet with. And that's what we'll be focusing on in this toolkit. We'll be exploring ways in which we can actively connect with nature and, at the same time, take positive action for nature and biodiversity. We'll explore how engaging with the natural world in different ways helps us to look after our mental health. And we'll also explore how we in turn can look after nature.

In other words,
how can we take care of
nature as it takes care of us?



Resource one: Spring

In this section we look at:

- 1) the many benefits **plant-life and gardening** can have for our mental health, and
- 2) we suggest an activity that you can do to help take care of nature.

We also provide links to resources and ideas if you want to explore this area more.

How does plant-life and gardening help us take care of our mental health?

Gardening has been found to have lots of benefits for both our physical and mental health, and this includes looking after plants indoors too. A large survey of over 6,900 people in the UK discovered that health benefits, including a sense of calm and wellbeing, was in the top three reasons why people gardened. It also discovered that the more time people spent gardening, the more it benefited their mental health and wellbeing. Gardening can help us to relax and let go of stress, to connect with and nurture living things, and give us pleasure and a sense of achievement.

Even just being around plants, can have a positive impact on our wellbeing. For example, researchers have found being able to see greenery while you study in school or at home, can help with concentration and to lower stress levels.

When you're in a garden, park or other green space, taking some time to notice the sounds of nature and the plants and flowers around you, might help you practise being 'mindful'. **Mindfulness** means purposefully paying attention to the present moment without judgement. Taking some time to yourself to try this can be a helpful way to calm your mind. The next time you're outdoors and around greenery consider slowing down for a few minutes.

- Notice what flowers and trees you can see.
- Take in the different colours or the scent of a flower.
- Become aware of the buzzing of bees or the rustle of leaves.

You can also try out this brief 'Leaves on a stream', mindfulness exercise on the Walk in My Shoes YouTube channel here www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1C8hwj5LXw

Did you know...?



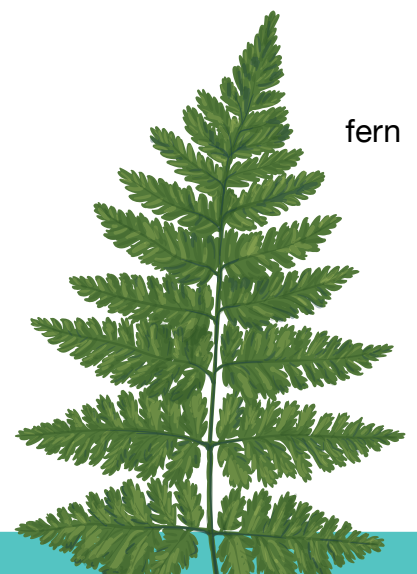
Having plants and flowers in a hospital room can help people recover from surgery? In an experiment with 80 people recovering from an operation, 40 people stayed in rooms without plants and 40 stayed in rooms with a variety of green potted plants. The rooms were identical except for the presence or absence of plants. The researchers found that people recovering in the 'plant rooms' went home from hospital quicker and had lower ratings for pain, tiredness and anxiety.



peace lily



kentia palm



fern

How can we take care of nature through gardening?

We've teamed up with Biodiversity in Schools who have kindly shared ideas for this toolkit. These are simple projects that can work really well in school or, at home, and will be a brilliant biodiversity boost for the local area.

Activity outline:

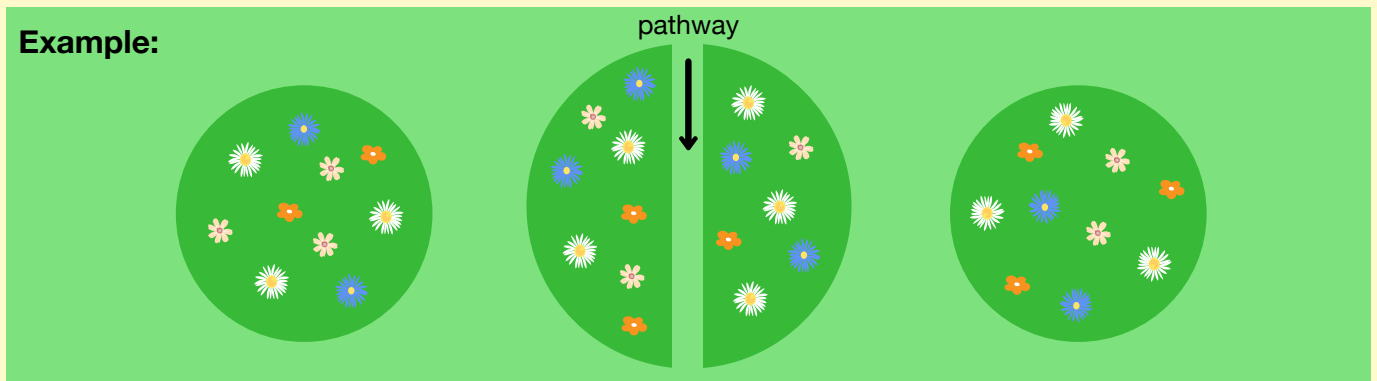
1) Let it grow!

Sometimes when it comes to looking after nature it's about what you don't do. Letting your grass grow that little bit longer is hugely beneficial as it gives wildflowers time to bloom. It's a win-win situation as it's completely free, really simple, less time is spent cutting grass and local pollinators such as bees can collect nectar and pollen.

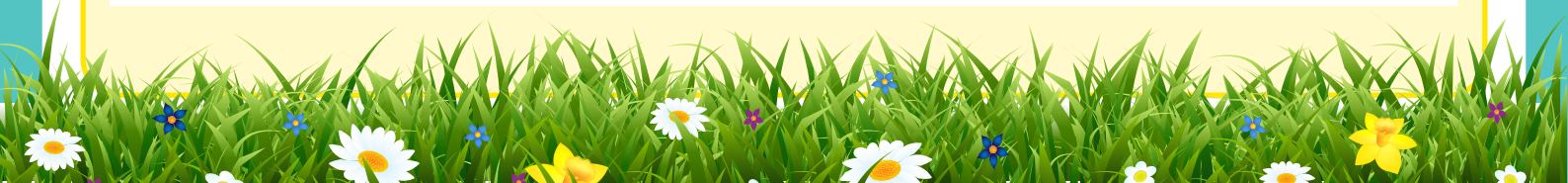
It's also a really fun project to undertake as you plan your interesting meadow shape and designs. Maybe a huge curving snake shape? Perhaps a collection of large circles dotted around the school? The result of doing this can be truly spectacular and is one of the best ways to help local wildlife. To ensure everyone is on board, make sure to discuss with your caretaker and make an interpretative sign to explain what is happening. Cut well-defined edges and pathways throughout to show both the intentional nature of your project and for access to explore. Meadows can last between six weeks all the way up to Autumn – whatever you decide. Time to get creative!

Sketch out the area where you will have your 'let it grow' patch. Draw what kind of shape you think would work, and add where you'll allow a 'path' through if that's needed.

Example:



Your design:

A large, empty rectangular box with a light yellow background, intended for a student to draw their own meadow design. It is positioned below the 'Example' section and above the decorative grass border at the bottom of the page.

2) Create a wildflower patch or pot

Not every school has large grassy areas. Also, newer schools might have brand new grass with no wildflowers. However, it's still possible to help local pollinators by creating a small wildflower patch or pot. Think of it as a micro-meadow! While your seed will come with instructions, generally speaking, choose a nice sunny spot, remove the grass surface by digging (don't use sprays), or for a pot (with drainage holes) use a compost/topsoil mix. Interestingly, wildflowers do best in poor soil. Standby for a wonderful parade of colour from your micro-meadow that the local pollinators will thank you for!

There's a few golden rules of biodiversity gardening when using wildflower seed. Firstly, try the 'let it grow' option if possible; if you need seed, only purchase Irish-grown, native, organic wildflower seed and only use within the school garden. Only use peat-free compost and don't use any herbicides.

How does this help the natural world?

A common threat facing biodiversity in Ireland is the idea of 'tidiness' such as keeping hedges trim and grass short. However, this is not great for biodiversity. This concept of tidiness is thankfully becoming less popular as society begins to embrace sustainability. The huge areas of grass that are maintained in urban areas have the most wonderful native wildflower seeds underneath that are ready to bloom if we give them a chance – flowers like dandelions, self-heal, buttercups, forget-me-nots, daisies and clovers. You might even get lucky with orchids! The above activities are fantastic for the wildflower population of the area, as well as providing food and shelter for a range of species including pollinators such as bees, butterflies, hoverflies and moths.

Where can I find more information?

For more detailed information on these projects and other ideas to help bees please visit:

www.biodiversityinschools.com/bees.html

For more information about the work of Biodiversity in Schools please visit:

www.biodiversityinschools.com



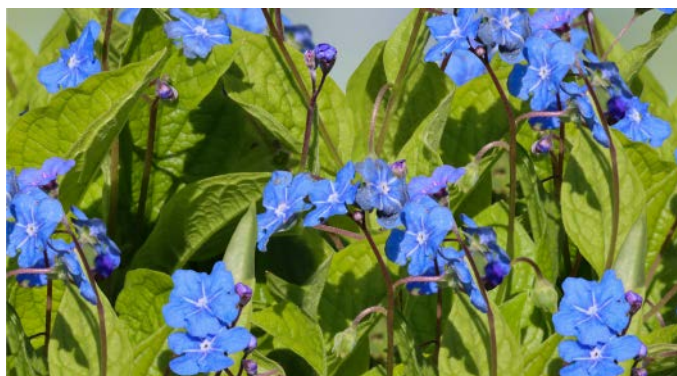
Daisies



Dandelions



Buttercups



Forget-me-nots

Resource two: Summer

In this section:

- 1) we explore how different natural environments can benefit our mental health and wellbeing, and
- 2) we suggest different ways that you can get involved with community efforts and help take care of nature spots in your area.

1) How can different natural environments impact our mental health?

Both 'green' and 'blue' spaces have been found to have positive effects on our mental health. Green spaces include gardens or fields, city parks, national parks, forest or woodland areas. Blue spaces include rivers, lakes and the seaside.

Why do you think this might be?

Pick a 'blue' or 'green' space you're drawn to. It might be somewhere you haven't been before. Take a few moments to imagine you're there. Think about the sights, sounds or sensations of the place and note them down. Note too what you think would have a positive impact on your wellbeing:

Natural environments provide lots of sensory experiences that can positively impact our wellbeing. Getting out for a walk on a blustery day on the beach, hearing the sounds of waves breaking and breathing in the scent of sea air might leave us feeling refreshed and energised. Spending some time sitting in a quiet garden observing the sounds of birds and the scent of flowers might help us feel more relaxed and calm.

Did you know...?



Researchers in America studied the effects of three different types of nature sounds – birds, water, and a combination of both. They found that water sounds had the largest positive effect on boosting mood and overall health. Other nature sounds can also have a positive effect on how we feel. These can include sounds such as:

- different animals, like bees buzzing or birdsong
- leaves rustling in the breeze
- waves breaking on the shore
- water babbling or flowing in a river
- rainfall.

Even if you can't get outside to hear them, there are free apps available that play different sounds, which you can try out at home.



Where can you think of in your local area that's a 'green' or 'blue' space?

Green:

Blue:

How can we best take care of different natural environments?

While spending time in different natural environments is good for us, it's vital we help protect these spaces and look after them. 'Leaving no trace' is something we explore further in the next section and, includes making sure to dispose of any litter or waste properly and respecting animals and wildlife. There are also many ways to take part in community efforts to look after different spaces. For example, there may be litter-picking days or beach-cleaning activities in your area. Or you could even arrange one as a class to help look after a local nature spot. As well as helping the environment and wildlife, taking part in volunteering activities like this has been found to be positively linked with wellbeing and life satisfaction.

Some county councils support schools in running litter-picking projects as part of these programmes, for example you'll find information from Fingal County Council here:

www.fingal.ie/litter-picking-schools.

Where can I find more information?

If you are from Dublin, you can find information on parks here:

www.dublincity.ie/residential/parks/dublin-city-parks/visit-park

and links to 'tree trails' in different parks here:

www.dublincity.ie/residential/parks/nature-and-biodiversity-dublin/native-tree-trails

If you are from Cork, you can find information on city parks and outdoor activities here:

<https://corkcity.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=47debefa9eb443cbbbdbd1930b60c8da7>

If you are from Galway, you can find information on parks and outdoor activities here:

www.galwaynationalparkcity.com/parks/

You can learn more about Ireland's six national parks and the flora and fauna within them here:

www.nationalparks.ie/

You can search Coillte and Waterways Ireland walking trails by county here:

www.getirelandwalking.ie/walkways/



Resource three: Autumn

In this section:

- 1) we explore how getting active outdoors can support our mental health and wellbeing, and
- 2) we share ways that you can learn more about the nature around you, and make sure you are 'leaving no trace' when enjoying the great outdoors.

We also learn how to carry out a mini-Bioblitz and provide links to resources and ideas if you want to explore this area more.

How can getting outdoors help our mental health?

Did you know...?



In Japan, **shinrin-yoku** or '**forest bathing**' is commonly practised and has been found to boost immunity, lower stress levels and improve mental health? 'Forest bathing' involves spending time amongst trees and taking in and noticing the different sensations this creates. This type of activity can help us slow down and become more 'mindful' in our daily lives.

You may be familiar with mindfulness and perhaps already take part in it. Mindfulness means purposefully paying attention to the present moment without judgement. And there's lots of evidence that doing different mindfulness practices can support our mental health. As we mention elsewhere in this pack, being mindful when out and about in nature can also be a powerful way to improve our wellbeing.



Getting active outdoors, including in nature-based activities, has also been found to help protect our mental health. We know that exercise and sport help us to stay well, both physically and mentally. When we exercise, mood-boosting chemicals called **endorphins** are released in our brains. Getting active can also help release stress, boost our self-esteem and improve our sleep. Being active outdoors has been found to add extra benefits to our mental health. The impact of different natural environments, and exposure to fresh air and sunlight, can have a positive and immediate effect on our sense of wellbeing. While we may be more likely to get out and about during the spring and summer months, it's important to keep doing these things all year round.



Think about what kinds of outdoor activities you enjoy or would like to try:

I enjoy it

I'd like to try it

No interest

Walking in the park or by a canal

Going for a hike

Playing soccer or other sports

Going for a run

Swimming outside (sea or lake)

Kayaking

Visiting a national park or woodland

Skating or skateboarding

Going for a cycle

Camping

Farming

Orienteering

Going for a nature walk

Walking the dog

Walking on the beach

Beach-cleaning

Bird-watching

Foraging (for example blackberry picking)

Gardening

Other:



We've teamed up with Leave No Trace who have kindly shared ideas and information for this toolkit. Leave No Trace is an Outdoor Ethics Education Programme designed to promote and inspire responsible outdoor recreation through education, research and partnerships. One of the ideas they suggest for young people and schools to get involved in an Autumnal mini-BioBlitz.

Autumnal Mini-BioBlitz

Autumn is a time for change in the environment. Nature starts preparing for winter. This usually lends itself to a beautiful natural world full of colour, change and activity. Getting connected with the environment can be a very daunting task. Learning what each animal or plant is has been quite challenging in the past. Technology is greatly improving our ability to discover more about the natural world around us. It's easy now to carry out a mini-Bioblitz in your local outdoor space. Take 30 – 60 minutes outdoors and start identifying all the plants and insects you can find; all you need is your phone. There are a huge number of apps that can help identify different species. We recommend 'SEEK'. It's free and a great place to start. How many different species can you identify?

Want to take it a step further? Submit your data to the National Biodiversity Data Centres website and your information could help us understand how our world is changing and what the best ways to help protect it are. Learning about nature is vital in protecting it. Once we learn what lives around us it is then easier to 'leave no trace'.

List any different species you identify in the Bioblitz here:

How can we best take care of the outdoors when we're there?

As increasing numbers of people seek the beauty and exhilaration of outdoor travel and recreation, our collective mark on the environment and its natural processes increases. Litter, water pollution, disturbance of vegetation, wildlife, livestock and other people are all indicators of the need to develop a national ethic that protects both natural and cultural heritage. Techniques designed to minimise the environmental and social impacts in these areas are incorporated in, and promoted by, the national Leave No Trace education programme as the following seven principles:

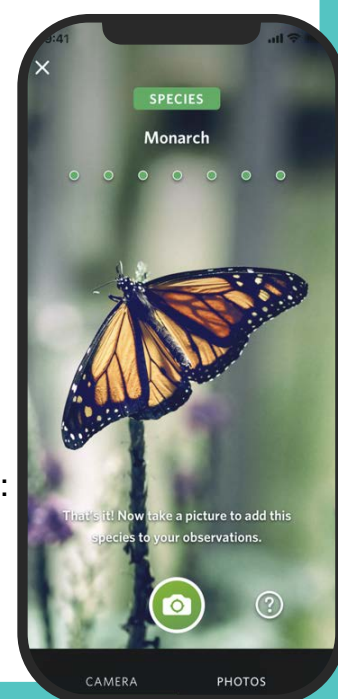
1. Plan ahead and prepare
2. Be considerate of others
3. Respect farm animals and wildlife
4. Travel and camp on durable surfaces
5. Leave what you find
6. Dispose of waste properly
7. Minimise the effects of fire.

Where can I find more information?

The National Biodiversity Data Centre website www.biodiversityireland.ie.

Learn more about the Leave No Trace principles and their educational resources here: www.leavenotraceireland.org/resources/educational-resources/.

Sport Ireland offers lots of information and ideas for outdoor activities around Ireland here: www.sportireland.ie/outdoors.



Resource four: Winter

In this section:

1) we explore how appreciating and caring for wildlife, and birds in particular, can support our mental health and wellbeing, and

2) we share ideas to help look after the birds around your school or at home.

We also learn how this helps the natural world and we provide links to resources and ideas if you want to explore this area more.

How does wildlife support our mental health?

Did you know...?



Caring activities, which can include wildlife care and protection, have been found in neuroscience studies to give us more pleasure than activities based on 'winning' or 'dominating' over others?

Even being near animals can have a positive effect on how we feel. A study by the University of Exeter asked over 270 people about their mental health and looked at different aspects of nature in their neighbourhoods, including the level of trees and birds in the area. The researchers found that people who were able to see more birds from their window or regularly in their local area had lower levels of depression, anxiety and stress.

And it's not just seeing birds that can support our wellbeing, hearing them can have a positive effect too. During the peaks of the Covid-19 pandemic, when people were spending far more time at home and there was less traffic noise, a survey in Northern Ireland found people reported being much more aware of birdsong, and that it helped to reduce their stress levels. Nature sounds have been found to boost our mood and manage stress. Researchers in America studied the effects of three different types of nature sounds – birds, water, and a combination of both. They found that bird sounds had the largest positive effect on reducing feelings of stress and annoyance.

Another way to connect with nature is through creativity. Sketching, photography or even reading books inspired by nature can be effective and helpful ways of appreciating nature, at the same time as supporting your wellbeing. You might like this Draw with Don wellbeing session that you can find here www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkIkOhN4PG0, recorded to mark World Mental Health Day 2021, where artist Don Conroy takes you through how to draw different types of wildlife.

Did you know...?



By just watching a nature programme you can positively affect your wellbeing? In 2017, a global study looked at the impact of the nature documentary series *Planet Earth II* on viewers. Researchers used different tests to measure how people felt before, during and after watching clips of the show. Increases were found in feelings like awe, amazement, wonder, joy, excitement, peacefulness and contentment. At the same time, decreases were found in feelings of stress, irritability, nervousness, anger and tiredness. Young people (aged 16-24) experienced the greatest amount of changes in emotions amongst all the age groups.



How can we help look after wildlife?

We've teamed up with BirdWatch Ireland who have kindly shared ideas and information for this toolkit.

Feed the birds!

One of the ideas they suggest for young people and schools to get involved is to start feeding the birds in and around your gardens and school grounds by putting up bird-feeders in safe locations. It's a very rewarding thing to do and a great way to get 'up close and personal' with nature. By using different kinds of food and feeders to provide for the birds, you will attract a greater number of different species. Over time, you should begin to get better at identifying the various species and at spotting their different traits and quirks. It's like having your own personal nature documentary right outside your window! You can find lots of tips and information all about feeding birds here:

www.birdwatchireland.ie/irelands-birds-birdwatch-ireland/garden-birds/feeding-your-garden-birds/



The Irish Garden Bird Survey

While you are feeding the birds this Winter, why not help BirdWatch Ireland to count and monitor them too? Their annual Irish Garden Bird Survey runs for 13 weeks each winter, and participants are asked to keep track of the highest numbers of each different bird species that they see at any one time in their gardens each week. It's a lot of fun and a great way to learn more about the birds that live around your home. You can download the survey form or add in your weekly totals online and read all about the Irish Garden Bird Survey here:

www.birdwatchireland.ie/irelands-birds-birdwatch-ireland/garden-birds/feeding-your-garden-birds/



Put up a nestbox

Have you ever considered putting up a nestbox in your garden or your school grounds? It's a wonderful way to benefit small birds that often struggle to find natural nesting sites, as well as an incredibly rewarding thing to do. As the eggs are laid and the chicks grow, watching the parent birds coming and going with food connects you to nature in a way that nothing else can. You put up that box; you made all of that new life possible! It's a simple, yet highly effective, way to give our birds a real boost and you can find out all about nestboxes here:

www.birdwatchireland.ie/irelands-birds-birdwatch-ireland/garden-birds/nestboxes/



How does this help the natural world?

Feeding birds and installing nestboxes can go a long way towards helping birds to cope with the problems that we humans have caused for them. The modern world has greatly reduced the feeding and nesting opportunities for many birds, and these are great ways to help to redress the balance. Also, the more you help birds, the more you will learn about them and the more they will mean to you. One of the biggest problems facing our natural world at the moment is a lack of understanding, and as you become enthusiastic about helping birds and other forms of wildlife, hopefully you will inspire others to do the same.

BirdWatch Ireland's 'citizen science' surveys, such as the Irish Garden Bird Survey, are vital tools in the effort to understand bird declines and to help endangered species to recover. It would be impossible for one organisation to gather enough data about birds by itself, but with the assistance of thousands of willing volunteers it becomes easy. The data that you gather will be used to set conservation priorities and even to draft nature protection legislation across Ireland, Europe and beyond. How great is it to be a part of that?

Also, by supporting BirdWatch Ireland and other conservation charities, you are making their vital work possible; they can't look after their nature reserves, their education and outreach programmes, their conservation projects and their monitoring surveys without the help of nature-lovers like you. You will also be helping to keep biodiversity on the agenda for politicians and decision-makers; the more people that show that they care about nature and understand its importance to our lives, the harder it is for others to ignore it.

Where can I find more information?

BirdWatch Ireland's website - **www.birdwatchireland.ie** - is a great place to start. You will find:

- special sections with tips on how to feed your garden birds, build nestboxes and take part in surveys
- a great online guide to Ireland's bird species, as well as lots of educational resources tailor-made to help people learn more about birds and other wildlife
- a full list of local branch links if you'd like to find out what's happening in your area there. New people are always extremely welcome, and no prior knowledge of birds or wildlife is needed and
- you can also ask any questions you might have through the website. BirdWatch Ireland will be delighted to help.

You can find information on another citizen survey project you can get involved in - Spring Alive - at **www.springalive.net**. This project helps to keep track of migratory birds which are under threat, such as the Swallow, Swift, Cuckoo and Sand Martin. This website is also packed with information about the phenomenon of bird migration, and also contains an interactive map that allows you to follow the journeys of these remarkable birds in real time.



My Nature Wellbeing Plan

As you work through this resource over the year, keep note of activities and ideas that you can try to support your mental health and wellbeing day-to-day.

Ways to connect with nature to mind your mental health and wellbeing:

Nature sounds, images or scents that I find relaxing are...

(for example waves breaking)



I can spend time at

(for example, the local park or community garden)

I can take time to notice....

(for example, flowers and trees you pass on your way to and from school)

I can take time to listen to....

(for example particular nature sounds on apps or outdoors)

I can help take care of....

(for example, plants at home or places you visit)

Something I'd like to try in the future....

(for example, a conservation activity or outdoor activity)

I'd like to learn more about...

(for example ways to protect biodiversity)

I can connect with nature in my hobbies by...

(for example nature photography or sketching, reading books about nature, watching a wildlife documentary)

