

Rewild Rangers

Background

- The Rewild Rangers project started two years ago as part of Count Me In Day Service (Western Care Association). Count Me In is a service and support for young autistic adults (18-25) without an intellectual disability. Count Me In offers workshops, training, and activities based on the young people's interests. These include everything from stained glass and wood burning workshops to driving test support. The service aims to create a welcoming environment where young people can build friendships, get support with their wellbeing, and pursue personal, educational, or employment goals. A key success has been forming partnerships with community groups to expand opportunities for the young people who attend.
- The Rewild Rangers are transforming a previously unused outdoor space with a walled garden beside the St. John's Resource Centre in Ballinamore, Co. Mayo. Their goal is to enhance biodiversity and support native plants and wildlife through hands-on restoration, climate training, and collaboration with local groups.
- The project started when facilitators noticed a shared sense of climate anxiety among the young people. Traditional activism, such as protests, can be overwhelming for autistic people due to sensory sensitivities to loud noises and large crowds. Instead, the group has decided to focus on practical, hands-on environmental action!

Key Stakeholders & Collaborations:

Western Care Association, Leave No Trace Ireland, Castlebar Tidy Towns, Burrenbeo Trust, Free Trees Ireland, Swift Conservation Ireland, and LAWPRO (Local Authority Waters Programme).



Image Source: Kieran O'Toole (Biodiversity Ireland)

Key Activities

Rewilding & Wildlife Monitoring:

- The project focuses on rewilding and allowing natural processes to restore the landscape and support ecosystem recovery, rather than traditional gardening or planting. The emphasis is on letting nature reclaim the space, removing invasive species, monitoring the health of native trees, and encouraging the return of wildlife.
- Led by young autistic adults, the project draws on their knowledge, interests, and strengths, particularly in native trees, insects, and wildlife to guide the work. Their enthusiasm drives activities such as observing insect habitats, tracking wildlife around trees and undergrowth, and soon, using wildlife cameras. Sightings are recorded using the National Biodiversity Data Centre.
- While the young people prioritise natural rewilding over structured planting, they have introduced a small number of native species where appropriate. This includes planting a modest orchard of apple trees to provide seasonal produce.

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Key Activities

Community Space:

- Beyond the ecological goals, the young people are planning to make this a space that others in the community can enjoy, including residents of the neighbouring nursing home. The young people have experienced first-hand the benefits to wellbeing through working in and connecting with nature and want to share this with others in the area.

Sheep Wool Trail:

- To support greater access while protecting the environment, the young people are working on a sustainable walking path made from sheep's wool. This natural material causes minimal disruption to wildlife and plant life, requires little maintenance, and can potentially last up to 100 years.



Collaborations:

- Leave No Trace Ireland - Completed training in the 7 Principles and took part in "walk and talk" sessions at Lough Lannagh.
- Castlebar Tidy Towns - Supporting local actions and community engagement.
- Burrenbeo Trust – Involved in the Burren Pine Project, helping conserve Ireland's only native pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) and taking part in the Hare's Corner biodiversity initiative.
- Free Trees Ireland - Planting native trees that support red squirrel habitats.
- Swift Conservation Ireland - Although the site isn't suitable for Swifts, the Rangers contribute to Swift surveys in Castlebar, helping monitor this Red-listed species whose breeding population has dropped over 40% in the last 15 years.
- LAWPRO (Local Authority Waters Programme) – Plans are underway to monitor and protect a nearby river through regular water testing.
- Additionally, with permission from a local farmer, they're establishing a hedgerow to link their site with nearby woodland, creating a habitat corridor.

Impact

- The Rewild Rangers take full ownership of their ideas and actions, boosting their self-esteem, confidence, and belief in their ability to make a difference.
- The outdoor space provides a calming environment. Being outdoors and engaged in meaningful work has proven to be beneficial for their mental health and overall wellbeing.
- Lastly, one of the young people has emerged as a strong advocate for both autistic people and environmental conservation. He has completed a Train the Trainer qualification with Leave No Trace Ireland and are now an accredited trainer. He has also taken part in public speaking, training sessions, and other advocacy work!



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Challenges & Solutions

Challenges:

One setback the young people experienced was when a tractor illegally dumped American laurel on the site, which then had to be carefully removed. Securing funding and managing grant applications has also been an ongoing challenge. Another key difficulty is striking the right balance between intervention and allowing nature to take its course, ensuring that any planting or activities are fully researched and do not unintentionally harm the ecosystem.

Solutions:

The young people take a careful, research-led approach, starting small and learning as they go.

Tips for Similar Projects

- Design projects that empower autistic individuals to lead and shape environmental actions, building on their interests and strengths. Encourage them to take ownership, explore their ideas, and guide the direction of the work.
- Identify neglected or unused spaces that can be transformed into accessible, biodiverse habitats.
- Start small!
- Have a clear vision and take time to do the research. Be guided by nature rather than trying to control it.
- Connect with other small organisations and community groups.

Identified Limitations/Weaknesses

The project is small-scale, but it's a strong idea that others can replicate. It's also scalable and will grow over time!

Resources

- Rewild Rangers [Instagram](#)
- Rewild Rangers [Facebook](#)
- [Western Care Association](#)
- [Count Me In Instagram](#)
- [Leave No Trace Ireland](#)
- [Free Trees Ireland](#)
- [Burrenbeo Trust](#)
- [The National Biodiversity Data Centre](#)
- [Swift Conservation Ireland](#)
- [Local Authority Waters Programme](#)



Partners

