

## Junior Ranger Camp 2010: Let loose in the Mendip Hills AONB



**EUROPARC intern Helena Aster tells us about her experience at this year's International Junior Ranger Camp that was hosted by the Mendip Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in the UK from 24th – 31st July.**

On arrival day, Saturday, I was really curious about the camp, the Junior Rangers and our first accommodation at Fernhill Farm. Sarah Jackson from the Mendip Hills who was responsible for leading and organising this year's camp greeted EUROPARC's Federico Minozzi and I at the train station in Bristol. After our arrival at Fernhill Farm we were warmly greeted by its owner Andrew, his wife Jen and Laura, a 18 year old Mendip Hills Junior Ranger and taken on a tour of the farm. Fernhill farm is a very comfy, modern place to stay. Particularly pleasing to the eye and mind are the contemporary, natural recreation rooms. It is a working farm 160 acres of species rich natural grasslands, traditionally breeding & rearing cattle, sheep and pigs, with walks through the fields & woodlands, harvesting from the orchard & gardens with ponds to explore.

On Saturday afternoon we were introduced to the other Mendip Hills Junior Ranger: Alex, Katie and John. We Together with the group of Junior Rangers from Slovenia, who had arrived the night before, we began to build the large tent where the boys would sleep. During the afternoon the other Junior Rangers arrived from the Czech Republic, Germany, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, the Netherlands and Slovenia. Although some were shy to begin with a game of Jenga soon broke the ice. In the evening we sat together in and talked about our expectations of the camp. Some of these were: to have fun, experience nature, play games, make new friends, good food and to get to know the Mendip Hills.



Junior Ranger at Fernhill farm. Picture: EUROPARC

The next day after a large, tasty breakfast the Junior Ranger divided themselves into two groups: one for sheep shearing and one for the wool workshop. I decided to join the sheep shearing group because it is something I have always wanted to do. After a quick introduction from Andrew we were allowed to have a go. I volunteered to go first and was shown the different steps of shearing. It was a pretty exhausting experience because it is difficult to hold a sheep still between your legs and to shear its hair at the same time but still exciting and a great experience.

We left the farm early on Monday and drove to Cheddar Gorge famous for its caving and climbing opportunities. After the first group had prepared themselves for caving, my group were told about safety regulations for climbing. After the partner check where our guide Andy made sure the climbing equipment was set up alright we could start to climb up the 30 m tall cliff in front of us. Two people were responsible for safe belaying at the bottom of the cliff whilst a third climbed slowly up it. At the beginning it did not seem to be so difficult but the higher you climbed the more you could feel the exertion in your arms and legs. Despite the aches it was certainly fun to do. It was great to see how the others got over their inhibitions when they started to climb and then how proud they were when they had reached the top. After we had finished climbing we descended into the caves to a large cave full of stalactites and were informed about how the caves were used years ago and the story about how they were discovered.

On Tuesday we were also divided into two groups. One group went to learn about dry stone walling and the other group were taken by a guide through fields around the farm and learnt about what vegetation is edible. I tried my hand at dry stone walling which was fairly exhausting because of the large stones that you have to

move around. But as the wall became larger the prouder we got of belonging to the group that had built it. We returned in the evening for dinner and enjoyed the home made pizzas that the other group had created.

We said goodbye to Fernhill on Wednesday and spent a day in the pretty town of Wells, England's smallest city. In Wells we were given an interesting tour of the cathedral, which was unfortunately hard to follow for some of the Junior Rangers who did not speak English very well. Afterwards we had a bit of time to explore Wells. Everybody enjoyed the market and I had the feeling that everyone found the excursion to Wells a welcome change to the work in and around the farm. After a relaxing afternoon we travelled to our accommodation for the second half of the week: Goblin Combe Environment Centre

Goblin Combe is an environment centre committed to providing safe and supported environments that will allow our children and young peoples to realise their full potential in the natural environment. After we had settled in we drove to a local pub where we had a country world cup in 'Green Botcha'. Everybody had a lot of fun and the world cup winners were the Junior Ranger from Slovenia.

Survival in the wild was the theme on Thursday. We gathered at the bonfire location behind the house and three ladies from the area gave us tips and tricks about how to survive in the wild. We learnt how to make a fire with flint and hay; made a hut from branches and leaves and then had to cook noodles with tomatoes sauce with the equipment they provided us with. This was in my opinion one of the best experiences of the week. The Junior Ranger could see what they were capable of making themselves and had the chance to implement their own ideas.



Junior Ranger on survival course.

Picture: EUROPARC

The last day came too soon and was spent in the woods next to Goblin Combe helping the Cleve Woods Conservation Project. In the evening we had great fun at a local town hall learning how to country dance – a local type of dance taught in Somerset. It was extremely funny learning all the steps and everybody really enjoyed themselves, Junior Rangers and Mentors alike. It was a fantastic party with a tasty curry to keep us going.

When saying goodbye on the Saturday morning it was clear that many new friendships had been formed during the week. Many of the Junior Rangers certainly hoped to remain in contact with each other. All in all the week was very enjoyable and full of new experiences for me and the other participants. It was a great pleasure to be part of such a nice group of people. I would recommend the Junior Ranger camp as a extraordinary event to anyone.

Helena Aster