

Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust

Slimbridge, Gloucestershire

It takes something to upstage the flamingoes and otters at the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust's Slimbridge Centre in Gloucestershire.

Yet visitors who flock to it in search of inspiration might have been surprised to spot a determined young man levering himself out of a wheelchair into the middle of a hedge to help his fellow voluntary workers.

Or a young woman with a learning disability insisting on making a speech to a room full of 80 people, most of them strangers.

Thanks to a partnership between the trust and the National Star College in Cheltenham, young disabled people achieving and enjoying themselves is becoming a common thing at Slimbridge.

Students' demolish old walls, paint kiosks, clear ponds and hides, and help test out new visitor attractions.

Sarah Aspden, Volunteer Co-ordinator at Slimbridge, says the difference the college's volunteers are making is matched only by the difference their participation is making to the young disabled people themselves.

"We're very impressed by the students volunteering and the staff team working with them. The partnership started two years ago when the college approached us to do a one-off day with a group of students. The first student volunteers came in and painted our fences – and painted each other as much as the fence! They had a great day. The next group did a taster session and cleared out the pond zone area for us. One volunteer even got himself out of his wheelchair so he could sit in the middle of a hedge and help out. It was a real hands-on conservation job."

National Star College, an independent specialist college working with people who have physical disabilities and associated learning disabilities, realised the opportunity for a good working partnership for their students – and a group began working every Monday as part of the centre's permanent volunteer team.

"The college team work on showcase projects as well as helping out with day-to-day maintenance," says Sarah. "The team worked out in the rain, wind and snow for three or four weeks. Three used wheelchairs and worked alongside their colleagues demolishing walls.

"When we started, we didn't know what tasks they would be able to do. Now I have different members of staff coming to me and asking if they can book the team for an activity or task. The confidence levels we see grow and grow throughout the year. The first group were quite reserved for the first couple of weeks. Then I asked them to clear stones for the Back from the Brink project – and they said they would... if we gave them a bag of seed to feed the birds first!

"One regular volunteer has progressed on from National Star College to be part of our visitor services team. She asked to make a speech to 80 people at the Christmas meal. She stood there, in front of so many people she didn't know, and thanked them for letting her volunteer.

"It's a form of higher education for the students, as well as being fun as they get to try out the attractions before the general public. They were the first to try out the canoe safari.

"They form an integral part of the volunteer team, interacting with the staff and the general public and representing the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust. The secret of volunteering from our point of view is knowing you have regular people you can rely on. We know that they will be there every Monday and the National Star College team will be there to support them."

"We're very impressed by the students volunteering and the staff team working with them"



"One regular volunteer has progressed on from National Star College to be part of our visitor services team"