

Cumbria Wild Watch

Summary Report of Pilot Year

27th-30th June 2024

by

Cumbria Biodiversity Data Centre (CBDC)

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Introduction

Cumbria Wild Watch is an initiative aimed at forging a deeper connection to Cumbria while also introducing more people to wildlife recording and so making a positive contribution to biodiversity across Cumbria. Cumbria Wild Watch was initiated as part of PLACE, a project led by Cumbria Development Education Centre (CDEC) which will result in more young (and older) people feeling ownership and agency, connection and a sense of hope that we can all make a difference and do something positive for climate and nature recovery.

The aim of the inaugural Cumbria Wild Watch in 2024 was to test the concept, specifically in the Westmorland & Furness area which is the setting for PLACE, of a large-scale community science project, looking at engagement and training resources and training as well as uptake and interest from the schools and communities invited to take part. More data are urgently needed to inform biodiversity decision making across the county but most people are unaware of the role they can play in contributing wildlife observations to local environment record centres. There is also a need to develop new recorders with expertise in different taxonomic groups. As such, Cumbria Wild Watch seeks to achieve some long-term objectives:

- Provide an opportunity for individuals, groups and communities to take ownership of the concept to run their own events and make a positive change for biodiversity in their gardens, green spaces or locals areas. Events will help cement local cohesion, be engaging and educational, and showcase how small actions can contribute to something much bigger;
- Demonstrate that contributing to nature recovery is something that everyone can do without any financial or time obligations: one record can take seconds to make using a free app and yet will be a significant component in a county-wide database of similar observations. There is no need to make a huge effort and can be done from a comfy chair with a cup of tea!
- Generate new biological records to help better understand biodiversity across Cumbria; and,
- Act as a gateway for new recorders.

Working closely with PLACE partners to identify opportunities to develop and promote the concept, the pilot Cumbria Wild Watch sought to obtain 1,000 new records, engage new recorders, encourage schools to take part and identify the appetite for future Cumbria Wild Watches. This report provides a summary of the pilot – from first steps to records obtained – and makes suggestions for future development of the concept.

Approach

Taking inspiration from the RSPB's hugely successful Big Garden Birdwatch which started as a school-based engagement exercise in the 1970s and has now grown to be the largest citizen science project in the UK, Cumbria Wild Watch provides a simple framework to encourage participation in biological data gathering.

The goal was to keep the approach as simple as possible to try and encourage as wide a participation as possible. Recording can take place anywhere – gardens, countryside, coast, farms etc. It can be at one place or as part of a walk to obtain geographically different records. An hour was suggested as an ideal time to record but participants could spend as little as ten minutes to every day of the event. Cultivated plants could be recorded where there was uncertainty concerning what is a native species but livestock, pets and other people were specifically excluded from the survey.

Participants were encouraged to use the free and extensively used iNaturalist app to record their observations. A project was set up to allow people to engage with the wider Watch and see what was being recorded across the county: this iNaturalist project picked up records made in the county automatically and did not require participants to actively join the Watch so removing another barrier to active participation. The app includes an element of gamification, with rankings for those recording the most observations and species. However, use of the app wasn't a requirement for participation in Cumbria Wild Watch, recognising that some people prefer not to use their phones to record and that there are safeguarding issues for schools and others working with young people. Other approaches were also provided, including an online submission form and a downloadable spreadsheet available from the CBDC website. Some also recorded using another app, iRecord, and while information was downloaded from this site, it wasn't clear whether these records were part of the Watch or just happened to coincide.

Involvement

In the run-up to the event, sessions were planned, in-person and online, with different groups to engage them with Cumbria Wild Watch and provide them with the tools and techniques to arrange an event or recording session during the June weekend. Resources were prepared to help different audiences to navigate through the world of biological recording, with particular resources for schools (see: <https://www.cbdc.org.uk/get-involved/cumbria-wild-watch/>). An emphasis was placed on those new to recording and hence the 'gateway' recording app, iNaturalist.

Being the first time that the Watch was run, there were different strands to explore including understanding levels of awareness regarding recording, levels of natural history knowledge and ID skills, guidance for recording using different apps, and tools to allow participants to take ownership of the event to integrate into other activities and events. Through running an in-person workshop and online recorded webinar, the message did reach teachers and school groups, other community groups and individuals. Lessons have been learned for future iterations of the event, as described below.

The event was planned for the last weekend in June, timed to avoid many other surveying schemes but to maximise summer-time recording. Running across the

Thursday and Friday allowed schools to take part with the weekend then permitting wider engagement, particularly students inspiring their families to take part.

Publicity

CDEC provided much of the publicity for the event to the core target group of schools and young people in Westmorland & Furness, and organised the in-person training session at Abbott Hall in Kendal as well as the webinar aimed at teachers. Press releases, talks to other community groups including Cumbria in Bloom, website blogs and social media posts all helped to raise the profile of the event but were done in a more ad hoc approach to ascertain the level of potential engagement across the county. Nevertheless, this resulted in a number of news stories on local TV news and printed news outlets which can be built on for future events (Appendix 1).

Results

Engagement

iNaturalist proved to be the most popular of the recording tools available, reflecting the advice given in promotion materials, resource packs, and in training sessions (Figure 1). A total of 113 recorders used the iNaturalist app: over half of these recorders recorded fewer than two observations. Approximately 50 further recorders used other recording formats including submission directly to CBDC or via the iRecord app. A number of recorders used different approaches and where this is obvious from their names, have only been counted once in the total engagement count. Overall, around 163 people recorded wildlife observations as part of Cumbria Wild Watch.



Figure 1: The iNaturalist Cumbria Wild Watch project page.

Most of the records came from a relatively small groups of recorders, all of whom were established recorders in Cumbria. A small number of new recorders (<20) took part in the survey and there were additional small numbers of records from recorders (around 40) who have been recording before but not extensively. From the results submitted directly to CBDC and via the apps, it does not look like many schools took part in the survey but this might be obscured by the way that the information was collected and some of the safeguarding considerations suggested when using the iNaturalist app. It is also unclear whether the results were submitted by one person on behalf of a group or

as part of an event. Only one event was known about: a CBDC Recording Day at Bassenthwaite Lake with the Lake District National Park Authority on 29th June which was attended by eight recorders (including four new recorders) and generated 412 records.

Most of the records were submitted on the Saturday (1,003 records) and Sunday (487 records) with Thursday (330 records) and Friday (349 records) showing a steady increase towards the weekend. A small amount of moth records (33 records) were collected over night from 30th June to 1st July. Figure 2 shows the distribution by date and it is apparent from the distribution of dots that most of the Thursday/Friday records took place in the Westmorland & Furness area which was the focus of school publicity about the Watch. A closer analysis of the map, however, does not show any obvious link to any school site.

Records

Around 2,500 records were originally downloaded from the different apps and submission pathways. Most of these records (over 1,300 records) came through the iNaturalist Cumbria Wild Watch project with a further >800 records from the iRecord app. The remaining records (>300 records) were sent to CBDC via one of the CBDC submission approaches. This resulted in some duplication of records (as iNaturalist feeds into iRecord and some recorders sent their iNaturalist records to CBDC). Duplication is considered to have occurred when species, date, location and recorder name are identical in two separate records. Such duplications have been removed wherever possible but it is possible that one or two remain in the results due to slight differences in grid reference detail.

Once duplicated records were removed, a total of 2,246 records were collected across the four days of CWW. Some of the records collected via iNaturalist were blank (except for location, date and recorder name) and it is not possible to go through each of these to identify the reason for the absence of species data: as such, these records have been excluded from further analysis, despite several of them being from first (and only) time recorders. Once the blank entries are removed, 2,207 records were obtained, more than double the goal of 1,000 records. A few more records were excluded due to uncertainty on their identification or because they were for a species we had specifically excluded (such as sheep).

Of these records, most were for plants (1,019 records). Invertebrate groups came next, with insects (865 records) by far the most dominant invertebrate group, particularly moths (>300 records). Other invertebrates included slugs and snails (around 30 records) and spiders/arachnids (36 records). There were 156 bird records while the remaining records include mammals and fungi (around 30 records each) and much smaller numbers of records for bryophytes, reptiles and amphibians. An interactive map is available at this link: https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=1h1nmDLHdD_a9CEZGKcAw8aAdPnAQG68&usp=sharing.

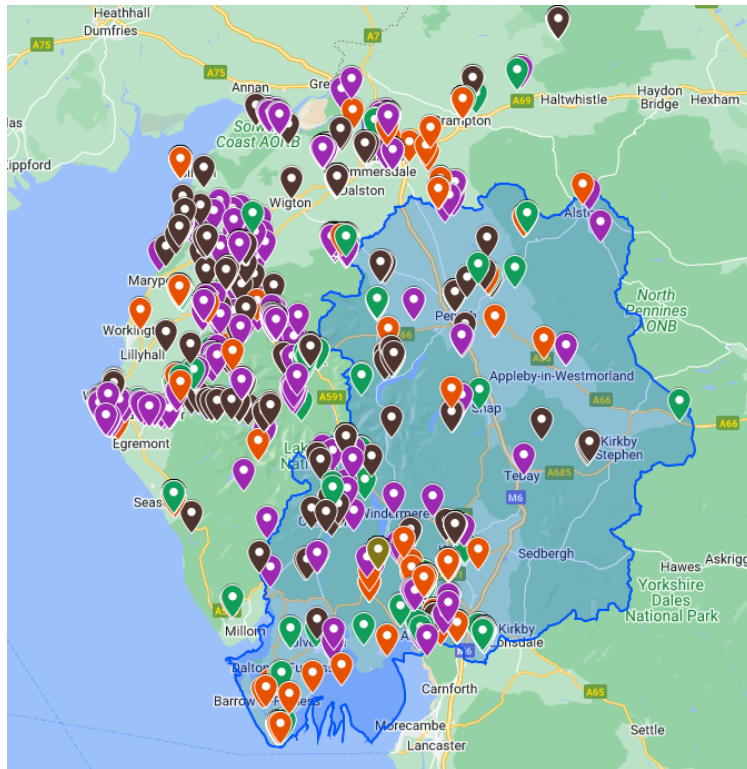


Figure 2: Records shown across Cumbria (Westmorland & Furness shown in blue) with purple and brown representing Saturday and Sunday respectively and green and orange the preceding Thursday and Friday.

The dominance of plant records might reflect the prevailing weather conditions at the time of the Watch, with low number of invertebrates generally seen across the four days. Butterflies in particular were particularly poorly recorded but two notable species, Northern Brown Angus (*Aricia artaxerxes*) and Mountain Ringlet (*Erebia epiphron*), were recorded during the Watch. Most other species recorded were relatively common species with Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*) and Hedge Woundwort (*Stachys sylvatica*) being the most recorded via iNaturalist with plants being dominated by plants in flower. Wind and rain prevented the observation of many bird species which would otherwise have been more widely seen. Despite the weather related issues, the species recorded provide much needed observations of species that are often over-looked in favour of rarer sightings but are essential to provide a baseline of all species across Cumbria – common and rare alike.

Around half of the records collected can be collated into the CBDC database to inform biodiversity decision making across Cumbria. The other half are excluded mostly due to iNaturalist licencing issues (which can be reset in future so might become available to CBDC over time) but there were some data quality issues such as unclear species with no supporting information, and vague recorder names (a record must have a recognised name as a recorder and not a social media handle/username).

Conclusions

While Cumbria Wild Watch achieved the aim of 1,000 species records over a four-day period, levels of engagement can be considered to be low with fewer than 200 individuals taking part across the county. iNaturalist records across Cumbria for the weekends either side of Cumbria Wild Watch show that around 600 records were obtained over a similar four-day period from 83-107 recorders: this falls to around 400-500 records for around 85 recorders across other summer weekend periods. Hence, Cumbria Wild Watch can be assumed to have doubled the number of records that would usually have been achieved but with only a very marginal increase in the number of people who would be expected to engage. Although numbers submitting directly to CBDC were smaller (300 records from five recorders), this was higher than would usually be expected for this approach. Overall, it can be considered that while there was engagement and interest in publicity and events before the survey weekend, this didn't result in participation in Cumbria Wild Watch.

A feedback form has been created and posted on the CBDC website, with links shared widely via the CBDC newsletter and with PLACE partners, to better assess reasons for lack of engagement in the event. Reasons could be lack of suitable resources to support participation, low levels of interest in schools and other organisations, poor weather putting people off or simply forgetting to take part! Having a better understanding of reasons for not engaging in Cumbria Wild Watch will allow future events to be better supported and publicised.

It is important to note that the decision was taken this first year to keep general publicity relatively low key to establish a baseline for engagement, to allow for organic growth of the concept and to concentrate on school and young people engagement. The focus was very much aimed at schools in the Westmorland & Furness Council area, with CDEC and other PLACE project partners leading on school engagement and organising an in-person workshop at Abbott Hall in Kendal in May and an online webinar for teachers in June. CBDC introduced Cumbria Wild Watch to the wider Cumbria recording community via a Cumbria Recorders' Conference presentation, talks to local interest groups such as Cumbria in Bloom and Cumbria Beekeepers Association, and press releases (one in April organised by Cumbria in Bloom which led to an appearance on local ITV news and another a week before Cumbria Wild Watch which led to a couple of local radio interviews and coverage in local newspapers (see Appendix 1 for details)). The next Cumbria Wild Watch will need a communications strategy and plan to ensure that publicity for the event is increased for 2025.

There does appear to be interest in running an annual Cumbria Wild Watch as a means of increasing engagement with wildlife and the natural environment across Cumbria. From a CBDC perspective, it offers a major gateway to encouraging new and improved wildlife recording across the county and can easily be linked to other initiatives run by organisations and groups across the county. As such, the aim is to run Cumbria Wild Watch in 2025 with increased engagement and participation.

APPENDIX 1

Cumbria Wild Watch – publicity, marketing and pre-Watch engagement approaches.

Scheme	Event/outcome	Date
Talk	Cumbria in Bloom AGM at Threlkeld – guest speaker	14 November 2023
Talk	Ambleside Natural History Society – guest speaker	08 February 2024
Talk	Carlisle Beekeepers' Association – guest speaker	February 2024
Conference presentation	Cumbria Recorders' Conference, Newbiggin near Penrith	24 February 2024
Press release	Press release by Cumbria in Bloom resulted in press coverage: - Cumbria in Blooms events listing - <i>People in Cumbria encouraged to record wildlife this summer</i> , News & Star (The Cumberland News) - ITV Border News interview – lunchtime, evening and late slot to raise profile of Cumbria Wild Watch	08 March 2024 12 March 2024
Workshop	Workshop at Abbot Hall, Kendal for young people (expanded to anyone interested)	30 May 2024
Webinar	Aimed at teachers and teaching support, providing an overview of Cumbria Wild Watch	06 June 2024
Webinar	Aimed at farmers and farming groups: an introduction to recording and Cumbria Wild Watch	27 June 2024
Press release	Sent to all media outlets in Cumbria. Resulted in: - <i>Cumbria Wildlife Watch: New survey to understand the region's natural environment</i> , ITVX News , 27 June 2024 - Interview with Heart and Smooth radio, 28 June 2024 - <i>Cumbrian wildlife to be recorded in first countywide event</i> , News & Star (The Cumberland News), 29 June 2024	Press release embargoed till 27 June 2024