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COUNTRYSIDE RANGERS

PART OF HIGHLIFE HIGHLAND
COUNTRYSIDE SERVICES

Annual Review
2025/2026



FOR HELPING
THE ENVIRONMENT
WINNER 2026



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MEET THE RANGERS



Imogen Furlong
Head of Countryside
Services



Andy Summers
Senior Ranger (North
Highland)



Eilidh-Ann Phillips
Senior Ranger (South
Highland) & Bunkhouses



Paul Castle
North Sutherland and
Caithness Countryside
Ranger



Marcia O'Hara
Easter Ross and SE
Sutherland
Countryside Ranger



Kirsty Rosie
East Caithness
Countryside Ranger



Patti Bremner
East Caithness
Countryside Ranger



Katie Grant
Wester Ross
Countryside Ranger



Jenny Grant
Wester Ross
Countryside Ranger



John Orr
Inverness Area
Countryside Ranger



Saranne Bish
Badenoch, Strathspey
and Nairnshire
Countryside Ranger



Pam Allan
Torrin Bunkhouse
Warden (Skye)



Michelle Melville
Highland Heritage
Ranger (Lochaber
based)



Donald Mitchell
NW Sutherland
Countryside Ranger



Fiona MacLean
Lochaber Countryside
Ranger /Glennfinan
Bunkhouse Supervisor



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



People and Recognition

This year has been one of well-deserved recognition for both staff and projects. The HLH Ranger and Museum Services' joint Puddles to Ponds project won the 2026 Scottish Gold green apple environmental award, celebrating the project's contribution to nature-based education.

Pam Allan of Torrin Bunkhouse was recognised with the HLH icare Trading Company Staff Award for outstanding dedication and contribution. The Green Libraries and Rangers collaboration was also recognised at the High Life Highland Staff Awards, reflecting the strength of partnership working and creative approaches to connecting people with nature and the climate agenda.



John Orr, Saranne Bish and Fiona MacLean were recognised for their commitment at the HLH long service awards, highlighting the depth of experience and dedication we have within the team. The year also marked the retirement of Donald Mitchell after 25 years of valued service. Donald's long-standing commitment has made a lasting impact on both the team and the communities he worked with.

Together, these achievements and milestones reflect a passionate and dedicated team, whose work continues to make a meaningful difference across the Highlands.



It has been another positive and productive year for the Countryside Service, with 12,746 people taking part in ranger-led activities across the Highlands. Work with schools continues to be a real strength, with 3,746 children enjoying outdoor learning and opportunities to connect with nature. Community learning reached 7,708 participants, slightly lower than last year due to a temporary reduction in capacity, but still reflecting a strong appetite for events, workshops and opportunities to learn about culture and the natural environment. Volunteering with the service continues to grow, with 1,292 engagements, a leap of 50% on last year and showing the increasing enthusiasm of local people to get involved with our projects and make a difference.

Overall, the team delivered 1,176 educational sessions and events, with 18% delivered in partnership, highlighting the value of working collaboratively to reach more target communities.

This has also been a year of change and expansion. In February 2026, the Ben Nevis Visitor Centre joined the service to complement our bunkhouse visitor services, alongside a new name; The Countryside Service, to better reflect the breadth of work now delivered. Throughout the year, the team led and supported a range of inspiring projects, including Green Libraries, the Big Pollinator Count and the Starling project, alongside ongoing green health programmes and partnership work with Keep Scotland Beautiful to support Eco-Schools across the Highlands.

The service also brought people together through the Biodiversity Conference, delivered in partnership with Highland Council and Highland Environment Forum. We offered free activities during Mòd week in Lochaber, and reached wider audiences through appearances on BBC radio and television. This work shows how the service continues to help people enjoy, learn about and care for the Highland region.



Imogen Furlong
Head of Countryside Services

Photos L-R: Top: Pam Allan at the i-care staff awards; Patti Bremner, Fiona Presly, Pam Bradley, Ruan Peat at the i-care staff awards
Bottom L-R: Imogen Furlong and John Orr at long service awards; Eilidh-Ann Phillips presenting Donald Mitchell with his retirement cake; Lorna Cruickshank (HLH Museums) and Imogen Furlong at the Green Apple awards

Impact Report

How our Countryside Ranger Service improves lives for Highland residents

In Person Engagments

12,746

Digital Engagments

91,575

Customer Satisfaction Level

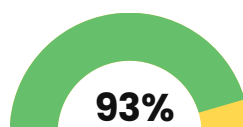


96%

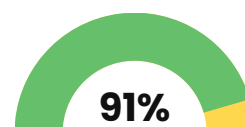
96% of customers reported our service **made life better** for them in the following ways:

- Learning new things **95%**
- Connecting with nature **85%**
- Meeting new people **74%**
- Improving mental wellbeing **67%**
- Feeling part of a community **64%**
- Encouraging physical activity **64%**
- Making a positive difference for nature **62%**

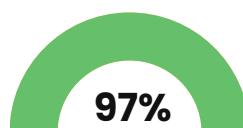
Customer Survey Results



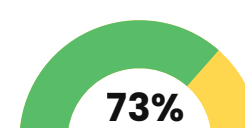
said we were excellent value



said we take excellent care



said we met or exceeded expectations



return visits

Customer Location

HIGHLAND
BASED

96%

REST OF
SCOTLAND

1.4%

REST OF
UK

1.3%

OVERSEAS

1.3%

Our 2025/26 customer survey shows the strong regional impact of the High Life Highland Ranger Service, with highly positive feedback from participants in our survey. 97% said events met or exceeded expectations, with most reporting they surpassed expectations. 91% rated our event delivery care as excellent. 96% felt the service offers good or excellent value, while 87% found it accessible. 96% reported improved wellbeing, learning, activity, and connection with nature and community. With 73% attending multiple events, the service clearly inspires loyalty. The service also fosters deeper engagement, with 38% of respondents taking part in volunteer activity.

Our digital engagement 'Nature Unveiled' publication reader survey shows strong engagement, with 100% of respondents valuing the blog for learning, enjoyment or connection to nature, and around 85–90% reporting it has already influenced or will influence action for nature. Almost all respondents have either already recommended the blog or are likely to, highlighting its role not just as an informative resource but as a trusted and motivating platform for advocating positive environmental engagement.



STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS



EDUCATION AND COUNTRYSIDE MANAGEMENT

Working in partnership with The Highland Council, High Life Highland Countryside Rangers deliver environmental education in schools and communities, contributing to Community Learning and Development (CLD) through inclusive informal learning opportunities, skills development, and engagement with the Highlands' natural, built, and cultural heritage. Rangers also support statutory duties by enhancing biodiversity, monitoring outdoor access, promoting the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, and delivering activities that improve health and wellbeing.

This partnership also enables us to build volunteer capacity for environmental stewardship and countryside management, operate bunkhouse accommodation for visiting groups, and provide nature and heritage-based learning opportunities across the Highlands. Through shared priorities and joint delivery, our work strengthens strategic outcomes for people, place, and nature while supporting learning, biodiversity, responsible access, and community resilience.



HEALTH & WELLBEING

Under the branding "Think Health Think Nature" the work of the Highland Green Health Partnership, , aims to encourage more use of the outdoors to promote outdoor physical activity, mental health improvement through nature connection and tackle health inequalities. Alongside key partners NHS Highland and Nature.Scot, the High Life Highland Ranger Service are both a strategic and delivery partner on the Green Health Action Plan. Our programmes promote health and wellbeing through active, nature-based experiences.



CLIMATE ACTION

High Life Highland Countryside Ranger service work strategically with both Highland Adapts, Highland Council Climate Change Team and Highlands and Islands Climate Hub to create a prosperous climate adapted Highland. Rangers support community climate action to create healthy eco-systems and promote nature positive solutions to climate change.



BIODIVERSITY

High Life Highland Countryside Rangers are an active partner in the Highland Environment Forum (HEF), which is supported by The Highland Council and Scottish Forestry. The Edinburgh Declaration (2021) outlines the shared commitments of the Scottish Government, local authorities, and international partners to address biodiversity loss over the coming decade. In the Highlands, these commitments are being implemented through the Highland Biodiversity Action Plan, where High Life Highland Countryside Rangers play a key role in the shaping and delivery of the plan and co-ordinating the Highland Biodiversity Conference.



BIODIVERSITY REPORT

Photo:
D.Haines - Starling on Seaweed



In 2025/26, the Countryside Service coordinated the second Highland-wide Big Pollinator Count, planting trees and undertaking gull, badger and bat surveys. A particular highlight was the Animal Homes Project, creating wildlife nesting and shelter sites with schools and communities. We also engaged people in recording and learning about declining starling populations through the Starling Project.

Other work included working with conservation agencies such as the Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust to monitor Highland slow worm, newt and lizard populations, and with Butterfly Conservation to help protect the rare small blue and dingy skipper butterflies. Together, these activities support The Highland Council's biodiversity reporting, strengthen local ecosystems and encourage community involvement in nature recovery. One volunteer commented:

“Ranger Paul Castle was well organised, friendly and inclusive at our recent volunteering event at Thurso Cemetery. His expertise is greatly valued by our volunteer group, Thurso Cemetery Friends, especially as the cemetery grounds are adjacent to an SSSI which is home to rare and endangered species.”

Another highlight of the year was bringing together people from across the Highlands for the Highland Biodiversity Conference, organised in partnership with Highland Council and the Highland Environment Forum. The event provided an opportunity for environmental charities, community groups and volunteers to share ideas, celebrate success and strengthen collaboration for nature recovery.



Volunteers Installing Bat Boxes



Imogen Furlong presenting at Highland Biodiversity Conference

VOLUNTEERING REPORT



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Photo:
Volunteers help to maintain beach access in Sutherland

Increase in volunteer
engagements

↑ **50%**

Volunteer involvement continued to grow strongly in 2025–26, with **1,292 volunteer engagements, an increase of exactly 50% from 861 the previous year.** Volunteering now represents **around 10%** of all Countryside Service engagement, demonstrating its importance to both delivery and community impact. This increased involvement also enables the service to achieve significantly more for nature, extending the reach of practical conservation work and supporting a wider range of environmental improvements across the Highlands.

- ✓ Beach Cleans
- ✓ Community Clean ups
- ✓ Footpath Maintenance
- ✓ Biodiversity monitoring
- ✓ Habitat Management
- ✓ Sessional delivery

A total of **58 volunteer sessions** were delivered, supporting activities such as footpath maintenance, litter picks and beach cleans, building and installing animal homes, and a Great Crested Newt survey workshop, and pollinator counts. The service has also seen a welcome increase in youth volunteering, with stronger links to the High Life Highland Leadership Programme, creating new pathways for young people to get involved in environmental action.

Feedback from volunteers continues to highlight the value and enjoyment of taking part. One volunteer shared: **“I really enjoy working parties with the ranger... I helped make an adder hibernaculum on one event and helped take sand off a boardwalk on another, also planted trees. It’s so varied and so much knowledge is given from any of the rangers... Can’t praise the service enough.”**

We are incredibly grateful to our volunteers; your time, energy and commitment help us achieve far more for nature and make a lasting difference across the Highlands.

Volunteer Photos: Clearing a Boadwalk, Young Volunteer with rubbish after beach clean, Installing a starling nest box and installing a rabbit proof fence.



COMMUNITY LEARNING REPORT

7708

Community Learner
engagements



Wildlife walk in West Lochaber



Introduction to bog habitats Wester Ross



Pollinator Count Event

In 2025/26, the High Life Highland Ranger Service delivered **7,708 community learning engagements**, an increase of **43%** from **5,382** in **2023/24**, though slightly down on last year as a result of reduced staff capacity.

Through 1,013 sessions, we have continued to provide a diverse programme of inclusive, place-based learning opportunities across the Highlands.. Participants enjoyed activities including wildlife walks, seashore safaris, fungi forays, pollinator surveys, nature-themed crafts, online talks and a variety of family events. In response to customer feedback, **we increased the number of weekend activities available, helping more people access our programme.**

We launched five additional library based nature clubs for children, bringing **the total to ten clubs across Highland communities**. Topics have ranged from whales and dolphins, garden birds and prehistoric wildlife to hands-on activities such as bug hunts, habitat creation and citizen science projects.

Partnership working remained central to delivery, **with 18% of sessions provided in collaboration with other organisations** and community groups. We also continued to work closely with High Life Highland Libraries to develop accessible cultural and natural heritage learning opportunities alongside our outdoor programme.

Feedback remained extremely positive, with one participant commenting:

"I can't think of any way to improve the service. It was a pleasant surprise to discover the wealth of activities available when I moved to the Highlands 4 years ago, and I haven't got bored with them yet!"

Our programme continues to help Highland communities learn, connect with nature and improve wellbeing.

Upcoming events can be found [here](#)

SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT REPORT

Pupils from Lochinver Primary School

3,756

Pupil engagements



In 2025/26, the Countryside Service engaged **3,746 school pupils through 155 sessions**, maintaining participation levels similar to the previous year and demonstrating the continued value of outdoor learning in Highland schools. Working this year in **partnership with Keep Scotland Beautiful**, Rangers supported and promoted the Eco-Schools programme, helping schools connect existing environmental activities with Eco-Schools themes such as biodiversity, climate, water and heritage. Feedback showed strong enthusiasm for sustainability learning and the practical, curriculum-linked approach delivered by Rangers.

A particular highlight was the Starling Project, where pupils learnt about and record one of Scotland's most familiar but declining bird species. STEM learning was further supported through partnership work with RHET, while targeted programmes with ASN pupils in Strontian helped ensure outdoor learning opportunities were accessible to all. Rangers also engaged pupils with local wildlife stories, including educational activities linked to a humpback whale sighting in Loch Broom. The Northern Pilgrims' Way Project delivered innovative school sessions that brought the history of medieval pilgrimage to life, engaging young people through interactive learning and local heritage.

These varied learning opportunities help young people explore biodiversity, climate change and local wildlife, while building a stronger connection with the natural environment and encouraging the next generation of environmental stewards.



CULTURE AND HERITAGE

Photo:
Participants take part
in a heritage activity on
a guided event

The Countryside Ranger Service continues to make an important contribution to celebrating and promoting the rich cultural heritage of the Highlands. During 2025/26, Rangers delivered a range of projects and events that connected people with local history, traditions and landscapes. A particular highlight was the Northern Pilgrims' Way Project, which brought the history of medieval pilgrimage to life through guided walks, school sessions and traditional craft activities. Working in partnership with the Northern Pilgrims' Way Group, Rangers helped local people discover historic sites, cultural traditions and the significance of this important heritage route.

The service also continues to support and promote Gaelic language and culture. In Lochaber, Rangers supported activities during the Royal National Mòd, delivering free family-friendly events that celebrated Gaelic through storytelling, nature, music and creativity. Alongside this, the team continued to run Gaelic and bilingual Bookbug sessions, helping young children and families engage with Gaelic language, culture and the natural environment in a fun and accessible way.

A dedicated Heritage Ranger in Lochaber delivered traditional and heritage-inspired craft sessions including woven buttons, slate etching, pewter casting, wet felting, candle making, soap making and beeswax hand cream workshops. These activities helped participants learn and preserve traditional skills, whilst providing opportunities for creativity, social connection and lifelong learning.

Combined with heritage walks on various subjects we offered online talks on the herring industry and Clava Cairns as well as digital storytelling through Nature Unveiled our online publication.

These activities help people explore the links between landscape, wildlife, history and culture. Together, this work strengthens people's sense of place, identity and belonging, ensuring that Highland heritage remains relevant, accessible and valued by future generations





Photo:
Participants take time
to look for cetaceans
with the ranger service

HEALTH AND WELLBEING REPORT

Supporting wellbeing through nature connection remains at the heart of the Countryside Service. During 2025/26, the team delivered over 1,000 publicly accessible sessions, providing opportunities for people of all ages and abilities to enjoy the outdoors. Activities ranged from short nature walks and family events to longer guided walks and conservation activities, while partnerships with local walking groups helped people deepen their connection with the natural world.

1,013

Public Activities
and Events
delivered

A particular highlight was the Highland Refugees Green/Blue Health Project, delivered in partnership with Highland Council Adult Learning. This project supported 88 Afghan refugees through hillwalking, beach visits and family outdoor activities designed to reduce isolation, improve wellbeing and build confidence. Participants reported feeling less stressed, more connected to their community and more confident exploring the Highland environment, demonstrating the value of nature-based activity in supporting people through major life transitions.

“The local rangers provide an excellent service... kind, encouraging, supportive and knowledgeable. They go above and beyond for all ages and stages of the community.”



Guided walk with the Ranger service

The team also expanded its successful Green Libraries partnership programme of events, delivering nature workshops through libraries and community venues across the Highlands. For those unable to attend in person, our blog “Nature Unveiled” and online talks provided opportunities to learn, stay connected and remain part of a wider community through digital engagement. Customer feedback reflects the *Five Ways to Wellbeing*. Activities help people connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and give back through volunteering and conservation projects. Overall, 96% of respondents reported that the service improved their lives.



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Ways you can support us

Join *highlife*

Joining High Life supports our charity work to improve lives and communities, membership also gives free access to gym and leisure facilities, plus numerous discount benefits. Support us and Join High Life today!



Book a break at our bunkhouse

Why not relax and book a short break at our bunkhouse in one of two iconic Highland locations: Torrin on Skye and Glenfinnan in Lochaber. Operated as a not-for-profit, any surplus benefits the charity. Enjoy a warm welcome from our wardens Pam and Fiona. Its the perfect getaway for groups or families. [Scan or click for more information.](#)

Subscribe

Discover **Nature Unveiled** our HLH Ranger online publication filled with fascinating stories, nature and heritage articles, and news from our dedicated team of Rangers. [Scan or click to read and pledge your support.](#)



Donate

Give a one off gift to the Ranger service to support our conservation, education, and community work in the Highlands. Help us protect wildlife and sustain this unique region's natural heritage for future generations. [Scan or click to donate now.](#)



Thank you



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HIGH LIFE HIGHLAND COUNTRYSIDE RANGER SERVICE

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