

Aberdeenshire Countryside Ranger goes European

Marr/Cairngorms National Park Countryside Ranger Helen Rowe, along with Balmoral Estates Ranger Glyn Jones had the opportunity to accompany two Cairngorms Junior Rangers – Hannah Scott from Alford and Robert Amphlett from Grantown - on a week-long European summer camp in July.

The Cairngorms National Park Authority coordinates a Junior Ranger scheme for Academy-aged pupils to participate in environmental activities led by different ranger services operating across the Park. After completing an initial week during the summer term, pupils can opt to attend follow up days, usually once a month at weekends, assisting rangers in their work. The hours they put in allow them to gain different levels of the John Muir Award and those who show commitment may be selected to go on a EUROPARC International Junior Ranger camp.

The EUROPARC Federation is an independent non-governmental body; its membership brings together organisations responsible for the management of most of Europe's protected areas, facilitating international co-operation to conserve our shared natural and cultural heritage. An important aspect of their work is the EUROPARC Junior Ranger Programme, supporting protecting areas in developing their own junior ranger schemes. An international camp hosted by a different protected area is held each summer, with funding from EUROPARC and participating parks.

This year's camp was hosted jointly by the Triglav National Park in Slovenia and the neighbouring Julian Prealps Nature Park in Italy, situated in the stunning limestone scenery of the Julian Alps with a rich flora and fauna. Junior rangers and their ranger mentors from protected areas in 12 countries were represented. After arriving tired on the first day after early starts and long journeys, everyone soon began to relax and mix. The weather also improved progressively from rain on arrival to hot sunshine by the end of the week!

An action-packed programme included hiking, cycling, museum/visitor centre tours, practical conservation tasks, visitor surveys and handicrafts. The overall theme of the week was interpretation – looking at how the parks communicate messages to visitors and their relevance to young people. As well as learning about the host parks, all junior rangers with support from mentors gave presentations on their own protected areas. It was interesting to compare different or similar approaches to countryside site and visitor management.

The junior rangers were a real credit to their own countries and many new friendships were made. It was an unforgettable experience for them, as well as for the rangers who accompanied them. Everybody was able to explore a fantastic area, observe its characteristic wildlife and hear first-hand from host park staff during excursions. It was also invaluable for enabling informal discussions among rangers with diverse roles from contrasting areas, but who share a common aim of engaging others in appreciating, understanding and conserving our environment.