

Breeze into the forest: Various forests

As part of the Forestry Commission England and Sport England 'Active Forests' programme a virtual focus group was undertaken in December 2022 with women involved in Breeze into the Forest. Five women participated who had undertaken Breeze rides at Delamere Forest, Haldon Forest and Channock Chase Forest.



Breeze into the forest

Breeze into the Forest is a programme of activity designed in partnership with British Cycling to deliver regular women-only led cycle rides on 12 of Forestry England's Active Forests sites. The rides are free to participants and led by a Ride Leadership Award level 1 qualified 'Breeze into the Forest Champion'. The women in the focus group had all participated in at least one Breeze into the Forest (BITF) ride and many had also participated in other Breeze rides outwith the forest. One of the women was a Breeze leader (not BITF).

Motivations to participate

Most of the women had been cycling for a number of years and one woman in particular was a very keen and active mountain biker. Another woman gained confidence from the Breeze road rides to feel able to then start going off road and mentioned it to two friends who got involved as well. A couple of the women stated that the BITF rides were for beginners and that they want to progress, go a bit further and have a bit more variety. A woman relatively new to mountain biking was motivated to improve skills, while another after years of road cycling wanted to try something different. One however, started with a BITF ride and then expanded to other road and off-road rides. The women found out about BITF in different ways through internet searches, a poster in the forest, or through the British Cycling Let's Ride website

Benefits of Breeze into the Forest

The women enjoyed riding with like-minded people, and the social side of the rides. The atmosphere of the BITF rides was said to be very welcoming and the leaders were said to be very encouraging and discussed other opportunities for rides - with cycling groups for example.

It was clear that gaining confidence and no one being left behind was critical and doing that in a women's group was thought to be important

I'm with you. I think, as a beginner, if it wasn't for Breeze I don't think I'd be doing any of the cycling I do now. In the early stages, because I wasn't very confident. I felt happier being with a group of women than I did with a mixed group, because there's a perception, if there's a mixed cycling group and there are men in it, you're going to be going fast.

Organised rides in forests were appreciated with a leader who knew the place, and once confidence had increased the women felt able to go off alone.

'I don't think I'd be cycling if I hadn't done that, to be honest, and gone on some of the Breeze rides to begin with. It gave me the structure to do it and the confidence.., and without that I really don't think I'd have done it'.

Benefits of Breeze into the forest

I found the leader...incredibly supportive about what you do and how you do it'. I just love being off-road, jumping, single track, roots and rocks.

I just love being in the fresh air of the forest, the smells of the trees, and I do like stopping and hugging a tree sometimes.

What I love about cycling is that you can see changing scenery far quicker than you can do walking. You can look over those hedges, look into the fields, ..and you can cover good geographies. You feel a sense of accomplishment when you've visited a certain place, got back home, increased your miles. I just really enjoy it, the fresh air and company.

Challenges and issues

The risks of road cycling were highlighted with fast traffic being a concern which could put women off and therefore options for off road cycling were identified as important. Stressing that BITF was trail riding rather than mountain biking was highlighted as some might be put off by the idea of mountain biking.

The Breeze leader was finding it difficult to get people to sign up for her road rides and was advised to aim them at beginners. However, finding the right balance of interest, variety for different abilities could be difficult, and sometimes participants cancelled at the last minute with little warning.

Breeze into the Forest has given the women a way to gain confidence to cycle off road as well as on roads, and all now cycled on both. Having women only rides was considered important and once confidence was gained the women were happy to join mixed groups. The fresh air and moving through the landscape was also much appreciated along with the opportunity for social interaction.

Funding: Sport England and Forestry Commission England

Website: <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/research/active-forest-programme-evaluation/>