

Forest Runner: Forest of Dean

As part of the Forestry Commission England and Sport England 'Active Forests' programme interviews were undertaken in November 2022 at the Forest of Dean with participants involved in the Forest Runner 10k. Twelve people participated in short interviews, individually or in groups including eight women and four men. Their ages ranged from 30s to late sixties. The run was held on a Sunday morning and the weather was sunny with autumn colours still showing.



Forest Runner

Forest Runner is a 5 and 10k running series held at a number of Forestry England (FE) sites. Both runs sold out. The run took place on a sunny cold morning in November. A group of 'This Mum Runs' women participated in the run and a video FE created. Black Trail Runners participants were given an allocation of tickets to participate in the run after its co-founder took part in an FE video encouraging diversity and trail running in the forest ([Forest Runner 2022 | Forestry England](#))

Motivations to participate

Most of the interviewees were runners, either long standing or getting back into running since Covid, all had done the 10k run. Two interviewees were in their late sixties and enjoyed trail running as *'it doesn't damage your legs or your hips and the older you get the long it takes to recover'* (from injury). The woman in her late sixties ran with her two sons stating: *'they don't mind me tagging along'*. Three women in a group of five were from Norway and had come over for a long weekend to visit friends and do the run. One man was aiming to run 365 miles in the year but was getting behind as his family has recently increased.

Benefits of Forest Runner

The forest run was described as beautiful, scenic, gorgeous, with lovely autumn colours helped by the run taking place on a sunny day. The route was also mentioned by many of the interviewees due to its variety and interest (see blue box box).

Representation of ethnic groups in the outdoors

A group of runners participated through their involvement in Black Trail Runners (BTR) which was set up in 2020 to increase diversity in the use of the outdoors. One person had travelled for about 1.5 hours to participate and outlined the challenge: *'Not many ethnic minorities here so for me to come by myself is a bit off putting as you are by yourself and there is no one around (like you). They are friendly but there is often no one of colour around so it's good BTR came down today as I would not have come ordinarily'*.

One of the co-founders of BTRs outlined how she had run for a number of years and not seen other people of colour, and wanted to see if others were interested in trail running – they were. BTR now has about two thousand members, and it includes White members who want to see more diversity in the outdoors.

'You want to see you belong and it makes a massive difference when you come somewhere like this and you look around and see other people like you. You feel I belong and you have a sense of identity. As a person of colour especially living in rural spaces you become so used to being the only one.. that 'othering' is part of your everyday lived experience. So, when you see others, you're wow, as it's so rare'.

Benefits of Forest Runner in the Forest of Dean

'It's gorgeous, beautiful and the colours it feels quite magical. It's such a nice run with people of all abilities, it's friendly and positive' (Woman, 30s)

'It was a really well-chosen route, it was beautiful, I think the mix of wide paths and narrow routes through the trees was really good' (Woman 30s)

'Trail running is more scenic, I love the outdoors you see nature, wildlife and there isn't that pressure to get a personal best as you're in the hills' (Male 40s Black Trail Runners)

'I started running at 16, I am now sixty-nine I will keep going while I can. I love the forest trails, it's the scenery and it's a beautiful day' (Woman, late 60s)

Barriers to participation

The barriers to wider participation were seen as financial, access to transport, skills, concerns about safety and a lack of a community to run with. The BTR are addressing some of these issues and outlined that it is not enough that everyone is welcome, there needs to be better representation of more diverse groups. The BTR want to *'normalise more diversity in the outdoors'*.

The Forest Runner event was very much appreciated in terms of the scenic forest, and interesting and challenging route. FE reached out to encourage participants from the BTR to attend and they outlined the challenges and barriers faced by ethnic minority groups in accessing and enjoying trail running in the outdoors. They outlined that some of their members would never have been to such places before due to living in urban environments.

Funding: Sport England and Forestry Commission England

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