

## Parkrun runners: Bedgebury Forest

As part of the Forestry England and Sport England 'Active Forests' programme a focus group was undertaken virtually on three occasions in 2021 (March, July, November) to explore changes to people's activities and forest access during the various Covid-19 restrictions from lockdown through to various stages of restrictions easing. 5-9 people participated in each focus group. Five men and four women.



### March 2021

At this time in England people could exercise outdoors with people from their own household or with one other person. The social connections people made through parkrun were very much missed as some of these had developed into long-term friendships:

*We met a lovely couple, and we were actually witnesses at their wedding (Male, Bedgebury)*

Participants talked about the quality of the trails on site after recent wet weather and how they were not as muddy as many other places they visited. They also welcomed the new trails that supported running different and varied routes safely through the forest.

*Bedgebury, and I think this is to do with the Active Forests group, has got lots of different routes you can do and different coloured arrows, that makes it again much more accessible for people who want to go there and explore it in a safe way. (Female, Bedgebury)*

### July 2021

Many Covid restrictions had lifted in July and up to thirty people could meet up outdoors. The participants felt that things were a bit more normal, and they were very much looking forward to parkrun restarting. Most of them had been involved in a trial parkrun event in the forest as the route had been changed and there were new Covid procedures to follow to support safety and social distancing.

Notice of nature was still greater than it had been pre-Covid with participants talking about the seasons, trees, and flowers with a specific mention of orchids.

One person had changed their approach to how they volunteered at parkrun and were taking much more notice of nature:

*As a marshall, I used to like to walk quite a distance to my marshalling point and, initially, I used to put headphones on and listen to the radio, but I find that I don't do that anymore because I prefer listening to the birds, smelling the pine trees, and everything else when I'm walking to my marshalling point, a nice 20 minutes of peace and calm (Male, Bedgebury)*

A few talked about getting, or were thinking of getting, Forestry England membership as they were now visiting the site more often.

*...seriously, there was no point paying £10 to park and just have a run, and so it wasn't much used by runners [membership]. What happened with parkrun is that there was a reduced fee, but I think what actually happened was that people thought I'm coming every week to the parkrun so I might as well get a membership. (Male, Bedgebury)*

## November 2021

In November there were no restrictions in place but discussions about a new Covid-19 variant were starting to take place. A significant change at Bedgebury was the creation of an informal running group that was started by people interested in parkrun who wanted to run on site outside of parkrun Saturdays.

*X and X are part of our Monday running group, and that wasn't operating before parkrun started. So that is a positive, we are going there more than once a week... (Female, Bedgebury group)*

*A small group (8-10). It's just an informal group, mainly people that go to parkrun. I don't know, word has got around that a few of us meet on a Monday morning and that we just do a run together. There's no pressure, no timing, and we usually do between 5km and 10km, depending on what everybody feels, and so it's just very relaxed. (Female, Bedgebury group)*

Others talked about changes in their weight, the impact of life stage on running, and sometimes changing habits with one person visiting Bedgebury much less due to joining a different running group. Most stated that they were as active as they had been previously with a couple being more active now parkrun had restarted, or because they had joined the Monday running group.

There was optimism amongst the group about parkrun being a low-risk activity as it was out in the fresh air. They were very happy about the re-start of parkrun and discussed the new route that had been created. All were trying to maintain their exercise levels and appreciated being able to do this in an attractive forest.

**Funding:** Sport England and Forestry Commission England

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