



Carol Coad on the Little Sugarloaf, Co Wicklow, with the Greater Sugarloaf behind

CAROL COAD, WICKLOW'S RRO

Helen Lawless interviews Carol Coad, who works as Rural Recreation Officer for County Wicklow

■ **Carol, some readers won't be familiar with the term 'Rural Recreation Officer'. Can you tell us a bit about your role?**

A key part of the Rural Recreation Officer's (RRO's) role is to manage the **Walks Scheme**, the scheme under which landowners are paid to maintain their section of a waymarked trail. The RRO is like an independent broker representing the private landowners, while working in partnership with other organisations such as the county council or the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

■ **How did your own involvement in outdoor activities begin?**

When I was young, I didn't know anyone who was into outdoor activities. I was introduced to orienteering by a teacher in school and I loved it. I went on to do an orienteering training course with the late **Ernie Lawrence** (whose brother **Leslie** was one of the owners of **Great Outdoors**) and then to Bangor University in North Wales to study sports science. That was a brilliant experience; I got to do my Mountain Leader Award, my Single Pitch Award for climbing, plus Level 2 in kayaking. During the summers, I worked at the Scout Centre at Lough Dan.

■ **You were a participant in Mountaineering Ireland's Millennium Youth Initiative. What was that like?**

It was amazing, just amazing. There were eighteen of us in all, nine from Northern Ireland and nine from the south. The social side was incredible. In the mid-1990s, there wasn't much contact between north and south. Great friendships were made through the programme. Many of us are still in contact.

The **Millennium Youth Initiative** provided an eye-opening experience of mountaineering. It was extraordinary. We got to hike and climb in places that you read about in books. It was all due to the generosity of volunteers like **Dawson Stelfox, Frank Nugent, Orla Prendergast** and others, giving their time to pass on their love of the mountains. It gave us such a sense of achievement and adventure, and a belief in what each of us could do, on and off the mountains.

Carol's Top Tips

- Be nice, say hi
- Remember that someone owns the land
- Pick up rubbish
- Support the businesses in upland areas
- Communication is key

It's not easy to get into mountaineering. I'm very grateful to the people who gave of their time to let us in through the door. Being part of the Millennium Youth Initiative was truly inspiring. I feel a sense of responsibility to give back, by opening the door for others, which feeds back into my role as an RRO.

■ **You started in your current role just at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, at a time when there was a huge upsurge in outdoor activity. That must have been interesting?**

Over the last year, so many people have realised the benefits of spending time outdoors, particularly in how it keeps your mental health robust. It's great to see young people going out, whether hiking or just sitting and chatting.

There have been challenges too – cars clogging up narrow roads and people leaving their rubbish behind. Having an RRO in the county provides a point of contact when issues arise. There are only thirteen RROs currently, so some counties have no RRO. In a county like Wicklow which supports so much recreation activity, it can be an incredibly busy role.

■ **Does much of your work relate to the Wicklow Way?**

Yes – it's a huge part of my job, as more than 75% of the landowners in Wicklow on

the Walks Scheme own stretches of the Wicklow Way. It's a wonderful route. Really, it's the jewel in Wicklow's crown. The Wicklow Way is managed by a committee comprising the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Coillte, myself, the Dublin Mountains Partnership and Mountain Meitheal.

There are always ongoing upgrade projects along the route, some financed through the group and some through the **Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme**. We have replaced the trailhead signage throughout the route this year and upgraded a section opposite Luggala to take the route off the road at that bad corner.

In the longer term, I see the Wicklow Way as the spine of Wicklow recreation, with villages, experiences and trails linking to it along the way.

■ **Are there ways in which walkers and climbers can support your work?**

One of my motivations is to make outdoor recreation work better for local people. The simplest things can make a huge difference - for instance, be nice, say hi. Without that, it can feel like an 'us and them' situation between locals and those who visit upland areas for recreation. It shouldn't be like that.

Remember that someone owns the land you're walking on - if you meet a farmer, say hello and thank them.

Pick up rubbish. There's no bin collection service in the hills. It's up to us to keep the place the way we'd like to find it.

Support the businesses in upland areas - spend a tenner every time you're out. It's a way of giving back to the places we get

so much benefit from.

Communication is key - we need to get these messages across in a way that's relevant to people.

■ **Are there lessons from the Covid period?**

Covid has shown that we have different tiers of users in the outdoors. Hiking has become a mainstream activity. While many of the new hikers may not be properly kitted out, they're fit, young and having a good time. We should welcome them with open arms, and encourage them to develop their skills and understanding.

We need to do that in an up-to-date and user-friendly way. For example, we've just digitised all the official trails in Wicklow and some of the more straightforward unofficial routes too. They will be shared on an app and via the **Visit Wicklow** website. It will make these routes more accessible to people.

It's not all young people. I have many friends who have come to the outdoors in the last few years and, for the first time, they feel they've found their tribe. People are recognising the physical and mental benefits of outdoor activities. The healing power of the mountains is phenomenal.

We're not on top of the unauthorised camping yet, like what we saw in Glenmalure and at Lough Dan last year. That's perhaps beyond education for an immediate effect. We need to plan properly so that responsible recreation is part of every child's education. We also need the Gardaí, landowning agencies and the local authorities to work together with local communities to tackle and prevent the destruction of our most beautiful areas.



Walkers on the Sugarloaf Way

■ **You seem to have a good understanding of the community perspective on outdoor recreation?**

I grew up and lived in the Glenmalure valley for many years. We are in Clara Vale now, so I can see this from different angles. The people living in locations like this have to put up with a lot. We need to support them. That's going to be particularly important this summer.

■ **Is there something you've done in your time as RRO that you're really proud of?**

It might seem small, but it's important. I got the contract for two new entrants into the Walks Scheme changed to include a **payment for picking up litter** - something which they should never have to do - but they do! I'm hoping this will be included as an option for other landowners on the scheme when they renew their contracts.

■ **Any final thoughts?**

Being a Rural Recreation Officer is the best job in the world; the outdoors means so much to so many people. There's isn't a handrail for getting into the outdoors. I'd like to change that so it's easy for more people to enjoy these opportunities.

➡ To get in touch with Carol, email ccoad@wicklowpartnership.ie or follow **Wicklow Trails** on Facebook or Instagram. Mountaineering Ireland encourages its clubs to make contact with the Rural Recreation Officer in their area. Contact details for Ireland's other Rural Recreation Officers can be found on www.bit.ly/RROnetwork.

Mountaineering Ireland recently participated in a review of the Rural Recreation Officer programme and has recommended that the programme be extended to cover all counties ■

The Wicklow Way with distant view of the Great Sugar Loaf

