Leading the way

After the Ramblers’ first ever survey of its walk leaders, Andrew McCloy uncovers the huge range of walks laid on by the charity each year and finds out what it takes to be a great walk leader.

Led walks. They’re probably what the Ramblers is most renowned for, and what the chief executive, Tom Franklin, calls the “jewel in our crown”. Each year, Ramblers groups organise more than 28,000 walks across Britain, yet it’s only recently that the charity has started to try to co-ordinate and better support the huge number of volunteers involved as walk leaders.

It follows a report commissioned by the Ramblers in 2006 – known as the Barton report – which looked in depth at the led-walks programme across England, Scotland and Wales, praising it as ‘a splendid institution that owes much of its success to the unstinting work of leaders and groups’. However, like any institution, the Ramblers needs to move with the times, and the study concluded that there were areas that could be tightened up to ensure the led walks remained popular and could cope with future demands.

Many of the recommendations from the Barton report have already been carried out. A led-walks officer, Karen Inkster, was taken on, which meant, for the first time, groups and leaders had a named point of contact. She immediately began fielding a whole host of queries, from safety concerns and insurance, to training and advice on good practice. Detailed information when incidents occur is now being recorded and collated, and, earlier this year, a Walk Leaders Group Survey was conducted.

“As a result, we’re able to get a much more accurate picture of what is actually happening,” explains Karen. “For instance, we can now say with some confidence that almost 15,000 people lead walks for the Ramblers, which equates to almost one in 10 members. This underlines just what a fantastic asset volunteers are to the charity and one of which we should be extremely proud.”

Although the results of the survey are still being analysed, the breakdown of where people lead walks is revealing. The majority lead in lowland, easy terrain, but a surprising number do lead walks in more challenging places. Over 500 people lead walks over extreme terrain, which includes steep ground, scree and exposed ridges – and more than half of them said these walks were done in wintry conditions. This tremendous range requires walk leaders with a great many different skills, confirming what remarkable people the Ramblers has out there. So who exactly are these leaders and why do they do it?

Passionate leaders

Terry Howard chairs Sheffield Ramblers and has led walks in both urban and rural settings for many years. For him, it’s all about sharing his experiences and his knowledge with others and giving purpose to a walk. “I can get a buzz on even the shortest walk,” says Terry, “if, afterwards, people say they’ve really enjoyed themselves or they’ve learned something new.

“There can be a great sense of collective achievement when you’re in a group, and I...
go out of my way to bring in anecdotes and stories to make the walks fun.”

These sentiments are shared by Olga Macfadyen, who leads walks for Edinburgh Ramblers, which she also chairs. Olga felt compelled to get involved and really enjoys leading: “I get so much pleasure from walking with the Ramblers that I felt I wanted to put something back. It comes naturally to me, I suppose, taking people to new and stimulating places.”

To lead walks in upland terrain, including many of her routes in Scotland, Olga says “you simply must have the technical know-how – navigation, planning, route timings, weather knowledge, and so on.” But a good walk leader also has to have people skills. “I make a point of speaking to everyone, so they feel welcome and included. “Depending on who’s taking part, I find I have to impose myself at the beginning, so the right pace is set from the start and the needs of everyone in the group are met,” says Olga. This is especially true of those at the back, since the pace of the group is ultimately set by its slowest member.

Effective communication is something that Terry Howard also believes is fundamental. “You’ve got to have confidence in your own ability to make decisions,” he says, “and not only be able to explain them but also be reasonable with people. It’s a question of striking the right balance and doing what’s best for the whole group. If heavy rain has set in, I’m perfectly prepared to change our plans and leave Kinder Scout for another day. Most people seem to understand that!”

Trained for extremes

While the Barton report was positive about the quality of both the Ramblers’ walks and its leaders, it also underlined the need for the Ramblers to carry out proper risk management and make sure that the led-walks programme meets wider expectations and demands. And it’s not just a question of bowing to the nanny state.

“The day before:

- Check the weather forecast
- Check personal gear

On the day:

- At the start:
  - Be prepared to change the route
  - Check people are adequately equipped and count numbers
  - Be welcoming and personable
  - Outline the walk ahead and introduce any backmarkers

- On the walk:
  - Stay at the front and communicate with the backmarker
  - Set a realistic pace, check your route, be alert to potential problems
  - Chat to newcomers and highlight points of interest
  - Check numbers throughout the walk

- After the walk:
  - Final head count
  - Report any incidents

For a full version of this checklist and more advice on leading walks for your Ramblers group, visit www.ramblers.org.uk/volunteer

“Training is one way to actually encourage people to take up leadership in the first place,” explains Peter Jones, Lake District Ramblers’ area secretary. “It’s also great to learn from more experienced leaders, so we operate a mentoring system on walks which has proved really effective.”

Leading in somewhere like the Lake District demands high standards – not least an ability to navigate in all conditions. “But,” says Peter, “participants on walks must also be aware of their own capabilities and make responsible, common-sense decisions themselves. Some simply don’t realise that a 15-mile walk on the Lake District fells is not the same as 15 miles over lowland terrain in the south. We’ve
Learn from an experienced leader. Right: always be aware of your own capabilities. Below: taking in the view

Olga Macfadyen, Edinburgh Ramblers

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learned to be wary of visiting walkers who can overestimate their own ability.”

This view is echoed by Edinburgh Ramblers, whose group-walks programme covers everything from leisurely strolls to serious mountain adventures over remote Munros. “Whether you’re participating in or leading walks in the hills, you must have the correct skills and you must be able to make the right decisions when it matters,” says Olga Macfadyen.

Indeed, feedback from Ramblers walk leaders in the recent survey suggests that many volunteers do indeed welcome the opportunity for expert guidance. Sheffield Ramblers have discovered that when they put on occasional training sessions for aspiring leaders, up to 50 members turn up, all keen to explore the issues and skills involved. Karen Inkster has also revised the popular Walk Leaders Checklist to include information on treating injuries and what action to take following an incident, after volunteers specifically asked for these details.

Karen has also had contact with organisations like Girlguiding UK, which, over the last decade, has developed a carefully structured training package attuned to the needs of its volunteers. Rolling out a similar tailored training scheme for the Ramblers 15,000 walk leaders would, however, take some time to introduce.

“Today’s public assume that Ramblers walk leaders, like those of the Guides, hold some sort of qualification or accreditation,” says Karen. “And as we look to grow the organisation, we do need to be able to meet this public expectation as well as that of our volunteers. The next generation of Ramblers walk leaders almost expect training to be offered. “We’re not saying walk leaders are currently doing things wrong – far from it. It’s just that as Britain’s walking charity, we have to recognise the importance of providing safe, welcoming walks that are attractive to all kinds of people.”