



Elliot Montieth plays a vital role in recording birds at Port Sunlight in the Wirral, according to Anne Litherland.

Socially isolated as a young teenager as a result of his Asperger syndrome, Elliot went on an RSPB conservation course. "I met all these young people fascinated by nature," he says, "when I'd thought it was just me."



WHAT IS AUTISM?

It is described by the National Autistic Society (NAS) as "a lifelong developmental disability that affects how people perceive the world and interact with others".

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

All autistic people share certain difficulties, but being autistic will affect them in different ways. They may find it difficult to read other people's body language, including facial expressions, and

struggle to understand social signals. This can cause anxiety in social situations, leading to feelings of isolation.

ANYTHING ELSE?

The desire for routine, highly focused interests and over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells and light are also a feature of people with autism. Some autistic people can feel overloaded by environmental noise and may use ear defenders to reduce the volume.

HOW DOES IT RELATE TO ASPERGER'S?

People with Asperger syndrome do not have learning disabilities and are of (at least) average intelligence. They may have problems with understanding and processing language.

HOW COMMON IS IT?

There are about 700,000 people diagnosed with autism and Asperger's in the UK – just over 1 per cent of the population. www.autism.org.uk

NATURALISTS ON THE SPECTRUM

TV PRESENTER CHRIS PACKHAM SAID EARLIER THIS YEAR THAT HIS ASPERGER SYNDROME HAS GIVEN HIM SPECIAL ABILITIES, AND – AS JAMES FAIR REPORTS – HE'S NOT THE ONLY ONE.

Half an hour into our interview and as he's showing me around Port Sunlight River Park in the Wirral, 17-year-old Elliot Montieth runs down to the foreshore of the River Mersey. "Two common sandpiper," he remarks to park ranger Anne Litherland. "That's a site first." He quickly focuses his

spotting scope on one of the birds and shows it to me. "There it is," he says proudly. "I'm made up. Last year I found the park's first and only kingfisher and whinchat, too." "How could he tell?" the ranger remarks. "Just from their flight?"

It's hard to say, on the basis of a morning in the field with Elliot, just how talented a birder he is,

but he knows his stuff and he's ticked off a number of unusual species in his local patch – Birkenhead Docks – just a short distance from Port Sunlight. He reels off a list of county rarities he's seen that includes Iceland gull, great northern diver, scaup and roseate tern.

In many ways, Elliot is just your typical, obsessive young birder, but he is different in one fundamental way. The teenager has been diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, part of the autism behavioural condition that affects the way in which those who have it relate to other people.

The issue received rare publicity earlier this year when TV presenter and *BBC Wildlife* columnist Chris Packham said that he was on the spectrum.

While this had resulted in social isolation as a teenager, he explained, it had also given him huge advantages as a naturalist. "The ability to recognise instantaneously and record immense

detail has been a tremendous asset to me," he told *BBC Wildlife* ('Packham's progress', June). "Hypersensitivity to smell, sound and colour are part of it."

Elliot can also see the pros and cons of being Asperger's, and talks enthusiastically about the pleasure he gets from identifying different species of gull. "Because I'm a visual

learner, I can pick out the key markings that distinguish them," he says. "I love gulls because they are so hard to ID."

With a friend, he's blogged about the basic elements of gull identification, and they plan to move on to warblers next. "Booted and Sykes's warblers are virtually impossible for me to separate, but it's something that I want to learn."

FROM TRAINS TO TERNS

Elliot recognises that Asperger's also gives him a drive to focus on a single area of interest that most teenagers don't have. It started when he was much younger with Thomas the Tank Engine, before he moved on to dinosaurs (he still loves collecting bones and skeletons) and then to birds.

Port Sunlight is a former

landfill site that's been turned into a green community space and is managed on a day-to-day basis by a local charity, Autism Together, which is how Elliot got involved. His mother, Adele Montieth, describes the park as "somewhere he can come and relax and feel comfortable, and not worry about things being a bit too boisterous", but Elliot isn't the only one who benefits. Ranger Anne Litherland says, "He spots things that we don't, so he's adding to the recording for the site."

There was a time when Elliot's Asperger's had a more negative impact on his life. He was bullied in his early teenage years, and found it difficult to make friends. "I got isolated, I was by myself, nobody talked



Elliot has recorded roseate terns in the Wirral.

to me and I talked to no one," Elliot recalls. It was only when he went on an RSPB conservation course in North Wales that he realised there were other people like him.

A LIFE'S DEVOTION

Indeed there are. Temple Grandin is autistic and also a professor of animal science at Colorado State University. While not a naturalist like Elliot or Chris Packham, she has spent her life trying to understand how animals think – in her case, in order to



Chris Packham has discussed being on the spectrum.

Elliot x2: Colin McPherson; Chris, Charlie Best; Tern, Markus Varasvornaturp.com

redesign slaughterhouses to make them more humane.

And, like Elliot, her thinking and learning is done mainly visually, as opposed to verbally. "[Autism has] given me a lot of insight into the animal mind," she said in a TED talk given in 2010, "because an animal is a sensory, not verbal, thinker. And the thing about the autistic mind is that it attends to detail, and in my work with cattle I've noticed lots of things [about the design of slaughterhouses] that most people don't."

AUTISTIC ARTISTS

There are other ways in which autistic people can express themselves in a way that involves wildlife – painting is an obvious one.

Austin Orelli is a 23-year-old American with autism who finds it difficult to communicate verbally, which brings added learning disabilities. In 2008

AUTISM HAS GIVEN ME INSIGHT INTO THE ANIMAL MIND BECAUSE AN ANIMAL IS A SENSORY THINKER"

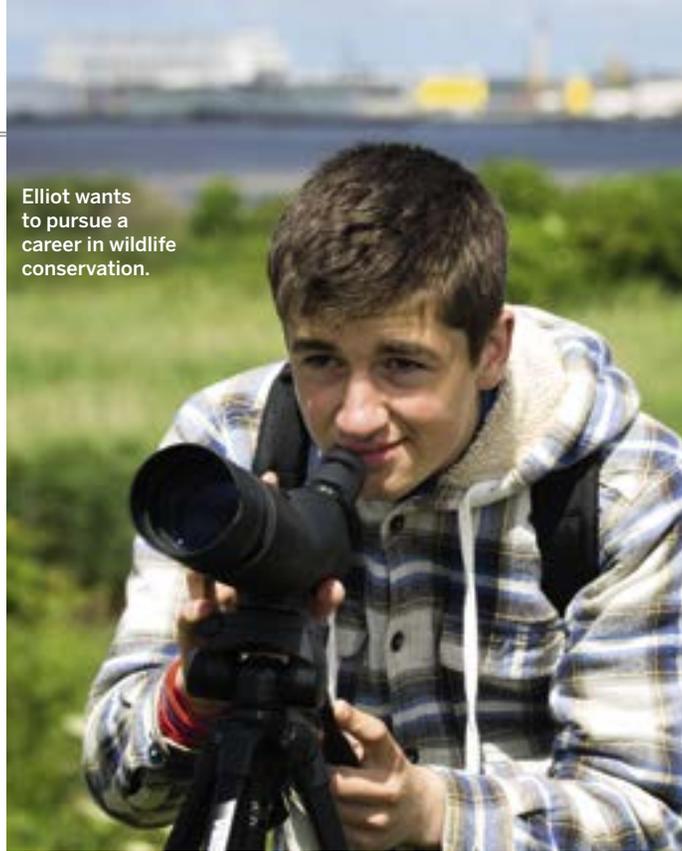
he drew a picture of some tigers for an auction raising funds for a centre for people with special needs – and his artwork sold for \$2,200 (£1,700).

"We thought, 'Maybe we should do something with his other paintings,'" says Austin's sister Tiffany Fuller, who works as his job coach.

Tiffany helps run a business – with Austin supplying the artwork – that in some years has pulled in \$6,000. It sells prints and postcards of everything from tigers and zebras to blue-footed boobies and lemurs. They are child-like, but charming.

"All of his animals have cartoon-like eyes," she says.

Elliot wants to pursue a career in wildlife conservation.



"The eyes are really intense. He definitely puts the emotion of how he sees the animals into the drawings."

A PERFECT FIT

There are two good reasons why people with autism may be especially drawn to wildlife – there's no pressure to communicate because animals don't talk, and their habitats are generally calm places that do not place heavy sensory burdens that autistic people can find difficult.

Sean Locke – who won a *BBC Wildlife* Blogger Award in 2015 – describes himself as 'the Autistic Naturalist' and writes about his wildlife encounters, particularly at RSPB Strumpshaw Fen where he works as a volunteer. In one blog he discusses his autism in depth, recalling how he would have violent breakdowns at school because of the stress caused by levels of noise.

"Being autistic is about being awkward socially – it's difficult to make friends, or fall in love," he says. "With wildlife it's a lot easier, because it doesn't talk back."

But, like Chris Packham, Sean acknowledges that his autism may give

him advantages in identifying wildlife in the field and greater clarity of recall. He can, he says, identify birdsong from a distance while listening to heavy-metal music in his headphones (which he does sometimes, particularly at times of the year when the birds are singing less). "It's an autistic skill that I've taught myself," he adds.

NATURE'S HEALING POWER

Of course, it's not just people with autism who need to get out into the wild to feel better – the idea of nature as a necessity within all our lives is part of the agenda driving movements campaigning for children to spend more time outdoors. However, perhaps the requirement is greater for people on the spectrum.

Elliot Montieth is determined to forge a career in wildlife conservation and has already

Austin Orelli has made a name for himself as an artist.



WELL-BEING AND NATURE

IT'S NOT ONLY AUTISTIC PEOPLE WHO BENEFIT FROM SPENDING TIME IN THE GREAT OUTDOORS.

GOING OUTDOORS

In a study carried out by the David Suzuki Foundation, participants were asked to spend 30 minutes outdoors every day for a month – those involved averaged 8.6 hours a week on walks or nature activities, an increase of 90 per cent on what they were achieving before they took up the challenge.

MORE 'GET UP & GO'

Participants scored how they felt for a number of parameters on a scale of one to five at the beginning and end of the month – the score for "vitality, energy and enthusiasm" rose by 18 per cent, while they also identified themselves as feeling less stressed as well as more calm and content.

PRODUCTIVITY UP...

At work, the average increase in productivity was reported as being 6 per cent, though there was no significant rise in job satisfaction.

...TV TIME DOWN

The average amount of time spent watching TV decreased from 8.3 to 5.7 hours a week.

successfully campaigned to protect nesting birds in Birkenhead Docks. It is possible that a condition that is usually seen as negative may end up giving him the edge in terms of success, and that nature and the environment stand to benefit as well. 🐾

➤ FIND OUT MORE

Autism Together
<http://bit.ly/2akUSok>
Elliot's Birding Diaries
<http://bit.ly/2aNtLDs>
The Autistic Naturalist
<http://bit.ly/2aMRwLg>