# Ruby Free embraces hope and action amid environmental challenges at Ballyconnelly Farm



As spring transitions into summer, Ballyconnelly Farm in County Antrim becomes a vibrant backdrop for reflections on age, nature, and environmental awareness. April marked a significant milestone for Ruby Free, who recently celebrated her 25th birthday. This time not only prompted personal reflection but also a deeper consideration of the environmental challenges facing young people today. Free expressed that, while she feels both older and younger than her years, the increasing ecological burdens lead to a sense of urgency regarding climate change, noting the targets set for net zero by 2050 and the necessity to halt nature loss by 2030.

The month commenced with alarming news: a cyanobacteria bloom was detected in Lough Neagh earlier than ever recorded. This situation drew expressions of despair from environmental advocates, particularly since it came on the heels of three years of campaigning for change with minimal results. In contrast, Free sought solace in nature, finding joy in the return of species such as the willow warbler and swallows that had migrated back from Africa to her farm. Her connection to the surrounding biodiversity provided a sense of hope amidst the worrying ecological landscape.

During the first week of warm weather, Ballyconnelly Farm transformed as hawthorn buds blossomed and bluebells carpeted wooded areas. Free observed her first butterfly of the season, a small white, signalling a time of renewal. However, this joy was quickly overshadowed by the visible impact of climate change, as smoke from wildfires on the nearby mountains served as a stark reminder of the rising temperatures and environmental degradation.

In the midst of these challenges, Free attended the launch of the British Trust for Ornithology's Seabird Report, where she learned about successful conservation efforts for seabirds, including the LIFE Raft project aimed at eradicating invasive species on Rathlin Island. Anne-Marie McDevitt, head of species at RSPB NI, emphasised the successes this initiative has brought, citing the revival of puffin populations. This story of resilience contributed to Free’s understanding of hope within conservation efforts.

As agricultural tasks intensified, particularly the need for watering after a prolonged dry spell, Free reflected on local environmental governance. Discontent with governmental inaction grew as she witnessed the natural world struggling against increasing weather extremes. Nonetheless, she remained committed to her local community; during her birthday weekend, a community farm event brought together volunteers, leading to a spirit of collaboration and connection through gardening.

Free's thoughts expanded on what hope represents. She posits that hope is not just a fleeting feeling but rather an intentional choice, manifesting in actions like beach clean-ups and educating young people about their natural environments. She cited Chris Packham, who said, “Even if I knew we were losing, I’d carry on fighting,” reinforcing the notion of persistent activism despite the odds.

As the farm continues to thrive, Free and her partner Craig Holmes remain dedicated to their mission of restoring biodiversity and fostering a connection between people and nature. Their initiatives stand testament to the possibility of change and renewal, illustrating that, amidst hardship, life can still flourish. Through commitment to planting, community engagement, and advocacy, Free embraces a hopeful perspective on the environmental challenges facing the world today.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.carbonbrief.org/lough-neagh-how-climate-change-intensified-toxic-algae-on-the-uks-largest-lake/> - This article discusses how climate change has intensified toxic blue-green algae blooms in Lough Neagh, Northern Ireland's largest freshwater lake, highlighting the environmental challenges faced by the region.
* <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/2024/12/09/satellite-technology-to-be-used-in-fight-against-lough-neagh-algae/> - This piece details the use of satellite technology to monitor and combat blue-green algae in Lough Neagh, reflecting innovative approaches to environmental conservation.
* <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-66883500> - This report provides statistics on the prevalence of blue-green algae in Northern Ireland's waterways, including Lough Neagh, underscoring the widespread environmental issue.
* <https://www.qub.ac.uk/News/Allnews/2024/queens-research-lough-neagh-public-risk.html> - This research from Queen's University Belfast outlines the public health risks associated with harmful algal blooms in Lough Neagh, emphasizing the need for action to address the problem.
* <https://www.niwater.com/bga/> - This resource from NI Water explains the nature of blue-green algae, its impact on water quality, and the importance of monitoring and managing its presence in water bodies like Lough Neagh.
* <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-66045645> - This article discusses the factors contributing to the blue-green algae bloom in Lough Neagh, including climate change and invasive species, highlighting the complex environmental dynamics at play.
* <https://www.irishnews.com/life/why-i-still-plant-seeds-even-when-it-feels-hopeless-GYXNYFTDBJGIDOHWZAGZ4IT6RQ/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data