



Neil Russell

Finding Freedom Off-Road

Meet an adventurous handcyclist who's determined to develop a more inclusive and integrated cycling community in Scotland

by FIONA RUSSELL

CYCLIST Neil Russell has launched an initiative to give more people the opportunity to follow new trails to freedom and adventure.

The 37-year-old, from Stirling, is the driving force behind a community interest company called Adaptive Riders Collective (ARC), which is fundraising for several electric-assisted handcycles to be used off-road.

ARC will be based at so-called "Gravelfoyle" – the nickname for the Stirlingshire village of Aberfoyle, which is at the heart of the fast-growing Scottish gravel cycling scene. It's also where Neil regularly rides forest tracks on his own adaptive electric-assisted handcycle.



Neil, who was born with spina bifida and had one leg amputated below the knee aged 18, says, "Handcycling has been life-changing for me and levelled the playing field of my disability.

"Being able to ride a handcycle off-road has given me the chance to explore many amazing places in Scotland and to enjoy some great adventures.

"But electric-assisted off-road handcycles like mine are expensive and often prohibitively so to many people – I hope that through ARC, I can give more people with a disability the chance to try off-road cycling."

It was in 2015 that Neil, a swimming teacher, first



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On the Aqueduct Loop

discovered the joys of handcycling. He says, “I had long had difficulties with using my right leg for sports and activities.

“I suffered nerve damage due to spina bifida and my right leg didn’t grow like the left one. The shorter leg led to back problems, and I also had lots of leg sores and infections.

“In the end, I decided to have the lower part of my right leg removed. This helped with my health, but I then had issues with different prostheses.

“I was able to walk a short distance and I did ride a ‘regular’ bike for a few years, but I never thought that

cycling would be for me because it never felt that easy or enjoyable.”

A friend persuaded Neil to take part in a paratriathlon at Castle Semple Country Park in Lochwinnoch, Renfrewshire. He says, “I managed to finish the race and, while the swim was fine, it confirmed that cycling really wasn’t much fun for me.

“But what I did discover at that event was handcycling. Luckily for me, Dave Hill – an outdoor instructor who offers activities for people with disabilities – had brought along a handcycle. I gave it a go and immediately fell in love with the sport.” >>

Neil describes the difference between a traditional road bike and an off-road handcycle.

He says, "Being able to ride a handcycle using my arms makes all the difference to me – I no longer have to rely on pedalling with my legs or suffer the pain of my prosthesis."

"In addition, the type of handcycle I have allows me to ride on rough paths and tracks, which means I can have access to many more places than when in a wheelchair or walking with a prosthesis."

Neil's off-road handcycle has three wheels and is electric-assisted – so while he needs to pedal, there is the benefit of extra power when it's required.

In recent years, Neil has completed many off-road adventures and challenges. He says, "As well as riding the fantastic gravel routes in the Queen Elizabeth Forest Park



Handcycling

at Aberfoyle, I have enjoyed a 20-day handcycling trip across several Scottish islands.

"I have ridden a two-day trip to the lighthouse at Cape Wrath, at the far north-west point of mainland Scotland, and stayed in a bothy overnight.

"It was my first stay in a bothy, but it would not have been possible without my handcycle because there was a bumpy, stony track to reach it.

"Last summer I cycled

125 kilometres (77 miles) in one day. It was off-road – and sometimes not on an obvious track – from Rannoch to Dalwhinnie, via the remote Corroul Estate in the Scottish Highlands.

"Handcycling has given me an enormous amount of freedom to get to places I had never been to before and to explore Scotland's trails.

"Our country is amazing for nature and I now know first-hand the mental and physical benefits of being surrounded by an incredible natural environment."

While Neil is a competent handcyclist, he is also grateful for the support of friends on his expeditions.

He says, "In some ways I have the best form of transport for some of the more challenging sections off-road because I am more sturdy and balanced on

Taking on a stony track





my three wheels, while my friends are all riding two-wheeled bikes.

“But I can also face difficulties and obstacles – sometimes due to it being front-wheel drive and also because I am unable to get off my handcycle to push it over boggy ground or to cross rivers.

“It’s why I feel very fortunate to have a great group of friends who are willing to accompany me on my adventures.

“We are constantly looking at what might be possible with my handcycle and considering places to explore, such as riding at night and snow riding. There is so much that is doable with the right people around me.”

However, rather than being content with pursuing only his own dreams, Neil is committed to the idea of expanding opportunities to other people.

He says, “I am lucky because I have been able to

afford my own handcycle and I have benefited from the activity, both physically and mentally.

“I am now happily part of a mainstream group of off-road riders and this has given me a new sense of confidence – something that I lacked before because being disabled frequently made me feel isolated.

“Through ARC I hope to be able to make a difference to the lives of other disabled people.

“We are in the funding and grant application phase of the project and so far there has been a very positive reaction.

“This is just the beginning of gravel handcycling – and the start of a more inclusive and integrated Scottish cycling community.” 📍

To find out more, see www.instagram.com/arc_cic and www.instagram.com/handcycle_adventures

DID YOU KNOW?

Gravel riding combines the off-road element of mountain biking with road cycling for a more accessible experience. Starting in Aberfoyle, three way-marked routes explore deep into Loch Ard forest. Visit www.gravelfoyle.com



Aqueduct

Pictures: PETE SCULLION