

Thriving With Nature

A GUIDE FOR EVERYONE



MAKING THE MOST OF THE UK'S NATURAL SPACES
FOR OUR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING



FOR
YOUR
WORLD



Mental Health
Foundation

“Nature has this calming and enchanting effect.
Walking in the woods, smelling the fresh forest
air, or sitting on a rock watching the ocean
waves and sea birds hunting for fish. Magical.”

Supporter on Twitter

Acknowledgements

This guide was produced by WWF-UK and the Mental Health Foundation in collaboration. Will Baldwin-Cantello conceived of the guide and co-authored with Victoria Zamperoni, Bethan Harvey, Jolie Goodman, Rachel Baird, Ross Fisher. Will Baldwin-Cantello and Antonis Kousoulis are accountable for the scientific integrity of this guide. Thanks go to many others at both organisations for making it possible. The team would like to acknowledge the Wildlife Trusts for advice and support, and all members of the Natural England convened Outdoors for All Working Group for their inspiration – many of whom are listed as places to go for more at the end of this guide. Among many others, the books listed at the end of the guide were also a source of inspiration!

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Foreword

I've learned how important being outdoors in nature can be not only for lifting my spirits but also helping me to cope with the stresses of a busy life. It's why I believe that 'Thriving With Nature' will play an important role in helping people to make the most of our natural spaces through the seasons.

Packed with inspiration and information, this guide will help you connect with nature throughout the year. From forest bathing to sharing nature with others as a volunteer, it's a unique resource that brings activities together in a way that truly resonates with me.

Personally, I've relished the benefits of walking since I was a nipper and I know there's something quite magical about being active outdoors – come rain or sunshine! Just an hour outside is good for you on so many levels – our moods, alertness and sleep patterns are all impacted by light.

For those of you thinking "I don't have time to get to the mountains or big rugged landscapes", a stroll in a city park, by a canal or around your local woodland can be just as reviving. And if you work in a dense urban jungle it's still worthwhile heading outside into the light; a single tree can inspire as much joy as a 'Big View'. You can certainly use this guide to help you discover, season by season, what is happening outdoors.

I feel strongly that everyone should be able to get outdoors. It's why I'm proud to be part of this guide and to lead The Outdoor Guide and AccessTOG in promoting awareness of walking for wellbeing and access for all.

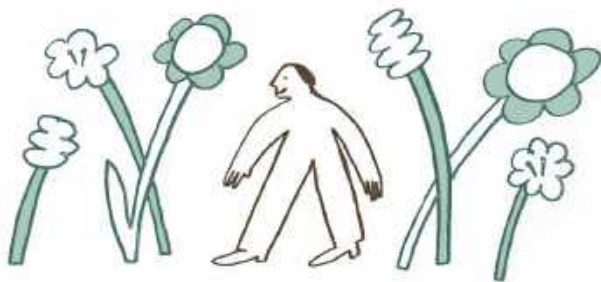
I'm delighted to see the Mental Health Foundation and WWF come together as I believe it's vital for all of us to spend time re-connecting with nature for our mental health and wellbeing. I really hope that 'Thriving With Nature' inspires you – and your friends and family – to get out and make the most of the amazing nature all around us.

Julia Bradbury

*Television presenter and
passionate outdoor campaigner*



Nature, wellbeing & mental health



WWF and the Mental Health Foundation have come together to produce this guide for you. We want you to thrive and for nature to thrive around you. We think the two are mutually supportive.

From forests and rivers, to parks and gardens, to window boxes or even house plants, we can find nature wherever we are.

Interacting with nature can be not just enjoyable, but also beneficial to our mental health and wellbeing, aspects of our health that are particularly important to look after.

“Sitting outside, in nature, calms me so much, gardening makes me feel healthier, inspired, the rain calms me, the smell and sounds of birds, animals, flowers, the wind, watching clouds float by, calms me.”

Supporter on Instagram

What is mental health?

We all have mental health and it is as important as our physical health. When our mental health is good, we feel emotionally well, able to look after ourselves and able to engage with the things that we care about.

When we struggle with our mental health, we can feel overwhelmed and unable to cope, which can make it difficult to manage in our daily lives.

A 2018 survey by the Mental Health Foundation found that almost three quarters (74%) of people have at some point felt so stressed they felt overwhelmed or unable to cope.¹ For some of us these difficulties may come and go, and for others they may be more long-lasting.



How do I look after my mental health?

Looking after our mental health and wellbeing is important for everyone, and there are things that each of us can do in our day-to-day lives that can help to support good mental health, including connecting to nature.

Many of us live a fast-paced urban life, with long working days and long, crowded commutes. In these environments there are many pressures that affect our mental health.

This is why it is worth making the time for nature, in whatever way works for you, even when things get busy and other priorities feel more important.

“Nature’s the best way for me to relax and get back in touch with my inner self, who tends to be calmer in dealing with life! Walking in the woods or by the sea, simply listening to nature’s soundtrack whilst watching my four-legged friend play, always helps put me in a better frame of mind.”

Supporter on Facebook



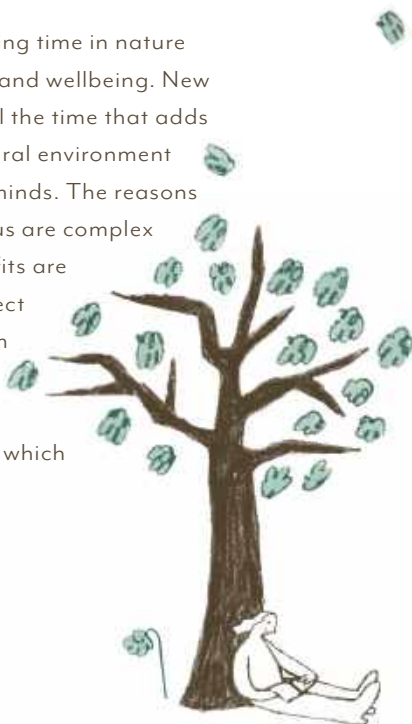
How can nature help?

There are lots of ways in which spending time in nature can be positive for our mental health and wellbeing. New and exciting research is happening all the time that adds to our understanding of how our natural environment affects the health of our bodies and minds. The reasons why time in nature has this effect on us are complex and still being understood. The benefits are often related to how our senses connect us to the environment around us, from the shapes in nature we see to the scents that trees give off and the soft fascination that nature can stimulate which helps our minds rest.



“Even finding some green space or waterside in an urban area helps my mental health. If it attracts birds, wild plants and insects then it’s nature.”

Supporter on Facebook



“Breathing fresh air and going on a long walk in nature I find really helps me. It’s like trees have secret powers.”

Supporter on Instagram

Here are some of the many ways that spending time outdoors can help support good mental health and wellbeing.

Time in green spaces

Across multiple studies, researchers have found a fascinating link between access to green space, such as fields, forests, parks and gardens, and a reduced risk of mental health problems, improved mood, and increased life satisfaction.²⁻⁶ Other benefits include reduced stress, increased physical activity, and better physical health.^{4,7}

Finding nature in the city

Green spaces are a little more difficult to find in big cities. At first glance nature can appear to be lost in the urban jungle, but if you pause, and take in your surroundings, you might notice that nature can pop up in even the most unlikely places. Signs of nature are threaded throughout the city.



It is worthwhile seeking out these natural spaces, such as parks, canals or courtyards. Research suggests that taking advantage of urban green spaces is also positive for your mood and life satisfaction.^{3,8}

We have also included in this guide things you can do in your own garden or outdoor space.

Staying active

An important link has been found between spending time outdoors and how physically active we are.⁸⁻¹⁰



Besides the benefits for our physical health, exercising and staying active is also good for our mental health. We know that physical activity may reduce the risk of mental health problems, like anxiety or depression¹¹, and exercising in green spaces can have an extra added benefit.

Walking or running seems to give us an extra boost when done in natural environments rather than indoors, reducing feelings of anger, fatigue and sadness.¹²

We don't even need to do it for long! Exercising in green spaces for as little as five minutes was found to improve mood and feelings of self-esteem.¹³



“Getting out for a walk when I’m feeling down is a must. Even if it’s just 10 minutes. Consciously making an effort to take in my surroundings and remembering to take a deep breath. I always come back feeling better for it!”

Supporter on Instagram

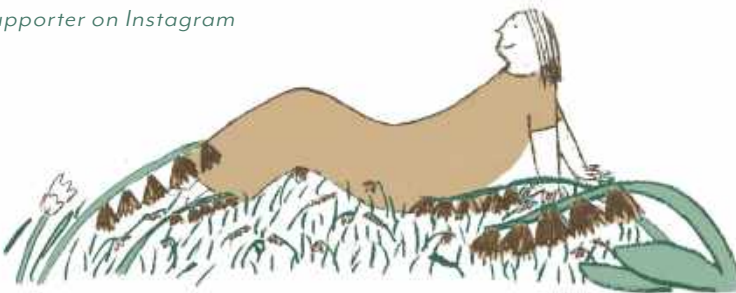
Relaxation and mindfulness

Taking quiet time to reflect on our natural surroundings can be positive for mental health and wellbeing. There is evidence that ‘forest therapy’ or ‘forest bathing’ (famously known as Shinrin Yoku in Japan) may lead to improved mental health.¹⁴ This involves spending active time in a forest observing our surroundings, using all of our senses.

The practice of ‘mindfulness’ (a way of directing non-judgemental awareness towards our thoughts, feelings, environment and body) has been found to reduce feelings of stress, and increase feelings of self-compassion and empathy,^{15,16} and who doesn’t want to be a little kinder to themselves?

“I find nature more calming than anything else. The beauty, the wonder of seeing plants and vegetables grow... it just puts things into perspective.”

Supporter on Instagram



Connecting with others

Having strong, healthy and supportive relationships with those around us is important for our wellbeing.^{17,18}

Nature has a link with these relationships as we often use green spaces to meet and socialise with others (e.g. playing sports, having a picnic, going for a group walk). In fact, natural spaces can provide a free or low-cost opportunity to get together, and this is another way to support good mental health.^{9,19}

So, what are you waiting for?
Grab that picnic blanket
or umbrella and arrange a
meeting in the great outdoors.



“Nature definitely helps with my anxiety – walking in London parks, walking the family dogs when I visit my parents up north, or just sitting outside. I love going for a walk with someone, friend, partner, family member and talking. I find all of that helpful.”

Supporter on Facebook

Interacting with wildlife

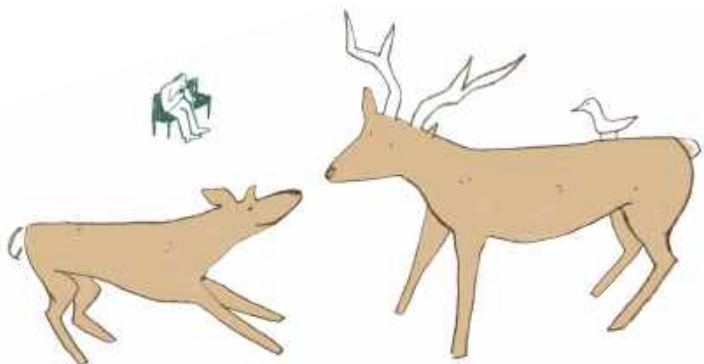
Some studies suggest that being around animals and wildlife may be beneficial for overall wellbeing. They have found that activities involving observing and interacting with wildlife in their natural habitat, such as watching birds in a garden, can improve people's feelings of wellbeing, relaxation, and connection to nature.²⁰⁻²³ The research in this area is still developing and there is still more to learn about the benefits of being around wildlife.

There is so much out there to observe – from watching the garden robin fluff up for winter to the squirrel searching for its nuts in the park, or even to the city pigeon cooing and sticking its chest out to attract a partner for spring.

Why not take a couple of minutes now to look out of your window or step outside and notice what is going on in the nature around you?

“I made sure my office have me sat with a view of the trees and squirrels.”

Supporter on Instagram



Creativity

Many people find nature inspires them to create, be it through painting, drawing, photography or writing. There is so much out there just waiting to be our source of creativity – from vibrant and fiery autumnal leaves to the crunch of frost underfoot on a cold winter morning.

There is also evidence that suggests taking part in creative activities like dance, music, art or expressive writing can help reduce stress and improve mood and wellbeing.^{24,25} This gives us even more reason to combine creativity with our natural environment.

Why don't you go outside and capture your surroundings, trying your hand at a few creative sentences or a quick sketch? There is space in this guide for you to do just that.

“I love my creative space. I have it set out so I can go and art journal every morning to keep me well.”

Supporter on Instagram

Gardening, conservation and farming

There is good evidence that people who spend time gardening experience a wide range of positive results including improvements in mood, quality of life and feelings of community.⁹



**“I’m blessed to have a garden,
and although it needs an Alan
Titchmarsh makeover, just
doing weeding, planting flowers
or looking at it from my
kitchen makes me feel better
if I’m having a difficult day.”**

Supporter on Twitter

And the evidence doesn’t stop there.²⁶

**“I live on a farm and go walking 5 miles a day with my dogs
and wife, we have a love of all animals and nature living
here, it keeps my mood enhanced and it is the best thing
for my thoughts.”**

Supporter on Facebook

Being part of something bigger

Do you care about the footprint you leave behind? Want to benefit your local natural environment or community? Or be a part of a global environmental movement?

“Nature helps me to understand we are part of something bigger.”

Supporter on Twitter



Well, research suggests that taking part in social action and making an impact in our local area not only benefits the community at large but also ourselves. Studies have found a link between taking part in social action or community engagement activities and increased empathy, self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as an increased sense of community.²⁷⁻²⁹

Nature for everyone

Nature is for everyone. It is essential that everyone can access nature, whatever their circumstances. For someone living with loss of vision, hearing or mobility, their need to enjoy nature remains, as does the positive impact of nature on their wellbeing. However, having a disability does change how and where you can access nature, and with whom. If this is your experience, please let us know how you find using this guide. Many parks, nature reserves and forest areas have made changes to make their entrances and paths more accessible and some organisations provide activities specifically designed to be more accessible – for example, see our suggestions at the end of the guide on places to go for more information.

Struggling with your mental health can also make it much harder to leave the house, never mind finding your nearest green space. If this is you, then we hope to encourage you to think of the benefits of nature, when you feel ready to go outside.



Financial pressures are another influence that makes it harder to get time in nature, because you have so little time, energy and money for transport and other costs when you're out. We have included activities in this guide that we think could relate to nature in homes, gardens or small patches of green space in a city. Accessing bigger green spaces may require some travel costs but most of the activities themselves are completely free!

How you can help nature

This guide aims to show that nature is truly amazing. It can inspire us, soothe us and enchant us. It can connect us with others and help us feel part of something bigger. Nature also seems to be like medicine for everyone's mental health. A sort of balm for our souls, you might say.

But nature is even more than this. Nature is vital. It provides our life-support system, and we cannot survive without it.

Yet, nature around the world is under threat like never before. We are wrecking forests, decimating wildlife and causing devastating changes to the climate. The nature in our own back gardens is suffering the same fate. In fact, the UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. This is a loss for nature, but also for everyone's mental and physical health.



We believe it is time to re-balance our relationship with nature, so that we nurture more than we destroy. That's why we're growing a movement of people around the world who are fighting for nature. Fighting for our world. A movement who want their voices to be heard.

Together, we can begin to restore nature and improve the state of our planet for future generations, as well as our own. We have the solutions and we know nature can fight back. We need people all over the world to take action and join the fight for our world.



Together we can strive for a world where everyone thrives in nature! Get involved on social media:

Use the hashtag **#ThrivingWithNature**

Tag **@Mentalhealth** and **@WWF_UK**

How to use this guide

This guide contains imaginative and simple suggestions for seasonal activities to help you engage with nature in your area throughout the year. Each activity will have different components that research suggests can be helpful for supporting your wellbeing (such as staying active, connecting with others, or spending time in green spaces). If any of these activities feel like a stretch for you right now, even just noticing more of the nature around you is a good start and there are suggestions for what you might notice in each season as well.



This guide is available and open to anyone, but we think it may be most helpful for those of us living in urban areas, with busy lifestyles and who may be experiencing stress or other strains on wellbeing. But there are plenty of activities in this guide that you can tailor to your own lifestyle and needs whoever you are and wherever you live.

The guide moves through the seasons from spring to winter to encourage you to get into the habit of getting outdoors regularly and follow the cycles of nature, but you can start it anywhere, anytime. There's no need to follow any particular order – we encourage you to get creative!



The most important parts of this guide are the blank pages, which are spread throughout. This is space for you to write or to draw or do whatever you want as part of your reflection on where you are, what you notice around you and in the way you feel there. We hope this will help you find a connection with nature and make the most of the benefits for your wellbeing.



At the end of this guide, there are some suggested further sources of ideas and inspiration in books and online. There is also a list of organisations who provide advice and even planned activities you can join that are out in nature and designed to boost wellbeing.

We want to acknowledge that on some days you may struggle with your mental health and on those days, you may find engaging with this guide a little harder and the tasks that seem simple to others may become overwhelming to you. On those days be gentle and kind to yourself and pick the guide up again in your own time whenever you feel ready.

Now, let's get started.





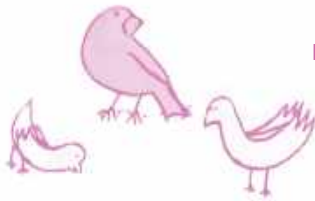
Spring

**The season of renewal,
flowering bulbs and the
re-emergence of green.**

As the days grow longer,
the temperature rises and
buds start emerging, this
is a good time of year to
get outside more.

Use your senses to...

Taste wild garlic. Often found in ancient and mature woodland, wild garlic can be hard to miss. You might notice the smell first and then, perhaps among the bluebells, you might see a carpet of broad-leaved plants on the forest floor. The leaves are best picked when young and fresh (before it flowers), and are perfect for adding to pasta or other simple dishes. Seek advice if you are not sure.



Hear the song of birds returned from their warm winter getaways. Can you notice different birdcalls coming from the trees and gardens around you?



Feel the soft, green new leaves on trees around you, changing the atmosphere of our streets and cities, and transforming previously stark woods and forests.



Smell the bright new flowers blooming around you. Parks and gardens are decorated with daffodils, and woodland floors are covered in bluebells and dotted with many other flowers over the course of the season.



See the first butterflies of the year, and the acrobatic manoeuvres of swallows and swifts in the air and tiny tadpoles swimming in ponds.

**“I love the spring because
everything is so fresh and
coming back to life after
the winter, the days gradually
get longer, and everything
just looks brighter.”**

Supporter on Twitter





Get outside and...

Draw

You can draw however you like, but here is a suggestion... Find a spot to sit or stand that captures your curiosity. Pick a starting point – a leaf, rock, tree, distant field... whatever catches your eye. Draw every detail you see but without looking at the page and without taking your pen or pencil off the page. Instead keep your eyes

fixed on the object, exploring its contours. Once you have finished, take a look at your work – you will find your picture is unlikely to even closely resemble what you were looking at but that doesn't matter at all. The idea is to focus your attention and notice more of what you are looking at.



Wellbeing benefits:

Connecting with others; mindfulness and relaxation; time in green spaces; creativity.

Get to know a tree

There is a good way to do this with a partner (and even better with a large group) and in a location with lots of different trees.

One of you is blindfolded, while the other guides. Setting off from a shared starting point, the guide takes their blindfolded partner on a winding walk before choosing a tree. The blindfolded person then sets about getting to know that tree in all ways but sight. When ready, the guide leads their partner back to the starting point (again, a winding route is good to add to the challenge). Then the blindfold is removed and that person has to find their tree. You may be surprised at how successful everyone is... Then swap roles and do it again – be mindful of the obstacles that might hinder the blindfolded person in particular.



Personal story

Green oases in London

London is not necessarily a place associated with nature, but it is full of spectacular parks and smaller squares and gardens.

When I am feeling low, it is a real treat to walk around one of London's spectacular parks, such as Greenwich Park, Regent's Park, Hampstead Heath. One of my favourites is Golders Hill Park, which is a hidden gem.

It is so important for people who live in the city to visit green spaces if they can. The fresh air, the greenery, the variety of plants and changing colours – and being able to watch and listen to birds, animals and insects. If the sun is out as well, it can really lift your mood.



I am lucky enough to have a small back garden. This year I finally started to pay it some attention, doing some weeding, planting things and trying to keep it tidy. It has really been worth the effort and I love coming home from work, sitting in it and admiring the colours and peacefulness.



I have been befriended by a friendly robin who comes to visit and sits on the fence as I struggle with the weeds. Luckily, my cat leaves the robin alone.

Nature can take you out of yourself, give you a chance to admire natural beauty and give you some exercise. All in all, very good for your mental health!

By Fran Edwards



This is your space.





Summer

**The season of sunshine,
long evenings and holidays.**

The warmer weather does lend itself to more time spent outdoors and there is much to explore. Long walks in the countryside can allow you to see a wide range of environments and get a good 'dose' of nature.





Use your senses to...

See whales and dolphins. We might normally associate the large mammals of the sea with oceans far from home, but actually during the summer is a good time to see those that live or migrate through our waters. The lucky among us could glimpse minke and humpback whales, bottlenose and common dolphins, basking sharks and more. This one will require some planning and travel but could be well worth it!



Feel cool, natural water by going 'wild-swimming'.

The coast and beaches are among the UK public's favourite natural spaces. As an island, we are all in reachable distance from the sea and salty air.

Why not take a dip in the chilly and refreshing water? If the sea is tricky to reach, perhaps there is a river or lake nearer by.

Hear grasshoppers and crickets in the grasses as they make their 'song' by rubbing legs and/or wings together. There are 30 species in the UK, and you are more likely to hear crickets at dawn and dusk, while grasshoppers favour sunshine during the day.

Smell the scent of freshly cut grass, barbeques in the garden or at the park.



Taste brambles. Late in the summer, blackberry (or bramble) picking is a great way to satisfy your sweet tooth while enjoying the fruits of nature. It is unlikely that you live far from blackberries even if you had never noticed them before. Look around you in a nearby park, canal path or other green space.



**“I love the summer evenings
especially at twilight when
everything is calm, the colours
of the flowers. I have a birdbath
and watch the birds splash
through it and I used to have
a hedgehog visit every night...**

**Something very soothing
in a breeze or a
warm wind.”**



*Supporter on
Instagram*

Get outside and...

Exercise

With bright mornings and evenings and warmer weather, it is easier to find time around work or childcare or whatever fills your time to get some exercise outdoors. We all know physical exercise is good for our physical health. So instead of hitting the couch or the treadmill, why not go for 'green exercise' instead? Try a brisk walk or jog in a nearby park, or one of the growing number of outdoor exercise classes. You could also take your bike out or hire one to try a safe route in a woodland or other green space nearby.



If you have a river, lake or beach near you, that is great too – green exercise near water has an added boost. If you are feeling particularly adventurous, you could hire a kayak or canoe and paddle your way downriver or learn to sail. Even small periods of time – say 5-10 minutes – can have a positive effect.¹³ So you could start by taking a 10-minute walk in a nearby park each day for a week and see how that makes you feel. You might find you are more tempted to keep up the exercise if it is out in nature rather than indoors...



Wellbeing benefits:

Finding nature in the city, staying active, time in green spaces.



Grow or pick your own food

It can be very satisfying to grow your own food and enjoy the fruits of your work directly!

It's also a great way to experience and learn more about nature.

Small gardens and even balconies can be enough space to grow food, such as tomatoes or strawberries. If you don't have access to a garden, you could plant salad leaves or herbs in a window box or plant pot. If you have enough space, on the other hand, why not go big on a vegetable plot and save on your shopping bill at the same time?

You may also find that in your local area there are opportunities to apply to share an allotment, or even community gardens

or food growing projects. That will allow you to share the labour and the fruits, as well as learn from others in a social environment.

Wellbeing benefits:

Connecting with others; gardening, conservation and farming; being part of something bigger.

And there are also immediate opportunities to pick your own food, by going fruit picking or foraging for wild food. Look for local farms, including city farms, or orchards that let you pick fruit to buy. And there are more opportunities for finding wild food than you might realise – from brambles (see page 40) and wild garlic (see page 26) in cities, to mussels on the coast.



Top tip: If you're going fruit picking or foraging, be aware that not all wild plants are safe to eat. Before eating something you've picked yourself, make sure you know exactly what it is by going with someone who knows what they are doing, reading up in advance from a reliable source or bringing a guide book with you. And picking from higher up the plant will give you fruit that will have been out of reach of dogs leaving their trail...



Personal story

Escaping through colour

I can feel the fanfare boom when summer arrives. I hear the eccentric brass band come to life. I watch the sun dance to their jaunty melody. I see the season fill with light. I wake to its bright, energetic mornings. I toss and turn to its warm, balmy nights. I travel through the warm breeze. Ebbing and flowing like the bobbing kite.

When summer drifts to a close. The vibrant beat takes a slower form. Reflecting the shorter days and evenings. And a time spent wrapped up indoors. As we approach autumn, the melancholic melody can be heard. Accompanying our falling leaves – and the migrating flocks of birds.



There is something that feels cosy. And there is something that feels safe. About being surrounded by vibrant colours and the branches' naked shape. I like to know that I can rest, like the hedgehog in its home. Nestled happily in crunchy leaves. Waiting to head out when dusk forms.

I watch the squirrels bury their nuts. And the barn owl hover way above. The blooming crocuses demand attention. The fragrant begonia brushes my glove. All the while I feel more peaceful. Surrounded by warming fires. Settling into the quiet atmosphere after summer says goodbye.

By Bethan Harvey



This is your space.







Autumn

**The season of morning
mists, starry skies and
rust coloured leaves.**

Autumn can be a wild and wonderful time of year. If we are lucky, it starts with an Indian summer and we get some more warmth and sunshine before winter. As the season moves on and the clocks go back, the weather can get windier and wetter...



Use your senses to...

See the trees around us put on a remarkable display of colour as they prepare for winter. This is a wonderful time to go for a simple woodland walk or visit one of the dozens of arboretums (collections of trees in a park or garden) around the country, like the ones at Kew Gardens, Westonbirt or Kilmun (search online for a full list). Which trees are more orange, more red, or more yellow? Which have held onto their green hues the longest?



Can you catch a falling leaf before it hits the ground?



Smell the fallen autumnal leaves. Grab a handful from a pile under a grand old tree and lift them to your nose – what does it smell like to you?



Feel the unmistakable smooth surface of a conker or an acorn, as horse chestnuts, oaks and other trees drop their seeds before the winter.



Hear robins singing from hedges, trees and bushes.



They are one of the few birds left singing at this time of year, as they stake their claim to territory.

Taste freshly picked apples. Many fruits ripen at this time of year, notably apples. So there are chances to go and pick juicy fruits to eat fresh or try a new recipe with.



“I live near a park and adore watching the trees shift and change with the seasons. There is a line of grand tall trees as you enter, and as it turns to autumn, they take centre stage. Their bright red and orange leaves illuminate under the low set sun. As the autumn progresses the trees stand bare above a blanket of amber leaves, covering the grass below. It’s as though the trees have gifted them to the dogs and children to run and play amongst. The sound of them crunching gently under my feet is pure bliss!”



Supporter on Instagram



Get outside and...

Gaze at the moon and stars

You may wake to find morning mists out the window in the autumn, leading to bright chilly days. And the dark evenings but not-quite-winter temperatures can make this an ideal time to go outdoors to see the stars.

Wellbeing benefits:

Relaxation and mindfulness; connecting with others; being part of something bigger.



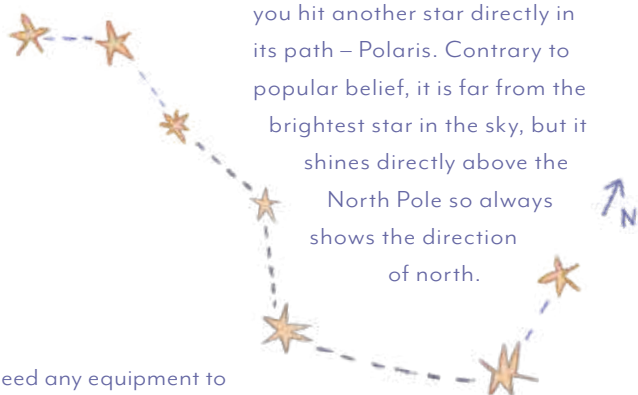
As we move towards winter, some of the most well-known constellations or asterisms (other shapes formed by stars) start to become visible earlier in the evening or morning – such as Orion the Hunter and his famous belt of three stars in a straight line.

Something you can do all-year round though is navigate your way to the North Star – Polaris – from the Plough (or saucepan or ‘Big Dipper’). The Plough is an asterism that forms part of the constellation Ursa Major or ‘the Great Bear’, and is quite easily spotted and recognised with its distinct handle and hook, or saucepan base.



Top tip: Try to give your eyes around half an hour to adjust to the dark, after which time you will see many more stars. While out there avoid using a torch and, if you need to, it is better to either have a red-light torch or tape a red sweet wrapper over the end of an ordinary torch – this helps your eyes to stay adjusted to the dark. Also go with a friend so you are not alone at night and let someone know where you have gone in advance.

You follow the line formed by the two stars that make up the side of the hook/saucepan on the opposite side to its handle. After a distance two or three times the depth of the hook/saucepan you hit another star directly in its path – Polaris. Contrary to popular belief, it is far from the brightest star in the sky, but it shines directly above the North Pole so always shows the direction of north.



You don't need any equipment to enjoy a starry sky (except perhaps some warm clothes) but if you have a pair of binoculars this can help you see the moon in surprising detail (especially if it is not full) and look deeper into areas with lots of stars to find the many more that the naked eye cannot see.

Plant a tree or volunteer for conservation work

Volunteering to help your local environment has many benefits for you and others. Autumn is the tree planting season in the UK, so you could join a local initiative to do this or even plant one in your garden if you have the space! Other activities across the year could be as varied as fixing fences, establishing wildlife ponds, sowing wildflower seeds or building 'bug hotels'. You can find out about

local opportunities by contacting a local conservation organisation such as your local 'Green Gym', Wildlife Trust, Woodland Trust or National Trust site (see 'Where to go for more' at the end of this guide for other suggestions).



If you live near the coast, you could also take the initiative to do a regular afternoon litter picking or beach clean. Bring along some friends or family to join you!





Wellbeing benefits:

Time in green spaces; staying active; connecting with others; creativity; gardening, conservation and farming; being part of something bigger.

And there is a lot you can do to help nature thrive around your home, such as planting bee-friendly flowers, putting up a bird feeder and table (particularly important in the autumn and winter months) or building a hedgehog house in time for hibernation.



Personal story

Red squirrel stand-off

My mind is busy, tired and full.
I need a break. So I step out
the door into the fresh air.

Birds are singing in a pocket of pine woods to my left, so I wander that way, walking alone, quietly and slowly. It's cool among the trees.



The soft layer of needles below my feet cushion and quieten my steps. The area has recently been disturbed and some trees felled, mixing dying golden colours with vibrant green regeneration.



After a couple of minutes down the path, I spot some movement on the ground in my peripheral vision. I freeze momentarily, excitedly yet sub-consciously engaging stalker mode. I step as silently as I can to a tree from which I can peer around and look in the direction of that mysterious movement...



But I am spotted first. A small, rust coloured creature bounces over twigs and skips through grass towards me. Can it be a red squirrel? They are so rare, I don't believe it...

But sure enough, as the creature approaches it is unmistakable. I see its tufty ears, big black eyes and bushy tail – more orange than red, in truth. I can't believe my luck. I've read and written about the threats to this endangered indigenous species, but never seen one with my own eyes. Here, in Scotland, are some of the last strongholds.

About five paces from me, this rare rodent pauses. I am still 'hiding' behind the rough barked pine trunk and craning my neck around, but there is no question my furry friend has seen me and is staring right at me.

Astonishingly, the squirrel rears onto its hind legs, stands tall and pumps its shoulders towards me – left, right, left, right... for several seconds. The rapid pumps reminiscent of a gorilla thumping its chest trying to impress and intimidate, only... smaller, and quieter.

After this display, the squirrel drops down on all fours again. It is poised on a fallen tree that lies diagonally towards me. My challenger steps forward and pointedly rubs its rear on the log as if marking its ground. A few hops closer and the squirrel is back up on its hind legs in a flash. It pumps its shoulders at me again – and for a longer spell this time. Then with a quick sniff of the air, the squirrel returns to all fours, spins and scampers up a nearby tree.

Only in this quiet and still moment of the stand-off do I notice the gentle and cool rain that has been falling, finding its way down from the thick, white clouds and through the canopy to reach my grateful face. Tuned in again to my surroundings, I also realise there is a cool breeze blowing. And I hear the chaffinches chirping, which I see in my peripheral vision moving all around us.



My red-tailed friend leaps through the air to another tree, then another – each further away from me. It leaps with skill not just strength, like a gymnast. I decide this is my cue and I turn to leave this squirrel in peace.

You never know what you will find in the woods if you look and listen carefully enough – I am grateful for that today. My mind is energetic, free and focused as I leave the pocket of trees.

By Will Baldwin-Cantello

This is your space.









Winter

**The season of frosty
mornings, quiet woods
and murmurations.**

Despite the dark and
the cold, there are some
magical moments only
to be experienced in
the winter.

Use your senses to...



See the spectacular murmurations of the starlings. The murmurations are the enormous flocks of starlings that move in unison across the sky at dusk as they prepare to roost for the night. The event starts as streams of starlings return to a roost site from all directions after a day out feeding. Then, as they prepare to roost for the night, these winter visitors create extraordinary shapes as they twist and turn, often in numbers reaching the tens of thousands. There are sites all around the UK where you can hope to witness this seasonal spectacular, but nothing in nature is guaranteed.

Hear the crunch of snow or frosted ground underfoot as you walk in a park or woodland.

Feel the soft yet prickly leaves of the holly tree that is a rare flash of lush green in winter landscapes. This tree and its red berry is a seasonal favourite around Christmas.



Top tip: For a national map of murmuration sites you can visit starlingsintheuk.co.uk. The starlings don't always roost at the same place each night, so don't be disappointed if you don't catch them close up first time – keep trying!

Taste pine needle tea. You will definitely want that warm drink on a winter's day outdoors so if you plan ahead you can get an added taste of nature at the same time. Pine needles have numerous health benefits, including being rich in Vitamins A and C. Simply add pine needles to hot water and let them infuse for a few minutes.

Top tip: Do not drink pine needle tea if you are pregnant. **Do not use yew and cypress needles,** which can sometimes be confused with pine. If in doubt, go with someone who can identify pine trees confidently or give it a miss until next time.

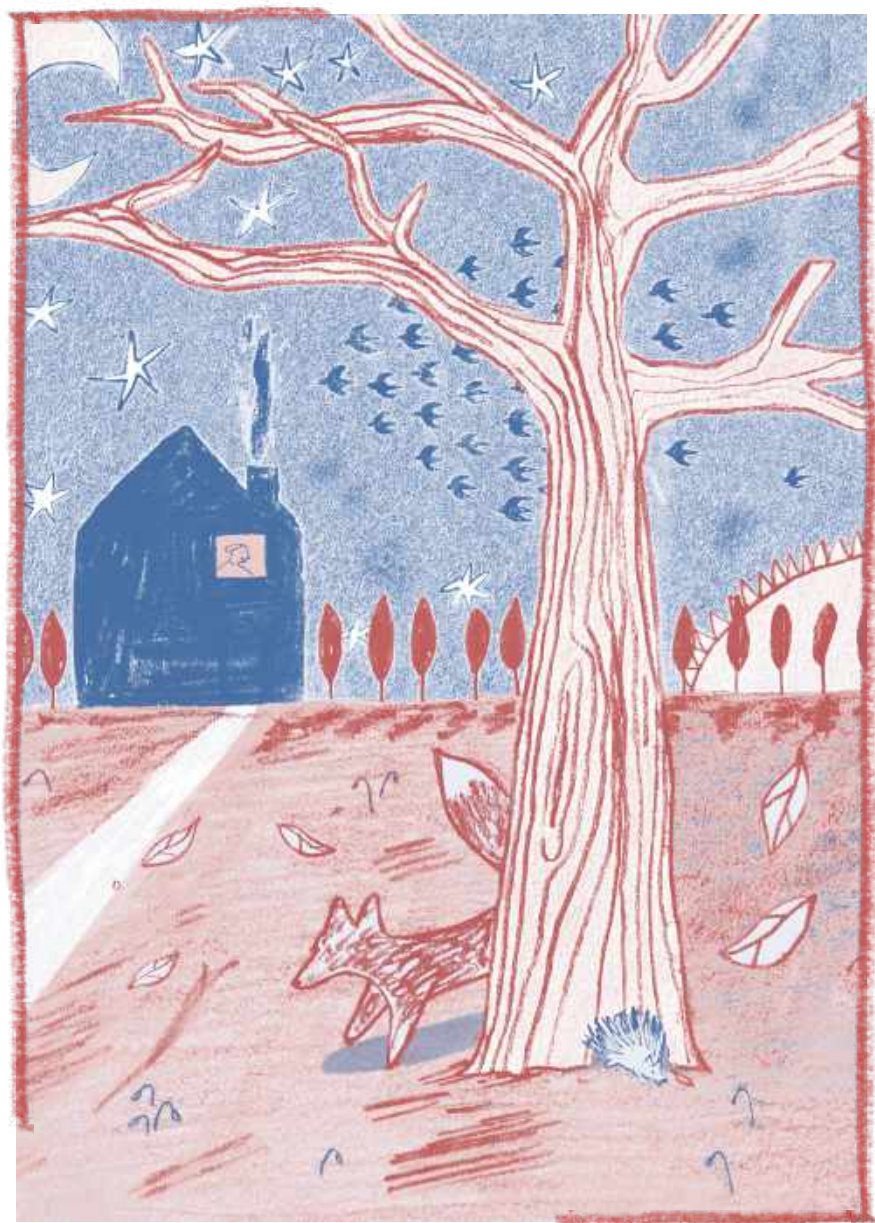


Smell... scents are a little suppressed in cold air, so you may need to pay particular attention to find the smell of winter. Can you smell damp earth in the woods, or woodsmoke from houses and canal boats nearby? Or perhaps of winter flowering plants like snowdrops?



**“I like the bleak and open landscapes of
winter and how quiet and still they are.”**

Supporter on Facebook



Get outside and...

Connect with animals

Animals are all around us all the time. From blackbirds to red foxes, and from terriers to tabby cats.



At home you might be able to attract some garden birds with a feeder and bird bath.

You can watch the different species popping up and see how they each behave. If you enjoy that, then you could

visit a nature reserve with bird hides to take a look at more

birds in the wild. Or take a walk around your local

park and try to notice more of the birds you can see

and hear around you. Find a seat and close your

eyes for a minute or two; how many different bird

calls can you hear?



Wellbeing benefits:

Relaxation and mindfulness; finding nature in the city; creativity; time in green spaces; interacting with wildlife.



And for some bigger animals, visiting a city farm can offer the chance to get up close and personal with sheep, goats, horses and more.

Many such farms will also offer you the chance to become a volunteer and help them care for the animals hands-on.



Bring nature inside

Despite all your best intentions, sometimes in winter you just won't want to go outside. We all know that feeling. So why not make sure there is some nature inside with you for those bitter cold and rainy days? You can surround yourself with sights, sounds and smells of nature.

You could start by potting up some house plants to bring some greenery and flowers into your room. Over time you can nurture and care for these.

You could print and frame some photos of the beautiful natural places you have visited and enjoyed in the past. Put them up somewhere you will regularly see and notice them.

Bring the scent of the outdoors in, including through scented candles or diffusing essential oils from trees like pine and cypress. And you could even complete the atmosphere by playing some soothing natural sounds, whether that's the gentle flow of a babbling brook, the constant swoosh of crashing waves or the melodic songs of woodland birds. Many of these are easily available online or through music streaming services. Let these sounds cast your mind back to places you have been before and remember the sights and feelings you had there.

Top tip: If you plan ahead you can plant bulbs in the autumn and have them blooming in time for Christmas. Hyacinths, for example, can be planted in September and after spending most of the autumn in the dark can be brought out just before Christmas to bloom.



Personal story

City life

I love city life. The constant buzz of activity, the diversity of people and experiences, and the fact you're never short of something to do. I find it exhilarating.

But I also find living and working in a big city can be draining sometimes, too. A stressful day at work can be compounded by a stressful commute – crammed on an overcrowded train, people rushing past – it doesn't always allow you the time to relax or recharge. There have been times in my life where I've felt hugely overwhelmed and stressed, and haven't been sure how to escape the bustle.

That's where I've found nature – even in small amounts – has helped. For me it's an escape from my thoughts and my stresses; it's almost meditative.



If I've had a rough day, on my commute I try to count the trees that I pass. I try to notice the changes each day or each week – leaves falling, the sounds of different birds, seasons changing as I look out the train window. In the winter I look at stars or the changing moon and realise just how small we all are. The more I notice, the more I slowly forget about work or the people around me and feel part of something bigger. 

I find it incredibly reassuring to know that no matter what's happened in my day, nature's still there, just doing its thing, beyond our control. Even in the city we're surrounded by it. It puts things into much better perspective and helps me feel connected to the wider world – to forget my own trivial worries.

I love city life but for me nature is a crucial part of thriving amid the bustle.

By Jessica Birtles



This is your space.





**Where to go
for more**

If this guide has whetted your appetite to try a few activities and you want to find information about what's going on near you, here are some good starting points. Descriptions are largely taken from the organisation websites.



The Conservation Volunteers and Green Gym

Provide good opportunities to participate in voluntary work in the environment and join outdoor exercise groups.

Dementia Adventure

Helping people living with dementia to retain a sense of adventure through connection to the outdoors, themselves and their communities.

Disabled Ramblers

A charity working across England and Wales to help make the countryside more accessible to people with limited mobility and that organises accessible 'rambles'.

The Environment Trust

Educate, empower and mobilise people of all abilities to improve, preserve and protect their neighbourhood for the benefit of nature and people everywhere. Based in southwest London.

Field Studies Council

Offer opportunities to learn and engage with the outdoors, including health and wellbeing experiences around the country.

Forestry Commission

This national body looks after many forests and woodlands that offer various outdoor activities – from accessible walks to mountain bike trails. Take a look online and see if there is a forest site near you.

Mind

This mental health charity has a lot of useful information on their website about options for and the benefits of ‘ecotherapy’.

National Trust

With very many sites around the country, there is a good chance there is one near you! Also provide working holidays and other volunteer opportunities.



Ramblers

An association of people and groups who come together to enjoy walking and other outdoor pursuits, as well as ensuring the provision of infrastructure and places for people to go walking. The related Walking for Health is England’s largest network of health walks with over 360 active schemes.

Riding for the Disabled Association

Provide therapy, fitness, skills development and opportunities for achievement, through activities like riding and carriage driving. Welcome clients with physical and learning disabilities and autism.

RSPB

There are many reserves that could offer you the chance to try your hand at a little birdwatching, including sites recommended for viewing the spectacular starling murmurations.

Social Farms & Gardens

A UK-wide charity supporting communities to farm, garden and grow together, and providing information for your local area.

The Outdoor Guide

A free-to-access online resource for walking, set up by Julia Bradbury and her sister Gina, that brings together information for walks around the UK and Europe to promote healthy living outdoors for all the family. TOG also has a section called AccessTOG, dedicated to creating a more accessible countryside suitable for wheelchair users plus buggies and pushchairs.

The Wilderness Foundation UK

Run programmes to develop future sustainability leaders, build resilience in vulnerable teenagers with challenging lives and mental health issues, introduce rural employment to urban youth, and bring curriculum-based sciences to life in the outdoors.

Wildlife Trusts

Look after many nature reserves and produce material to inspire our experiences in nature, and offer 'Well-being through Nature' courses at a range of locations providing a supported journey.

Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust

Provide access, activities and conduct research to support the physical and mental health benefits that time in nature, and specifically 'blue spaces' like wetlands, can provide.

Woodland Trust

Restoring and maintaining healthy woods for everyone to enjoy around the country, and in many there are also activities run for health benefits.

Mobile Apps

Seek

This is an app designed by iNaturalist with WWF and it uses photos you take on your phone to help you identify plants and animals you find. You can interact with others in the app as well. Often you will want to get a digital escape when out in nature, which is great, but for those times you want to be learning about species around you this is a good place to start!

Suggested reading

Waterlog by Roger Deakin

The Almanac by Lia Leendertz

Into Nature by The Mindfulness Project

The Wild Remedy by Emma Mitchell

365 Days Wild by Lucy McRobert

Mindfulness and the Natural World
by Claire Thompson

And there is much more out
there to be found in your
library or local bookshop!



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Mental Health Foundation is a registered charity in England 801130 and in Scotland SC039714 / **mentalhealth.org.uk**



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