fresh air

Leap into the Great Outdoors

FREE
OUTDOORS MAGAZINE
Issue 1 | 2026

Spread Your Wings
With Butterfly Walks, Birdwatching and River Volunteering

Interviews
Birds and the Belles
Cambridge Bike Party
IceBreakers
Jo Moseley
The Yorkshire Dippers

Expert Summer Foraging Guide

Mini City Adventures

Pool Appreciation
Swim outdoors in these amazing lidos this summer

SWIMMING | FORAGING | SUP| WALKING | NATURE | BIRDWATCHING



Dip in, plunge in

...to a water theme in this first issue. Left to right: The Yorkshire Dippers, Birds and the Belles, Paddle the Dee.

Welcome

It is a delight to introduce you to the first issue (2026) of Fresh Air, a free magazine full of approachable ways to access nature and the outdoors.

Exploring the outdoors doesn't have to require a mountain to climb. It could be crossing a city in a different way. In the first pages, you'll find those types of adventures. Cambridge Bike Party founder, Patricia, explains the transformation of bikes and lights upon her city's landscape (P6), while York Georgian Festival (P8) will lead you through the streets in style. Glasgow's Botanic Gardens (P5) provide a hidden tropical route.

A water theme links some of the stories. Paddle the Dee guide visitors through Chester by water (P10). Successful author Jo Moseley inspires us with a paddleboard adventure on page 28. I've also got a checklist of outdoor lidos to visit thanks to the pool tour (P17). As a former river volunteer, I heartily recommend reading about the Ribble Rivers Trust on page 35.

I found the stories of The Yorkshire Dippers (P12) and IceBreakers (P14) equally empowering, with different tales to tell. Birding with Birds and the Belles was also a great day - have you visited the reserves they recommend?



On the Cover

Conwy Town Walls. The North Wales path crosses them (P32).

Talk to Us

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@fresh_air_magazine

Two long-distance, but beginner-friendly, walks feature on pages 31 - 34. Thank you to English Heritage for sharing some insights into Whitby Abbey. On page 38, Butterfly Conservation shares tips for spotting butterflies on their Upper Thames guided walks.

Finally, on page 40, foraging professionals Lisa Cutcliffe, Julie and Matthew Bruton-Seal, and John Rensten describe ways to find some great summer edible plants and learn more about our cities in the process.

Many thanks to all the wonderful people in this issue and thank you to you, reader, for stopping by.

Leanne Dempsey
Editor



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Find different way to explore our urban jungles. Starting in the Botanic Gardens in Glasgow, we cycle the streets with Cambridge Bike Party, see York during its Georgian Festival, and explore Chester from the water with Paddle the Dee.

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Dip into outdoor communities that gather around water. Read about how The Yorkshire Dippers started their wild swimming group. IceBreakers, the men's charity, talk cold-water immersion, community, and seeking new places to dip. We then tour outdoor pools and lidos, before chatting to Birds and the Belles about the emergence of their all-female birding network. They also share their birding tips and five favourite wetland reserves.

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The water theme continues as successful author and paddleboarder Jo Moseley details her journey from coast to coast - from Liverpool to Goole via the canals. If walking is more to your taste, make a pilgrimage from English Heritage's Whitby Abbey and follow in the footsteps of a female leader along the East Yorkshire Coast. Another seaside route follows: the North Wales Path.

Step into Nature 35

Connect with flora and fauna from page 35, with a talk to Ribble Rivers Trust about the value of citizen scientists in river monitoring. Take a guided butterfly walk with Butterfly Conservation, before rambling through the urban landscape via its edible summer plants - with advice from four foraging experts.



Photo: Gareth Jones



Photo: English Heritage



Photo: Dave Gibson

How Will You Dive Into The Great Outdoors?



Photo: Shell Clarke

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Photo: J and M Bruton-Seal

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Mini City **ADVENTURES**

Not all outdoor adventures mean climbing mountains. We can find odysseys in a city landscape with a change of perspective. Here are four ways to view four different cities: from plants to pedals, paddles to parades.

Glasgow Botanic Gardens

Inside Kibble Palace glasshouse, it's hard to imagine the Glasgow traffic is just metres away. The Botanic Gardens are a tranquil oasis and a 25-minute walk from Kelvingrove Art Gallery.
Find the giants in the grounds (Giant Redwoods are here).
Spot bunches of Bananas.
In fact, find many recognisable ingredients, including Tea Tree and Mango, labelled and living in the glasshouses.

730 Great Western Road, Glasgow. G12 0UE Free entry and tours
glasgowbotanicgardens.com



Eve' admires the Tree Ferns collection in Kibble Palace glasshouse.

Photos: Leanne Dempsey

Light Up The CITY

Once a month, a friendly group cycles through the city of Cambridge – with bikes, lights, costumes, and catchy tunes. All you need to bring are your wheels.

This is Cambridge Bike Party, what founder Patricia Lambert calls "a monthly social cycle event for the whole community."

Bike Parties are social cycling events, where participants follow a leader, and the music, across a route. In 2018, researchers studying San José Bike Party noted the differing interpretations of bike parties, from small groups following a set route, to 1000s of riders stopping traffic with their numbers.

When Patricia, a US native, first moved to Cambridge, she enjoyed getting to know the city by bicycle. Having experienced first-hand the success of San Francisco Bike Party, she decided to start her own in her new city - albeit with some alterations. Cambridge Bike Party is a more intimate, harmonious affair: stopping at lights together, taking life at a cruising pace. It balances adventure with knowing where you are going.

Patricia's commitment to making the event accessible for all has produced a winning formula. Each monthly cycle adopts a different 2-hour city route, alternating half-hour party stops with half-hour leisurely cycles. This proves a hit with families and little legs on Halloween rides, or visitors and newbies who fear they'll never keep up, having not got on the saddle since childhood. No one is left behind. All feel welcome.

Each month's theme guides the music choices. She dips into all genres, looking for the theme words. "We had a day-night theme recently, so music had to incorporate those topics". There have been Reggae, Disco, Under the Sea, and Alter Ego Rides to name but a few. Riding the first half of the event before sunset allows guests to view the city by light, in ways they'd never seen it before. The latter half sees them cycle under the stars, lighting the way with bicycle décor.

Patricia wonders if one aspect of her Cambridge Bike Party may be unique. "I never play the same song twice," she says. These songs are played once on one ride. Each ride is a curated soundtrack. "I'll do test rides, and I try to time the song to where we are in the city." She considers the architectural landscape, and how she might elevate that space into something magical. On a Christmas ride, they cycled Trinity Lane to Carol of the Bells. A river ride was adorned with water-themed tunes across genres. King's College may be greeted with the Star Wars theme. If the route passes through a busy area, the crowds are considered, and the music chosen to engage the stationary audience. "They look at us sometimes and for a moment think 'why are there cycling pirates?' Then (seeing the brand flags) 'oh it's Bike Party!" Audiences often dance along with them. One guest said "I feel like I'm in a parade!" Researchers Terry and Todd (2014) likened bike parties to "collective performance".

It's a joy for Patricia when guests say "Where are we? I've never seen this road!" - even if it may be but minutes from their own street. She enjoys finding new ways to view Cambridge, then sharing them with the group. Visitors coming from the UK and abroad time their trip to hire a bike and tag along with that month's Bike Party.

At the midpoint, the Party watches the sunset, admiring costumes and sharing snacks. Their troupe included mermaids and octopus outfits when their Under the Sea Ride meandered by the river. When their Berlin Techno Ride passed through a concrete subway, Patricia noticed how much everyday streets transform with lights and the right song.

The costumes, Patricia says, "let people disconnect from daily life". However, she stresses the costumes and lights are optional: "The most important thing is showing up".

And when you do, for one night only, the city streets feel like yours.

cambridgebikeparty.com

"The most important thing is **showing up**"





Cambridge Bike Party is fun, free, and friendly. Follow the music, join the pedal parade, and explore in style.



"I never play the same song **twice**"





Party Time

Monthly themes inspire the music and costumes. Rides so far include Under the Sea, 70s Rockstar, Pirates, and Outer Space.
Photos: Cambridge Bike Party

Parade Through The PAST



York Mansion House: The hosts open their doors on St Helen's Square ready for festivities.

Photos: York Mansion House

Walk through another era this August at York's Georgian Festival.



Immerse yourself in 18th-century splendour this August with a visit to the York Georgian Festival. From 6-10 August, York Mansion House will host the fourth edition of this engaging festival with a packed interactive programme. York has continued to collect architecture and stories from every era since its Roman beginnings, but Georgian England more than any other paved the way to our own society. It gave us Jane Austen, industrial revolution, train travel. Many of its changes feature in the festival's talks.

Join the Parade

On Saturday 8 August, the parade begins at Clifford's Tower, heading to York Mansion House with His Majesty's 33rd Regiment of Foot leading the way. Book a free place online to join in - dressing up is optional. There will also be a series of regimental drills and Galliard Dancers displays throughout Saturday 8 and Sunday 9 August. These will take place in St Helen's Square outside Mansion House itself.

Take Dancing Lessons

Learn to dance, Georgian style, at The Guild Hall on Friday 7 August. Why not brush up your skills especially for the next day's Masquerade Ball? Little lords and ladies can also attend a lesson on Thursday 6 August at York Mansion House.



Learn Fan Language

Discover how the Georgians sent secret messages across the dance floor with fan language lessons, taking place at York Mansion House on 6 and 7 August.



Attend the Masquerade Ball

Book a place for the Ball at 7pm on Saturday 8 August in the Grand Assembly Rooms. This annual spectacle of period-style dresses and dancing includes masks this season. Dance the Past will be on hand to guide the dancing, while Eboracum Baroque will provide the live music.

A Taste of Georgian Life

Georgians liked to promenade, so there's a bookable river walk on Friday 7 August with York's Hidden History. If you prefer to learn more history, there are talks and tours throughout the festival covering topics from female convicts to the slave trade, and from Georgian cooking demonstrations to papercrafts and dress customs.

"The popularity of the Georgian and Regency period shows no sign of slowing down, with people finding so much joy in recreating the social occasions of the time. We aim to bring some of that joy to the streets of York." – Richard Pollitt, York Mansion House

York Mansion House is a Georgian Lord Mayor's residence with four floors of history. Learn more about the festival and book events at **yorkgeorgianfestival.co.uk**

Paddle Through HISTORY

Jamie Greenhalgh, director of **Paddle the Dee**, guides paddlers right up to Chester's historic Roman walls.



Jamie Greenhalgh

We're spoilt for choice of waterway tours through Chester in the capable hands of Paddle the Dee, the professional river paddling instructors. They offer tuition and tours through a city that holds more than 2000 years of history.

On a kayaking tour, you get to glimpse the city from a different perspective and calmer pace. Chester has long-established facilities for its stretch of the Dee. Its river access points, including a public launch point, facilitate activities such as tour boats, rowing clubs, sailing clubs, and the annual Dee Mile swim. Its landscape, a combination of green spaces and history, invite paddlers to leave daily troubles on the banks and immerse in nature. "You can go right to the City Walls," says Jamie of his tours. "Past Sandy Lane Park, past the Chester Meadows, through the history. It's picturesque, really."



Kayaking on the Weir: Chester Weir and Salmon Leap is listed Grade 1 by Historic England.



Staying on the Water: these sturdy inflatable kayaks give beginners more control. Sitting on, not in, is also more accessible for newcomers.



Photos: Paddle the Dee

For the adventure curious, you could try a whitewater session. The weir managing the river's tides includes what Jamie describes as a "watery staircase". It is these steps where beginners get a taste of whitewater kayaking through expert tuition.

Whether taking a kayaking tour or trying out a whitewater session, both options utilise a sit-on kayak. There's no cloth covering over the opening – though the team do offer lessons in cloth-covered kayaks too. By sitting on the kayak, there's no need to roll or submerge - something that can deter beginners from the sport. Instead, paddlers learn to control a sturdier boat - without fear of capsizing. It opens up the accessibility of the sport.

"Just because the sport can be extreme, doesn't mean it has to be done in an extreme adventure," says Jamie. "You can do it in your own way."

The same can be said for their weekly SUP skills tours. Stand-up paddleboarding does not require standing up, if that's not your way. You learn how to paddle kneeling, standing, or on your tummy.

These tours include hire of a board, paddle, and buoyancy aid - no need to bring your own. Jamie and his team teach foundational skills such as SUP safety and steering of these sturdy boards. "SUPs are good at going in a lazy straight line. We teach how to go straight, how to turn - but more efficiently." With these skills, you are all set for adventure.

Paddle the Dee run various tours throughout the year. Find out more at **paddlethedee.com**

The City of Chester by Water

Chester Meadows: parts are called 'Eyes' from medieval times, meaning 'island'.
The Weir: has Norman origins.
The Old Dee Bridge: has been guiding visitors into the city since the 14th century.
Bridgegate: one of four medieval gates, once guarding Chester from Welsh invasion.
City Walls: Roman in origin, with Norman extensions. Chester is the only British city with a **complete** circuit of **ancient** walls.

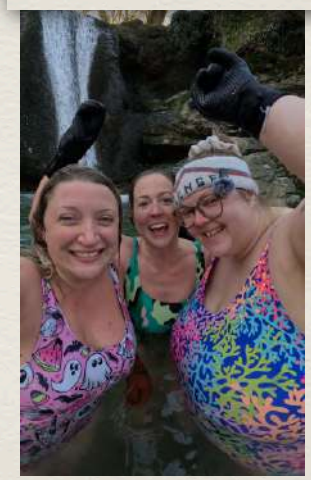
"Just because the sport can be extreme, doesn't mean it has to be done in an extreme adventure. You can do it in your own way."











Photos: The Yorkshire Dippers

DIP INTO COMMUNITY

The Yorkshire Dippers began as three friends, Vic, Emily, and Leia. That friendly approach is at the heart of their wild swimming community.

Back in December 2023, Emily Starkey & Victoria Colquhoun-Postill, alongside their friend Leia, took to social media to invite others on a few wild swims. Over 40 people would join them for what they called Wet January. In that moment, The Yorkshire Dippers community took shape. We caught up with Emily and Vic to learn more about TYD, wild swimming, and wellbeing.

Why Wet January?

TYD: As non-drinkers, Dry January seemed pretty irrelevant to us. Instead, we decided to visit a new and exciting swim location every weekend and call it Wet January. It is just that month where people need a bit of a pick me up. Money is often tight, the weather is crap, the days are short, regrets of over-indulgence kick in. It's just the perfect month to get outside and enjoy nature. Yes, it rains, but we are getting wet anyway! Over time, we have realised how much joy it brings and how much it helps people. Wet January is probably our most popular time for new people to come along.

It's Not Just A January Dip Though, Right?

TYD: We decided on monthly trips out but we would also invite people along to our weekly swims at Pool Bridge Farm (near York). We meet there at least twice a week. In the summer we float on floaties and jump from jetties. In the winter, we smash ice and swim under the twinkling fairy lights.

Describe A Typical Event.

TYD: To summarise: squeals, belly-laughter, snacks, swear words, nature, and love!

Vic, You Spoke Publicly About Self-Consciousness And Swimming. For Others Feeling The Same, What Would You Say?

Vic: Oh I'm so glad you asked this because it's such a real thing. I talked about it with This Girl Can and on my blog. At the start I felt so self-conscious. It's such a weird "sport" in that we're basically standing around in what is socially acceptable underwear and pretending that's completely normal. If you're feeling like that before coming, you're not the only one.

Honestly, nearly everyone has that wobble before their first swim. The outfit overthinking. The 'does this cling in the wrong place?' spiral. It's very normal. What I've found though is that once you're there, it fades so quickly. People are cold, laughing, trying not to drop their towel in the mud. No one is analysing your body. Everyone is just focused on getting changed and getting in.

Wild swimming especially isn't glossy or performative. It's bobble hats, goosebumps, red knees and big grins. All sorts of bodies just getting on with it. That's actually what makes it feel freeing. Wear what makes you feel comfortable. Swimsuit, shorts and a tee, wetsuit, whatever works. There's no 'right' look. The first dip is always the hardest, socially and temperature-wise. After that, it's just magic.

Any Tips For Newcomers?

TYD: If you're considering it, but putting it off, just try it. Just dip your toes in (literally and figuratively). You'll probably love it! For gear, the main thing is swimwear, towel, neoprene (when cold), a drink, and something to get changed under.

What Makes A Great Swim Location?

TYD: Top of the list is safety. We try to choose spots with plenty of safe entry and exit points. Places that are accessible for a quick dip of the shoulders for those who aren't ready to go out of their depth. We stick to spots we are familiar with so we can put appropriate risk assessments in place. Unfortunately, we also have to monitor water quality. But we also consider the beauty. We want people to experience that wow moment with us, it's such a privilege.





Photos: The Yorkshire Dippers

What Do Members Think?

TYD: It is such a pleasure and privilege to run the group and be able to bring so much joy to so many people's lives. Take it from one of our regulars who said, 'The best bit is having a spectacular group of real friends who all care about each other and are there for you when you need it. Thank you for creating this community that has made life so much more for so many of us!'

The Yorkshire Dippers is a non-profit wild swimming community. Find out more here:
linktr.ee/theyorkshiredippers
@theyorkshiredippers



Photo: Gareth Jones

WE DIP AS ONE

Cold-water immersion, exercise, and a safe space for men to chat. Jack Horner talks to us about the IceBreakers Way.

Imagine today is Sunday and it's 8am. It could be raining, it could be glorious. Either way, the men will be there. At various places from Bath, Brighton, and Bristol, to Bude, London, and the River Findhorn near Inverness, groups of men meet for this weekly cold-water immersion. It begins with movement, ends with movement, and they dip in between. Every week. 8am. This is the IceBreakers Way. It's now a charity, and it's so popular they are on the hunt for places to start new chapters.

Founders Jack Horner, Tim Bowles, and Arron Collins-Thomas all had experience in wellbeing coaching, but noticed their local retreats in South West England had a shortage of men. They wanted to create a wellbeing space, an alternative to the pub where men felt more comfortable attending. However, as Jack Horner explains, they were mindful of not making it "too woo woo". "Our audience is blokes who want to connect, but struggle a bit," says Jack.

With that in mind, the three founders hosted a sample WellMan event to gauge local interest. Of all the activities, the attendees were buzzing about the cold-water immersion. They found a river dipping location at Warleigh Weir, an evergreen beauty spot 5 minutes from Bath, and started their first chapter of IceBreakers. But the dip is only part of it. Wanting to offer something unique, they researched cold-water swimmers and their strategies for





The IceBreakers founders



Photos: Gareth Jones

"The water is a metaphor for encountering something difficult."

adjusting to water temperatures. Warm-up exercises prior to entering cold water seemed uncommon. Also, the founders noticed that after a dip, it could take some outdoor swimmers hours before they felt restored to their normal temperature. Co-founder Arron, a Qigong instructor, already taught warm-up movements. He believed these exercises could prepare swimmers: first to enter water in a calmer state, then to restore core warmth more successfully upon exit. Applying this knowledge to their sessions, they began hosting dips with a difference.

All sessions start with a warm-up. The leader guides the men in some breathwork so when they all enter the cold water, they have techniques on hand to regulate their breaths. "We want them to experience that parasympathetic response, not plunge into fight or flight," explains Jack. After a short dip, they return to more Qigong-inspired moves. Some men struggle with this part at first. They might miss out the moves and just come for the dip. Jack understands. "I mean, there's 30 or 40 of us blokes clapping half naked on a river bank. It is quite tribal. It can take a bit to get over



WHAT IS IT? A community for men with dips, walks, retreats, saunas, BBQs and chatting round a fire.
WHERE IS IT? Bath, Brighton, Bristol. Bude, North London, River Findhorn (Inverness).
ANY COST? Forever FREE. Saunas may incur a charge.
HOW TO JOIN? All details are on icebreakers.uk

The charity is looking for new places for the men to dip and chat. Jack says demand is there, and men are stepping up to lead, but the difficulty is finding safe wild swim spots with entry points. If you know a place, or would like to lead a chapter in your area, visit icebreakers.uk to contact them.





Photos: Ed Schofield

that self-consciousness, to realise it's important. It has purpose. It 100% works – it warms you up." It all works. Going from what Jack calls "three blokes on a riverbank" to 800 men is testament to the method. The Bath group was joined by another at Bristol. A couple of visiting men asked if they could set one up in Brighton. The chapters swim in rivers or meet at the beach, while in London their nearest accessible swim is a lido. That intention to create a space for wellbeing, without overdoing it, has hit the spot. The cold-water immersion is a good opener. "The water is a metaphor for encountering something difficult," Jack says. "Once you get to that euphoria, it's resilience building. We do it shoulder to shoulder."

By treating it as a regular ritual, it fosters trust. They all do the same thing, creating a level playing field. There's no competitive element that might hamper safe space for connection.

Most chapters now have additional social offerings. Several have sauna sessions, running clubs, and ad-hoc swims. IceBreakers Bath does a monthly Brekkie and a Brew, bringing out the BBQs and cooking whatever the men bring.

Some chapters lie close to rural areas where isolation may be more of a risk factor. For some of the men, it is a social lifeline, possibly their only safe men's space to open up without judgment. Members use phrases like 'life changing', 'inspiring'; a place to 'let off steam.'

National statistics highlight the need for such spaces. The NHS Mental Health 2025 bulletin found men accessing talking therapies less than women. A 2023 Parliament briefing on men's health stated men were less likely to seek support or confide in loved ones about their mental health. But at IceBreakers? It's okay to confide. It's okay even to turn up with your towel and simply dip. There's no pressure.

Recommendations bring men from all kinds of backgrounds. Jack says some partners send their men. You don't need to be a man in crisis to attend. Some do it for a natter, or to keep on top of their health. According to Jack, most of the men dip in swimming trunks, with warm clothes and a hot drink for after. Dryrobe even gifted them kit to lend to new members.

Right now, the difficulties are more in finding dipping places, rather than leaders. The charity are working on new chapters and looking for new waters. IceBreakers are not going away. Sunday. 8am. They dip as one.

icebreakers.uk



Photo: Hampton Pool

Pool Appreciation

Get to know outdoor swimming in a pool this summer. These eight pools and lidos across England and Wales all offer something different: from warm swims in summer, to saltwater in the suburbs, or winter under city skyscrapers. Dip in.

Lido Ponty
National Lido of Wales

Lido Ponty is a grade II listed 1920s gem in Pontypridd, South Wales. Its revival saw the restoration of original turnstiles and wooden cubicles, plus a new café and visitor centre. Three pools, heated to a pleasant 28 degrees, cater for all ages. Opening hours vary: do check their website for the latest timetable.

Ynysangharad War Memorial Park, Pontypridd CF37 4PE
Rctcbc.gov.uk





Photos: Lido Ponty

Seasonal Fun





Photos: Ilkley Lido

Ilkley Lido

This mushroom-shaped celebration of 1930s lido culture comes to life over summer. As well as the chance of a refreshing dip in the unheated pool, there's a café and additional events. This year includes outdoor yoga sessions and a visiting Nordic sauna. See their Instagram for details.

Denton Road, Ilkley, West Yorkshire LS29 0BZ
@ilkleylido
bradford.gov.uk



Jesus Green Lido

At 91.4m in length, Jesus Green has the joint longest lido in the country. The slender design mirrors its neighbour, the River Cam. Swimmers have been enjoying its unheated waters for over a century and you can too, all year round. There's also a sauna, café, and picnic areas.

Jesus Green Lido, (Off) Chesterton Road, Cambridge CB4 3AX
Jesusgreenlido.org



Photos: Jesus Green Lido

Different Dips

Britain's outdoor pools offer quite the variety in design, seasonality, and water temperature. The type of water may also be different: Droitwich Spa Lido affords a rare inland opportunity to swim in a saltwater pool.

Droitwich Spa Lido

This 1930s Arts and Crafts lido reopened in 2007 after a unanimous local vote in its favour. In summer the sun terrace and children's wet play area complement a heated saltwater pool. In winter, cold water sessions are available for adults.

Lido Park, Worcester Road, Droitwich Spa, Worcestershire WR9 8AA
riversfitness.co.uk



Photo: Droitwich Spa Lido

Portishead Open Air Pool

Overlooking the Bristol Channel, Portishead Open Air Pool has community at its heart. There are swims for all, from general swims to twilight dips and SEN sessions. It remains open all year round: heated for the summer season, mostly cold for the winter, with hot treats from the café. The colourful terrace transforms into seating for an outdoor cinema in summer.



Photo: Ben Maliphant



Photo: Portishead Open Air Pool

Esplanade Road,
Portishead, Somerset. BS20 7HD
portisheadopenairpool.org.uk

Sea Views



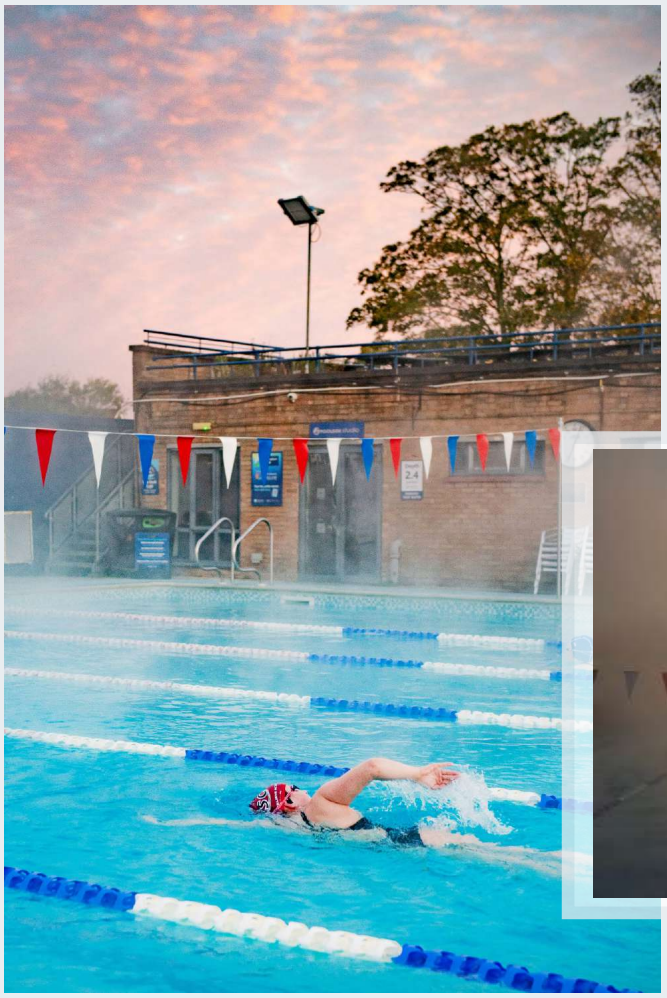


Photos: Sea Lanes Brighton

Sea Lanes Brighton

Swim in all seasons at Sea Lanes, The National Open Water Swimming Centre at Brighton. The 50m pool's 6 lanes remain heated to 19 degrees. Overlooking the coast, it describes itself as a stepping stone to the sea. Good food and accessibility are also key features.

300 Madeira Drive, Brighton. BN2 1BX **sealanesbrighton.co.uk**



Hampton Pool

Enjoy heated outdoor swims throughout the year at Hampton Pool, a stone's throw from Hampton Court Palace. It's a thriving pool for the people: as well as a gym, teaching pool, and café, it has BBQ club, family water polo, and summer concerts.

High Street, Hampton, Middlesex, TW12 2ST **Hamptonpool.co.uk**



Photos: Hampton Pool

City Swims





Photos: Sea Lanes Canary Wharf

Sea Lanes Canary Wharf

Swim among skyscrapers at the new Sea Lanes site: a 50m unheated natural pool in Eden Dock, Canary Wharf. The pool has accessible features and opportunities for paddleboarding and freediving, as well as year-round swimming and a sauna.

Eden Dock, Heron Quays Road, London. E14 4HJ **sealanescanarywharf.co.uk**

Birding Without Barriers

Birds and the Belles talk beginner birding, favourite reserves, and the benefit of birdwatching in a group.

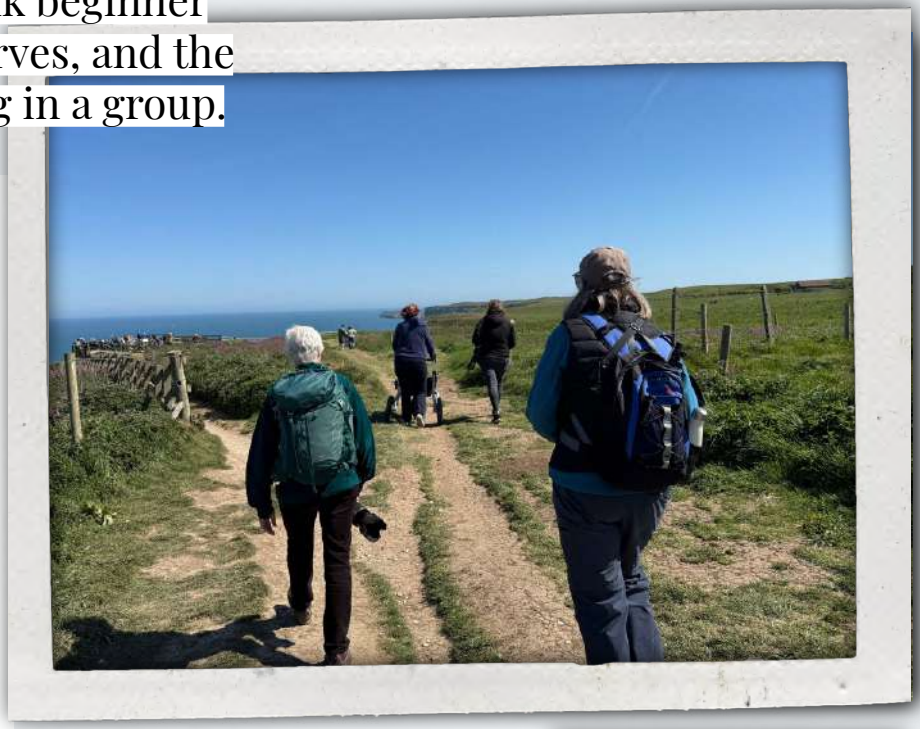


Photo: Ali Marley

"When I first asked that question, I thought there would be groups", says Shell Clarke. She is talking about the moment in 2024 when she enquired on social media about other women joining her at a Yorkshire bird reserve. She thought there would already be female birding groups in the area. To her surprise, she could find none. Nevertheless, the response to her idea of meeting was positive enough to put the idea into action. The first event, at North Cave Wetlands near Hull in October 2024, was the first meeting of her group Birds and the Belles. It is now a national all-female birdwatching network.

"I was ambitious from the beginning", she says. "I had a gut feeling it was needed and I ran with it." This determination has fuelled the growth from one group to several, when Shell noticed that women were travelling two hours or more just to reach the Yorkshire meet-ups. The initial growth was organic – groups popped in England in the North West, North East, and in Yorkshire, as members were travelling from these places. "What changed is the last six months," Shell explains. "We filled the north. Then someone got in touch from Oxfordshire." They were interested in leading, but would demand continue? No concerns needed. At the time of writing, groups have begun in Derbyshire, Dorset, Hertfordshire, Norfolk and Wiltshire, with more emerging.

Meeting the Belles

A group of ladies are outside the visitor centre of RSPB Leighton Moss, Lancashire. Newcomers approach and spot Beth Sheils, the North West ambassador, in her branded hoodie. Her friendly demeanour soon eases members into a chat about what they'd like to see, including the Marsh Harrier and the new Tawny Owl chicks. Beth's hoping for a Hobby. A typical Belles monthly meet starts with birdwatching for 2-3 hours. Bird hides provide regular seated breaks. Ambassadors



Puffin: Julie Wilkinson

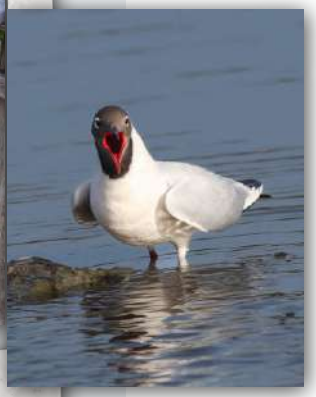
Sharing the View: many of the Belles also love photography, helping each other capture great birding moments.



Blue Tit: Shell Clarke



A Belles meet-up, with Beth Sheils (North West ambassador) at the front.



Photos: Beth Sheils

seek out reserves with toilets, parking, and cafés. Shell says "the social element is really important – that cup of tea and a chat at the end." Members are free to "dip in and dip out" at any time.

Offering Options

It's an irony that the network aiming to offer birding without barriers sometimes faces obstruction. They've been asked why the network is only for women. Some reserves, Shell explains, do not put up event posters in case it annoys other users. By contrast, other reserve managers are happy to see an increase in female birders, putting posters in every bird hide. These meet-ups, in offering a female-only environment, reduce barriers that vary because women attend for different reasons. Ali Marley, the North East ambassador, found members expressing wariness of venturing to unknown places alone. "We don't have many reserves in the North East" - so she takes her group further, to new places where some ladies express they would "feel insecure going on their own". Ali describes her role as "an enabler". For Shell, her own mobility issues in outdoor spaces made her feel vulnerable and crave a group to navigate the outdoors together. In choosing meet-ups at reserves with even paths and accessible hides, she noticed it attracted other members with similar experiences. Nevertheless, she concedes that not all women feel vulnerable or feel nervous about visiting places alone. It isn't necessarily that all members have to have had traumatic past experiences - although some have - to find it unnerving visiting places alone. But for ladies who don't wish to explore nature by themselves, Shell resolved not to let that stop them birding, by "making safety in numbers always an option".

Beth Sheils, the North West leader, was drawn to the group's space for female friendship at a time when making friends elsewhere felt difficult. "It can be hard as an adult to meet new people. People move away, or you grow apart," she says. But as an ambassador, "it's lovely to meet new people. You learn off each other in a no-pressure environment. It's not competitive." This absence of competition underpins the whole network, and impressed the editor of Bird Watching Magazine when he interviewed them in 2025.

Back at Leighton Moss, this supportive culture is visible. A new member has seen 99 birds this year and aims for her 100th today. The group are galvanised into find something for her. One lady hears a Cetti's Warbler – "is that on your list?" A beginner admits not knowing the bird and all rally to spot it, to share the knowledge. To help a new friend.

Getting into Birding



Photo: Shell Clarke

A Belles meet-up at North Cave Wetlands near Hull.

"Perhaps it's the expectation for us not to be experts. We're not led by experts, we're a team," says Shell on why the groups are so collaborative.

All three leaders are self-taught. Ali found birds through photography. When she had to quit work for a time due to chronic illness, her husband bought her a camera. During the pandemic lockdowns, she began photographing her garden birds. Once lockdown lifted, she ventured to RSPB Bempton Cliffs: "The zoo used to be my happy place, but Bempton became my 'zoo'." Ali fell in love with the birds there too, particularly the gannets. She taught herself professional wildlife photography while also studying seabird behaviour, returning again and again to see the gannets. This year, RSPB Bempton Cliffs asked her to run their photography workshops. Those birding efforts didn't just manifest into a profession - they transformed Ali's wellbeing. "My health is under control. I've conquered something." For her, it was time spent with the seabird colonies that made all the difference: "birds would reset me for the week. It grounds you. It's freedom."

Shell also began her birding journey at RSPB Bempton Cliffs. "I always loved birds. My dad had an aviary, but I wasn't a birdwatcher. Then (as an adult) I went to Bempton and I fell in love with the puffins. I became obsessed." She says her bird knowledge has soared since managing the network surrounded by members sharing photos, experiences, and tips.

Beth also recalls childhood days spent seeking out birds with her dad: "I can't remember a time I wasn't into birds." However, it was only after a difficult time as an adult that she reconnected with birdwatching in a more committed way. "It was the only thing that made me feel better. Birding gets addictive - you want to see all the species. It gives you a reason to stop and slow down. It's one thing saying go outside, but it's actually stopping and taking everything in."



Little Owl: Danni Burgess

There lies one of the benefits of birdwatching with the Belles. It's a dedicated time to stop everything and focus on nature. The network connects women who enjoy wildlife, not just birds. In Shell's words, they "hit the ground running in terms of conversation" because they always have that one interest in common.

Find the Flock

Birds and the Belles share their favourite northern wetland reserves - and what birds to look out for



Photo: Shell Clarke

The Belles at one of Blacktoft's bird hides

RSPB Blacktoft Sands

Blacktoft Sands occupy the largest tidal reedbed in England on the Humber Estuary. Look out for Avocets, Bitterns, Tree Sparrows, and their popular grazing ponies. The reserve has been a great supporter of Birds and the Belles events there.

Goole, East Riding of Yorkshire DN14 8HR Paid entry

rspb.org.uk 01405 704665

The Belles Say:

Shell: "Blacktoft is one of my absolute favourites. It's super accessible - several hides all with one path connecting to them. With very little walking you get a view of different things: Spoonbills, Brent Geese, Marsh Harriers. The Marsh Harriers drop food parcels."



Photo: Ali Marley

The faces of the group (including Ali, left) after seeing the Bitterns.

RSPB Leighton Moss

The reed beds here are the largest in North West England. Visitors flock to see the rare Bearded Tit, or 'Reedling', as well as a variety of wildlife across the marshes, woods, and saltwater lagoons.

Myers Farm, Storrs Lane, Silverdale, Lancashire LA5 oSW Paid entry

rspb.org.uk 01524 701601



Bearded Tit (female): Beth Sheils

The Belles Say:

Beth: "It's one of those places where you expect a lot – you've got a chance of Bitterns and Bearded Tits. It's one of their (RSPB) biggest reserves in the North West. It's buzzing with excitement."

Ali: "We were like a group of schoolkids seeing the Bittern!" (the group were treated to an hour of sighting these elusive birds)

North Cave Wetlands (YWT)

A recent transformation of this quarry into wetlands has attracted Avocets, Bitterns, and Yorkshire's largest sand Martin colony. Three of the hides are wheelchair-friendly, connecting to an accessible circular path.
Dryham Lane, Market Weighton, East Riding of Yorkshire HU15 2LY
ywt.org.uk *FREE entry*



Bittern: Shell Clarke

Go with a target in mind, says Shell. Get to know where it likes to live, like the Bittern (above). This improves your chances of seeing something new.

The Belles Say:

Shell: "It's incredible. Their list is impressive." (the reserve lists their species count on social media) "The Bitterns are a big deal. And they have Crane flyovers. You are always going to see something interesting."



Photo: Shell Clarke

Get to know a subject, says Ali. Knowing the Kestrel (above) hovers before diving for its prey helps you tell it apart from the other raptors at RSPB Marshside.

RSPB Marshside

In winter, Marshside becomes a goose airport, as Pink-footed Geese return in droves to these coastal saltmarshes. In summer, look out for seven raptor species.
Marshside, Southport, Sefton PR9 9PJ FREE entry
rspb.org.uk 01704 211690



Buzzard: Sue Davis

The Belles Say:

Beth: "I love Marshside. It's really accessible." (It is not a remote reserve; it lies directly on the Lancashire coast road into Southport). The Belles commented on the friendliness of the reserve's volunteers who help visitors spot the latest bird sightings.

RSPB Bempton Cliffs

This coastal reserve is like an apartment block for seabirds. The colony includes Gannets, Kittiwakes, Guillemots, Puffins, and Razorbills, all crammed onto the sheer cliff face. It appeared recently on BBC Springwatch 2026.
Cliff Lane, Bridlington, East Riding of Yorkshire YO15 1JF
rspb.org.uk 01262 422212
Entry charges



Gannets: Ali Marley

Get to Know the Gannets: when they lift their heads up, these seabirds are about to take off in flight.

The Belles Say:

Ali leads photography workshops here and when she speaks about the Gannets, it is with utmost respect for their beauty and determination. In spring storms, their early nests may blow off the cliffs. They start again, undeterred.

Shell describes it as an asset to the east coast. "It's a massive draw even to people who don't like birds." (on account of the incredible cliff path with expansive sea views)



Bempton Cliffs: Ali Marley



Guillemot: Ali Marley

Focus: Seek out the same birds. That way you get to know a bird's shape but also its quirks. For example, some Guillemots (above) have lines around their eyes like spectacles.



Gannet: Ali Marley

Use Your Senses: you know you are at a seabird colony before you even see it. The smell, as well as the noise, is a sensory experience!



Photo of Jo: Jumpy James

Paddle POWER

Author and film maker Jo Moseley talks about turning a dream into reality: a paddleboarding adventure from coast to coast.

THE DREAM

The moment Jo Moseley took her first paddleboarding lesson in 2016, she dreamed of venturing further: "my original idea was to go from Liverpool to Leeds. This felt like a fabulous long distance SUP (stand-up paddleboarding) route and yet one that also felt accessible in terms of the level of experience I had at the time - which was in fact one lesson!" However, the initial plan received some negative responses. "When I first shared the idea, I was met with sceptism and doubt," she says. " I was told it sounded boring, complex, and too difficult for a woman of my age - I was only 51! I am sad to say I listened to the naysayers and put the dream away." Her attitude changed after attending several funerals of female friends. "I realised that life is very short and if we have even the tiniest spark of a dream we owe it to ourselves to try." Her sons would both soon be at university - it was time for an adventure of her own. "When I finally embarked on the trip in 2019 I had decided to add an extra 34 miles so that it became coast to coast, from Liverpool to Goole. 162 miles, 200 bridges, and 101 locks."

The Canal and River Trust opened this route, known as the coast-to-coast canoe trail, in 2019. It crosses three counties and passes through both cities and countryside. It uses two canals: Leeds and Liverpool Canal and the Aire and Calder Navigation. Paddling a canal system provides an established and historic route to follow, yet few have actually completed it on paddle power. Jo was one of the first: "a friend had successfully completed it in February (2019) and I would become the first woman to do so."



Photo of Jo: Jumpy James

NAVIGATING UPS AND DOWNS

Jo admired the canal system's history, as well as the other waterway users: "I saw some gorgeous wildlife from the canal. Mainly in the rural areas. Oystercatchers, butterflies, sheep in the fields. Also Moorhens, geese, and swans. I was paddling in late July/August so the cygnets were quite big and the parents less territorial. "
There were downsides. "I found a lot a litter. Nests made up of discarded plastic. I even found birds that looked like they had choked on plastic. It was the grim reality of what we are doing to our inland waterways." One of the biggest obstacles, however, was believing she could do it. "One evening we stayed in someone's home that I had met online. I couldn't get to sleep, (I was) really doubting myself. I decided I could take as long as I needed to and it would be okay. I took all the pressure off myself and that was a turning point."

THE JOURNEY

"Originally I didn't have any back up support," Jo recalls. "I had started to think about pubs/hotels I would stay at nearby, and taxis to the canal. But then the film maker Frit Tam asked if they could make a film about my journey and joined me for 8 of the 11 days so we had a van."

Jo chose to collect litter along the route, raising awareness of the work of the 2 Minute Foundation. Another charity she supported was The Wave Project. In this way she instilled a sense of purpose into her journey.

She would carry her board, paddle, and leash on the towpath between locks. Other kit included waterproofs, a buoyancy aid, head torch (for canal tunnels), phone, power bank, water bottle, and snacks. The Canal and River Trust also rent out keys for their toilet blocks, while the canals' proximity to towns reduces the need to carry all food. Now all she needed to do was take the plunge.

"The beauty of a canal is that you are never far from the towpath and the water is usually relatively calm." Jo was able to paddle at a pace that enabled her to chat with towpath users. The novelty of the trail also attracted enquiries.
"I had some gorgeous conversations. I did have some questions about what I was doing. But the vast majority of people were incredibly friendly."
One of Jo's most memorable moments was towards the finish line: "the final day as I arrived in Goole will always stay with me. I had thought there would only be my Dad and a couple of others possibly, but Frit had contacted Paddle UK and the Canal and River Trust and there were supporters from both there. My friend Emma Kitchen paddled out for the final stretch in her kayak too. "

"Just as she met me the heavens opened. It poured with rain and then a rainbow appeared! When my Mum was dying in hospital she said that if we ever saw a rainbow she was close by. There is footage of me simply sobbing as I crossed into Goole and saw the rainbow. "



Jo now gives talks about adventure and wellbeing.

Photos: Jo Moseley



Jo attending Sheffield Adventure Film Festival.

GET INSPIRED

Jo's three books are published by Vertebrate Publishing. Find them at **adventurebooks.com jomoseley.com**

@jomoseley
@thejoyofsuppodcast_

THE IMPACT

Completing the trail had quite an effect on Jo: "There is a huge sense of accomplishment knowing you paddled from one side of the country to another. Many more people have climbed Everest than have done this!" But the journey did not end at the finish line. Jo collaborated with Frit Tam the film maker to take the adventure from trail to screen.

"We made a film about the journey called Brave Enough – A Journey Home to Joy. It has been screened at sell-out events online and adventure festivals. At the end of the film I reflect upon how much courage setting myself the challenge had given and it made me realise I was braver than I ever imagined I was. (The coast to coast) really helped my self belief. My confidence grew and as a result."

This confidence empowered Jo to make her own award-winning short film Found At Sea. She also wrote three SUP books and launched a podcast series The Joy of SUP – The Paddleboarding Sunshine Podcast. "I became an award winning, bestselling author in my 60s! Eleven days and 162 miles created quite a ripple effect and changed my life."

Jo has written two books about Stand-Up Paddleboarding: one featuring routes across Britain, another focusing on the Lake District. Her third book, published in 2025, saw her connect to others who love SUP. Adventures on the Water - the Power of Paddleboarding to Change Lives, features 27 inspiring stories of water, adventure, and wellbeing.

TRY SUP

Jo encourages people of all ages to try stand-up paddleboarding. Beginners can take their time on a board, especially on the canals. "You can paddle hard one day and have a slow easy relaxing trip another – you can adapt it to how you feel on the day."

Resting above the calm water can be empowering. "From the minute I stood up on a paddleboard during my first lesson on Derwentwater," says Jo, "I felt like 'a warrior not a worrier'. I felt strong, confident, and joyful."

Jo now gives talks to inspire others to start adventures and not let age deter anyone from having a go. She also advises a SUP lesson from a qualified instructor. They'll teach you how to paddle, turn, and stop safely. After that: your adventure awaits.

PATHS and PILGRIMS



Photo: English Heritage

Learn about a medieval female leader at Whitby Abbey.



Photo: English Heritage



Photo: English Heritage

Whitby Abbey (above) and its museum's edition of Dracula (inset).

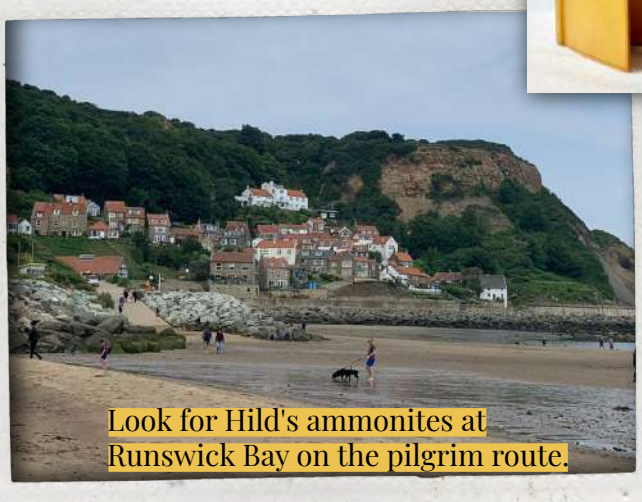


Photo: Leanne Dempsey

Look for Hild's ammonites at Runswick Bay on the pilgrim route.

One section of the North Yorkshire coast follows the footsteps of both a saint and a sinner.

Between Whitby and Hartlepool along the Yorkshire coast lies what British Pilgrimage Trust call The Way of St Hild. This is in honour of Abbess Hild, who led Hartlepool Abbey before founding Whitby Abbey in the 7th century. Though Hartlepool's Abbey no longer remains, Whitby Abbey still stands, a majestic ruin towering over the sea, sands, and streets of Whitby. English Heritage cares for the Abbey - once a monastery, now a museum and site of more than a thousand years of history and legends.

English Heritage explains that at the time of Hild's leadership, the Abbey was a place of sanctuary and political influence in a Britain made up of warring kingdoms. Hild is one of few medieval female leaders recorded in written history. The Abbey museum reveals some of these written stories: why Hild's symbol is an ammonite, how she inspired the first known poet of English verse, and how her Abbey influenced certain national traditions still in use today.

Whitby Abbey museum also hosts the first edition of a novel which draws pilgrims of a different kind. Bram Stoker's legendary titular vampire Dracula arrives in Whitby on the beach at Tate Hill Sands. A large dog bounds from Dracula's ship up the 199 steps towards the Abbey, past St Mary's Church, whose real graveyard is where Bram Stoker sourced character names from the gravestones. Watch the Dracula story brought to life in plays this summer in the shadows of the Abbey walls - see **english-heritage.org.uk** for more information.

Start long-distance walking with the North Wales Path: sixty miles of coast, climbs, and castles.

Take The HIGH ROAD

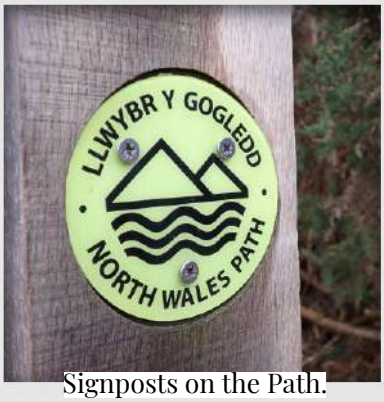


Photos:. Leanne Dempsey

Wales is one of few countries worldwide with a continuous coastal path. In total, it covers 870 miles of shores and more. If, however, you would like a long coastal adventure, but not *that* long, the North Wales Path provides hills, history, and sea views - all in a more manageable 60 miles.

The Path is a challenge, without being too wild or remote. Signposts are regular. The track is well-trodden, with alternatives in case of closure. Small towns are frequent and many have train stations so you could complete a day of walking and return by rail.

When the North Wales Path reaches Conwy, walkers have a choice: take the high road by following the black North Wales Path signs into Carneddau mountains, or follow the blue shell Coast Path signs for the lowland route along the shore, which reduces the trail to around 46 miles.



Signposts on the Path.



History Points on the route.

THE ROUTE

Starting at Prestatyn, the Path traces Victorian coastal resorts like Rhyl and Llandudno, before crossing the medieval fortress town of Conwy. It then climbs over Conwy Mountain into the Carneddau range, past Aber Falls, into the city of Bangor. Search for 'North Wales Path' on conwy.gov.uk for a free trail map. Alternatively, use 115 and 116 Ordnance Survey Landranger Maps.

SPOT THE STORIES

How many of the History Points can you find on or near the route? There are over 2500 signs across Wales including this trail. Scan the QR code or head to **historypoints.org** for insight into the places you find.

Photos: Leanne Dempsey



View on the limestone Great Orme, looking towards the eastern Little Orme.



St Tudno, a church with ancient history and open-air services.



Kashmiri goats overtaking on the road!

LLANDUDNO AND VICTORIAN SEASIDE

Starting in the east, the North Wales Path paces through a string of seaside resorts. They grew out of the Victorian era, when the Mostyn family turned Llandudno into a seaside resort to rival the spa towns. Walking into Llandudno from Little Orme, there remains the extensive sweeping promenade, saving many an ankle from clambering over the pebble beach and presenting a view of the pier and the Great Orme.

Even the Great Orme has that seaside holiday capacity to offer an accessible day trip, with trams and cable cars taking summer tourists to a visitor centre, the Copper Mines tour, and an ice cream - without ever climbing the hill.

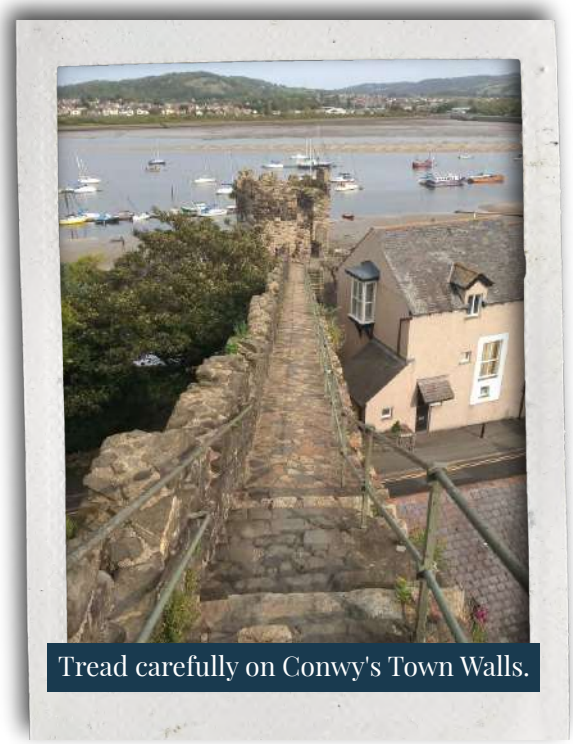
The Orme's history, however, extends far beyond the 19th-century resort. People and animals have lived on this peak for centuries - longer, if the 4000-year-old Mines included settlers. Detour from the outer road and ascend to the summit for the remains of a 13th-century village and St Tudno's church, with its open-air services in summer. The Orme's limestone habitat hosts unique plants and rare wildlife. Admire the view which includes Anglesey, Puffin Island, and Conwy Castle towards the west, and the Dee Estuary to the east.

Look around for the wild Kashmiri goats. Once a royal gift to the Mostyns, they are now free to roam – though heavy gates attempt to keep them from church services (or flowers).

Returning to the coast road, look for the lighthouse before journeying towards Deganwy, whose castle predates another fortress you are walking towards - Conwy.

CONWY AND THE PEAKS

Castles are a continuous feature along the corridor of the North Wales Path - though not all have guarded this stretch of coast. Gwrych Castle in the east near Abergele is a 19th-century revival of castle culture. National Trust's Penrhyn Castle, at the end of the trail, is an opulent homage to gothic fortresses. But crossing the River Conwy presents you with the 13th-century idea of a working castle. Conwy Castle greets visitors from the riverside, its many towers merging into the town's medieval walls. You can walk both the castle battlements and part of the Town Walls. According to Conwy Culture Centre, inhabitants born within those walls are nicknamed 'Jackdaws', perhaps because the real birds nest in the towers and holes in the walls.



Tread carefully on Conwy's Town Walls.

Photos: Leanne Dempsey

The North Wales Path's upland option leaves the walls behind at Bangor Road and heads left up the Mountain Road into the edges of the Carneddau Mountain Range. The first peak is the modest Conwy Mountain. Ruins of another hilltop settlement remain here too, dating back to the Iron Age. The Carneddau Mountains also contain two of Wales' five 1000m peaks but the North Wales Path skirts these.
The alternative Pilgrim's Way delves further into the mountains for stone circles and ancient churches. Its route featured on BBC Two's Pilgrimage.



Inside Conwy Castle.

Before the path leaves the mountains for Aber waterfall and Bangor's city streets, look out for Carneddau's own herd of ponies. Hoof marks in the trail lead off into the heather and lucky walkers may see both the ponies and their foals in spring.



Sychnant Pass, where the Path descends towards Capelulo and Penmaenmawr.

Ribble Rivers Trust works for the wellbeing of Lancashire waterways. They talked to us about how their local army of volunteers lead the way on river monitoring.



Photo: Dave Gibson

River CHAMPIONS

In 2024, after a long campaign by the Ribble Rivers Trust charity, Edisford Bridge on the Ribble at Clitheroe became Lancashire's newest Bathing Water site. However, after the first season of water tests, the Environment Agency gave it a 'poor' rating. This is not uncommon across the country's Bathing Waters, but the charity was not about to give up its efforts to achieve a safe bathing area in a healthy river. They asked the community's help in finding the pollution. Help came, first in the form of long-standing volunteers - then local residents began signing up too. “We are seeing more getting in touch," says Ellie Brown, head of the Trust's Data and Evidence Team. "There seems to be an increase in awareness of rivers. People might walk a particular part, want to learn more about it, or they might already suspect an issue with it.”

What would be the task of these volunteers? RiverBlitzes. A team survey 10-15 sites across a river in just one day. Do they need experience to do this? Not at all. There are always newcomers, according to Ellie. Beginners may start the day having never seen a river survey, before they pair up with experienced volunteers and by the end of the RiverBlitz, they are citizen scientists contributing valuable data.

These samples may be from amateur volunteers, but they are trusted by local stakeholders. Both the Environment Agency and United Utilities asked Ribble Rivers Trust for more RiverBlitzes, because the local knowledge is reaching further than their own efforts.

So why don't government agencies, like the Environment Agency (EA), test the river catchment and find the pollution? Why is a charity's army of staff and volunteers also doing the job?

With constant media coverage of years of funding cuts and unregulated pollution incidents, not to mention charities like The Rivers Trust network asking for the government to clean up river regulation, it would be no surprise if public trust in the regulator is low. On the EA's Water Quality Explorer (a publicly available website), some areas in the Ribble catchment have not been tested for more than a year. This catchment alone has 74 waterbodies, a huge undertaking. People power and local knowledge is essential when looking for an issue along these many waterways. Local knowledge means local trust - something the Ribble Rivers Trust has cultivated for over 25 years.

The Trust may have no powers to regulate pollution, but they have influence. That could mean residents telling them about local river issues. It's not just the public who work with them either. “We are trusted by local landowners,” Ellie explains. Where landowners may be wary of regulators, they are happy to work with the Trust. “We can access areas the others in regulatory positions wouldn’t be able. We can engage.” This could mean permission to access new areas of riverbank to conduct a RiverBlitz. They have a farm advisory team especially to help farmers with neighbouring rivers.



Photo: Dave Gibson

The Ribble Rivers Trust staff and volunteers began RiverBlitzing in earnest all around the Bathing Water site - at upstream sites, downstream, near the sewage works, on connecting brooks. You might think the sewage works would be the obvious source of the pollution, but the RiverBlitz data disagreed. It may still contribute to overall river health, but it wasn't the source of the poor bathing waters. This year (2026), volunteers will conduct more RiverBlitzes in new areas, committed to getting to the root of the matter.

Waterbodies can be impacted by all different sources, not just water treatment works. That's why Ribble Rivers Trust collects data rather than making assumptions. It's also why their staff and volunteers conduct such varied work, from planting trees on riverbanks, to monitoring salmon numbers. In urban areas, staff run campaigns to inform residents about how they can help the rivers, such as what not to flush down your loo, and how to check your washing machine is not misconnected and flowing into the river.

What is a RiverBlitz?

A RiverBlitz provides what the Trust calls a "snapshot" of the river's health. The RiverBlitzers collect water samples and conduct habitat surveys, before returning to a classroom to test the findings. Riverfly volunteers also collect water, checking the numbers of eight pollution-sensitive insects, before returning these to their river home.

What Do They Test?

Electrical Conductivity

"If there is a high input of organic nutrients it can spike the electrical conductivity. A really good indicator of what might be going on," says Ellie.

Tubidity

"The higher the amount of tubidity, the more sediment or mud is in the sample," explains Ellie. "It is associated with sewage spills – a lot of 'stuff' suspended in the water that shouldn't be there."

Other Water Tests

The volunteers also test water temperature, pH, phosphates, ammonia, and e.Coli.

Spot the Signs of Pollution

Ellie also highlights the value of public reports of pollution. She encourages anyone who sees river issues to ring the Environment Agency's 24-hour hotline: **0800 80 70 60**. But what are we looking for? What does a polluted river look like? Fortunately there are a few visible signs that beginners can identify. The first obvious clue is seeing dead fish. Not one - that could be natural causes - but several fish floating on the surface.



Photo: Ribble Rivers Trust







Photos: Ribble Rivers Trust

Ellie points out river colours to look out for. “A grey cloudy colour is a sign of water coming out of houses getting into the river (through washing machine misconnections)." White is another unwelcome sign. "If the riverbed has a white coating, this can be sewage fungus." Brown river water may look dirty, but it is not uncommon in areas with peaty soils, and healthy brown rivers generally have some clarity in the top few inches of water. Instead, check for bad smells. Also, look out for a lot of bubbles that cannot be explained by fast flows. Soapy areas could be household detergent. Sadly, some pollution has no visible signs. Ellie says chemical pollution "can have no smell and the water could look very clean.”

River Victories

River volunteering however, is not all a case of looking for trouble. When the RiverBlitzers find no pollution, when the Riverfly monitors find good levels of insects, and when the Otter volunteers find (the right) pawprints, they are finding clues to healthy places.
"We now know consistently good sites in water quality and habitat," says Ellie. Volunteers see Otters, Grey Herons, and Salmon. They hear Curlews over the river. Citizen scientists are finding the river's wild side and making it count.

Volunteer with Ribble Rivers Trust at **ribbletrust.org.uk**
For other areas, see **theriverstrust.org**

Volunteer Viewpoint

Alison Bruce, a Citizen Science volunteer, heard about the Trust's survey opportunities and liked the sound of it for her approaching retirement.
"I was a subscriber to Ribble Rivers Trust and found out about the Anglers Riverfly Monitoring Initiative. In the past I had worked in entomology, which was interesting, and had also been a fly fisher. So, the Riverfly monitoring was an obvious thing to do. Since then, I have also engaged in habitat survey, algae survey, and water quality monitoring. It appeals to my preference for scientific and practical activity and it’s great to have sites I regularly monitor as I can get to know them.
It’s mindful activity in nature. And who doesn’t love pottering about on the riverbank?”

Get to know butterflies this summer on a free guided walk with Butterfly Conservation's Upper Thames branch. Peter Philp, walks coordinator, offers insights into finding these winged wonders.



Red Admiral: Peep Saluvee, Canva

SPREAD Your WINGS



Photo: Iain Leach

Purple Emperor (above) and Duke of Burgundy (bottom) are both highlights of this region.



Photo: Tony Penycate



Photo: Gilles san Martin

"How do we see more butterflies?" is a question often put to Peter Philp, walks coordinator at Butterfly Conservation's Upper Thames branch. His answer is simple. Start with more time in green spaces. He does not believe you need to be an expert to spot them, but to be out in countryside, cultivating your spotting skills.

Guided Walks

The Upper Thames branch want to help the public do just that, so every year they lead around 50 guided walks across Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, and Oxfordshire. These walks are free for anyone to join. On specialist walks, leaders aim to find a butterfly specific to that habitat. On generalist walks, it's a case of see what everyone can spot. There's also a third option: butterfly ID training.

Highlights

Three-quarters of Britain's resident butterfly species and over 1700 types of moths have been recorded in the Upper Thames region. They have some amazing habitats offering havens for some of our most specialist butterflies.
Peter finds it difficult to choose favourite walks or butterflies, with so many rarities locally. For example, Bernwood Forest is one of the best areas in the country for woodland butterflies, including Purple Emperor, White Admiral, and Purple Hairstreak. Aston Rowant, meanwhile, is a national chalk downland where in August the walkers will seek out Chalk Hill Blue, Adonis Blue, and rare Silver Spotted Skipper butterflies. These are just two of the branch's many butterfly walks this summer.
Why not join them?

Butterfly Spotting Tips

iRecord: Peter often starts walks by introducing the iRecord Butterfly app. It isn't just for recording, he explains, but includes a list of likely butterflies for your current location, based on area and time of year.

On the Move: Butterflies are restless. They are constantly moving from plants. Peter encourages beginners to practise looking for any sign of movement around them.



Marbled White: Iain Leach

Rain: Butterflies can still fly in rain. After rainfall is a good time to look - when the adults are desperately searching for a meal.



Gatekeeper: Platinumportfolio, Canva

Binoculars: Peter recommends binoculars when looking for butterflies. Hairstreaks, habitat specialists, prefer the tops of trees.

Explore Habitats: Walk beside hedges, woodland edges, or grasses. Butterfly generalists use a few of these habitats, while specialists stick to certain types.



Duke of Burgundy

Photo: Iain Leach

Identifying Butterflies

Flying with Style

Watch a butterfly's behaviour. They may all fly, but they have different styles of flight, explains Peter. Admiral butterflies like the Red or White Admirals glide, rippling their large wings. Some butterflies flap, some always fly low along grasses, some fly high among trees.

On the Edge

Patterns on the edges of wings can aid identification, so look out for these. Butterfly Conservation's website shows images of upper and underwings of all British butterflies.

Where Did You See it?

Habitat can help round down to species. Where was the butterfly and what was it doing? Was it flying along grasses, or flying up and down a line of trees? When did you see it? For example, the Upper Thames group visits certain woodlands in search of the Purple Emperor butterflies, which favour tree sap. For the rare Brown Hairstreak, they'll look in hedgerows in August at Rushbeds Wood. Behaviour and habitat are why an expert leading can point out some species to you... even if the butterfly is far away!

Join a Butterfly Walk

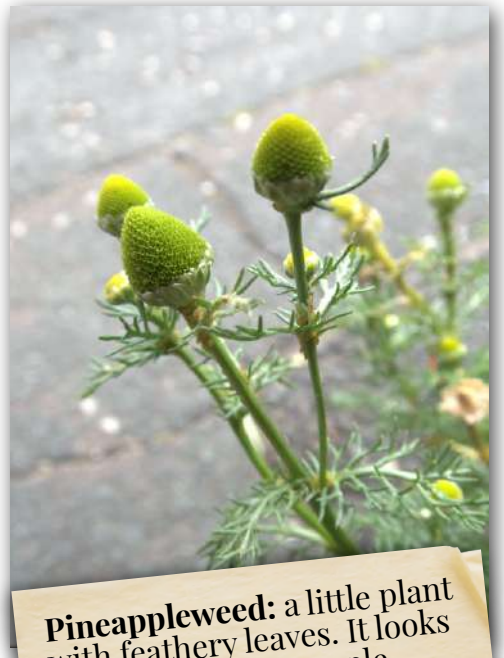
Head to **upperthames-butterflies.org.uk** for more details on their free butterfly walks. For events elsewhere, visit **butterfly-conservation.org**.

Photos: Leanne Dempsey



Four foraging experts tell us about finding edible plants in the city and how it reconnects us with the urban landscape.

Forgotten FLAVOURS



Pineappleweed: a little plant with feathery leaves. It looks and smells of pineapple.



Ribwort Plantain: Julie Bruton-Seal of Hedgerow Medicine prefers Plantains (Plantago sp) over Docks for soothing insect bites.

Fifty metres from a city bus stop, it's there. A little plant, less than 20cm tall, next to a post. Pineappleweed. It is in exactly the type of habitat that John Rensten, of Forage London, said it would be: in a scruffy patch of earth. Almost in the tarmac itself.
"It's such a fun thing to introduce to foragers," says John. "It looks, smells, and tastes like a pineapple. You can make granita, or infuse it in vodka." A tropical flavour - all from a tiny plant in a British city. Of course, this plant by a busy road is not the best one to pick for consumption. It is one of the first steps in the foraging journey: learning what a plant looks like and where to find it. It's these tiny patches of green near our streets and stops which John believes are a good place for beginners to start learning about edible plants.

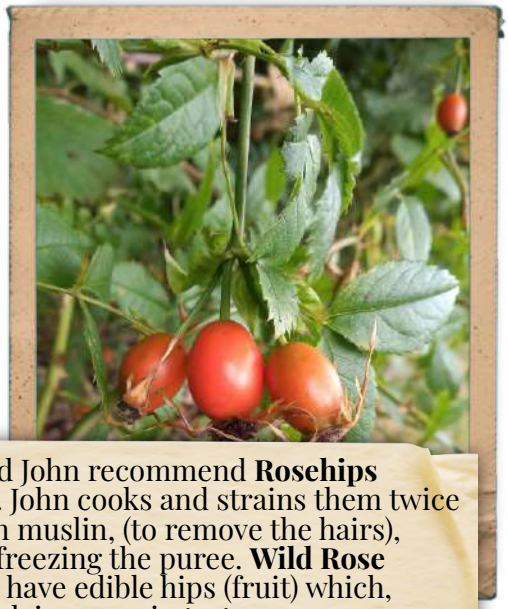
"If you are looking at a bit of land next to your bus stop, you don't need to make a special journey to get there," says John. "There's this bizarre misconception that the countryside is clean and the city is dirty." But, John explains, when moving from learning to picking edible plants, he recommends people start in their local park, avoiding pollutants. "The idea of foraging in a city is normal - once you make it so."

For beginners and experts alike, finding edible plants is a treasure hunt. It invites us to dispense with the endless distractions of modern life and start noticing things we never knew were there. Once we do notice something, Lisa Cutcliffe, of Edulis Wild Food, has a few tips. "Never munch on a hunch. Also, never trust an app to eat something."

Identification apps, like iNaturalist, Plantnet, Flora Incognita, and Obsidentify, compare your photograph of a plant to their database of photographs, and suggest the closest match(es). They are getting more accurate, but foraging instructors like Lisa warn against using them to identify a plant for consumption. Apps may provide a starting point - a plant family to look and learn in a wildflower guide. Lisa encourages beginners to look for guides from reputable publishing houses written by authors with experience, thus avoiding books with AI-generated descriptions. “Get foraging books, but also get field guides,” advises Lisa. “The edibles and ‘deadibles’ are in foraging guides, but you need field guides too because you need to know more about others in the habitat.” For example, she says that a foraging guide might have only one edible Orange Milkcap mushroom, giving a false impression that it is easy to find, but a field guide reveals there are several non-edible Orange Milkcaps too. The Association of Foragers' directory can also help identify expert authors and instructors.

If you have already found a plant, a wildflower guide focuses on helping you identify it, with information on appearance and typical habitat. Where foraging remains in many mainland European cultures, many UK inhabitants fear wild foods in case everything has a poisonous lookalike. Only when looking through a field guide of our entire flora does it unfold a different picture. Some edible plants do have poisonous lookalikes, such as the Carrot family, which includes Wild Carrot and Celery alongside toxic Hemlock Water-Dropwort.

Photos: Leanne Dempsey

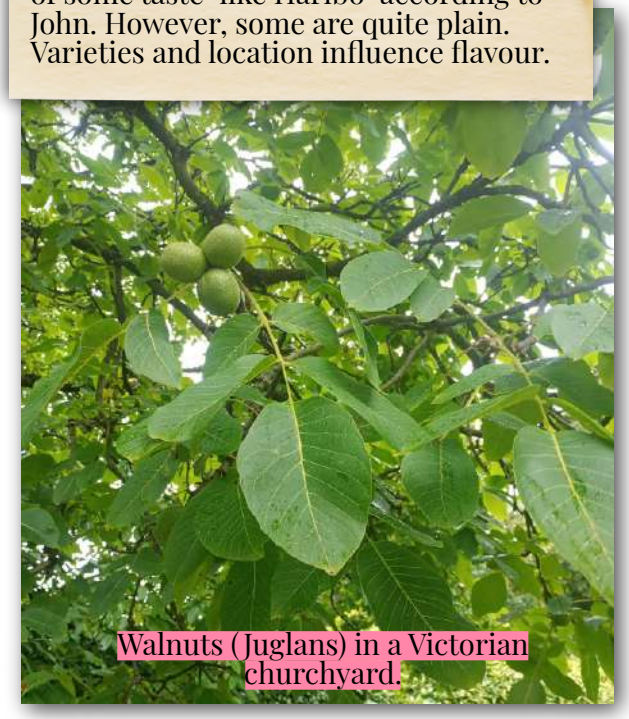


Lisa and John recommend **Rosehips** (above). John cooks and strains them twice through muslin, (to remove the hairs), before freezing the puree. **Wild Rose** species have edible hips (fruit) which, Lisa explains, vary in taste.

"There's this bizarre misconception that the countryside is clean and the city is dirty." - John Rensten, Forage London



Crab Apples (above) are planted in some cities. Sliced and dehydrated, the fruits of some taste "like Haribo" according to John. However, some are quite plain. Varieties and location influence flavour.



Walnuts (Juglans) in a Victorian churchyard.



Photo: J and M Bruton-Seal

Elderberry Syrup

By Julie and Matthew Bruton-Seal

Harvesting Elderberries
Pick bunches of elderberries when they are ripe and black but still firm and shiny. The easiest way to strip them from their stems is to use a fork.

Making the Syrup
Put ripe elderberries into a large saucepan with half their volume of water. Simmer and stir for 20 minutes. Allow to cool, then squeeze out the juice using a jelly bag or fruit press.

Measure the juice, and for every 500ml of juice, add 250g muscovado sugar, a stick of cinnamon, a few cloves, and a few lemon slices. Simmer for 20 minutes, then strain and pour while hot into sterilised bottles.

Dose: Take 1 teaspoonful neat every few hours for colds and 'flu, or use it as a cordial and add boiling water to taste for a hot drink.



Elderflowers

Photo: Leanne Dempsey

Nevertheless, there are plenty of edible leaves and flowers with nothing else looking remotely like them. There are also plant families with lookalikes, but they are all edible too.
Expert foraging books explain if a plant is edible, inedible, or poisonous. They also describe which parts of a plant you can eat, and how to make it ready for consumption. Lisa considers it unusual for a plant to have edibility straight away – they might need cooking or preserving to extract or enhance flavour.

Julie and Matthew Bruton-Seal, of Hedgerow Medicine, encourage people to look again at well-known edibles. For example, if blackberries are not yet ready, Julie recommends trying the leaves, citing them as good for a herbal tea. Elderflowers are also popular for cordials, yet where the berries are prized in Europe, Julie says less British people seem to think of picking them.

They have both spent years uncovering the historic uses of the wild plants that still grow quietly in many of our urban parks and hedgerows. Their book Wayside Medicine focuses on some of those plants, once used by our communities for medicine, but since forgotten.

"There's a lot of overlap between foraging and medicine," Julie, who trained as a herbalist, explains. "Nearly all leaves, if non-toxic, are wound-healing." Knowledge of these local edible plants and their locations would have been important in times before affordable modern medicines. It is incredible that our ancestors used certain leaves accurately, even though they had no means to test their properties. Those historic demands for leaf medicine may have impacted their current locations.

For example, according to Julie and Matthew, Roman armies carried Yarrow for healing wounds. Yarrow is still sometimes found around ancient military establishments like medieval castles. Parks that were once large estates with kitchen gardens could also have self-seeded herbs nearby.

City parks can yield surprising finds. In Leeds, Lisa finds a city's history can give clues about edible plant habitats. The city's areas of industrial heritage may have less greenery, but where parks grew out of former stately homes, diversity is on offer.
“Lots of parks in Leeds have old tree collections - planted as ornamentals but many are edible,” says Lisa.
“You can get huge diversity in a city because of those plants planted from the Victorian plant-hunting era.”
In parks, look out for Walnut, Magnolia, or lines of Limes (Tilia sp) blossoming. One of John’s parkland recommendations is Black Mulberry (Morus nigra). He cannot fail to pick Black Mulberry fruits without juice everywhere and hands "looking like Lady Macbeth.” According to John, some parks even have helpful tree identity labels.

As Julie and Matthew teach hedgerow medicine, we cannot miss out this incredible habitat, which Julie describes as "a very British thing, the hedgerow. We’re lucky to have them. They’re highly biodiverse habitats because they are an edge.
A linear wood.” Choices of hedge plants change according to their era: old lanes might have Hawthorn and Blackthorn, while a modern housing estate could be encircled by prickly Japanese Roses (Rosa rugosa), full of hips and flowers.

Spring and autumn are peak times for many wild edible plants, while summer is more uncertain. Lisa and Julie both use the phrase "hungry gap" to describe summer foraging in their areas of Leeds and Norfolk respectively. Dry summers can send salad plants to seed, while berries are on a spectrum of availability depending on location and weather.



Photo: Leanne Dempsey

Nettles: Picking them only before they flower, Lisa likes to dehydrate nettles and add the powder to cakes.

"Lots of parks in Leeds have old tree collections - planted as ornamentals but many are edible."
Lisa Cutcliffe, Edulis Wild Food



Photo: Leanne Dempsey



Photo: J and M Bruton-Seal

Black Horehound: Julie and Matthew consider this plant from the mint family as effective against bacteria.

Photos: Leanne Dempsey



Blackberries: fewer people know the leaves make good herbal tea, explain Julie and Matthew Bruton-Seal.



Yarrow (above): The Roman army used to have cartloads (of it) - it is medicinally one of the most useful plants," says Julie.



Dandelion (above), with its single hollow stem. Dandelions are actually a group of 100s of microspecies. Your local Dandelions could look and taste varied.

"Nearly all leaves, if non-toxic, are wound-healing." Julie Bruton-Seal, Hedgerow Medicine.

However, this isn't about foraging for your entire dinner (though some foragers do just that in the Wildbiome Project, returning this autumn 2026). We are so used to year-round availability of foods that it's a new experience to search a city for a berry and wait for its arrival, sometimes eating it before other foragers elsewhere even in our own city.

Waiting for a plant to develop is also a great way to boost our plant knowledge. For John, there's value in returning to the same plant, such as a tree on a local street corner. "You see something. 'Oh, I don't know what that is!' ...and then you come back a few weeks later and it's got plums on it." This emulates his book, The Edible City: A Year of Wild Food, documenting edible plants month by month. Once you have got to know a few plants in your nearest green space, you could venture out a little. "If elderflower has gone over in central London, 6 miles out it is still flowering." John calls this gentle venturing "moving around in a hunter-gatherer style".

Finding edible plants takes time. It requires patience, rewarding us with local flavours and history we never knew. Lisa finds it a wonderful way to interact with nature: "Pick a leaf here and there. It's mindful slow gathering."

John Rensten's book and courses are on **foragelondon.co.uk**

Julie and Matthew Bruton-Seal's books and courses are on their website **hedgerowmedicine.com**

Lisa Cutcliffe's website is **eduliswildfood.co.uk**

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