

ON THE NATURE TRAIL... TO WELL

LBEING

Autumn is a brilliant time to get outdoors, connect with nature and boost your sense of wellbeing. Tune into meditative forest-bathing, wild swim in the sea and raise your eyes to the mystery of star-studded skies. Or simply walk, reflect and get creative, says Kerry Fowler

From reducing stress and firing the imagination to inducing calm and taking us far from our daytime world, stargazing is good for us. As psychologist Dr Chris Barnes of Derby University discovered in his study into nature connectedness, people who stargazed scored better on mental health and happiness scales. 'The higher the connection that someone had to the natural environment at

night, the happier they felt – they had a more positive outlook and more positive wellbeing,' he says.

Chris's own fascination with stars began on a family holiday to Denmark. 'There's a peace and a serenity about the night,' he says. 'All the noises of the day disappear because you are in this very special moment. Sometimes it feels like it's an experience just to yourself.'

Standing outside in the crisp autumn air under a display of stars can also stir a feeling of awe in us, as astronomer Adrian West, author of *The Secret World of Stargazing: Find Solace in the Stars* (Yellow Kite), explains: 'The night sky gives me tranquillity, mixed with wonder and inspiration. When looking up, it feels like some form of meditation... the sky

is a big place and difficult to get overcrowded! And you only need to travel a few miles out of a town or city to see the night sky in all its splendour.'

STARGAZING HOT SPOTS

Head to a national park for some of the best spaces for stargazing, and take part in one of the many Dark Skies Festival events throughout autumn and winter (darkskiesnationalparks.org.uk). Whether you go in a small group (it's always safest to go with at least one other person), with the family or want to discover the joys of astrophotography, there's a star with your name on it in every part of the UK.

● Exmoor Dark Skies Festival

(17 October-2 November) features dark-sky yoga and night-time family wildlife walks.

● Cumbria Dark Skies Festival

(24 October-21 November) runs residential stargazing stays and nocturnal canoeing events on Coniston Water.

● The North York Moors and Yorkshire Dales is running a star-studded Fringe Festival from 24 October-2 November.

● For more night-sky inspiration, set your sights on these super-stargazing spots: Brecon Beacons, Snowdonia, the South Downs, Wessex Downs, Kielder Forest, Lake District, Galloway Forest and the Highlands of Scotland.

STUDY THE NIGHT SKY

'It really is as simple as just looking up and immersing yourself in the night sky,' says Adrian, who also hosts an illuminating stargazing experience in his Night Sky Show (venues around the country: nightsskyshow.co.uk). 'You don't have to be scientific about it – enjoy it your way.'

'Stars, skies, leaves all provide us with what are known as fractal, or self-repeating, patterns that our brains respond to by releasing alpha waves,' explains Dr Georgina Gould, clinical lead at A Dose Of Nature, a charity that promotes the mental health benefits of engaging with the natural world. 'And these help us to feel wakefully relaxed – a state we all want to be in because it helps us feel alive, inspired, creative and motivated, but calm and relaxed at the same time. It's the genius of nature.'

The Countryside Charity (CPRE) offers plenty of sparkling advice at cpre.org.uk. ➤



REFOCUS AND RECHARGE

Autumn is rich with sensory pleasures – shafts of soft, mellow light, the rustle of golden leaves, the lovely loamy scent in the air – making it a time ripe with opportunities to give yourself a seasonal emotional boost.

As Georgina says: ‘On every level, connecting with nature benefits our psychological wellbeing and settles our anxiety. When we step outside into nature, our sympathetic nervous system, which is linked to anxiety, settles down, so blood pressure, heart rate and levels of cortisol and adrenaline, which are stress hormones, all decrease and we can feel more able to function in a calm, thoughtful, mindful way. The evidence from over the past 30 years is now incredibly robust.



‘In the natural world, you don’t see hard edges,’ Georgina adds. ‘Soft fascination is the effortless, gentle engagement of attention that natural environments provide. Take time out to watch the clouds, trees moving in the wind, ripples on water... rest, recover and return to whatever you’re doing with renewed focus.’

WALK IN THE WOODS

‘A sensory immersive woodland walk helps us feel deeply relaxed, alive and at one with nature,’ says Susanne Meis, a nature-wellbeing educator who leads forest-bathing events year round (*meetinnature.com*). ‘It guides us to effortlessly unwind our mind, calm our body, lift our spirits and gives us a sense of belonging and peace.

‘Whether you are in a city park or out in the wilds, imagine that you are discovering a tree for the very first time. Use all your senses to explore: notice your tree’s shape and colours, touch its trunk or roots, sit or lean against it, smell its fallen leaves, listen to the wind rustling through its leaves.’

Trees are wonderful companions in many ways. A study by the University of Derby suggests that forest bathing can reduce anxiety and boost our mood more easily than mindfulness meditation. And they also share their natural assets, as Georgina explains: ‘Trees contain phytoncides, a kind of chemical compound, and when we breathe in these compounds they have an extremely positive effect on our mood, wellbeing, cognition and sleep.’

VITAMIN SEA THERAPY

Whether you splash around in the waves or take a meditative wild-water swim – being in and around water is a great mood booster. ‘Short days and long evenings can start to drag us down in autumn,’ says Tessa Wardley, author of *Mindfulness in Wild Swimming* (Leaping Hare Press) and director of the Rivers Trust, ‘but you can replace your zest for life with some “vitamin sea” (or lake or river) nature therapy. ►

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‘Being in water literally buoys us up and makes everything feel all right. If you are sluggish it can give you a lift and energise you in the short term, and then later in the day you will be relaxed and tired, ready for a great night’s sleep. We will always feel better when we come out of the water.’

If you’re worried the water might be too cold in autumn, it’s worth remembering that sea water holds its heat even when air temperatures start to drop. So autumn can be a good time for chasing waves – but be careful if you’re swimming in lakes or rivers, which can be more on the icy side. Check out water temperature, water quality and advice from local outdoor swimming groups before diving in, or find updated information from the Rivers Trust (*theriverstrust.org*). The Outdoor Swimming Society (*outdoorswimmingsociety.com*) also has invaluable advice on how and where to swim happily and safely.

WAYS TO LIFT YOUR MOOD

‘I have always been drawn to the world outside, where things are constantly moving and changing before our eyes,’ says Hamza Yassin, wildlife cameraman and author of *Homeward Bound: The Joy of Nature and My Life Outdoors* (Gaia). ‘Autumn is

a special time,’ he continues. ‘As a child I played under a horse-chestnut tree, scooping up fallen conkers; I remember my bare feet on the grass, the feel of spiky conkers... I noticed the calls of songbirds, the darting of dragonflies and the scuttling of beetles. By getting outside and taking note of the wildlife around us, we are immersed in an environment that’s full of possibility.’

Whether you spend five minutes watching squirrels leap around your local park or take a trip to see roaring stags in Scotland, the positive emotional benefits of being in nature and watching creatures in their natural habit are the same.

According to research carried out by the University of Surrey, even something as beautifully everyday as hearing a robin singing in the back garden lifts our mood: by listening and focusing, we feel restored.

‘Shifting our focus away from ourselves and toward the world around us can leave us feeling more grounded, present and deeply connected,’ says nature-inspired artist and author Inga Buividavice (*Wild Watercolour* and *Painting Landscape*; both Leaping Hare Press). ‘Autumn offers a very rich visual experience. You may notice the sun sitting lower in the sky, casting a

WILDLIFE WONDERS

- For inspiration on where and what to watch in autumn, the **Wildlife Trust** (*wildlifetrusts.org*) is a brilliant starting point.
- The rewilding project **Knepp Wilding** in Sussex (*knepp.co.uk*) invites you to join in autumn dusk wildlife safaris (free-roaming deer, pigs and longhorn cattle) and beaver workshops.
- Backed by a group of organisations and passionate conservationists, including Deborah Meaden of *Dragon’s Den*, the newly launched **Wildling app** (free, iOS and Android) highlights hundreds of wild and wonderful country and coastal locations to explore with your family... or just your backpack!
- **Naturetrek** (*naturetrek.co.uk*) runs wildlife trips around the globe and in the UK, including day trips to see small mammals in Hampshire, bird-migration trips in Dorset and Yorkshire and autumn eagle-spotting trips in Scotland.
- In the New Forest, **Tudor Farmhouse Hotel** (*tudorfarmhousehotel.co.uk*) is collaborating with wildlife expert and guide Ed Drewitt for autumn retreats that include a wildlife safari where you can learn about bats, deer, badgers, foxes, voles, mice, hedgehogs and wild boar.

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES

warm, golden light over everything – notice the different hues.

‘Wildlife becomes more active in autumn as animals prepare for the colder months ahead. One of my favourite things to observe is bird migration. I think it’s very symbolic how birds leave to spend the winter in the warmer climates yet always return home. We can easily see a parallel with people always drawn back to the places they belong.’

If you are a beginner who wants to paint, says Inga, take time to look at the shapes, colours and textures around you: ‘Notice how the scene makes you feel – essentially we are capturing emotion, and that can be a deeply personal experience.’

Carry a sketchbook with you on your nature walks; take your paints, your poetry notebook, your camera, and make it a creative adventure to remember. You never know when you might see something that captures your imagination. ■