

# Wetlands and wellbeing

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Ideas and activities to help you connect with nature this spring and summer



[#WetlandWellbeing](#)

# Brighter days as a natural remedy

**For most of us, longer days bring with them a feeling of hope. Spring flowers are blooming, birds are building nests and the first bees and butterflies of the year are flitting around.**

The weather teases us with its ups and downs, but spring days bring a definite feeling of joy and promise for the summer to come.

This feeling is not just emotional, we also experience a physical response to the changing season. As human beings we're part of the natural world and just like the spring flowers that bloom in the sunshine so do we.

As the weather warms up many of us gravitate towards water. Our affinity with water suggests that wetlands are especially important in the nature-health interaction.

Being close to water - marshes, rivers, streams, ponds, lakes or coastlines - improves how you're feeling<sup>1</sup>, reducing both negative thoughts and stress levels<sup>2</sup>. Spending time at our wetland sites creates a similar experience.

#### Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> *What impact do seas, lakes and rivers have on people's health?* Tim Smedley, *Guardian* (2013)

<sup>2</sup> *Does living by the coast improve health and wellbeing?* B. Wheeler, M. White, W. Stahl-Timmins & M. Depledge, *Health & Place* (2012)

“There is a sense of excitement and anticipation as soon we arrive, and this continues at all stages for me, wondering what is around the next corner, or below a bridge, or hiding in the reeds, or singing from the top of a tree. I love the fresh-air feeling.”

> Feedback from a WWT member



# How the change of season improves our wellbeing

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- **Extra hours of sunlight and rising temperatures** increase levels of serotonin and dopamine in the body - the chemicals responsible for feelings of wellbeing.
- **More light energises us.** Humans are programmed to rest in the dark and be active in the light, so more daylight hours equals more energy.
- **We also get vitamin D from the sun.** It's easy to become vitamin D deficient over the winter months (and especially during a lockdown winter) because of the lack of exposure to sunlight. A vitamin D deficiency can lead to dark moods, brain fog and body aches.
- **Nature also encourages us to be socially engaged and physically active,** and when outside we take deep breaths of fresh air.





## A deeper connection

**Nature is awesome. Not only does it give us peace, beauty and space, it offers us an awareness of something much bigger than ourselves.**

Whether it's a beautiful reedbed, a gently meandering river, huge skies or the first catkins on a willow tree, our feeling that we and our problems are at the centre of the universe is called into question by the scale and complexity of nature. For many experiencing mental health challenges, nature offers an escape from everyday pressures and demands. This can lead to improvements in our wellbeing.

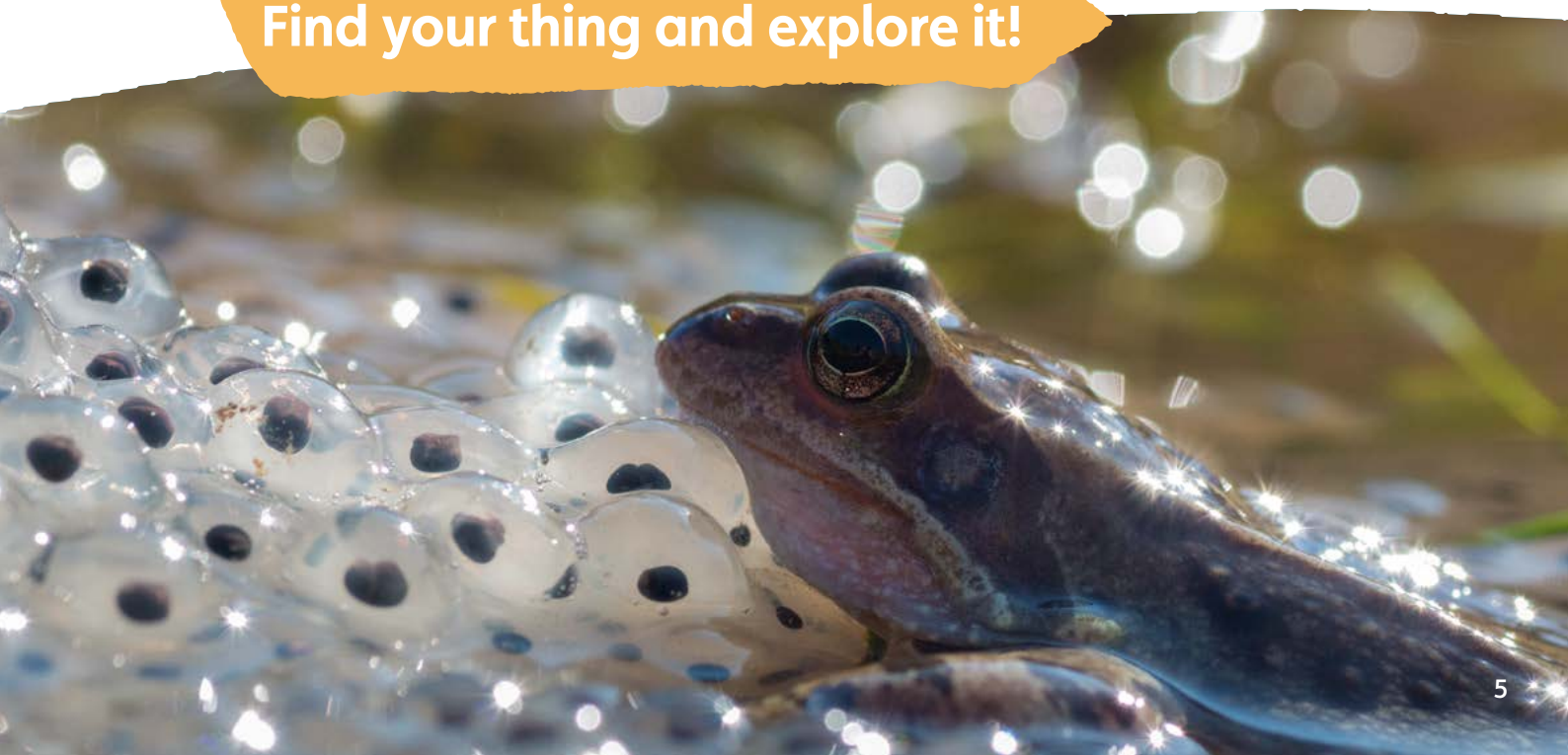
**“The science of ecology had not been invented when I was learning biology; yet the instant its principles were enumerated, I immediately realised the essential truth that all nature is interrelated, that we are a part of it and need contact with it.”**

*> Sir Peter Scott*

# 5 ways to strengthen your nature connection

- 1 Senses.** Engage with nature through all your senses: listening to birdsong, smelling wild flowers, touching the bark of a tree or listening to the wind through the reeds.
- 2 Meaning.** Celebrate spring traditions, such as seeing the first swallow or smelling the first bluebell, thinking about where the names for things come from - like cuckoo flower, frogbit or kingcups.
- 3 Compassion.** Look after nature as you would look after yourself, as we are all a part of nature. This could include making ethical product choices or being concerned with the welfare of animals.
- 4 Emotion.** Do things that increase your emotional bond with nature, or reflect on the positive feelings nature can inspire. Growing something or listening to the dawn chorus are great ways to get in touch with your emotions.
- 5 Beauty.** Engage with the aesthetic qualities of nature, such as appreciating natural scenery or engaging with nature through poetry, music or art.

Find your thing and explore it!



# A sensory experience

How do you feel when you see a flock of curlew feeding on a river bank? What does it feel like as you lift your face to the sky on a sunny day? How does the warm soil feel in your hands as you plant a bulb in the earth?

Last year The People & Nature Survey for England 2020 found that 85% of adults reported that being in nature made them happy. But increasingly studies are showing that the real power comes from developing a relationship with nature that goes beyond knowledge and identification towards an awareness of the feelings it evokes, the beauty we see and the meanings we attach to it.

Connecting with how nature makes you feel, rather than what it makes you think is a powerful thing.

## A mindfulness practice for nature connection

- Find somewhere outdoors where you won't be disturbed. A bench in the park, lying down in the grass, a sunny river bank or just sitting outside on your front steps.
- Close your eyes, take a few deep breaths then focus all of your attention on what you can hear.
- Notice which sounds are most obvious to you, as well as those that are in the background. Notice how some sounds come and go, while others are constant. Notice how some get louder and softer.
- When your mind wanders, notice you've become distracted and then gently return your attention to listening.
- Continue listening in this way for at least five minutes.



# Wetlands in spring and summer

Wetlands are full of life at this time of year, birds are busy raising their young, the air is buzzing with insects and the ponds are full of tadpoles, pond skaters and dragonflies.

The light changes as the seasons move on too. With the sun higher in the sky water takes on a magical quality in the sunshine. Spending time on a wetland as the spring days lengthen and the summer sun begins to cast its first rays is truly a sensory treat, so get yourself out there.



Here are some ideas to inspire you to get outside and experience wetlands in the spring and summer.



## Look out for firsts

As the seasons roll through spring towards summer we are treated to an endless succession of 'firsts'. The first sand martins, the first tadpoles, the first orchids and dragonflies. The first family of swans on your local waterway. These experiences can fill us with a sense of wonder and possibility. What firsts can you see and how do they make you feel?



## Have a mini-adventure

We all need an adventure every now and then. New experiences are good for our sense of wellbeing. They don't need to be big, grand or expensive. Go wild swimming, camp in the back garden, cook on a campfire or go on a night-time nature walk.



### Get creative

Watery landscapes inspire writers and artists the world over. Find something that speaks to you and write, draw or paint how it makes you feel rather than what it looks like.

[Here are some creative ideas to try.](#)



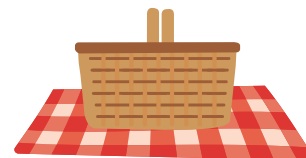
### Attract wildlife to your garden

Caring for the nature around us makes us feel good and strengthens our connections with the natural world. Plant pollinator friendly flowers, create a toad shelter or build a garden pond and feel the satisfaction of watching wildlife thrive.



### Embrace you inner 5-year-old

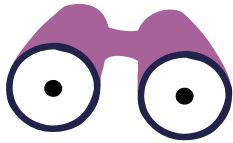
It's easy to take life too seriously sometimes. Forget your worries and embrace the joy of play. Roll down a hill, play Poohsticks, go puddle jumping, climb a tree, make a daisy chain. Remember the world as a place of hope and adventure.



### Have a picnic

The first picnic of the year brings with it the promise of warm summer days ahead. Head to your favourite watery spot, lay out the rug and lie back for an afternoon of relaxation - there's nothing like it for feeding the soul. Or wetland centres also have great picnic areas where you can immerse yourself in the nature all around you.





### Take a closer look

Is there a bird that visits your garden every day, a tree that you walk past on your daily walk, or an interesting plant growing on your local wetland? Take a closer look and discover something new about it. If armchair nature-gazing is more your thing check out what's happening on our wetlands via our webcams.



### Embrace the good old British weather

Rainy days can be just as fun as sunny ones. Do a rain dance, find a puddle and jump in it, smell the rain on the soil, watch the patterns the rain drops make as they splash on water. Nature can be very different when the weather changes.



### Forage for wild food

For our ancestors foraging in wetlands was a matter of survival. Today picking spring greens along the river bank is a much more inviting option than a trip to the supermarket. Nettles, wild garlic, watercress, chickweed and dandelion are all ripe for the picking at this time of year. Just make sure you forage carefully and responsibly in places that allow foraging, and never eat anything you aren't sure of.



### Visit a wetland site

Just as birds and animals find a welcome retreat at our wetlands during spring and summer, you can also find solace in our wide-open spaces, soothing scenery and sheltered hides. Go to [www.wwt.org.uk/visit](https://www.wwt.org.uk/visit)



We'd love to hear your experiences of how wetlands and nature have helped you maintain your wellbeing and look after your mental health.

Please do send through your stories and artwork; drawing, paintings, photographs or film clips to [waterlife@wwt.org.uk](mailto:waterlife@wwt.org.uk) or tag us in **#WetlandWellbeing** on social media.

Here are some words from our members to inspire you.

“Water, nature and peace · My other home  
Life blood of Earth · Rest, recuperation, escape  
Harmony, wildness, calm · Calm, suspended time  
Nature, amazement, joy · Beauty, birds, bugs!”

*Quotes from supporters on Twitter*

“...it's a feeling of peace, uplifting, it's healthy. I think for anyone who's got something on their mind, after five or 10 minutes walking, and just noticing something in nature, they can leave their stresses and troubles behind. It's hugely healthy.”

“I love that it stops me thinking about anything other than enjoying wildlife.”

*> From phone interviews with a member*

**#WetlandWellbeing**



## Further resources

We hope that this has given you some ideas and information to get the most out of visiting wetlands and looking after your wellbeing in the spring and summer.

### The Blue Prescribing Project

We believe that nature should be available to those who need it most. WWT has been working on a project called '**Blue Prescribing**': a wetland based health programme based on the concept of social prescribing, intended as an alternative or complementary treatment option for people experiencing mental health issues.

Find out more about the project at [wwt.org.uk/wellbeing](http://wwt.org.uk/wellbeing)

### Campaigning for wellbeing

We want to create more accessible blue spaces close to where people live in urban areas by improving wetlands and creating **sustainable drainage systems (SuDS)** such as ponds or rain gardens, as part of our proposals for a '**Blue Recovery**' for the UK.

Find out more about the Blue Recovery at [wwt.org.uk/blue-recovery](http://wwt.org.uk/blue-recovery)

### Looking after your mental health

The **Mental Health Foundation** has a wealth of resources full of simple, inexpensive and practical tips to help you look after your mental health.

### Public Health England

If you want to develop a personalised plan for supporting your mental health you can also visit the PHE **Every Mind Matters** site, developed in collaboration with the **Mental Health Foundation**.

**#WetlandWellbeing**



# Visit one of our 10 wetland sites – we'd love to see you!

## **WWT Arundel**

Mill Rd | Arundel | BN18 9PB

## **WWT Caerlaverock**

Eastpark Farm | Caerlaverock | DG1 4RS

## **WWT Castle Espie**

78 Ballydrain Rd | Comber | Newtownards | BT23 6EA

## **WWT Llanelli**

Llwynhendy | Llanelli | Carmarthenshire | SA14 9SH

## **WWT London**

Queen Elizabeth Walk | Barnes | London | SW13 9WT

## **WWT Martin Mere**

Fish Lane | Burscough | Lancashire | L40 0TA

## **WWT Slimbridge**

Newgrounds Ln | Gloucester | GL2 7BT

## **WWT Steart Marshes**

Steart Marshes | Steart | Somerset | TA5 2PU

## **WWT Washington**

Barmston Ln | Washington | NE38 8LE

## **WWT Welney**

Hundred Foot Bank | Welney | Norfolk | PE14 9TN

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Book online at **[www.wwt.org.uk](http://www.wwt.org.uk)**