

Wetlands and wellbeing:

A guide for winter

Ideas and inspiration to help you connect with nature during the winter, as well as information on how **engaging with wetlands** can improve our wellbeing.

#WetlandWellbeing

A natural remedy

This year, we connected with nature in new and surprising ways. Many of us found comfort in the longer days of spring and felt hope as we watched nature come to life around us. As the leaves start to fall and the nights draw in, many of us are wondering what the future holds. Now more than ever we need to make the most of nature's healing powers.

Although research¹ suggests that 120 minutes might be the optimal amount of time to spend in nature a week, this can be made up of short spells – and we should prioritise quality over quantity. Making a deep emotional connection² with nature is more beneficial than exposure alone. And even if you can't get outside, there are ways to bring the outside in, through creativity and community.

Footnotes:

¹ Spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature is associated with good health and wellbeing, Mathew P.White et al (2019). University of Exeter Medical School

² Applying the Pathways to Nature Connectedness at Societal Scale, Prof. Miles Richardson (2020)

“In the crazy world of today, when the human race seems so little able to control its destiny, when crises and depressions follow each other in mad succession, the need for escape is more urgent and the call of wild places more insistent than ever.”

> *Wild Chorus, Peter Scott 1938, P1.*



What is it about water?



If you've ever visited WWT wetland sites, or even your local river or pond, you'll know there's something special about water, with its power to inspire and calm us. Wetlands are uplifting places to visit in autumn and winter, when they come to life with migratory birds.

Blue spaces

There is some early evidence that people prefer landscapes with blue spaces³, and these might bring greater wellbeing benefits than green space alone.

These benefits include improving how you are feeling, reducing both negative thoughts and levels of stress.^{4, 5}

“I seem to connect with a different bird each time I visit. Whenever I have the time to just stand and watch as they preen or swim or feed. I am often in awe of the power of the swans.”

> *From phone interviews with a member*

Footnotes:

³ What impact do seas, lakes and rivers have on people's health? Tim Smedley, *Guardian* (2013)

⁴ White, M., Smith, A., Humphryes, K., Pahl, S., Snelling, D., and Depledge, M. (2010). Blue space: the importance of water for preference, affect, and restorativeness ratings of natural and built scenes. *J. Environ. Psychol.* 30, 482–493. doi: 10.1016/j.jenvp.2010.04.004

⁵ Grassini, S., Revonsuo, A., Castellotti, S., Petrizzo, I., Benedetti, V., and Koivisto, M. (2019). Processing of natural scenery is associated with lower attentional and cognitive load compared with urban ones. *J. Environ. Psychol.* 62, 1–11. doi: 10.1016/J.JENVP.2019.01.007

Five steps to find a connection with nature

- 1 Engage all our senses** – touch, smell, sight, hearing, taste. Closing your eyes for just a moment can heighten our other senses.
- 2 Explore our positive emotional connections** with nature that allow us to feel calmer and happier.
- 3 Look for beauty in things**, such as appreciating natural scenery or engaging with nature through art and music.
- 4 Look for the hidden meanings**, emphasise traditions, localness, seasonality and language – nature is everywhere, from folklore to place names.
- 5 Show compassion** by developing a moral and ethical concern for nature, such as making ethical product choices or helping an animal.

Everyone is different – you may find certain methods create a greater connection for you than others.

Find your thing and explore it!

“Man needs nature for his spiritual wellbeing as well as his material wellbeing.”

> Sir Peter Scott WWT founder



Wetlands in winter

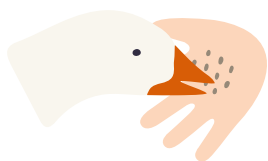
As winter arrives and everything else goes quiet they're spectacular, wide-open spaces in which to enjoy a shimmering sunset reflected on the water, or get a dose of fresh air while you watch birds splashing. You might even be lucky enough to spot a rare water vole swimming secretively through the reeds.

In winter, we can have less energy and some people experience Seasonal Affective Disorder with symptoms of depression that come and go according to the seasons.

Although it might be difficult, the extra effort to keep in touch with nature during the winter can positively impact our mental health and lift our spirits.



Here are some ideas to inspire you to get outside and experience wetlands in the autumn and winter.

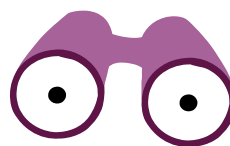


Helping nature in winter

Helping nature is a great way to feel a part of the natural world. Birds and wildlife need food in winter too, and with their loss of habitat it helps to leave out water and food in your garden or on your windowsill.

Ducks and geese are great birds to feed from your hand. Hold the food out on your hand and stay as still as possible. It will tickle but try to stay still so that you don't frighten the bird.

You can find more information on what to feed wild birds on our website: wwt.org.uk/feeding-ducks



Birdwatching

Many people have written about the healing power of birdwatching, but it's about more than making lists and finding rare birds. Being attuned to what birds are doing can give meaning and rhythm to our lives, from the ethereal call of the curlew across a wintry estuary to the sights and sounds of whiffing geese as they come in to land.

Winter can be an especially rewarding time to find birds in wetlands you'd never normally see, like the secretive bittern or the shy water rail. You could start in your garden, local park or pond, and you don't even need binoculars to get started.



Seek out puddles

Get your wellies and waterproofs on and head out after it's rained to splash in the puddles. Watching raindrops fall on puddles and noticing the shapes and sounds they make can be mesmeric, especially if you're warm and dry in suitable clothes or hiding under a shelter.

If you're feeling adventurous, you could even have a dance. How big a splash can you make?



Watch a sunset

There are few finer pleasures than watching the sun set in the sky, and water just enhances its beauty, as it's constantly changing: one minute still as glass, the next rippling the reflection.

Look at the weather forecast and check what time the sun sets and rises. Try watching on different days because every sunset and sunrise is different.



Go stargazing

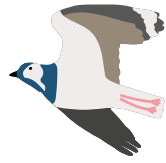
Spending time in nature can be a totally different experience at night. Wetlands are incredible places with wide open skies, where the moon shines bright as geese fly across. Check the weather forecast and choose a clear night. Grab your coats and find a comfortable place to lie down.

Look up the sunset time and head out just before sunset. Will you see bats? Hear owls? Maybe even hear migrating geese flying over, nearing the end of their journey.



Get creative

Expressing a love for nature through writing, music, art and photography has been a way to connect with nature for many celebrated artists for a long time. You don't have to be a professional to do this. It could be as simple as taking a photograph of objects you found on a walk, or putting your inhibitions aside and getting the paints out. You might want to take a sketchbook and pens out with you and make a drawing of the amazing seasonal colours as they change. This can be pleasurable and fun and done from inside your own home.



Listening to a bird fly

There's no better sound than that of a bird's wings as it flies overhead, whether it's a slow 'whomp-whomp' of a powerful mute swan to the skittish flurry of a wading bird and the loud arrival of whiffing geese.

Find a position where you can sit or stand still, close to where birds are flying (this could be close to a bird feeder, under a tree or near a body of water).

If you listen carefully you may be able to hear the birds' wings as they fly.



Looking at feathers

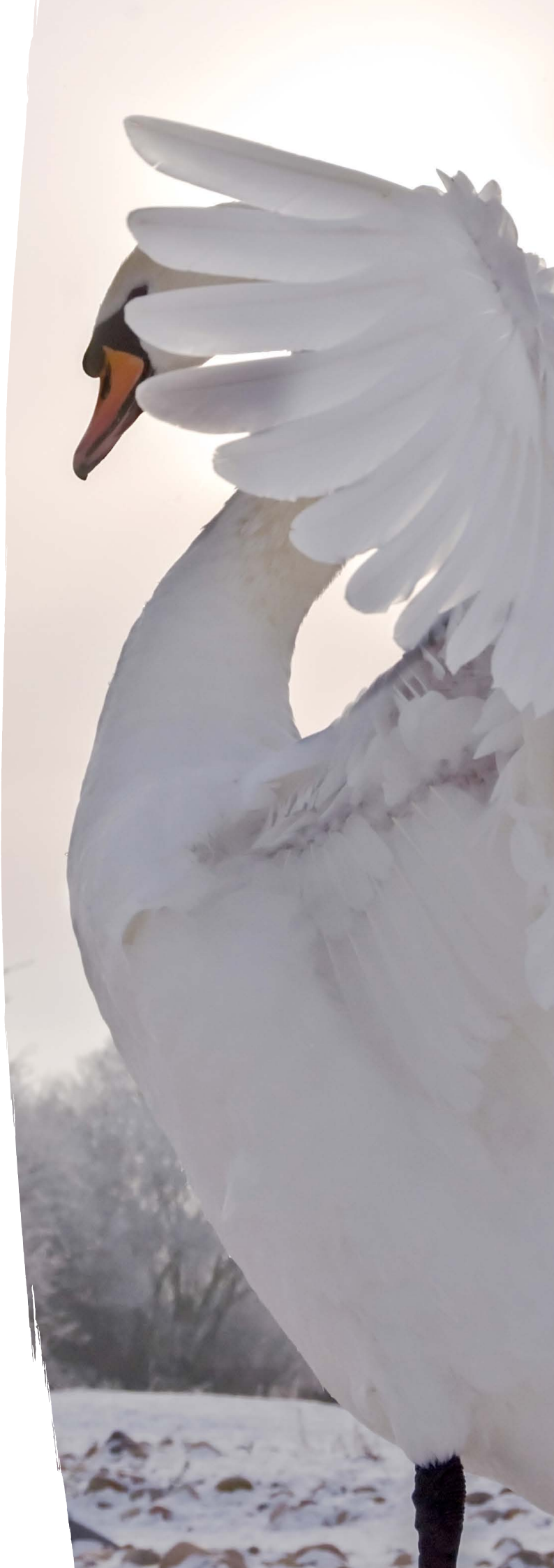
Feathers on waterbirds are often more brilliant and vivid in winter. Look really closely at a feather, and you'll see how it's made of thousands of individual strands, bending the light into intricate patterns and shapes. Feathers are truly amazing, as they keep birds warm and waterproof, enable them to fly and communicate with each other. Next time you find a feather give it a close look.



Cloud watching

Every cloud has a silver lining they say, and it's true that clouds make for a dramatic landscape, their shapes changing and reflecting in the water. Wetlands are a fantastic place to sit back for a minute and focus on the clouds scudding by, wide open spaces filled with light and shapes where your imagination can run wild.

Wherever you are, taking a minute to watch clouds can allow us to reset and acknowledge a bigger world than our own lives.





Track wildlife

Looking at what's gone before you and what other life you're sharing the world with can be a great exercise to help you feel connected to the world around you. When you're out walking in the mud or snow, concentrate on the ground to try and work out who's been walking there.



Watch a murmuration

It's hard to imagine the breathless feeling of wonder upon seeing your first bird murmuration, until you experience it. Thousands of birds wheeling and calling in unison is a symbol of nature at its most connected. Starlings are best known for their hypnotic set pieces, but they're not the only ones – dunlin are famous for flashing their wingtips while golden plover put on a shimmering display.



Visit a wetland site

Just as birds and animals find a welcome retreat at our wetlands during winter, you can also find solace in our wide open spaces, soothing water and sheltered hides. Go to wwt.org.uk/visit

“ The thrill of watching wild geese at such close quarters is most easily appreciated by those who have previous experience of their proverbial wariness, but even those who have never seen geese before cannot fail to be stirred by such an intimate view of these magnificent birds.”

> First booklet of the Wildfowl Trust, Peter Scott, 1948 (Re-printed in "Collected Writings" P71)



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 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

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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 this winter.

Blue prescriptions

We believe that nature should be available to those who need it most. WWT has been working on an option of its own that could prove useful as we seek to recover from the stresses of the pandemic.

It's a project called '**Blue Prescriptions**', 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

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

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, as well as specific mental health advice related to the challenges of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Public Health England

Public Health England have developed explicit guidance on mental health in the crisis. 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**.

“ I believe in the basic greatness and goodness of man. I believe in a lot of simple things, beliefs which are common to most of us – that good deeds don't justify bad means, that love and tolerance and kindness make the world go round.”

> 1953 broadcast, Peter Scott (Reprinted in *Peter Scott Painter and Naturalist*, Elspeth Huxley 1993, P295)

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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**