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Climb to the summit of An Sgùrr, the highest point on Eigg, for awe-inspiring views

A Scottish island idyll



“One of my favourite weekends away was 10 years ago when I was invited to the Isle of Eigg for a music festival put on by my friend Johnny Lynch – aka the Pictish Trail. From his home in the Inner Hebrides, Johnny runs a record label and music festival under the delightful name of Lost Map. So it was that my friends and I drove the length of the UK, arriving exhausted but overwhelmed by the views. We made camp and enjoyed

a few drams in front of the open fire until the small hours.

The next day, emerging bleary eyed from our tents, we made a slow but steady hike to the top of the 393-metre volcanic monolith that dominates the island, the views across the Hebrides smacking our collective gob with every step. Later, I found myself sat in sunshine talking to a whisky expert, who insisted on sharing his many fine samples with me while we watched a whale shark in the harbour.

I've been lucky enough to travel to some of the most wonderful places on Earth, but I've rarely been anywhere that rivals days (and nights) in the Scottish highlands and islands for a warm welcome, stunning views, jaw-dropping wildlife and rewarding hiking. Not to mention a warming nip!

So this issue, we've picked our favourite 10 islands to escape to – please send us a postcard if you visit!

Paul

Paul McGuinness, editor



**Don't miss our nature and countryside
Podcast, available on all podcast providers**



26 April

From blossom-rich orchards to historic gardens and high-tech farming, the Vale of Evesham is shaped by both tradition and innovation. Adam Henson and Sammi Kinghorn discover how this region became the 'fruit and veg basket of England'.



3 May

Matt Baker and Vick Hope visit the chalk grasslands of the Chilterns as wildflowers bloom and butterflies take to the wing. As pressures on this landscape grow, how can the people of the Chilterns ensure its most vulnerable habitats endure?

10 May

Set on the England–Wales border, Oswestry's livestock market has shaped rural life for centuries. Adam Henson and Charlotte Smith experience the intensity of the auction ring, where skill, instinct and a little gambling combine.

17 May

Once Scotland's most productive river, the River Leven powered more than 30 mills and helped build thriving communities. Joe Crowley and Anita Rani visit as restoration work is improving fish passage, and local historians gather memories and reconnect people with their past.

**BBC
ONE**

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iPLAYER**

OUR COLUMNISTS



John Craven, 'New forest plans offer space for nature', p20

"Only 13.5% of the UK's land surface is covered by woodland compared to a Europe average of around 40%."



Adam Henson, 'Meet the farmers fighting to increase diversity', p23

"The latest figures from DEFRA show that 99.7% of farmers surveyed in England are white."



Nicola Chester, 'Dog licencing could benefit owners and pets', p98

"Owning a dog is a joy as well as a connection with the outdoors and nature. But it is a big commitment."



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Westerwick Cliffs, Mainland Shetland, by

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The Garland King is enclosed in a bell-shaped bouquet of oak leaves and sweet-smelling wild flowers as he prepares to lead the Garland Day parade through Castleton in the Derbyshire Peak District. The unique traditions of the village's annual Garland Day, held on 29 May, have evolved over the last 190 years but are believed to have been started to commemorate the 1660 restoration of Charles II. Today, the Garland King and his consort, accompanied by a marching band and dancers, visit six local pubs before a shindig around the village maypole.

castleton-garland.com

A person in a blue and white costume with a large floral garland is riding a white horse. The garland is made of many colorful flowers, including red, purple, yellow, and white. The person is wearing a blue jacket with white lace and a red ruffled collar. The horse is wearing a black halter. The background is a dark, textured wall.

Garland for a king

Discover our quirkiest spring
festivals with a subscription to
BBC Countryfile Magazine

Check out
this month's
special
subscription
offer, page 24

MAY 2026

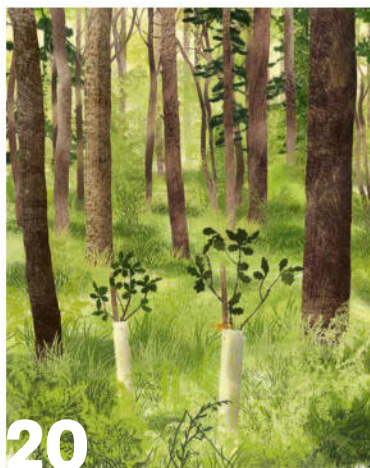
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Is it time to reintroduce dog licensing, for the benefit of nature, animals and people?



May

NATURE | TRAVEL | NEWS | VIEWS

An octopus mother guards her eggs in her final weeks of life

The common octopus is seen quite frequently around British shores, but Tom Ingram's amazing image – which won the Underwater Photographer of the Year 2026 British Waters Macro category – captures a very special behaviour. This mother embraces her brood of hundreds of thousands of eggs with her arms – each up to 1m long – guarding and wafting oxygen-rich water over them. “During this time, which can last for several months, she doesn't leave their side, not even to feed herself,” explains Tom. “Once the eggs hatch, sadly, she will die.”



The UK's most misunderstood creatures

The UK is home to a fascinating array of wildlife, but some species have a negative reputation – whether it's misunderstandings, old superstitions or just bad PR. Yet each of these species plays a vital role in our environment, writes **Jo Wimpenny**

1 RED FOX

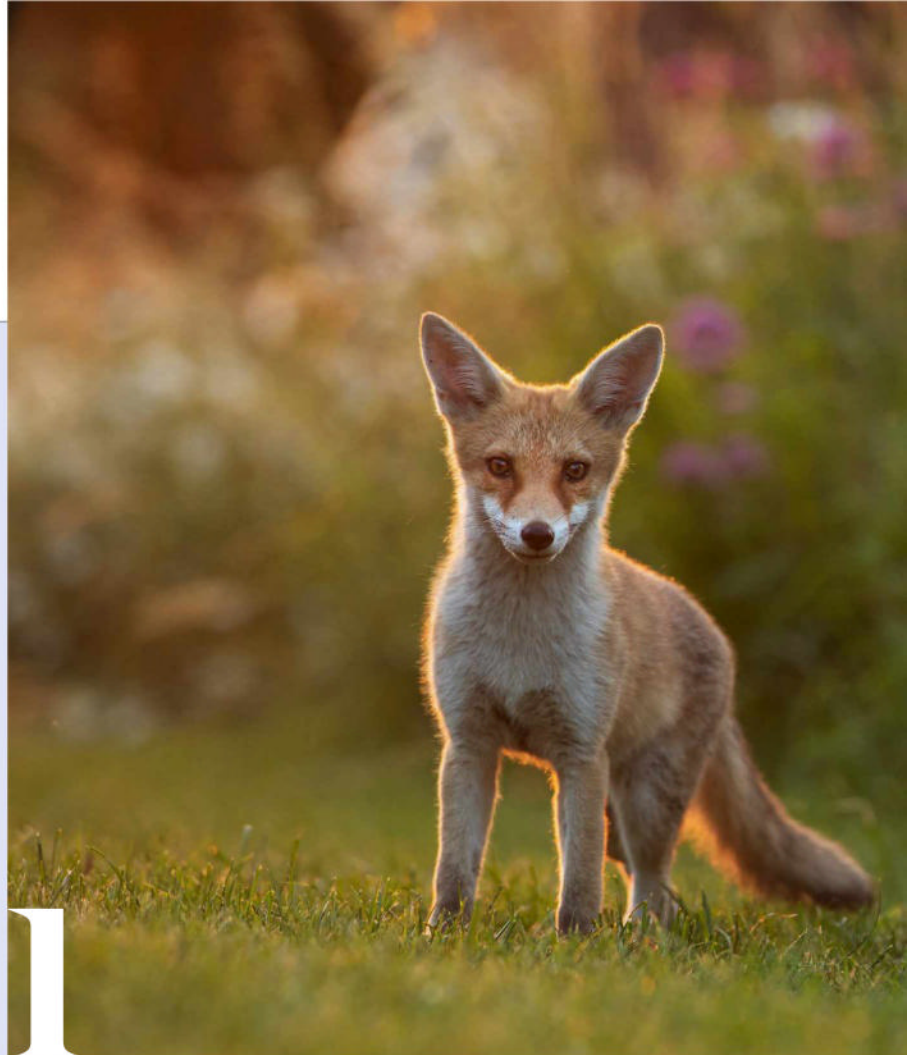
The archetypal wily villains of fable and folklore, foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) are widespread across the UK. Rural foxes are wary of humans, who have long persecuted them for poultry theft and hunting; their urban cousins, however, learned long ago to thrive alongside us. These bolder animals moved into London in the 1930s, providing a rodent control service. The flipside is their willingness to explore our bins, but fears of disease or pet predation are overblown. We're already seeing evolutionary changes in foxes; city-dwellers have shorter, wider snouts and smaller braincases than rural animals.

2 EUROPEAN HORNET

As the UK's largest native social wasp, hornets (*Vespa crabro*) are often assumed to be more aggressive versions of common wasps. In truth, while we should discard the notion that any wasp possesses human traits such as meanness, hornets are even more docile. These beautiful insects can be heard whirring through woodlands, only stinging when their nest is threatened. Like other social wasps, they're ecological superstars, providing pollination and pest control, including preying on insects that plague gardens and farms.

3 CARDINAL SPIDER

Found in old buildings and walls in southern England, cardinal spiders (*Tegenaria parietina*) are said to be named after Cardinal Wolsey, who was apparently terrified of them at Hampton Court. Indeed, as the largest house spider species, with leg spans in adult males reaching 12cm, cardinals can be alarming. Every autumn, the tabloids demonise house spiders as home 'invaders'; in reality, the males are looking for mates. Unfortunately, many people kill these non-aggressive spiders, overlooking the fact they help keep homes fly-free.





4 GARDEN SLUGS

The more than 40 slug species in the UK mostly live harmless lives, munching on decaying plants, fungi and fruits. Members of nature's clean-up crew, slugs return vital nutrients to the soil. A few species wreak havoc in gardens by devouring seedlings and prized plants. Rather than reaching for poison pellets (which can harm other animals), make your garden wildlife-friendly to encourage slugs' natural predators – hedgehogs, blackbirds and toads.

5 HERRING GULL

Herring gulls (*Larus argentatus*) are found all around the UK coast and in inland pockets. As their natural foods have become harder to find, these opportunistic birds have learned to supplement their diets with human food. Add to that their raucous calls and generally menacing appearance, and it's no surprise they're unpopular. Fewer people know that herring gulls are devoted partners or that much of their 'nuisance' behaviour comes from the parents protecting their nest.

6 TAWNY COCKROACH

Cockroaches have a reputation as scuttling, dirty pests that spread disease. While this may be the case for a dozen or so invasive species, most cockroaches are harmless and even beneficial. Alongside the dusky and lesser cockroaches, the tawny (*Ectobius pallidus*) is one of the UK's native species. They spend their time chomping on leaf litter and plant debris in southern England's woods and heathlands, with a vital role as decomposers. ^{CF}



Jo Wimpenny's
Beauty of the Beasts
is out now
(Bloomsbury, £20).

BRITISH WILDLIFE TOPS POPULAR SURVEY TO STAR ON NEW BANKNOTES

Native animals will feature on the next run of Bank of England notes, replacing historical figures including Jane Austen and Winston Churchill

Following a nationwide survey, native British wildlife will feature on the next generation of Bank of England notes, replacing historical figures such as JMW Turner and Alan Turing. The announcement marks a significant shift away from the longstanding tradition of showcasing inspirational people from the past.

The decision comes after more than 44,000 responses were submitted to a consultation launched by the Bank of England in July 2025, asking people across the UK to choose which theme should be used on the next series of notes. Wildlife proved the favourite, selected by 60% of respondents. The other options were architecture and landmarks (56%); historical figures (38%); arts, culture and sport (30%); innovation (23%); and noteworthy milestones (19%).

For more than half a century, Bank of England notes have carried portraits of influential individuals on the reverse side. Portrayed on current notes are Winston Churchill (£5), Jane Austen (£10), the artist JMW Turner (£20), and mathematician Alan Turing (£50). (Wildlife currently appears on banknotes issued by the Royal Bank of Scotland, with mackerel, otters, red squirrels and osprey all featuring.)

"Nature is more than just scenery," says wildlife filmmaker and photographer Gordon Buchanan, who sits on the expert panel advising the project. "It is the living thread that binds our landscapes, our history and our future together."

For the Bank of England, the move also serves a practical purpose. Wildlife imagery offers distinctive shapes and features that help create recognisable and secure banknote designs – an important consideration in ongoing efforts to improve anti-counterfeiting measures.

Will the red fox appear on future Bank of England notes?



"The key driver for introducing a new banknote series is always to increase counterfeit resilience," explains the Bank of England chief cashier Victoria Cleland, "but it also provides an opportunity to celebrate different aspects of the UK."

The species that will be shown on the new banknotes will be decided following a further consultation this summer. The expert panel, which also includes broadcasters Miranda Krestovnikoff and Nadeem Perera, will help to create a shortlist from which the public can choose.

The new series may feature other nature-related images too, such as native plants and landscapes. Each note will also



bear a portrait of King Charles III and shields representing the home nations.

The Bank says the launch of the new notes, incorporating the latest anti-counterfeiting technology, is still several years away. Designing and producing them is a complex process involving extensive testing to ensure they are secure, high-quality and accessible. **Kate Milsom**



Despite rescue efforts, only one of the 55 whales stranded on Tràigh Mhòr beach in 2023 was successfully refloated

SCIENTISTS DISCOVER HEARTBREAKING REASON FOR MASS WHALE STRANDING

Pilot whales that died on a beach on the Isle of Lewis in 2023 were supporting a female giving birth, new research suggests

The mass stranding of 55 long-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala melas*) in Tolsta Bay on the Isle of Lewis in July 2023 seems to have been caused, at least in part, by the marine mammals' loyalty to their pod, according to a new study involving scientists at the University of Glasgow.

The unusually large landing at Tràigh Mhòr, a sandy beach on the north-east coast of this island in the Outer Hebrides, could have been triggered by the pod's social instincts. These may have led the whales to remain close to a female experiencing distress during a difficult birth, according to the report compiled by the Scottish Marine Animal Stranding Scheme.

Investigations on one of the female whales detected dystocia – difficulty during labour, which may have been caused by a large or poorly positioned calf. Pilot whales are known for their extremely strong social cohesion, often gathering together en masse when one of the pod is sick or injured in order to protect that individual from predators. In this case, the entire group may

have followed the distressed female into shallow waters. One was successfully refloated by rescuers; the rest perished.

The report emphasises that multiple factors are often involved in such incidents. The topography of this beach could have played a role in the stranding of a species usually found in deeper offshore waters. The steep shelf of the shallow bay, potentially combined with onshore winds, may have hindered the pod's ability to navigate. Once stranded, the whales were unable to refloat themselves, facing surf driven by onshore winds and difficulties caused by the soft sand floor of the bay. The whales were found to have good overall health, with no significant underlying diseases or infections.

An even larger stranding in July 2024 on Sanday, Orkney, resulted in the deaths of a 77-strong pod of long-finned pilot whales. A year later, 23 pilot whales were discovered dead on a different beach on Sanday, again having stranded. The causes of those incidents are being investigated. **Freya Parr**

The Plodcast

Tune your ears into our podcast this month*

5 May

Hear stories of fables and wild folk on a wander in an enchanted Herefordshire landscape with writer and artist Jackie Morris and stained-glass painter Tamsin Abbott.

12 May

Celebrate Britain's urban wildlife with botanist Amanda Tuke on a ramble through Cardiff's hidden wild spots – and learn about her new book, *Wild Pavements*.

19 May

Join bee expert and conservationist Dave Goulson for a glorious springtime stroll in Sussex in search of insects as he publishes his new book, *The Bee Spotter's Guide*.

26 May

The Plodcast heads to Torridon in the north-west Highlands of Scotland for eagle spotting, foraging and roaming in some of Britain's wildest landscapes.



Wild and beautiful
Loch Torridon



Our nature and countryside Plodcast is available on all podcast providers. countryfile.com/podcast

Into the extraordinary

Unique, unspoiled and full of surprises – the Isle of Man is close to the UK, yet a world away

Anchored in the Irish Sea, sitting equidistant between Scotland, Ireland and Wales, the Isle of Man is a jewel waiting to be explored. From the drama of craggy cliffs watching seals and dolphins play in the surf, to the hush of wooded valleys where Manx cats roam and buzzards soar overhead, this island offers unrivalled diversity for walkers and wildlife enthusiasts.

Norse and Celtic history sit side-by-side here, while the Isle of Man's unique landscape and coast makes it a playground for outdoor adventurers.

In recognition of its natural beauty, rich culture and heritage, the Isle of Man became the world's first entire nation to be designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2016. It was a celebration of the unique relationship between people and nature here, and recognition of a community that cares deeply about a sustainable future. Let's explore why the Isle of Man should be on your travel list for 2026.

WALKS FOR ALL

Rolling hills, rugged cliffs, picturesque glens and hidden coves – the Isle of Man offers walkers a diverse range of landscapes. There are routes for all abilities, from long hikes to gentle rambles and leisurely strolls. For those in search of a challenge, the long-distance trail



Spot an abundance of wildlife from every coastline and clifftop

Raad ny Foillan (Way of the Gull) stretches 160km and circles the entire island. Take in dramatic clifftop views, spot seabirds and grey seals, meander through harbours and quiet farmland, and explore the heather-covered uplands, where red grouse and peregrine falcons can be seen.

The Isle of Man has 25 summits over 304m, and hillwalkers in search of dramatic 360-degree views will enjoy the Manx Summit Walks. Designed to celebrate

the 1,000th anniversary of Tynwald (the island's parliament and one of the world's oldest), the route is based on an ancient ridgeway known as the Via Regia, and it offers walkers spectacular views, as well as a journey through Celtic history.

Outdoor explorers will find plenty to do on the island with 95 miles of coastline, 18 national glens and 10 marine nature reserves. Explore ancient forests, paddle in sheltered bays or – for the brave – try



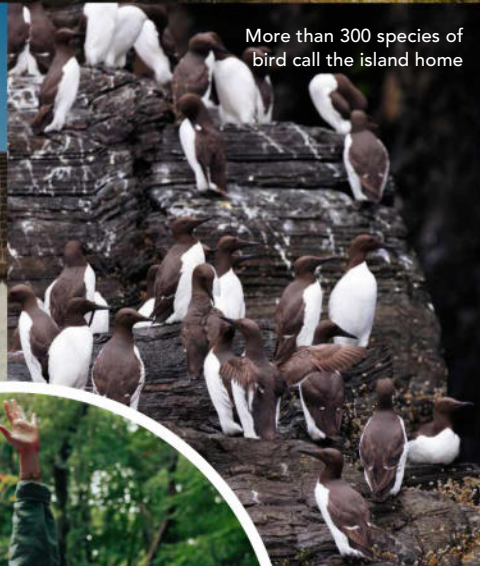
Add a dip in an outdoor hot tub to your itinerary



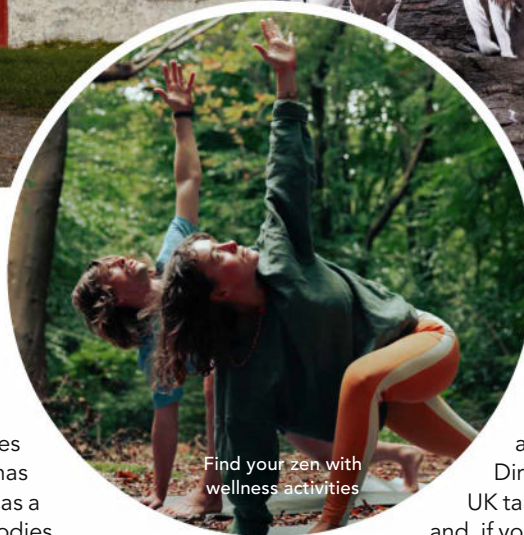
Heritage railways connect you to Manx history



Family adventures await



More than 300 species of bird call the island home



Find your zen with wellness activities

coasteering along the jagged cliffs before diving into the Irish sea for a bracing cold-water swim.

UNIQUE HISTORY, CULTURE AND FOOD

For an island measuring just 33 miles in length, its small size has not prevented the Isle of Man from being a centre of significance throughout its 10,000-year human history. Norse, Celtic and maritime history are intertwined here. Viking fortresses, Celtic castles, historical harbours and ancient monuments bear testimony to how crucial the island has been over generations, thanks to its strategic position between neighbouring nations.

The culture of the Isle of Man also reflects its patchwork past of influences. Manx Gaelic, a blend of Irish and Scottish Gaelic with traces of Old Norse, is still widely spoken on the island. In 2026, the Manx people will celebrate their language with a year of events. Arts, crafts and customs continue to thrive across the island, reflecting how the Isle of Man's history remains very much alive and part of everyday life. At the end of the day food

takes centre stage. From kippers and Loaghtan lamb to the national dish – succulent Manx scallops, known as Queenies – the Isle of Man has earned its stripes as a destination for foodies.

AN ISLAND OF SURPRISES

Close to home, yet a world away, the Isle of Man is an island of surprises, where unspoiled landscapes, ancient history, outdoor pursuits, food and culture collide.

Easily reachable from Ireland, Scotland and England, it makes an ideal destination for both short breaks and longer stays.

Direct flights from the UK take around 30 minutes and, if you're travelling with your dog, there's a regular ferry service of about two and a half hours.

On the Isle of Man, locals say the ordinary becomes the extraordinary – and this year could be the perfect time to discover what makes it so special.

For more information, visit www.visitisleofman.com; or follow on @visitisleofman (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn, Pinterest, YouTube)





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THE RHYTHMS OF NATURE

In her first book, **Cathy Haynes** explores how noticing nature's cues can help you mark the passing of time

What inspired you to write about telling time by noticing nature?

Like many people, my life is increasingly clock-bound and spent on screens. And I was curious about other ways of being. As a curator and artist with a long-term fascination with time, I particularly wanted to know how ordinary people told time before clocks. Many of the old methods focus your attention on events around you in the living world – the cock crowing in the darkness, say, or a shadow reaching a notch on a windowsill. Writing the book was an opportunity to explore that forgotten art of sensing time.

You grew up on a farm; how did that help you become aware of seasonal rhythms?

Back then, life was fundamentally shaped by the ebb and flow of the farming seasons, especially lambing and harvest. And I grew up among people who were keenly aware of the changes around them – the blackthorn blossoming, the oak bursting into leaf, the colour of the wheat. But as a young person, I left for the city. The adventures of the book are partly my way of reconnecting with the rhythms of the living world – and trying to share something of the appreciation my parents had for details in their surroundings.

For those living more urban lives, what are some ways we can notice the time of day using nature's cues?

I live in inner London and it's been surprising to me how little effort it takes to spot signs of the phase of day. You could look for flowers opening or closing in parks and gardens, such as daisies and pot marigolds. And if you've spent the day staring at a screen, it's a joy to pause and notice



the surge of signs as day turns to night, like the light turning golden on the tower blocks, bats flitting over gardens, the brightest stars popping out above the streetlamps.

Is it possible to tell time by the sequence of birds joining the dawn chorus?

Well, I wouldn't time catching a train by it! But the chorus does have a broadly predictable order. Studies show that birds with better vision in dim light typically start first, such as blackbirds and robins. Then others join in as the light brightens. (Although the timing and pattern depend on local and seasonal factors, not least sunrise moving earlier, habitat and weather, and species present.) For an amateur trill seeker like me, it's a lovely challenge to try to pick out the sequence. It's slowly sharpening my ear to the individual voices.

What is your favourite way of marking the progress of spring?

I love that liberating feeling when the balance of the year tangibly tips after equinox and the days begin to overpower the nights. Another subtler and looser way of tracking the seasons that I most look forward to is the tree buds fattening and unfurling, and then the lush greens of the soft new leaves before they mature and darken over the summer months. ☺



In some parts of the UK, daffodils are called Lent lilies, as they bloom around the date of Ash Wednesday

INSET In 2013, Cathy Haynes was Timekeeper in Residence at the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology at University College London



The Fullness of Time: Marking the Day by Birdsong, Blooms, Shadows and Stars by Cathy Haynes is published by Bloomsbury, £22

Sir David Attenborough's greatest programmes

As the broadcasting titan celebrates his 100th birthday this month, **Kevin Parr** digs into the archives to choose his favourite television series from Sir David Attenborough's unparalleled career

1 **Zoo Quest (1954–1963)**

David Attenborough was in his mid-20s when he first worked in TV production and became friends with Jack Lester, curator at London Zoo. The two collaborated to document an expedition to Sierra Leone where Lester hoped to capture a white-necked rockfowl. The plan had been for Lester to present the series, but ill health forced Attenborough to step in. The rest, as they say, is history.

2 **Wildlife on One (1977–2005)**

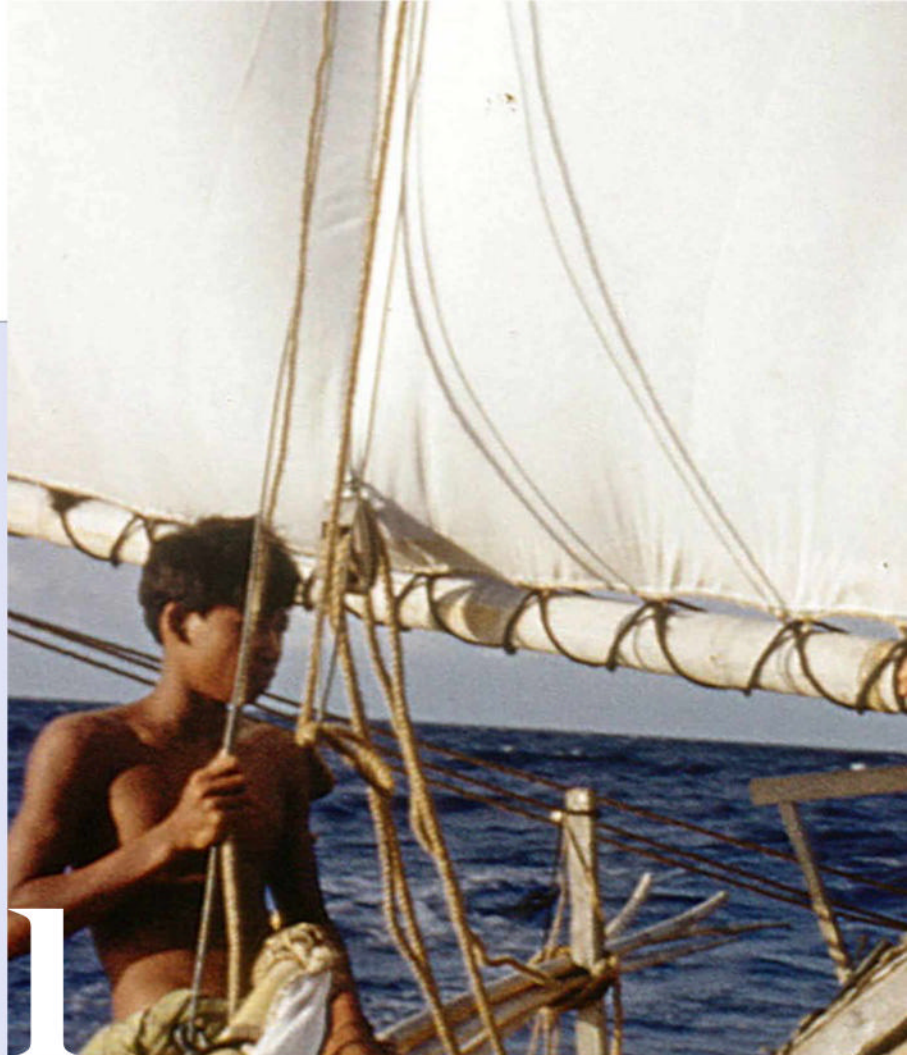
Attenborough became synonymous with wildlife TV through the 1960s and 70s, but in 1977 came the programme that regularly drew audiences of up to 10 million. *Wildlife on One* ran for 33 series, with Attenborough narrating all 253 episodes. The 1987 episode 'Meerkats United' was one of the most popular, but it was 'Return of the Sea Eagle' in 1981 that captured my own imagination.

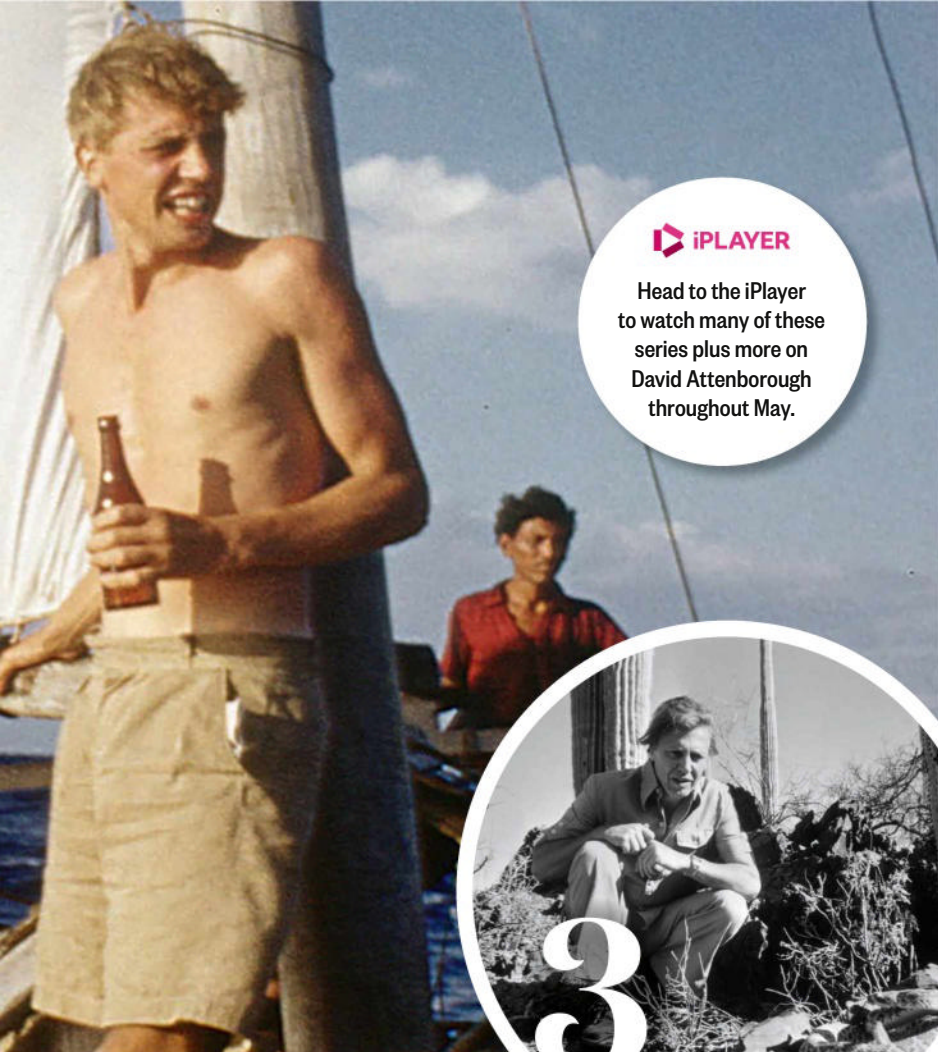
3 **Life on Earth (1979)**

A million-pound budget and groundbreaking techniques took wildlife TV to new heights in 1979. *Life on Earth* saw Attenborough travel the globe and visit more than 100 locations to explore the evolution of species. The 13 episodes included a mesmerising gorilla encounter and slow-motion bat-flight filmed inside a wind tunnel.

4 **The Living Planet (1984)**

A sequel to *Life on Earth*, these 12 episodes delved even deeper into nature. *The Living Planet* was another multi-location production involving some epic filmmaking and daring camera work. The crew waited two years for the opportunity to film an erupting volcano, while a team of geese were trained from chicks to be filmed in flight.





Head to the iPlayer to watch many of these series plus more on David Attenborough throughout May.



5 *The Blue Planet* (2001)

A new millennium brought a series centred upon the oceans. New technologies were harnessed across five years of production to reveal previously unknown behaviour such as the migration routes of the blue whale. In the deep sea, species like the dumbo octopus were captured on film for the first time. *The Blue Planet* was hugely popular, with UK audiences exceeding 12 million.

6 *David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet* (2020)

In an 83-minute film Attenborough described as a “witness statement”, he explored the changes to the planet during his lifetime, and reflected upon a bleak future if patterns did not change. He also pondered the impact of a growing human population, and how a holistic approach to renewable energy may benefit us all. On Netflix.

7 *Wild Isles* (2023)

Attenborough kept his passport in the drawer to present this celebration of wildlife across the British Isles. This five-episode series had a sixth episode, ‘Saving our Wild Isles’, that appeared online. The spectacular footage included orca hunting seals in the Northern Isles, white-tailed eagles in the Hebrides taking advantage of the winter influx of barnacle geese and the incredible relationship between large blue butterflies and red ants. **CF**





**BBC
ONE**

Watch the 12 April
episode of *Countryfile*
to discover more about
the National Forest.



New forest plans offer space for nature alongside development

Suddenly, just as it seemed to some campaigners that England will never have enough trees, along come plans for three new national forests – all at once. And one of them will transform, with its many shades of green, a 66-mile-wide science and technology zone that could become Europe's answer to Silicon Valley.

The forests form part of a Government pledge to allocate £1bn to tree planting during this parliament. Currently only 13.5% of the UK's land surface is covered by woodland and forest compared to a mainland Europe average of around 40%.

Trees, as we know, are vital for the wellbeing of people and planet. They help fight climate change, provide cleaner air and havens for wildlife and, just by being there, improve our mental health. Which is why the new forests have been largely welcomed, not only from an environmental perspective but because they could result in 14,000 new 'green' jobs.

The Western Forest will stretch from the Cotswolds to the Mendips, a second will cover what's known as the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor, which includes Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire and Cambridgeshire, and there's a competition to decide the location of the third, in either the Midlands or north of England. Mary Creagh MP, the minister for nature, said the Government would be "creating places and spaces where generations of people are going to build a home, bring up their families and where nature can thrive."

The Oxford-Cambridge corridor is the area Chancellor Rachel Reeves

calls Silicon Valley because it's already home to several thousand high-tech, innovation-driven, knowledge-intensive companies with around 150,000 employees. And there's space for many more. It benefits hugely from having two of the world's great universities within its borders: behind many of the start-up firms are former students turning their research into businesses.

But not everyone supports the plan. "A forest large enough to be within a 10-minute walk of every new home in

**"MORE THAN 8,000
HECTARES OF HABITAT
HAVE BEEN CREATED"**

the area will simply wipe out what's left of the agricultural land in the region," says Nick Burton of the campaign group Stop the Arc (another name for the corridor). "Between Bedford and Cambridge is some of the best growing land in the country. Converting it into forest could be enough to tip the UK into negative food security."

At the rate it's growing, estimates are this area will contribute up to £78bn to the UK economy by 2035. That growth will mean more housing, more facilities, more business and research premises and millions more trees: the hope is that nature will prosper alongside development, a practical partnership that will benefit people and wildlife. And there is a blueprint to work from.

Just over 30 years ago I found myself looking across a stretch of barren countryside in the Midlands which had been declared, incredulously so it seemed, part of a new environmental concept – The National Forest. I was

there to plant the first tree (an oak) in what would become *Countryfile*'s very own wood. Recently, I returned there to film for *Countryfile* and marvelled that the view over scarred mining land had metamorphosed into a delightful sylvan setting. The forest now covers 200 square miles of Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Staffordshire, and Charlotte Smith and I had the honour of planting its 10 millionth tree – an oak.

The list of achievements across the past three decades is impressive. Forest cover has gone from 6% to 25% with an ultimate target of 33%, thousands of homes have been built, and new woodlands are within easy reach of where people live and work. More than 8,000 hectares of wildlife habitat have been created and species such as the purple emperor butterfly and the dormouse have returned.

"The National Forest has shown what can be achieved with ambition, partnership and targeted delivery," says John Everitt, its chief executive. "We have transformed a post-industrial landscape using trees as a catalyst that can harness an uplift in growth, nature and wellbeing, instead of them acting in conflict."

Another planting scheme, across Northern England, recently celebrated its 10 millionth tree and aims for 50 million of them in and around cities including Manchester, Leeds and Hull. Maybe, with all this arboreal activity going on, the UK might one day find itself no longer amongst the laggards of Europe when it comes to enhancing its vistas with new forests. **CP**

BBC ONE Watch John Craven and the team on *Countryfile*, Sunday evenings on BBC One.

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A VIEW FROM THE FARM

Meet the farmers fighting to increase diversity in agriculture

Farming is a numbers game. Our lives are dominated by yields, commodity prices, profit and loss. Quantities of this and percentages of that. But some figures leap from the page and one of those concerns the ethnicity of the farming population.

The latest figures from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) show that 99.7% of farmers surveyed in England are white and that “other ethnic groups, including Asian or Asian British, Black, Black British, Caribbean or African and Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups received too few responses to be shown separately”.

What is equally surprising is that those results have remained virtually unchanged since the last time the question was asked in 2022. So why are so few people of colour owning or managing farms? There are plenty of theories and opinions, including inheritance patterns and high land costs, with another major reason being that, as ethnic populations settled in the UK, they were drawn to already established communities from their countries of origin in places such as Birmingham, Bradford and London.

It's worth remembering the Windrush generation was encouraged to emigrate to British cities for work; dreams of a life in the countryside were often out of reach because of low wages and a lack of job opportunities. That feeds into today's debate about the ‘whiteness’ of the countryside, and what impact that has on people of colour.

In my part of Gloucestershire, popular spots such as Bourton-on-the-



Farmer Wilfred Emmanuel-Jones shares his life journey on episode 159 of our Plodcast

“FIGURES SHOW THAT 99.7% OF FARMERS IN ENGLAND ARE WHITE”

Water are attracting more British Asian visitors and I've noticed that trend at the Cotswold Farm Park. But it's not the case everywhere. It's an issue West Country farmer Wilfred Emmanuel-Jones has strong views about. He's the self-styled Black Farmer and when he appeared on this magazine's Plodcast he didn't hold back. “Diversity is the lesson that nature is teaching us, so why is it that the countryside doesn't adopt that in terms of the diversity of people that are welcomed into this environment?”

Emmanuel-Jones has turned his concerns into action, working with the famous agricultural college at Writtle in Essex on an initiative called New Faces for Farming to attract greater diversity in the industry. “I don't care whether you're black, Asian or white,

it's those people who are on society's dustbin heap who want to have a break,” he tells us. “Those are the people that I would like to inspire.”

It's a similar story with Kenyan farmer Flavian Obiero who is now a tenant farmer at Tynefield Farm in rural Hampshire. He's become a cheerleader for racial diversity in agriculture and he's worked with Plumpton College to encourage young people into the industry, particularly students from non-farming families. Other black and Asian farmers have become role models, including popstar-turned-farmer JB Gill, and a few are agricultural pioneers, such as Makhan Singh Padda.

Padda came to the UK from the Punjab in 1966 and 30 years later established a fruit farm in the Vale of Evesham. When I visited last summer, business was booming with three generations of Paddas growing 2,000 tonnes of strawberries and 1,500 tonnes of raspberries annually. “Our culture is all about the beauty of farming,” Makhan's son, Bal tells me. “Once you're a farmer, that's what you are because it's in your blood.” But perhaps the most powerful comment in this debate was Bal's recent speech at the NFU Conference when he said skin colour doesn't matter in British farming – but being able to do the job does. 

 **Have your say** What do you think about the issues raised here? Write to the address on page four or email editor@countryfile.com

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DISCOVER

The Peak District

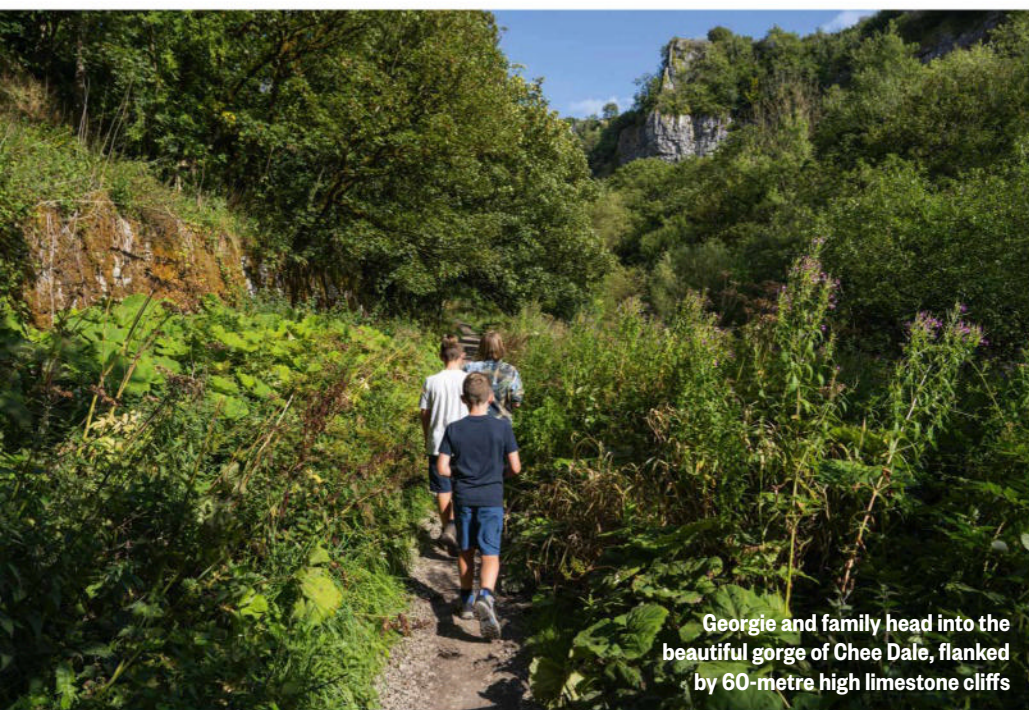
On the Peak District National Park's 75th birthday, **Georgie Duckworth** takes her family on a time-travelling adventure deep into the limestone gorges and rolling dales of Derbyshire, with the help of a 1950s guidebook



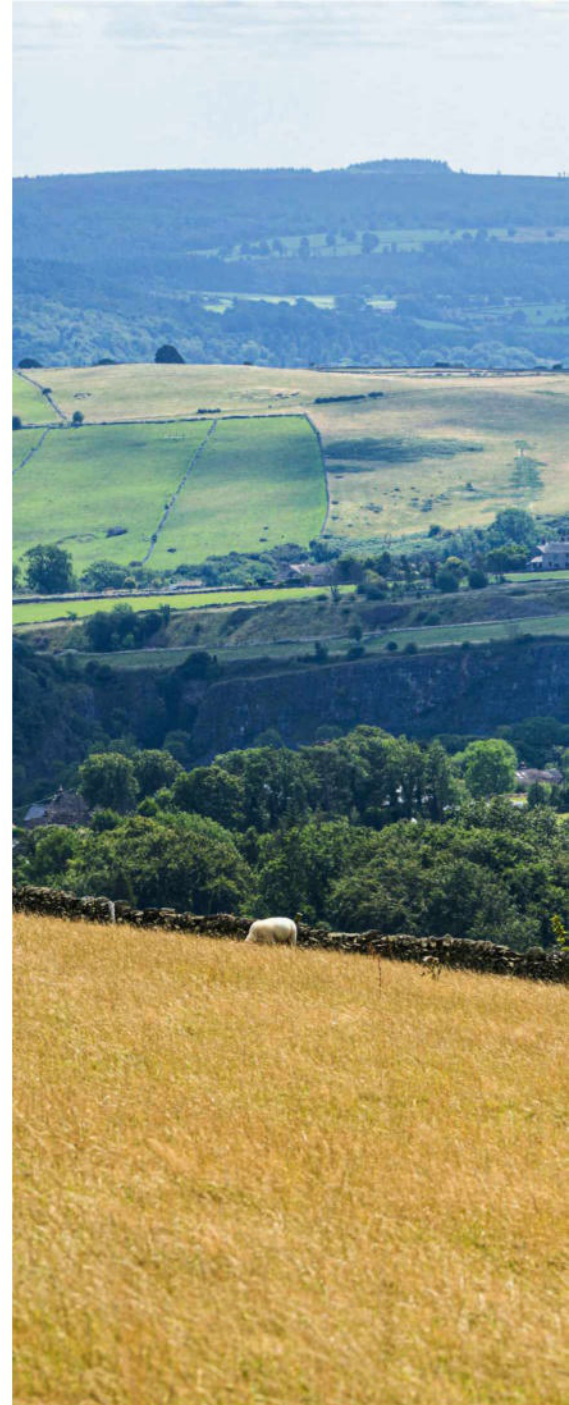
Bathe in the warm sunset glow over Hope Valley from Stanage Edge, the Peak District's longest gritstone escarpment. The edge was once quarried to make grindstones, some of which are still strewn across the landscape



The cavern of Cucklet Church served as a pulpit during Eyam's plague outbreak in the 1660s



Georgie and family head into the beautiful gorge of Chee Dale, flanked by 60-metre high limestone cliffs



We are standing beneath the craggy limestone archway of Cucklet Church, near the Peak District village of Eyam.

Like stepping through the wardrobe to Narnia, this remarkable rock formation – with its jagged crests and pitted hollows sculpted by ancient torrents – has emerged almost magically from within the folds of an inconspicuous dell.

It is here, beneath these ivy-clad walls, that a plague-stricken congregation once gathered for open-air sermons in the 1660s. Birdsong drifts softly through the woodland around us, but the narrow gorge holds a reverent calm that

invites peaceful reflection. My young son turns to me, wide-eyed, and whispers, “Is this the place from the book?” I nod. Tucked into a rocky alcove, we find a cave small enough to

“The narrow gorge holds a reverent calm”

scramble into. As our eyes adjust to the dim light, we see them: dozens of butterflies, hibernating in stillness, waiting to emerge into the sunlight.

The circumstances behind our family trip to the Peak District during this

school holiday are unusual. Weeks earlier, browsing the shelves of a second-hand bookshop in Bristol, I’d noticed a small, slightly musty travel guide to Derbyshire, written by E Carleton Williams in 1950. Ordinarily, the book might not have caught my eye except that, days before, my father-in-law had been reminiscing about childhood trips to the area during the same era. I picked it up as a possible birthday gift but, flicking through its yellowing pages, with a handful of black-and-white images and a simple fold-out map, I found myself unexpectedly drawn in.

In an age where tourism has shifted increasingly online, with a stream of polished photos, curated guides and



Derbyshire's dales and rolling fields are perfect for a mix of livestock and arable farming

more information than most travellers can digest, the simplicity of this little book felt refreshing. Aside from a brief introduction to the county's geology, history and wildlife, *The Little Guides: Derbyshire* offered no itinerary, no reviews, no 'Top 10' lists. Instead, an alphabetical index of place names from Abney to Youlgreave provided factual detail: a church's age, a village's setting, a moment from local history.

TIMELESS BEAUTY

Setting Google aside and allowing the guidebook to lead, we set off to explore an area unfamiliar to us all. My two digitally savvy sons, aged 10 and 13, are initially sceptical, questioning whether a guide from 75 years ago could still be

“Through all this change, the geology and natural beauty remain timeless”

relevant or accurate. Indeed, much has changed in the Peak District since the 1950s. Visitor numbers and tourism infrastructure have grown significantly, agricultural intensification and climate change have affected local wildlife and the “spreading blight of raw quarries” that Williams once lamented has only worsened, but as the author shrewdly observed, “we suppose the monster of trade must always have its way”.

Yet, through all this change, the geology and natural beauty of the Peak

District remain timeless: the high moors of the Dark Peak to the north, dominated by millstone grit, and the White Peak to the south, defined by rolling dales, deep limestone gorges and fortress-like cliffs (or edges). Williams' description of moving north through the area could have been written today: “From the lowlands, the traveller may pass up the [River] Derwent to the dales, cliffs and steeply climbing woods, and presently see the rocky edges of Froggatt and Bamford, until the grandeur of the farthest



moors emerges beyond the dams and the newly born stream tumbles sparkling from the flanks of Bleaklow beyond Kinder.”

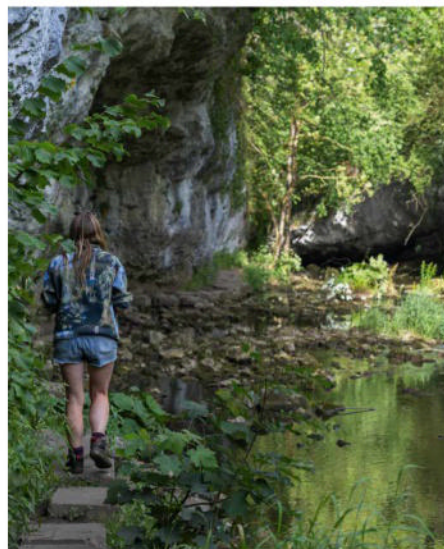
Limited by time, we choose to focus on those places in the guidebook that have most captured our attention, visiting a different location for a walk each day. Exploring predominantly by foot, we soon realise that the guide’s integrated map is a little too simplistic, so we revert to a modern, paper OS map to help with navigation.

GIANT BUTTRESSES

For our first stop, my father-in-law had spoken fondly of the beauty of Chee Dale, located in the White Peak near Buxton. Williams clearly shared his admiration, describing it as a “magnificent gorge with limestone cliffs massed like giant buttresses, and Chee Tor, a superb bastion dominating the scene”.

Walking from Topley Pike at the top of Chee Dale, we descend through

“The kids imagine cavemen hunting giant beasts”



Charming stepping stones beside the River Wye add to the enchanting feel of Chee Dale

steep meadows where wildflowers bask in the sunshine. Reaching the River Wye and turning to follow its meandering passage through the gorge, the landscape changes dramatically and adopts a wild, almost prehistoric feel. As the ravine narrows and widens beneath steep cliffs, the children imagine cavemen hunting giant beasts here, leaping across the stepping stones that are a much-loved feature of this dale.

We pinpoint the exact spot near the Tor where Williams had stood to capture the grainy photograph in the book. The mighty, jagged rock formation is unchanged, but the ash trees pictured are either missing or visibly struggling, leafless and brittle, showing unmistakable signs of ash dieback disease.

Dave Savage, landscape recovery manager at Derbyshire Wildlife Trust, explains that much has changed in the landscape here since the 1950s. Woodlands once dominated by



In the 1950s trains would have still been running across Headstone Viaduct; it's now part of the delightful Monsal Trail

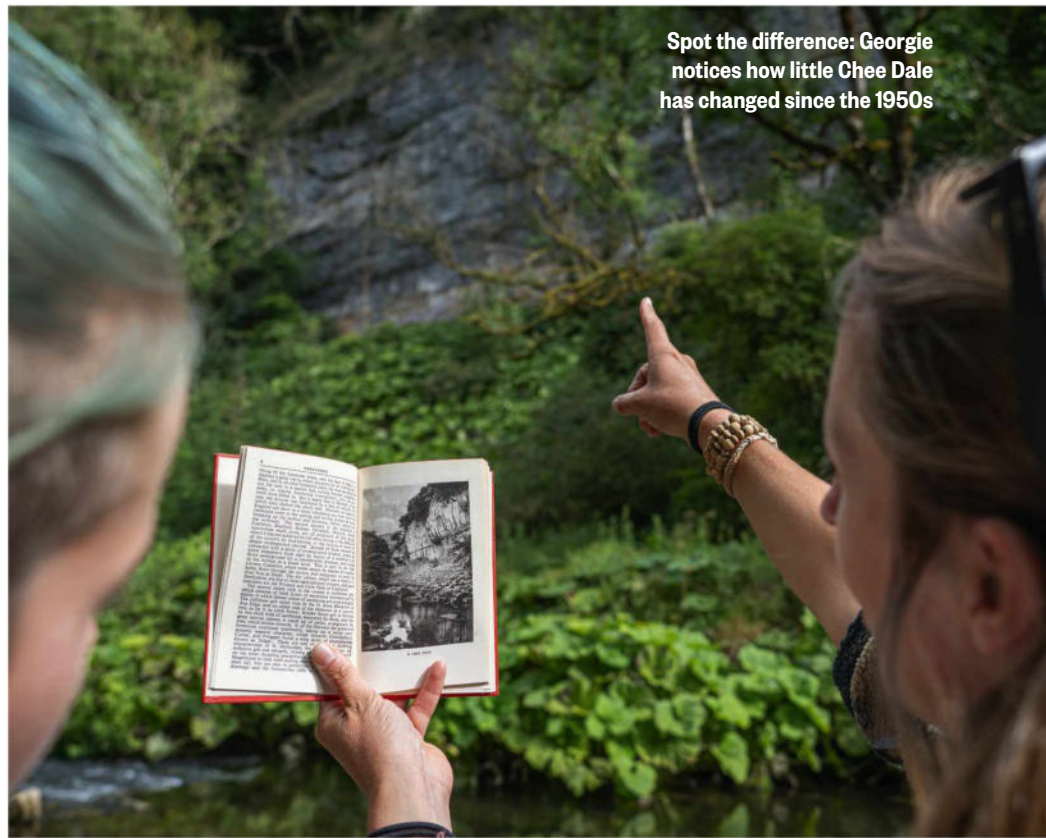
now-threatened ash are gradually being diversified with a mixture of alternative native trees. Species of local wildflower once celebrated by Williams, such as the Nottingham catchfly, green hellebore and columbine, have become scarcer in recent decades. The reasons for this decline remain uncertain, though overgrazing and climate change are likely contributors. Through its Wild Peak rewilding programme, the Trust is working to reverse these losses and restore the area's natural biodiversity.

Yet in my eyes, life thrives here. We see water avens with bumblebees buzzing among their bell-like flowers, unfurling ferns cling to the stone cliffs and the broad green leaves of butterbur transform the riverbank into a green jungle.

We lose count of the dippers we spot, their white bibs bobbing up and down on the river rocks. The familiar songs of wrens, blackcaps and chiffchaffs provide a comforting soundtrack,



Chee Dale's steep limestone cliffs offer valuable nooks and crannies for hibernating butterflies



Spot the difference: Georgie notices how little Chee Dale has changed since the 1950s

while Mandarin ducks, a species arrived since Williams' time, float past with rows of fluffy ducklings. This has been a wonderful start to our Peak District adventure.

HAUNTING HISTORY

Moving slightly east, our second day begins in Stoney Middleton, where Williams describes "houses built in tiers on the hillside, so that it brings

back memories of the hill towns of Italy". Admittedly, the frequent rumble of quarry lorries along the main road somewhat taints this picturesque scene, but the church's unusual octagonal nave, built in 1759, adds a flavour of the exotic.

Leaving the village and climbing through gentle pastures, a green patchwork of rolling dales and drystone walls stretching out around



Dating from the late 8th or early 9th century, the carved cross in Eyam's St Lawrence's churchyard is remarkably preserved



Sitting beside the manor house ruins, Padley Chapel was restored and consecrated in the 1930s

“Burbage Brook tumbles over giant mossy boulders”

us, it's hard to imagine the area's troubled past. Residents of Eyam, known as the 'plague village', famously quarantined themselves during a 17th-century outbreak to prevent any further spread of the disease. Five-sixths of the inhabitants are said to have died in just a few months. As we pause to enjoy the magnificent views, we discover a boundary stone where people from Stoney Middleton left food for their neighbours in Eyam in exchange for coins that were carefully sanitised in vinegar. The deep pits of coin holes are still visible today.

Reaching Eyam, we seek out the intricately decorated pre-Norman Cross in St Lawrence's churchyard referenced by Williams. It's a remarkable piece of ancient history, but it's the display of emotive, often heroic, plague stories inside the church, as well as the old stocks on the village square, that really capture our attention.

After a quick coffee and cake at the Village Green café, we use the OS map to locate Cucklet Church, noted by Williams but well off the modern-day tourist trail. Standing amid the rocky makeshift chapel, the weight of the tragedy can really be appreciated. For me, its haunting beauty captures much of the spirit of Eyam's layered history.

HIDDEN WONDERS

For our final outing, we head slightly north to Padley Chapel. Williams recounts how, amid fears of a Spanish invasion in 1588, two outlawed Catholic priests were discovered hiding in the chambers of this tiny chapel and subsequently condemned to death.

Beside the chapel lie the remarkable ruins of the former manor house. Excavation work in 1933 revealed a clear footprint of the building, including walls, an old staircase and a weathered stone basin, offering a rare glimpse into the scale and structure of this once-grand residence.



Georgie surveys the gently rolling hills above Eyam

From here, in his characteristically modest way, Williams references a “pleasant walk through Padley Woods”. For us, this means following a trail through Padley Gorge, an ancient, wooded valley where the Burbage Brook tumbles down over giant mossy boulders. Magnificent oak trees line the path; we spot treecreepers and hear the high peep of a nuthatch as we walk. On the edge of the gorge, a former quarry, once a site of heavy industry, has transformed into a delicate woodland of silver birch. The early summer sunlight dances playfully through fresh green leaves and it makes for the perfect picnic spot, with supplies purchased from the bakery at Tindalls of Tideswell.

Nourished and re-energised, the children scramble over boulders as my

husband and I perch on a fallen tree trunk, reflecting on our newfound appreciation for this diverse and remarkable landscape. Despite the decades since Williams’ visit, I’m surprised by how little has truly

“The essence of the Peak District is much the same”

changed. The essence of the Peak District – its atmosphere, rich history and distinctive geology – is much the same. It has an intoxicating beauty, sometimes subtle, sometimes dramatic, but always full of hidden wonders and intrigues to discover.

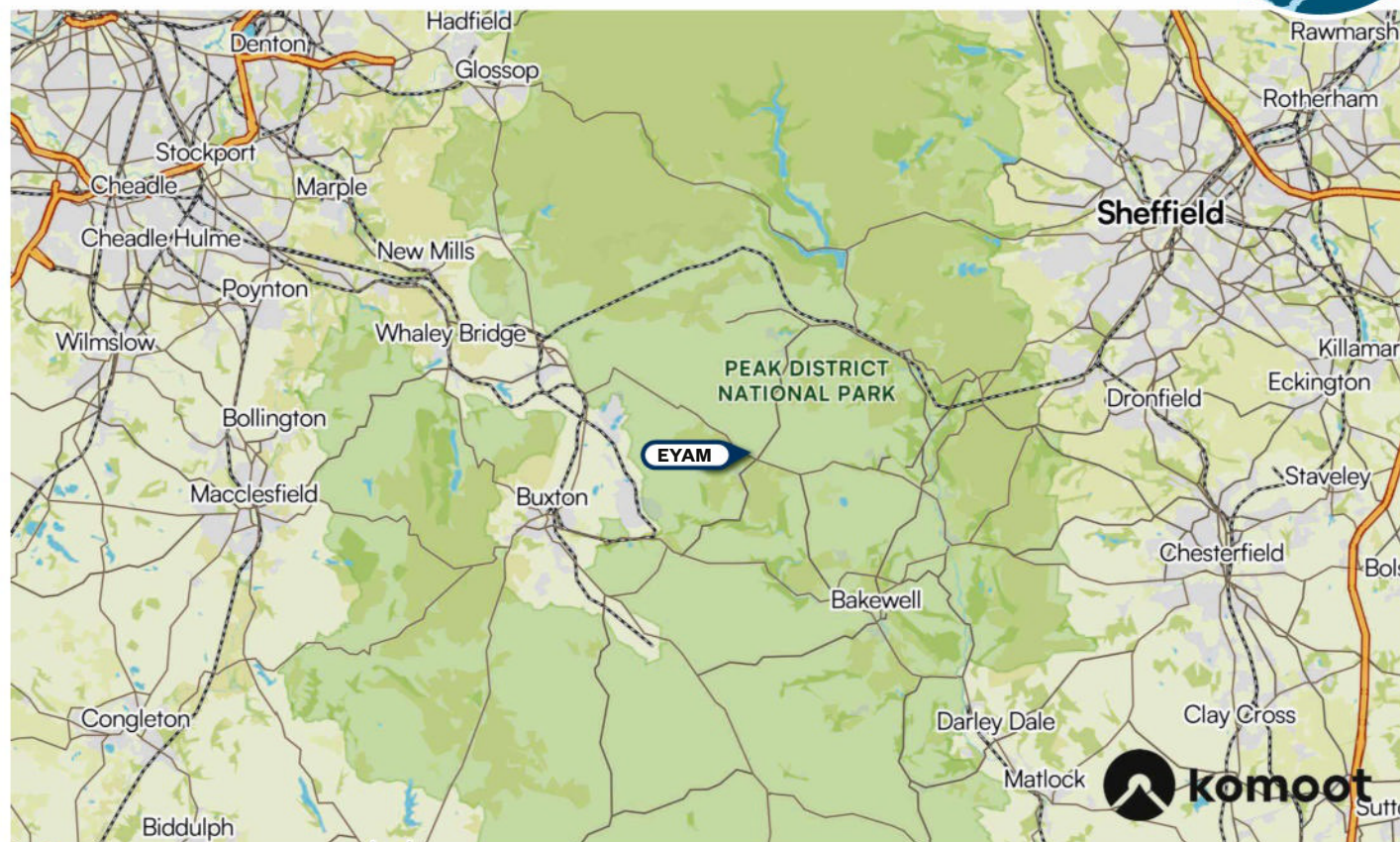
Throughout our trip, Williams’ words are a reassuring but not overbearing companion. His simple descriptions mean there’s no pressure to ‘tick off’ sights, just a gentle encouragement to explore for ourselves. The children, initially unconvinced, are soon completely absorbed in the book, eager to leaf through its pages each time we arrive somewhere new. For our family, the discovery of this modest little 1950s guidebook opened the door to a slower, more curious way of travelling. And the Peak District has proven to be the perfect setting for it. 



Georgie Duckworth is a Somerset-based writer and the author of *Wild Swimming Walks, Bristol & Bath* (Wild Things Publishing, £14.99).

NOW GO THERE

Georgie Duckworth on where to eat, drink and stay in the Peak District



GETTING THERE

The Peak District is well-connected by train due to the Hope Valley Line from Manchester to Sheffield and the Derwent Valley Line from Derby to Matlock. Stations include Edale, Hope, Bamford, Hathersage and Grindleford. It's also easily accessible by car via the M1 or A6.

TRAVEL IN THE PEAKS

As well as the train services, local buses connect the villages of the Peak District. Some locations listed here are included on the 65, 257 and X66 routes.

The Peaks are also connected by a fantastic network of biking routes and footpaths. Many recommended trails can be found on the Let's Go Peak District website.

letsgopeakdistrict.co.uk

KEY LANDMARKS

➤ CUCKLET CHURCH

A natural limestone amphitheatre with caverns and arches south of the village of Eyam. During the 1660s, the plague-stricken residents would gather here for an outdoor service led by Reverend William Mompesson. A commemoration service is still held here every August.

CHEE TOR

A dramatic limestone cliff rising above the River Wye in Chee Dale. Referred to by Williams as, "a magnificent bastion of rock", it's popular with walkers and climbers and is one of the most remarkable sights in the area.

PADLEY MANOR

A fascinating set of ruins with a clear footprint of the former 14th-century manor. Open access to the public year-round. The adjoining chapel is a

listed building (open to the public Easter to October on Sundays between 2 and 4pm) and the whole site is a Scheduled Monument.



Historic arches at Cucklet Church

ACCOMMODATION

PILSLEY INN, PILSLEY

A welcoming traditional inn in the charming village of Pilsley, part of the Chatsworth Estate. Enjoy fantastic food and comfortable accommodation, including family and dog-friendly rooms. Walk from here to the Chatsworth Farm Shop for picnic supplies. chatsworthescapes.co.uk

YHA RAVENSTOR, MILLERS DALE

This large, simple hostel is a fantastic base for exploring the surrounding network of dales. It offers both shared and private rooms with bunks, there are meals available onsite and a licensed bar. yha.org.uk

NORTH LEES CAMPSITE, STANAGE

Run by the Peak District National Park, this idyllic, peaceful and basic



It's said that Peter's Stone, the huge domed limestone stack in Cressbrook Dale, was named after Rome's St Peter's Basilica

campsite is great for nature lovers, bird spotters and those wanting space to run a little wild. Pitch your own tent or choose one of the wooden camping pods available.

peakdistrict.gov.uk

EAT & DRINK

TINDALLS OF TIDESWELL

A visit to the Peaks isn't complete without a trip to Tindalls. This traditional bakery and delicatessen offers freshly baked bread, delicious pork pies and a selection of local cheeses, as well as thar cakes, an ancient Peak District speciality.

01298 871351

GRINDLEFORD COMMUNITY SHOP & CAFÉ

This wonderful community shop and café is tucked inside the vestry of St Helen's Church. Offering everyday essentials and light refreshments, it's

www.countryfile.com



Sit in the sunshine outside Eyam's Village Green café

the perfect spot to enjoy a peaceful cup of tea under the shelter of trees in the churchyard garden.

grindlefordshop.co.uk

THREE STAGS' HEADS INN, WARDLOW

A real slice of history and chance to experience Williams' 1950s Peak District at this unique and unchanged

country pub. A simple parlour, a cosy fire and plenty of locals (and their dogs) to share a yarn with.

01298 872268

BARREL INN, BRETTON

The highest pub in Derbyshire, said to mark the dividing line between the White Peak and Dark Peak. On sunny days, relax on the outdoor benches

and take in the stunning views; in bad weather, enjoy the cosy fireside and old-world indoor charm.

barrelinn.co.uk

◀ VILLAGE GREEN, EYAM

Bustling little café with friendly staff and a great organic, homecooked lunch menu. Coffee and an irresistible selection of cakes too. It's popular with walkers, cyclists and locals. cafevillagegreen.com

FURTHER INFORMATION

THE WILD PEAK PROGRAMME

Led by Derbyshire Wildlife Trust, this bold and ambitious rewilding initiative spanning the Peak District aims to restore habitats, reintroduce native species and connect local communities with nature.

derbyshirewildlifetrust.org.uk

Wings of desire





The ability to fly evolved in animals several times, while humans have revered and yearned for this evolutionary advantage for millennia. **Simon Barnes** looks at the how and why of flight

This composite image of a northern wheatear, taken on Shetland Mainland, shows how the bird's wing movements allow it to gain height

“Think of air as a kind of soup. It moves, it flows, it resists”

It began many years ago in a garden in Fulham. I was lying in a hammock and a couple of feet above me was a hoverfly. It hung in the air in much the same way that bricks don't... a line from *The Hitchhikers's Guide to the Galaxy*, yet to be written at the time of my epiphany of SW6, but one that captures for all time the miracle of flight.

It continued in Borneo a fair bit later. I was in the jungle. Dusk was falling but the squirrels weren't. They were flying. Sort of. I could pick one out, bounding up a tree, holding onto a swinging twig as if trying to summon up his nerve, and then leaping into emptiness.

He spread out arms and legs, revealing a furry membrane, and then, wobbling alarmingly in the roll axis, apparently on the very edge of control, he made it all the way across the clearing to slap himself against the trunk of another tree. It wasn't great flying, but it was a hell of a lot better than not flying. Flying is the most colossal advantage – even if a flight of 50 metres is close to your limit.

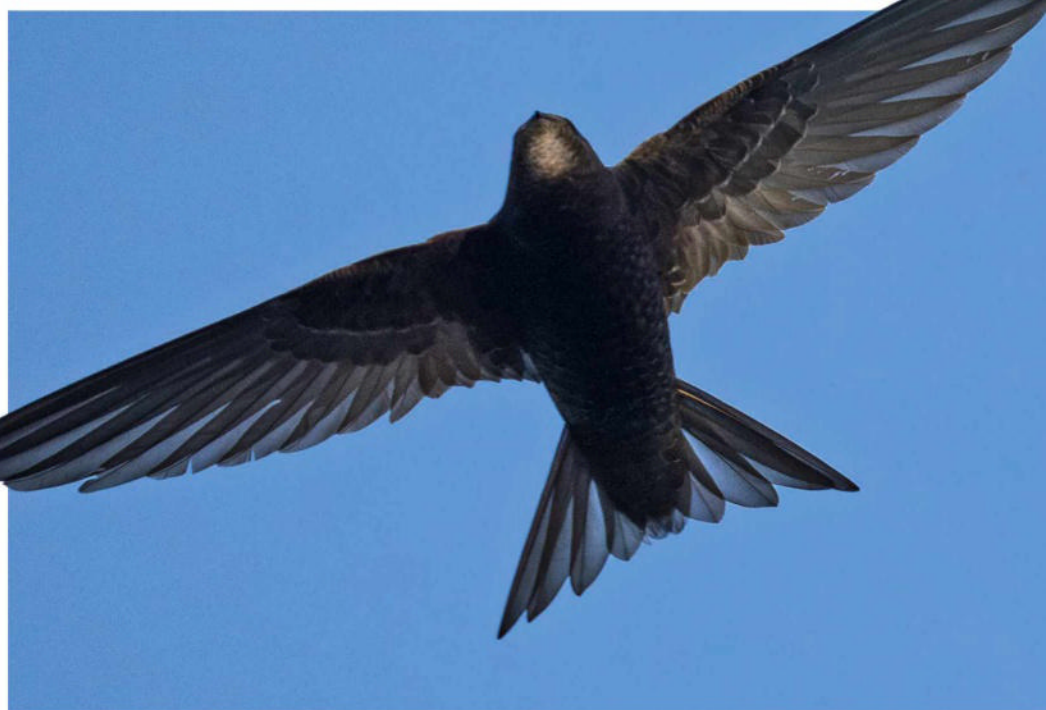
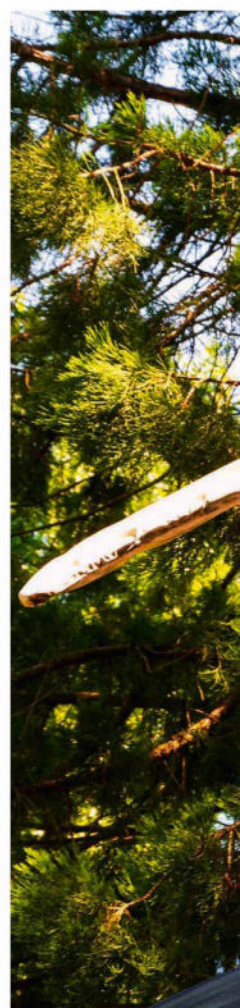
One more. I was paddling my kayak on the local river in the Norfolk Broads when I met a small flight of swifts. They were feeding on low-flying insects, sipping from the river at breakneck speed – the ultimate quick drink – and then fizzing back up again. They're such brilliant fliers that the young birds can spend their first two years of life in the air: eating, sleeping and eventually even making love on the wing.

THE PHYSICS OF FLIGHT

Flight has always fascinated me, as it has always fascinated everybody. It seems like a miracle. That's because we think of the air as a kind of emptiness. But have you ever turned a corner on



Borneo's red giant flying squirrel can glide from tree to tree thanks to its fur cape



The world's fastest bird in level flight, the swift has an astonishing top speed of 69mph. These athletes rarely touch the ground, flying around 14,000 miles a year on their seasonal migrations



Artist and engineer Leonardo da Vinci was fascinated by flight; this model of wings invented by him hangs in the park of Château du Clos Lucé, France

a windy day in the city and been hit a solid blow by a gust of wind? Or stuck your arm out of a car window at 70 mph? In such circumstances the air is a very powerful presence.

Think of it as a kind of soup. It moves, it flows, it resists – and if you get it right, it supports. Put your hand out of the car window again. Hold it flat, palm forwards and it takes strength to hold it there. Turn it edge on and it's a lot easier: less resistance. Now turn your hand slightly so that your thumb is higher than your little finger – at once your hand tries to soar. That's because you've created a pressure difference: the lower pressure on the back of your hand is pulling you up, the higher pressure under your palm is pushing you up. That pressure difference is the secret of flight.

Sometimes a trait is so valuable that it has evolved several times over: the same solution to the same problem by

different evolutionary routes. It's called convergent evolution. Examples are the camera eye, the opposable thumb, echolocation. And flight.

Flight has evolved four times, five if you count humans. It has evolved in insects, the extinct pterosaurs, bats and birds. Squirrels don't count: they're mere gliders. The animals that have mastered real powered flight all operate by the same principle: paired wings that give both lift and thrust. Thrust or power from the flap, which pushes against the air like paddling a canoe in water, and lift from the pressure difference over those paired wings.

Insects were the first to get off the ground, around 350 million years ago. How did this come about? The fossil record won't tell us, so we can only guess. It's *Just So Story* time: perhaps they started by hopping up or drifting down or catching prey or avoiding

THE HUMAN YEARNING FOR FLIGHT



Why do we celebrate Icarus (above), a figure from Greek mythology? Much better to celebrate Daedalus, his father, who didn't fly too close to the sun and didn't crash. Daedalus is the eternal dream of human flight.

We have pursued this dream throughout the centuries, sometimes with crazed optimism and sometimes with scientific detachment. Eilmer the flying monk of Malmesbury was probably closer to the first of these when he leapt from the church tower in the 11th century. All the same, he managed a flight of 200 metres. He broke both legs but survived: a pretty good result.

The breakthrough came when humans separated thrust from lift: non-flapping wings and an engine. The Wright brothers were the first to get airborne; meticulous, thoughtful men who took their knowledge of cycling into the air. Louis Blériot crossed the channel with his plane and his aerofoil moustache in 1909. He hadn't bothered to research a landing place, but managed to get down anyway.

Soon humans were making war in the air and after two world wars the advances in technology made flight a possibility for millions. I remember my flight on Concorde, flying only from London to Edinburgh – but goodness, I looked wonderful from the ground.



Each autumn, Bewick's swans migrate over 2,100 miles from their breeding grounds in Russia to overwinter on British shores

REMARKABLE MIGRATORY FLIGHTS

- You could hold a dozen willow warblers in your cupped hands, but these tiny winged athletes fly from Britain to Africa every winter, and then back for the spring.
- Bar-headed geese have the world's toughest overnight commute: every spring they cross the Himalaya to reach their breeding grounds on the Tibetan Plateau.
- In 2022, a tagged bar-tailed godwit was recorded flying non-stop from Alaska to Tasmania: a six-day journey of 13,560 km.
- Bewick's swans fly from Siberia in autumn to enjoy Britain's winters.
- On the US-Canada border every September, broad-winged hawks and sharp-shinned hawks funnel together over the narrowest part of the Great Lakes as they migrate south in great crowds of raptors.
- Homer wrote of the loud, bugling calls of migrating cranes in *The Iliad*.

Photos: Alamy, naturepl.com

predators. What's certain is that flight was a massive advantage; insects have been flying ever since.

And yes, it's wholly possible to explain how a bumblebee can fly. It's all to do with the colossal rate of their wingbeats: up to 230 times a second. They can do this because their flight muscles aren't directly attached to their wings, as they are with birds and dragonflies. The small but violently oscillating wings shift a colossal amount of air – easily enough for the bumblebee to fly.

WEIGHING IN

It's important to remember that size matters in flight. It's a great deal easier for an insect to fly than an albatross. The biggest flying creature that ever lived was a pterosaur: the wonderfully named *quetzalcoatlus* had a wingspan of 10 metres. Modern research shows us that all these flying reptiles were warm-blooded – active and skilled aeronauts.

There's a group with the unlovely name of anurognathids who clearly hunted other flying creatures and did so on the wing – the hardest trick in the book. Perhaps they flew in flocks like swallows over the heads of the

“Flight is the most energy-expensive form of locomotion”

dinosaurs: brilliant flying creatures that went extinct, not because they were inadequate but because a meteor-strike wiped out almost all large-sized life on Earth 66 million years ago.

Since then, birds have dominated the airways of the day. A few species operate in twilight, and a very few work at the dead of night, but mostly, night is the time of the bats. Many insect species adapted to the night to escape the attentions of the birds, but bats can hunt them down when no other living thing can see.

There are 1,500 species of bat, the most numerous order of mammals after rodents. For most of them, night is made clear as day by sonar: the radar-like system that makes flight in pitch darkness possible. The pipistrelle bats at the end of the garden are one of nature's masterpieces.

Birds can fly because of their feathers but feathers didn't evolve for flight, they evolved to keep birds warm. They do so brilliantly, as anyone who has ever worn a down jacket knows, but it turned out that feathers were also ideal for flight: light, stiff but flexible and capable of moving the air. A trait that has evolved for one purpose and then gets used for another is called an exaptation.

There are more than 10,000 species of birds and almost all of them can fly. Some can only just about do it, like pheasants, who aren't much better than flying squirrels, but again, a little bit of flying is a huge improvement on none.

UPLIFTING ENERGY

Flight is the most energy-expensive form of locomotion, but it's distance-cheap. It's harder to fly for an hour than to walk for an hour but much easier to fly a mile than walk it. For



Due to its epic migrations, an Arctic tern can fly the equivalent distance of three round trips to the Moon over its lifetime



How to Fly: Taking Wing with Birds, Bats, Insects and Humans by Simon Barnes is out on 7 May (Bloomsbury, £22)

a flying creature, distance is far less a concern than it is for non-flier, and that puts new food sources, new places of shelter and sometimes a new mate within your scope.

That's true for a mute swan – the world's second-heaviest flying bird after the kori bustard of Africa – commuting with loud heavy flaps to another part of the river. It's also true for the Arctic tern that nests in Britain and right up into the Arctic Circle and spends winter at the opposite end of the world, moving by easy stages down to the Antarctic. No living creature sees as much daylight in a year as an Arctic tern.

When we think of flight we think first of birds. Flight enthral us humans: fills us with envy and desire and optimism and even a sense of reverence. In many religions the holiest being below God is an angel, often depicted as a human with the wings of a swan.



A pipistrelle bat uses echolocation to swoop upon insect prey under the cover of darkness

What birds are best at lifting the hearts of us humans as well as themselves? In this country, pink-footed geese flying in thousands to their nightly resting-place or the kestrel on the motorway verge or the

kingfisher low over the water or the gulls over a landfill site or a starling murmuration or the peregrine over the Tate Modern in London.

Or elsewhere in the world, the all-day glide of an albatross or the insouciance of a bateleur or the hawk migration over the Great Lakes or a hummingbird feeding from a flower or a flock of bustards taking wing or a bat hawk operating at dusk.

Or a swift. It always comes back to swifts. The masters and mistresses of the air. To them the sky is not a challenge. It's home. Who wouldn't like to be a swift? **CF**



Simon Barnes is an author and journalist who has written over 20 books on wildlife, conservation and travel. simonbarnesauthor.co.uk

Sailing Norway through the seasons with Hurtigruten

Svalvar, Norway

From the Northern Lights to the Midnight Sun, explore how Norway's wildlife and landscapes transform through the seasons on a Hurtigruten coastal voyage.

Norway's moments of unbridled natural beauty don't fade with the seasons; they simply find new ways to astonish you. From magical summer nights under the Midnight Sun to the dramatic snow-covered landscapes surrounding the fjords, you can create unique memories all year round.

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Experience a whole other side to Norway under the 24-hour Midnight Sun. Say goodbye to snowy landscapes and experience long days under a warm glow. Enjoy adventures in the great outdoors, soak up the culture at fun-filled festivals, and indulge in fresh and delicious seasonal cuisine.

AUTUMN (SEPTEMBER—NOVEMBER)

Embrace Norway at its most peaceful — no summer crowds or winter cold, just pure tranquillity. Enjoy the vibrant colours of the mountains, hills and woods by day while darker night skies increase your chances of seeing the iconic aurora borealis. From peak harvest local cuisine to sailing with Hurtigruten into the majestic Trollfjord and Hjørundfjord, get ready to try something new.

WINTER (DECEMBER—FEBRUARY)

Enjoy rosy cheeks, crisp air and hot drinks as



Hurtigruten MS Nordlys

you wander the dazzling Christmas markets and cosily lit homes that light up the coast. Gaze in awe at the showstopping Northern Lights during the polar twilight, indulge in soul-warming food and have fun with endless winter excursions including dog sledding and cross-country skiing*.

SPRING (MARCH—MAY)

Watch Norway burst into life with bright colours from fruit trees lining the fjords, stronger waterfalls from melting snow, and the return of beloved puffins to the coastline to nest. This season is full of change; you'll witness the Northern Lights at the start and the Midnight Sun at the end. Thanks to the variation in weather and daylight hours, you can enjoy more of your passions while exploring natural wonders with hiking, biking, kayaking and even skiing*.

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*Excursions are an additional cost

 **HURTIGRUTEN**



TOP 10

SCOTTISH ISLANDS

Some 790 islands stud the seas around Scotland – but which to visit first? **Alastair MacDonald Jackson** picks his favourites



Eigg, Small Isles

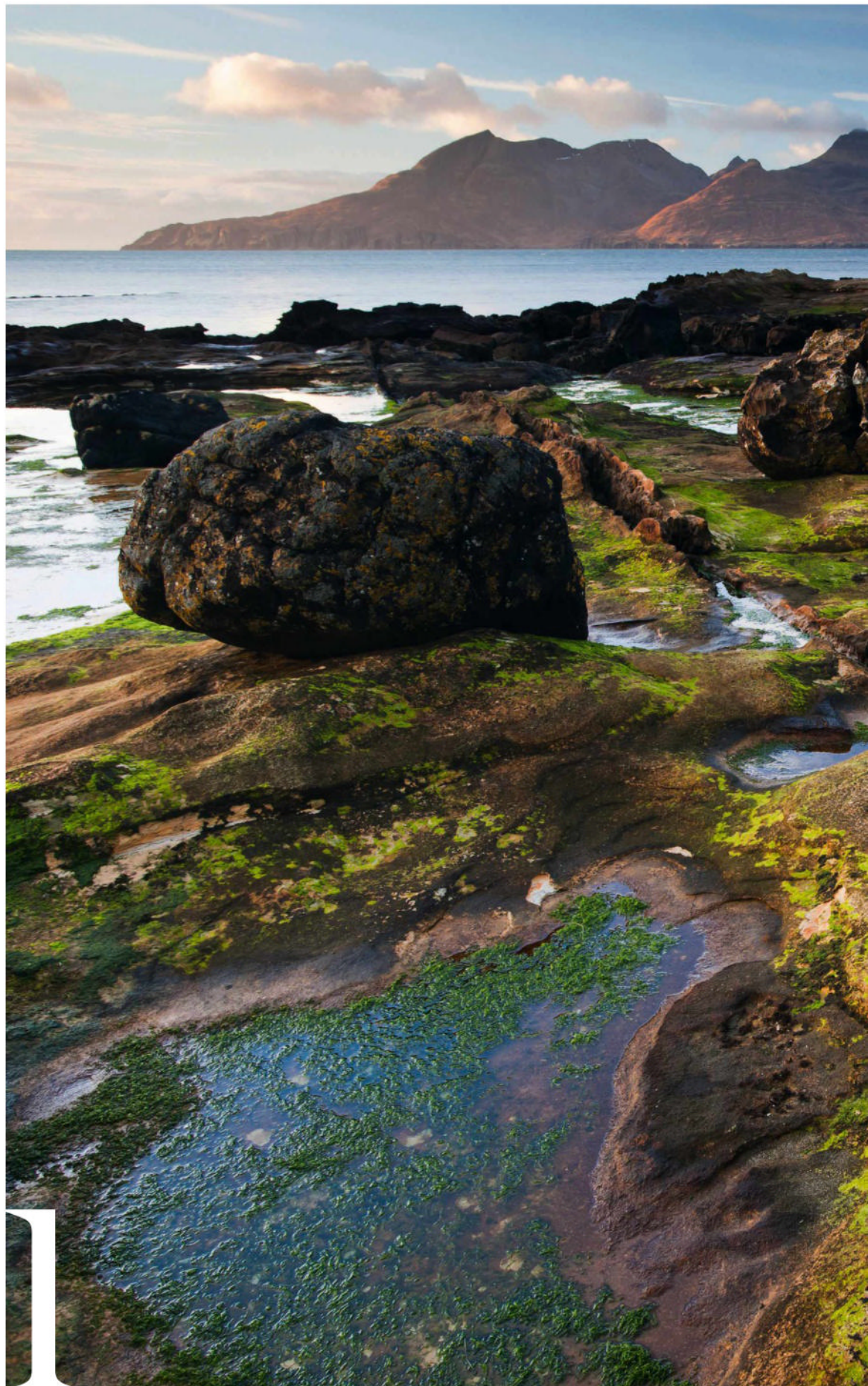
Community owned, fully powered by renewable electricity, home to Britain's most remote record label and Scotland's first cooperative brewery, Eigg is no ordinary island. One of four in the archipelago known as the Small Isles, it's connected to the mainland by ferry to Mallaig, about 12 miles to the north-east.

Since the island was bought by the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust in 1997, the population has increased to 105 – some of whom you'll meet in the Galmisdale Bay Café & Bar on a Friday evening for a lively session. You may also run into Johnny Lynch – the enthusiastic musician who performs as Pictish Trail and runs both Lost Map Records and occasional episodes of the Howlin' Fling! music festival held on the island.

Eigg is a walkers' paradise, with rewarding paths leading to the south coast and Massacre Cave – named for the slaughter of a reputed 400 islanders during a 16th-century clan feud – and up to the summit of An Sgùrr, the island's highest point at 393m.

As well as B&Bs, a hostel, campsite and self-catering options, wild camping is permitted – as it is in most of Scotland. There's no public transport and only residents are permitted to bring cars onto the island. Cycling is a good – if challenging – option; bring a bike or hire one on Eigg. The ferry from Mallaig doesn't sail daily – though more frequently in summer – and is prone to cancellation in bad weather.

Find out more, including ferry and accommodation details, at isleofeigg.org.







Shetland Mainland, Shetland

Despite the popularity of TV drama *Shetland*, Britain's most northerly islands receive only a tenth of the number of visitors that flock to Skye. Steeped in Neolithic and Viking heritage, this archipelago feels more Nordic than Scottish; the islands came under Norwegian sovereignty until 1472 when they were annexed by the Scottish crown due to an unpaid dowry.

That Norse heritage is celebrated each January at the Up Helly Aa fire festival in Lerwick, where a replica Viking longship is torched. Viking and older histories are on display at Jarlshof, an ancient settlement inhabited for some four millennia from about 2700 BCE; its Norse ruins make up the largest such site visible anywhere in Britain. Nearby is Sumburgh Head lighthouse and puffin colony.

"It's an amazing place to be, and I wouldn't want to live anywhere else," says Sorley Johnston, a local teacher who enjoys kayaking and spotting some of the one million seabirds that nest in vast colonies on Shetland's cliffs each year.

To get there, take the 12-hour NorthLink ferry from Aberdeen or fly to Sumburgh from several Scottish cities with Loganair.

travel.shetland.org

Barra, Outer Hebrides

A jewel in the crown of the Western Isles, Barra is the second-most southerly populated island in the chain, famed for its wild western coast pounded by Atlantic swells. Writer Compton MacKenzie – author of *Whisky Galore* – who lived here for several years, described the colour of the sea between Barra and South Uist as "richer ultramarine than any stretch of water this side of the Mediterranean".

Barra's 'capital', Castlebay, a delightful crofting

community of 300 people, is guarded by 16th-century Kisimul Castle, perched on a rock in the bay. Continuing the whisky theme, in 2001 the castle was leased to Historic Scotland by the chief of Clan MacNeil for 1,000 years – for the annual sum of £1 and a bottle of whisky.

Barra's airport, connected only to Glasgow by Loganair, is actually a cockleshell beach on which the Islander plane lands – the world's only airport where scheduled flights use a tidal shore. A sign warns visitors to 'Keep off the

beach when the windsock is flying'. Alternatively, catch the CalMac ferry from Oban (**calmac.co.uk**).

The essence of the island is summed up by the owner of the Dunard Hostel, who advised a guest: "If you leave early, just pop your money in the mug on the shelf".

Cycling the full circuit of the island from Castlebay offers 21km of spectacular scenery. You can hire in the summer from Barra Bike Hire (**info@barrabikehire.co.uk**) or bring your own on the ferry for no additional charge.



Holy Isle, Firth of Clyde

If the relative bustle of Arran in the summer is too much for you, head next door to Holy Isle, a small peaceful retreat in the Firth Of Clyde.

Not to be confused with Holy Island (Lindisfarne) in Northumberland, the island is now owned by the Samyé Ling Buddhist Community, styling it as the Centre for World Peace and Health (holyisle.org).

There is a long tradition of spiritual history on the island. Saint Maolaise was a 6th-century Irish hermit monk who lived in a cave that can still be seen today, complete with Viking runic graffiti carved into the walls.

To get the full experience, stay overnight at the centre and attend a course or retreat. However, most day-trippers

will be happy with a half day walk along the rocky spine of the island across the 314m hill Mullach Mòr and the wander back along the coast. The remainder of the island is a nature reserve, and it's special to see Eriskay ponies, Saanen goats and Soay sheep wandering wild. The lady who tends the herb garden at the retreat came to the island 20

years ago and simply never went back to 'civilisation'.

In accordance with the centre's Golden Rules, you are asked to not smoke, drink or tell lies on the island. With the exception of assistance dogs, pets are not permitted. Bring sandwiches instead and book the ferry ahead of time, as crossings are tide dependent. lamlashcruises.org.uk






Raasay, Inner Sound

Skye's smaller, less well-known neighbour makes a rewarding escape from the larger isle's tourist honeypots. MV *Hallaig*, the ferry making the short voyage from Sconser on Skye (calmac.co.uk), is named after a verse by acclaimed Gaelic poet Sorley MacLean (1911–1996), who hailed from Raasay. Only 10 minutes' walk from the ferry terminal, the visitor centre at the new Raasay distillery offers tours and spectacular views back to the Cuillin Hills.

From the ferry, follow the single-track road winding north and up onto the island's spine, before descending to the ruins of 16th-century Brochel Castle, a MacLeod stronghold that also marks the start of Calum's Road. Using little more than a shovel, pick and wheelbarrow, local man Calum MacLeod constructed a two-mile stretch of road himself in the 1960s, after years of inaction from the local council.

For more magnificent views, make the trek up to the flat-topped summit of Dùn Caan (443m), where 18th-century biographer James Boswell is said to have danced a jig during his famous tour with writer Samuel Johnson.

There is no public transport so a bike would be handy to reach the north of the island.

Bute, Firth of Clyde

The mainland ferry terminal for one of Scotland's most accessible islands is just an hour's train ride from Glasgow Central and Wemyss Bay station – a Class-A listed building with an amazing steel-and-glass canopy – is worth a visit in its own right.

Bute's main town of Rothesay is a Victorian resort, a throwback to the days when paddle steamers went “doon the watter” from Scotland's urban areas, replete with all the shops, cafés and pubs required for a day out – as well

as attractions including 13th-century Rothesay Castle. Sports enthusiasts, meanwhile, can take in a shinty match. This freewheeling form of field hockey, a traditional Highlands sport, has been played at a high level on the island since 1907.

To get active yourself, catch the bus south to Kilchattan Bay to join the West Island Way (westislandway.co.uk). Opened in September 2000 as part of Bute's millennium celebrations, this rewarding walking route was the first

waymarked long-distance trail on a Scottish island, running for 30 miles along seashore and through moorland, farmland and forest, passing historic sites such as the ruins of St Blane's Church. Between April and September, look out for ospreys nesting around Loch Ascog and Loch Fad.

Another major attraction is the grand, 19th-century Mount Stuart House, ancestral home of the Marquesses of Bute, with its colonnaded Marble Hall and Marble Chapel. mountstuart.com





Coll, Inner Hebrides

Some islands have had songs written about them, but few have been the subject of an entire concept album. Coll is one such island, celebrated by electronic ambient classical duo Kinbrae's *Tidal Patterns*, released to some acclaim in 2016. "The beauty but remoteness of it – I wanted to try and capture that through sound," explains Andy Truscott, one half of Kinbrae.

Roaming the shell-white shores of RSPB Coll Nature Reserve, listen for the 'crex crex' call of the corncrake (above). Populations have dwindled elsewhere in the UK but are soaring on Coll, thanks in large part to collaboration with local farmers to improve conditions for this rare bird, which also benefit species such as skylark and reed bunting.

Most of the island's 20 or so stretches of beautiful sand lie some distance from the nearest roads, however, the fantastic beach at Red Rocks is accessible. Coll is a Dark Sky Community; with no street lights on the island, clear nights offer spectacular stargazing.

Lying west of Mull, Coll is linked to Oban by ferry, with sailings taking under three hours (calmac.co.uk). With a population of around 195, the island has no public transport.

Berneray, Outer Hebrides

The islands of the Outer Hebrides receive far fewer visitors than the likes of Mull or Skye. Even in summer they don't feel overrun by tourists, and many traditional events in crofting communities endure, at which you are likely to hear Gaelic spoken.

The causeway linking Berneray with neighbour North Uist, opened in 1999, incorporates culverts to allow easy passage for otters and fish – reflecting the importance of wildlife and natural habitats on the island.

The whole of the western shoreline facing the Atlantic is one long beach (below) – perhaps the finest in any of these islands, despite stiff competition. As you walk along West Beach and it curves east, the hills of Harris come into view, creating a magnificent vista. You might be joined on your stroll by curlews, oystercatchers, redshanks and ringed plovers. If you're lucky, nosy grey seals might peer from the waves to see who is on their beach. In the south of

the island, common seals are seen lazing on the rocks.

To reach Berneray, catch the ferry from Leverburgh in Harris, or sail from Uig to Lochmaddy in North Uist and drive from there (calmac.co.uk). Berneray also makes a fine stop on a magnificent week-long road trip from Barra to the Butt of Lewis in the north.

This part of the Western Isles is traditionally Presbyterian, so be prepared for shops closing and ferries not running on Sundays.





Kerrera, Firth of Lorn

This small island, lying in the Firth of Lorn just off Oban, is a walkers' delight. From the main ferry port on the east coast, set out south on an excellent six-mile circuit taking in the Sound of Kerrera, then veering west for stunning views towards Mull, Colonsay and the Garvellachs. You'll also see the striking ruins of Gylen Castle (above), a 16th-century tower that was only 65 years old when it was besieged and burned down in 1647. Surprisingly, despite being left at the mercy of the elements for so long, it's in pretty good shape and stands almost to its original height.

In common with other small Scottish islands, driving on Kerrera is permitted only for residents. The ferry serving Kerrera – which sails from a jetty two miles south of Oban, served infrequently by the 417 bus – is the smallest in CalMac's fleet, with space for only 12 passengers, so be prepared to wait at busy times. Alternatively, book a water taxi direct from Oban's North Pier to the marina at the northern end of Kerrera (kerreramarina.com).

Towards the south, Kerrera Tea Garden (kerrerahouse.co.uk) serves lunch Thursdays to Mondays from Easter to September, and offers bunkhouse accommodation, but bringing food is wise.

Photos: Alamy

Iona, Inner Hebrides

Sitting pretty across from Fionnphort on the south coast of Mull, Iona is a place of ancient pilgrimage. Though one of the best known of the smaller islands, and with easy ferry access from Mull (calmac.co.uk), it is without doubt a special place, famous for the 13th-century abbey established on the site of the monastery founded by Saint Columba in the sixth century.

Iona is also home to an international religious community – founded in 1938 by Reverend George

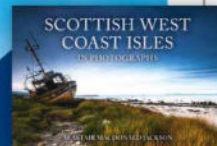
MacLeod – which spearheaded the rebuilding of the abbey.

Saint Columba's story is a surprisingly violent affair. Born in Ireland in 521, he left not as a missionary but reputedly as an act of self-imposed penance for a mess he caused at home. Having illicitly copied a psalter, he refused to hand over his copy of the manuscript – sparking a pitched battle in which Columba's warrior family prevailed but many men were killed. Full of remorse for his

actions and the deaths, Columba fled, finally settling on Iona – the first place he found from where he couldn't see his native Ireland.

Poet Kenneth Steven, who lives on the nearby island of Seil, sums up the spirit of Iona: "I keep returning, thirsty, to this place that is older than my understanding."

For such a small island, Iona has a surprising number of shops selling quality local products, including Oran Creative Crafts and Aosdanna, a gallery selling contemporary jewellery. 



Scottish West Coast Isles by
Alastair MacDonald Jackson
is out now (Amberley
Publishing, £18.99)

From rail to trail with Transport for Wales

Offa's Dyke Path

Wales is home to some of the most beautiful walking trails in the UK, but you don't need a car to explore them

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Bannau Brycheiniog

BANNAU BRYCHEINIOG – ABERGAVENNY STATION

Explore the dramatic peaks, waterfalls and trails of Bannau Brycheiniog (formerly Brecon Beacons), with access via Abergavenny train station or by public transport connections from Cardiff. Travel by train to Merthyr Tydfil, then catch the T4 bus, which passes Pen y Fan on its way to Brecon, the gateway to the national park. Stroll down gentle valley walks or brave challenging climbs on this easily accessible outdoor adventure.

OFFA'S DYKE PATH – KNIGHTON STATION

Walk the historic Offa's Dyke Path straight from Knighton station, tracing the Wales-England border. Experience the longest monument in Wales and its rich heritage all within easy reach using train or local bus services.

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Catherine's Island, Tenby

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TRAFNIDIAETH CYMRU
TRANSPORT FOR WALES

Power struggle



Completed in 1995 at a cost of £2 billion, Sizewell B on the Suffolk coast is the most powerful reactor in the UK, supplying roughly 3% of the country's energy needs

In an increasingly energy-hungry Britain, is nuclear the best way to meet soaring demand without burning fossil fuels? **Fergus Collins** investigates the benefits and risks

Britain has an energy problem. It faces ever-growing demand for electricity from domestic consumers, businesses and data centres, but must find a way to wean itself off fossil fuels to meet its net zero commitments by 2050 while maintaining a secure power supply. Recent US-Israeli attacks in the Middle East have also led to soaring fossil fuel prices and added a new element of energy insecurity. For its advocates, nuclear power is the solution, providing plentiful, dependable energy and eliminating the need to burn harmful coal or gas.

Nuclear plays a significant role in electricity generation in many parts of the world. The USA and China lead the field in terms of numbers of nuclear reactors and total power generated by them, but France has the largest proportion of nuclear in its power generation mix – about 67% of the total. The UK currently has nine operational nuclear reactors at five plants, with four more due to come online in the 2030s – two at Hinkley Point C in Somerset and two planned at Sizewell C in Suffolk – demonstrating Government commitment to this energy source (devolved Scotland has no nuclear plans).

“Nuclear will play a central role in meeting the UK’s future energy needs as we deliver our net zero target,” says the current minister for nuclear Lord Patrick Vallance. “As set out in our clean power mission, while our future electricity system will be dominated by renewables, we still need firm, low-carbon power to ensure the system is stable, secure and affordable. Nuclear provides that essential backbone – delivering clean power for millions of homes while underpinning a safe, resilient and cheaper system for the decades ahead.”

“The Chernobyl and Fukushima disasters still dog the industry”

Not everyone is convinced, especially those concerned about safety issues; the shadows of the Chernobyl and Fukushima nuclear disasters, in 1986 and 2011 respectively, still dog the industry. Nuclear power creates vast amounts of potentially lethal radioactive waste, which must be contained and stored securely for thousands of years. Then there are questions of cost. Nuclear reactors are massive infrastructure projects and hugely expensive, not least because of the requirements of mitigating safety risks. Is it worth the investment – or could we power the UK through other means?

CHAIN REACTION

First, it's helpful to understand how nuclear reactors create electricity – and how this technology has come to be adopted in the UK. Power stations are like large kettles: they use a heat source (from nuclear fission, or in conventional power stations from burning coal or gas) to boil water and create steam. Under pressure, this steam drives a turbine, which converts rotational energy into electricity via a generator.

Nuclear power generates heat from fission – splitting the nuclei of atoms. Typically, the fuel used is uranium-235 in the form of an oxide, which is processed into small ceramic pellets stacked into rods. Deep in the reactor, the fuel rods are bombarded with neutrons. These make the uranium nuclei unstable, causing them to split, releasing heat, radiation and more neutrons. These additional neutrons hit and split other uranium nuclei, creating a chain reaction and releasing plentiful heat-generating energy.

Nuclear fission was discovered in 1938 in Germany, with the first nuclear chain reaction achieved in the USA in 1942. By 1945, nuclear weapons had been developed and deployed. And while the Soviet Union constructed

the first nuclear power plant to generate electricity, it was the UK that built the first commercial nuclear power station, Calder Hall at Windscale in 1956. Since then, Britain's love affair with nuclear has waxed, waned and waxed again. At its peak in 1997, nuclear supplied about a quarter of Britain's electricity needs but this has declined to less than a fifth as older plants have been scaled down and closed.

The two new nuclear power stations at Hinkley Point and Sizewell are being built by EDF, France's state-owned energy company. EDF manages eight nuclear sites in the UK – seven Advanced Gas-cooled Reactor (AGR) sites and one Pressurised Water Reactor (PWR). It says it's driving the transition towards “An Electric Britain – a secure, affordable, low-carbon future for everyone. As Britain's biggest generator of zero-carbon electricity, we are investing more than £100 million weekly in Britain's electricity infrastructure.” In addition to providing power, EDF points to wider economic benefits – “around 31,000 jobs a year and more than £123 billion in economic value [as at the end of 2024] to the UK so far”.

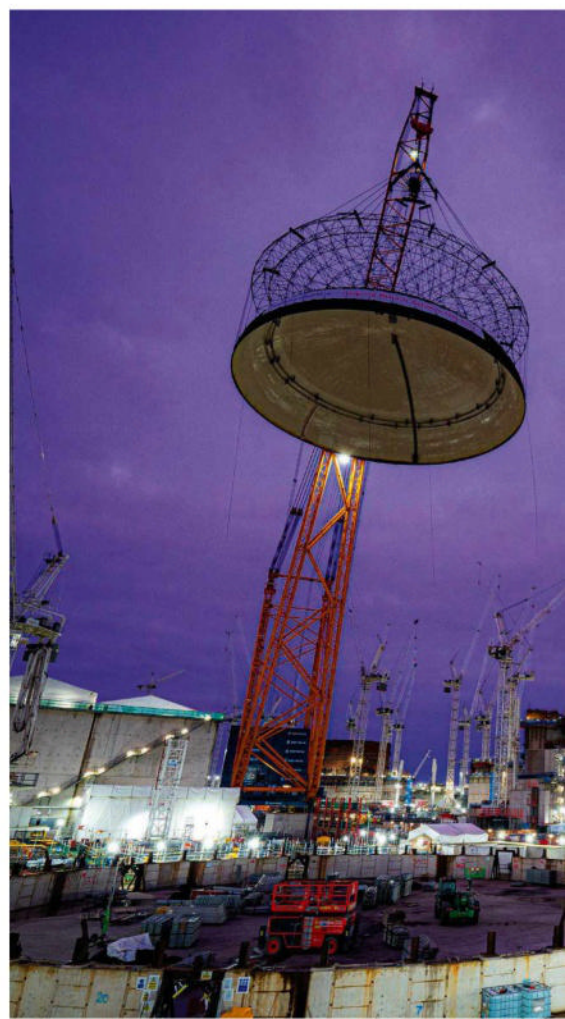
As to having a foreign energy company providing such critical infrastructure, the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) says: “We welcome international investment and participation in our national infrastructure but investment will never come at the expense of national security. Staff with access to critical systems on a UK nuclear site have to be UK nationals with a particular level of security vetting.”

RIISING COSTS

Some of the strongest voices against nuclear power in the UK come from groups protesting against the new reactors at Hinkley and Sizewell.



The 1986 Chernobyl disaster caused 30 immediate deaths and released at least 5% of its radioactive fuel into the environment





The 245-tonne steel dome is placed on Hinkley Point C's first reactor building during construction in 2023



Despite strong opposition, plans for the two new reactors at Sizewell C got the green light from the Government in June 2025

Former science teacher Allan Jeffrey has been voicing concerns for over 40 years as part of campaign group Stop Hinkley, which works closely with TASC (Together Against Sizewell C). He doesn't mince words: "Nuclear Power stations are toxic radioactive waste factories!" and argues that nuclear is "neither clean nor green" saying "large amounts of greenhouse gasses are produced in the nuclear fuel cycle from uranium mining and fuel processing to the building of power stations and waste storage sites and decommissioning old reactors."

Jeffrey dismisses the idea that nuclear is more ethical than the gas or coal supplies the UK buys from unstable or openly hostile foreign states. "Uranium is not a renewable fuel," he says, "and is mined in countries such as Australia, Canada, Niger and Kazakhstan. The miners frequently get lung cancer from the Radon gas, and much environmental pollution is left locally by the mining tailings and river water pollution." Jeffrey also points at the cost of

"Nuclear is 'neither clean nor green'"

nuclear: "Nuclear reactors take too long to build and pay back their greenhouse gas emissions." He has a point with Hinkley Point C, which has been a building site since being approved by the Conservative Government in 2016.

Stop Hinkley and TASC are supported by statistics from CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) and many prominent anti-nuclear voices, including the environmentalist and friend of King Charles, Jonathan Porritt. In a recent blog post he claimed: "The Treasury's financial modelling for the new power station at Sizewell C (seen by the *Financial Times*) gives a range of roughly £80 billion to £100 billion, far higher than the official estimate of £47 billion from the DESNZ – which in itself was

The trial of underwater ultrasonic speakers to deter fish from swimming near Hinkley Point C's intake pipes has been deemed "highly effective"



“Most nuclear waste is stored at Sellafield”

It also misrepresents the number of fish affected by the proposed plant.” Browne goes on to say: “On the basis of these false claims, the Government is now considering progressing recommendations which will lead to nature protections being severely compromised.”

Both Hinkley and Sizewell projects stress their positive environmental impacts, including the creation of three nature reserves at Sizewell C that are “already three times the size of what Sizewell C’s permanent footprint will be,” says EDF. As for safety, DESNZ quotes the UN’s International Atomic Energy Agency, which says nuclear power plants “are among the safest and most secure facilities in the world,” and nuclear power is one of the safest forms of energy generation. “For context,” it continues, “the annual radiation dose to an adult living beside a new nuclear plant is much less than taking one trans-Atlantic flight or eating 100g of Brazil nuts – neither of which have heavy radiation.”

The Office for Nuclear Regulation (ONR) is an independent body that oversees nuclear safety in the UK. It says: “it has consistently found that the industry maintains high standards of safety, security and safeguards that we expect across the nuclear sector in Great Britain, with most of our inspections confirming good levels of compliance.”

WHAT TO DO WITH WASTE

One area where there is a gap in the Government and EDF’s positive messaging – and one that tallies with Stop Hinkley and Porritt’s deeper fears – is just how and where to store nuclear waste. Even after it’s no longer useful for generating heat, it continues to emit radiation, which breaks molecular bonds and causes severe

already nearly double the original cost of £20 billion!”

DESNZ argues that there will be a big saving with Sizewell C because it is a replica of Hinkley and will be “built at a cost of £38bn in 2024 real terms. This would represent around 20% saving on the capital cost of the project compared with Hinkley C”. That said, the Government’s own review, led by Sir John Fingleton, found that Britain was the most expensive place in the world to build nuclear facilities due largely to a “fragmented” regulatory system that had led to “conservative and costly decisions not proportionate to the actual risk being managed”.

One very public reason for rising costs – and one the press have leapt on – is mitigation measures to prevent deaths of wildlife, especially fish. Nuclear power stations are located on

the coast so they can draw seawater to cool the reactors. But they also suck in large numbers of fish; the Environment Agency has estimated 4.6 million per year at Hinkley, a figure EDF strongly contests. EDF says it has spent £700 million in mitigation measures, including sonic fish deterrents developed with Swansea University. These use ultrasound to drive fish from the water intakes and have been dubbed ‘fish discos’ in the press.

However, Matt Browne, head of public affairs at The Wildlife Trusts, disputes EDF’s claims. “The developers of Hinkley C continue to misrepresent the impact that the nuclear plant will have on nature... This is highly misleading and allows EDF to pretend that £700 million is being spent to protect nature, when the real figure is closer to £50 million.



In 2025, EDF paused its plans to create 340 hectares of new habitat near existing saltmarsh at Hinkley Point after opposition from the local community

damage to cell tissues in all organisms, leading to cancers and other severe health issues. And, as it breaks down very slowly, the waste emits this harmful radiation for tens of thousands of years.

The ONR says “Nuclear waste is primarily transferred to specialised, secure and regulated facilities for storage pending long-term disposal. Current Government policy is that UK higher activity radioactive waste will be managed in the long-term through geological disposal facilities (GDF)”. GDF means burying the waste in deep subterranean vaults and leaving it alone till its radiation cools.

For Allan Jeffrey, this is simply an “unsolved environmental problem for future generations... a heavy burden to lay on our children and their children’s, children.” Porritt is aghast: “This is a truly extraordinary development – confirming that the UK still has NO idea what to do about its legacy nuclear waste.” And there is, of course, a huge cost involved, firstly with decommissioning a nuclear reactor and then storing the waste.

Currently, most high-level nuclear waste is being stored at Sellafield. Once at the forefront of the UK’s nuclear programme, Sellafield stopped generating electricity in 2003 and is now in the process of being decommissioned. As well as dealing with Sellafield’s own waste – spent fuel rods and other debris stored in silos and artificial ponds – it holds waste from other plants. High level waste usually occurs in liquid form, a byproduct of processing spent fuel. This is mixed with crushed glass in a furnace and the molten product is poured into steel cannisters where it cools and solidifies, making it stable and safe for storage. But it is temporary storage only and Sellafield is almost full. Communities in Cumbria and Lincolnshire have been identified as potential nuclear waste sites.

THE NUCLEAR LEGACY

The decommissioning of Sellafield is a massive project that may take over 100 years, with spiralling costs – but that’s a blink of an eye in terms of nuclear radiation. Those looking for

a longer-term solution may take some heart from Finland, which has successfully developed deep geological disposal of nuclear waste using technology developed by Swedish nuclear fuel management company SKB. After much research, Finland’s Olkiluoto Island was identified as having the ideal layers of bedrock to contain radiation; the Finns have excavated a series of shafts up to 500m below ground where, sealed in copper cannisters and clay, 6,500 tonnes of nuclear waste can be left safe and untouched for 100,000 years. France is expected to build a similar facility in its north-east. According to DESNZ, “A process is underway to identify a suitable site for a GDF in England and Wales.”

Such gigantic periods of time, when all current decision makers and hundreds of generations of their descendants will be long dead, are hard to comprehend. Opponents of nuclear, such as Stop Hinkley and TASC, urge policymakers not to take the risk and to invest instead in renewables such as wind, solar and hydro power. In 2025, wind provided approximately 30% of the UK’s electricity needs compared to just 11–17% provided by nuclear. The UN’s International Energy Agency predicts renewables will generate 90% of all new power in the coming years. And yet you’ll find protest groups opposing almost every new wind or solar farm with the same vigour as those who are anti-nuclear.

For now, until more renewables are developed and we as a nation are prepared to accept them in our landscapes, the Government is committed to that “backbone” of nuclear power for the foreseeable future. It may not be the whole answer to Britain’s energy problem, but it’s here to stay. **CF**



Fergus Collins is a writer and editor and the host of the award-winning Plodcast from BBC Countryfile Magazine.

Filmed in 2024, Lucy Shepherd's TV series
Secret Amazon: Into the Wild follows the
explorer and her team on a gruelling
50-day trek across virgin rainforest



WILD WORLD

Lucy Shepherd represents the next generation of visionary British explorers. She talks to **Mark Bailey** about the power of adventure and how to find the wild side of Britain

Lucy Shepherd was asleep in the Serengeti when she felt the paw of a lion brush against her tent in the darkness. “I’ve had a lot of scary moments in my time, with snakes, jaguars or avalanches, but that has to be the most scary,” admits Shepherd, who was crossing Tanzania’s unforgiving wilderness with members of the Hadza and Akie tribes for her new Channel 4 series *Secret Africa: Into the Wild*, which is screening in May.

“Different prides were getting closer each night. And then one lion put himself next to my tent. It just started roaring for two minutes. The only thing you can do is remain completely silent. They know you are there. They are just showing you who’s boss. His paw was so close I could feel the heat of him. I was curled up like an embryo and trying not to move.”

The 33-year-old, who grew up in Suffolk, has enjoyed adventures in the natural world since childhood. From holidays in Scotland and Wales to epic expeditions to the Arctic and Amazon, she has forged a reputation among her peers for her creative vision and gritty resilience. At the age of just 23, Shepherd became a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, and she is the youngest ever elected council member of the Scientific Exploration Society.

Her first TV show *Secret Amazon: Into the Wild* saw her complete a

50-day, 400km trek with Amerindians across the Kanuku Mountains of Guyana from east to west, using 50-year-old maps to navigate. “Move over Bear Grylls... there’s a new TV adventurer on the block!” declared the *TV Times*. The *Times* newspaper dubbed her “the most hardcore member of the new generation of British adventurers.” Shepherd has now published a memoir, *Into the Wild: The Making of an Explorer*.

“I want everyone to know that the wild still exists,” explains Shepherd, when we speak at a café close to her home in London. “The wild creates this real excitement for adventure.

Everyone is an explorer in their own right. I want my stories to reach everyone, including the people who may not necessarily go to the travel section of a bookshop, or who might not have gone hiking. Adventure is exploration. It is friendship. It is going through hard times. It is coming of age. It is a shifting of perspective.”

In his 2007 book *The Wild Places*, nature writer Robert Macfarlane memorably chronicled the mystery,

“Adventure is exploration. It is a shifting of perspective”

the allure, the apparent loss and the astonishing resilience of the wild in Britain. Shepherd’s adventures are forged by a similar yearning for untamed landscapes.

“My mission is to try and rekindle a sense of awe and wonder for the wild,” she says. “A lot of us lose it because we don’t think there are wild places out there. But the wild still exists. In Scotland, I see dramatic mountains and I just think ‘Wow, this exists here’. Unlike New Zealand or the Alps, where there are clear footpaths, Scotland is even wilder. But that’s the beauty of it.”

DREAMING BIG

All adventures begin with the imagination. As a child in Suffolk, Shepherd would climb trees and dream up magical adventures in her garden. She loved the feeling of dirt under her nails and the breeze in her hair. “There was a rough, untidy bit of our garden where you could feel like you’re in the wild, and it made me live in my imagination. I was an only child as well, so I had to rely on my imagination. And my mum said how important it was to hang onto that. Even when I was bored, I could still escape in my mind.”

She would film herself and her best friend Harry playing out episodes of Bear Grylls’ *Man vs. Wild* in the garden. Today, her own TV shows, also self-filmed, are sparked by the same wild imagination. In her new book, 



In the Kanuku Mountains, Lucy and the team of trekkers had to cross rivers infested with huge black caiman

she writes: “An adventurer and an explorer by definition is a professional delusionist: someone capable of fooling themselves into pushing further than they thought possible, under the illusion of total control.”

Shepherd’s vivid imagination is also an essential part of her survival toolkit. “Even now, I get this gut feeling mixed with a reading of the future,” she says. “Visualisation has helped me on expeditions. Before you go, you have to ask: ‘what if?’ I’ve got to go through all the negative scenarios in my head so that, if it does happen, I’ve thought about how physically and mentally I will cope.”

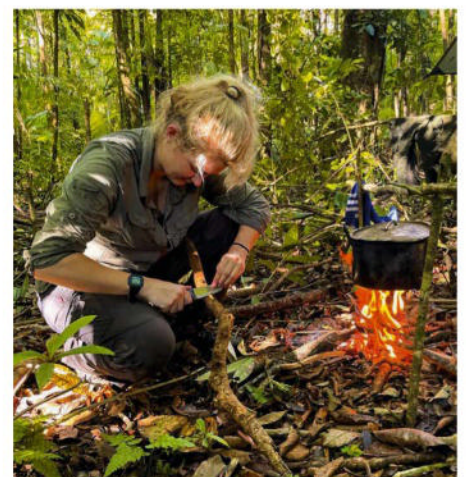
NEW HORIZONS

Shepherd is a huge fan of adventurers Bruce Parry and Bear Grylls. “Their programmes opened my eyes to parts of the world I had never seen,” she says. “I had this desire to get everywhere. But I also liked seeing people who would do a Comic Relief challenge, like Davina McCall, and overcome a mental battle. That inspired me too.” Aged 15, Shepherd joined a Ridgway Adventure

camp in Scotland, where she did kayaking and climbing. “For the first time, I really felt like I was living what I had been playing when I was younger,” she says. “And that introduced me to this word ‘expedition’ and it sounded so grown up. I wanted to go on an actual expedition.”

When she was about to turn 18, Lucy found out about an extreme 10-week Arctic expedition to Svalbard led by the British Schools Exploring Society (BSES). “It was quite competitive, because they were only taking 10 people,” she says. “I applied, and we did interviews and went through training for a weekend.” She earned a place and enjoyed a spectacular Arctic adventure. “I really felt like I had found my thing,” she says.

Returning to England, she began hanging around the Royal Geographical Society, where she met Sir Ranulph Fiennes and other adventurers. Shepherd has since completed over 30 expeditions, traversing mountain ranges, tropical rainforests and polar regions, from a 2017 ascent of Alaska’s 6,190m Mount



Secret Amazon was self-filmed, meaning one of the team was always behind the camera

Denali, where she faced -40°C degree temperatures and 90mph winds, to an unsupported crossing of Norway’s Finnmarksvidda plateau in 2018.

Her big highlight is that 2021 Amazon expedition to Guyana’s Kanuku Mountains – one of the last untouched wildernesses on Earth. She encountered dense jungle, perilous rivers, illness, bushmaster snakes, jaguars, alligators, fire ants and



Lucy has reached many summits, including Alaska's Mount Denali, North America's highest peak

parasites. "On the most arduous days we were only doing 2km per day," she says. "I had a sore on my leg and groin and every step was just agonising pain. As time goes by, the more I think: whoa, how did we pull that off?"

EMPOWERED BY ADVENTURE

Despite her own epic adventures, Shepherd is troubled by research which suggests three quarters of UK children spend less time outdoors than a prison inmate. What can parents do to instil a passion for nature in their children? "I remember the amount of walks that we went on as a kid and that is an easy way to do it," she says. "But it's also about engaging and making that walk fun, like you're searching for trolls or something, so you have a fun time as a family, rather than just trying to kick the kids out the door."

"There is so much thrill to be had from just climbing trees," she adds. "Once children find that love of feeling empowered by what they can do outside, not being told off for being muddy, they will love it. But make it fun for the parents as well. What can you

"I had a sore on my leg and groin and every step was agonising"

recreate that you used to love doing? Maybe you climb a hill or walk a loop together. It is a start."

Shepherd has faced some prejudice as a female adventurer, but she sees progress in the notoriously macho industry. "All the work that's been put in, you're starting to see it is more inclusive," she says. "There is still a sense that you have to prove yourself, not necessarily by your achievement, but by proving that you really want to be there. People have sized me up. Testing to see if I get offended easily. But I always stuck it out."

Through her expeditions Shepherd likes to raise awareness of the beauty and the vulnerability of nature. She strongly believes that adventures help us smash through the apathy of

LUCY'S FAVOURITE PLACES

THE WEST COAST, SCOTLAND

"It is almost Caribbean on the west coast when the sun shines. You have the beaches, the rocks, the forests and the mountains. There is nowhere else I would rather be."



ERYRI, WALES

"It is such a cool thing to have this wild mountain area that's actually fairly close to London. You could get there in a few hours and enjoy some incredibly dramatic scenery."



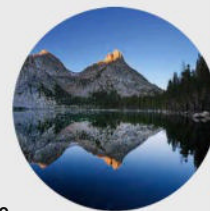
SUFFOLK, ENGLAND

"Suffolk is very flat, but there's something about the big skies that connect you to something bigger. With big oak trees to climb too, it is a beautiful place."



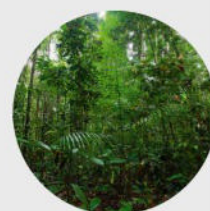
HIGH SIERRA, CALIFORNIA

"I was there with my boyfriend and a very good friend. Just being on a beautiful mountain, with two people who I love dearly, was so rewarding."



AMAZON JUNGLE, GUYANA

"In the Amazon jungle, when you're by a water source, with the bird noise and the sun streaming through the smoke of the fire, moments like that are so magical."





Into the Wild: The Making of an Explorer by Lucy Shepherd is out now (Penguin, £25)



In 2011, Lucy spent 10 weeks on an expedition in the remote Arctic wilderness of Svalbard



Amerindians from the Macushi and Wapishana tribe were Lucy's team on the Kanuku Mountains trek

“The wild really shows me the best version of myself”

climate doom and rekindle a deep respect for nature – and a desire for positive action, however big or small. “Even the difference no-mow May has made in London, you see more insects,” she says.

A CHANGE OF MINDSET

Lucy also believes that adventures make us better people. Venturing into the wild inspires us to adopt an ‘explorer’s mindset’: to bravely embrace the unknown, to feel a sense of community that we lack in modern society, to relearn how to focus without mobile phones and to build the resilience to overcome challenges. “Resilience happens easily on adventures, because you’re constantly coming up with obstacles to overcome – and it’s very fulfilling,” she says. “You then use that in everyday life.”

Adventures are just brilliant fun too. American aviator Amelia Earhart once said that “adventure is worthwhile in itself”. It’s a quote that Shepherd treasures. “Adventure has the ability to fill you up with energy,” she says.

But exploring the wild is, above all else, deeply transformative. “I feel that the wild really shows me the best version of myself,” explains Shepherd. “The wild, whether it’s in Scotland or Wales or anywhere outside, is like a time capsule for your soul. Whenever I go into the wild, I feel like I’m the same person I was when I was 18 or 12. This is me at my purest. Just me. And it is the same for everyone. You are at your rawest in the wild. Being outside is a catalyst. There is no hiding. You will see your good side, and your bad side, and really know yourself.” **CF**



Mark Bailey is a freelance writer who has written for *The Observer*, *The Telegraph* and *National Geographic*. marksbailey.com

Photos: Alamy

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As the seasons change and the days get longer, it's natural to start thinking about getting outside more for longer walks – and what you wear on your feet can make or break a hike. A carefree ramble can easily turn into a test of endurance if your shoes aren't supporting you in the correct way.

Footwear brand Vionic shoes has a range of stylishly designed walking shoes and trainers for both men and women that prove you don't have to compromise on style in order to prioritise comfort and support. We spoke to Vionic to gain some insight on what's key when choosing a walking shoe.

A STEP AHEAD

When your footwear is designed to support the natural contours of the foot and provide cushioning, the effect can be felt throughout the entire body, say Vionic. Stabilising the heel and supporting the arch helps realign posture, which allows for a more fluid, natural motion to reduce the wear and tear of a walk. If you feel discomfort, it's likely you're wearing shoes that haven't taken these natural contours into consideration. Put simply, your footwear could be working against you.

Every pair of Vionics features the brand's built-in, signature VIO MOTION Technology which provides cushioning for shock absorption, flexibility, a contoured arch and deep heel cup. The result is better posture, improved balance and significantly less strain on joints.

STEP INTO SPRING

Vionic grew from a mission to transform medical-grade support to create a range of footwear that looks as good as it feels. The Vionic range is designed to support your body's natural alignment so while the collection features practical footwear, every style looks as elegant as the landscapes you love to explore.

As we approach the new season and plan fresh walking adventures, it's a good time to assess whether your footwear is matched to the challenge. Put your most comfortable – and stylish – foot forward and venture into the new season with shoes that can keep up with your plans.

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WALK AND SAVE

To help support you in your walking endeavours this spring, Vionic is offering *BBC Countryfile Magazine* readers a 20% discount with the code **VIONIC26**. The offer is valid between 19 March 2026 and 30 April 2026. Explore the collection at vionicshoes.co.uk.

Terms & Conditions: Promotional code VIONIC26 is valid on all items and must be used at checkout for discount to apply. Offer code must be used at time of placing order and cannot be used retrospectively or in conjunction with any other offer unless specified separately. Shoe care products and orthotic shoe inserts are excluded. Code can only be redeemed once per customer. Offer valid from 19 March until 30 April 2026. Vionic reserves the right to withdraw and/or amend promotional offers at any time. For full terms and conditions, visit www.vionicshoes.co.uk/tc. UK only.

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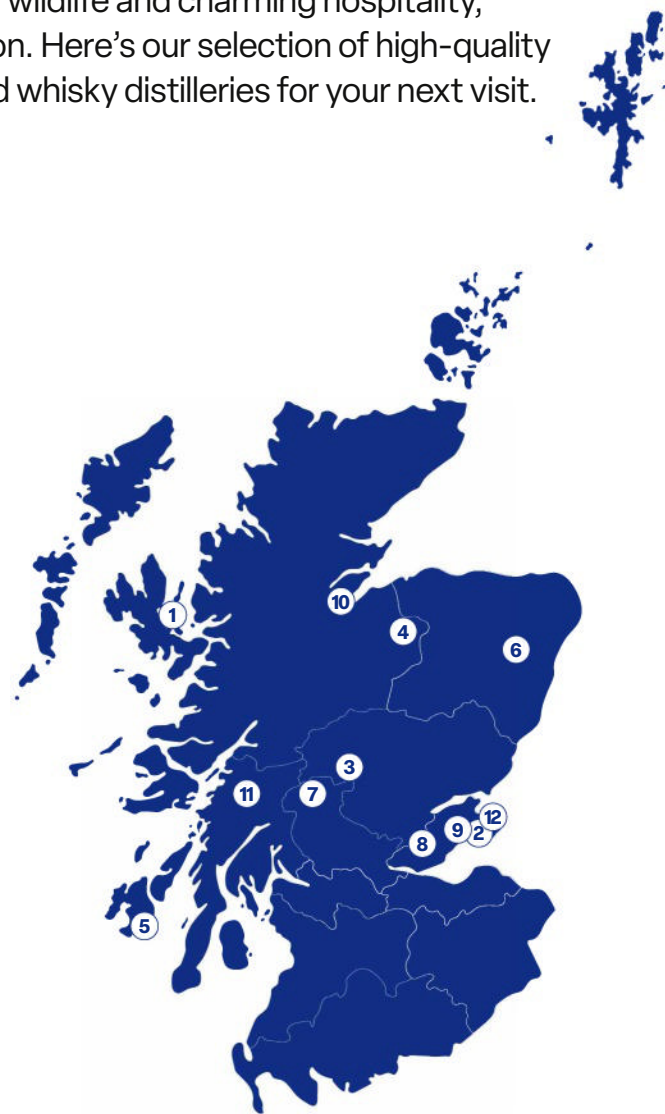
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5. ISLAY

LAPHROAIG IS ON A MISSION TO PROTECT PEATED WHISKY FOR GENERATIONS TO COME

Laphroaig is the number one selling Islay single malt globally* and synonymous with the famous whisky island. It remains one of the world's most distinctive single malts, with an unmistakable flavour and unforgettable drinking experience.

The whisky embodies the character of Islay, with its intense smokiness from the unique local peat, naturally infused with marine vegetation, and a hint of salt from the sea air. It is also one of only a few distilleries continuing to make whisky using traditional techniques, including hand-turning the barley on its malting floor and infusing it with the peat aroma.

When crafting Laphroaig, there is no alternative to peat. The taste and quality in every drop of the spirit depends on it. As such, Laphroaig is championing peatland restoration on Islay, to protect its home and the iconic taste of its single malt.

Parent company Suntory Global Spirits and Suntory Holdings launched the Peatland Water Sanctuary™

initiative in 2021, dedicating more than \$4 million (USD) to conserving and restoring peatlands and natural watersheds across Scotland. To date, almost 200 hectares of peatland have been restored on Islay, including iconic locations such as The Oa and Loch Gruinart, in collaboration with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), and Glenmachrie Moss, which is harvested annually to make Laphroaig's floor malt.

Alistair Longwell, head of distilling and environment at Suntory Global Spirits, comments: "To protect our whisky's smoky character, it's essential we protect Islay's peatlands. Our love for peat, and the wildlife that relies on the bogs, means we need to look to the future and ensure we responsibly restore and harvest peatland on the island and across Scotland. We're on track to annually restore more peat than we use to make Laphroaig by 2030, and we're committed to doubling this target to replenish twice what we use across our whisky portfolio by 2040."

The restoration work also protects and enhances habitats for a diverse range of wildlife, for locals and visitors alike to enjoy. The rugged and beautiful Islay landscape is home to species including large heath butterflies, golden eagles, hen harriers and adders, and important wintering birds such as barnacle and Greenland white-fronted geese.

Laphroaig's commitment to more sustainable practices has not gone unnoticed. In 2024, HRH King Charles renewed the whisky maker's Royal Warrant, recognising its dedication to people, policies and environmental progress.



For more information, please visit www.laphroaig.com and follow @laphroaig on Instagram.

Laphroaig encourages responsible drinking. For more information and resources on responsible consumption, please visit drinkaware.co.uk.

*By volume and value in 2024. Source: IWSR Global Database

6. ABERDEENSHIRE



GLEN GARIOCH CRAFTS ITS SINGLE MALTS USING THE TRADITIONAL DISTILLING METHODS OF THE PAST

Glen Garioch (pronounced Geery), one of the oldest operating distilleries in Scotland, has been producing its mighty malt in the historic market town of Oldmeldrum, near Aberdeen, since 1797.

The distillery's founding family, the Mansons, came from farming stock, like so many of their time. However, the family was entrepreneurial, diversifying into a tannery, snuff mill and brewery. This enterprising spirit has endured throughout Glen Garioch's history, as the distillery has adapted to each new era.

In the 1970s, the distillery gained global attention but not for the reasons you might expect. While fine whisky-making continued, it was the distillery's greenhouses that made headlines. Spread across four acres of tunnels on the grounds, world-class tomatoes were grown alongside other vegetables and fresh-cut flowers, with heat recovered from the whisky distillation process pumped into the greenhouses,

helping to produce a bountiful harvest.

Bringing that same resourcefulness into the 21st century, Glen Garioch has been revived and refitted for the future. Inspired by traditional Scotch methods and driven by a desire for intensity, complexity and fullness of character, the whisky-making team has scrutinised every stage of production to find the optimum set-up. Flouting trends of efficiency and corner-cutting, they have reintroduced floor maltings, extended fermentation times, trialled barley varieties, and even, on occasion, adopted brewer's yeast. Peated malt has also featured, and in a rare move, a direct-fired wash still has been installed. Each method, old and new, has been carefully recorded, traced and tasted, all in the pursuit of exceptional flavour. The resulting new-make spirit is undeniably rich, with abundant orchard fruit flavours and a malty, cereal robustness.

While traditional methods have been revisited to unlock distinctive flavours, new technology has been integrated to

improve environmental performance.

Energy is captured and recirculated around the distillery, helping to heat stages such as the kilning process. These adaptations, completed in 2022, have reduced the overall energy footprint by 15% and water usage by up to 80%.

Since its flurry of fame in the 1970s, Glen Garioch has remained largely hidden from the world's prying eyes. Nestled deep in the fertile 'Granary of Aberdeenshire', the distillery and its whisky are rare finds. Bottled in small, precious batches, two flagship expressions lead the range: Founder's Reserve and the iconic 12-Year-Old, which are available to buy in select specialist whisky stores. Additional rare vintage releases are available exclusively from the distillery.

For more information and to experience the distillery for yourself, visit [glengarioch.com](https://www.glengarioch.com) and follow @glengariochmalt on Instagram

7. THE CRIANLARICH HOTEL

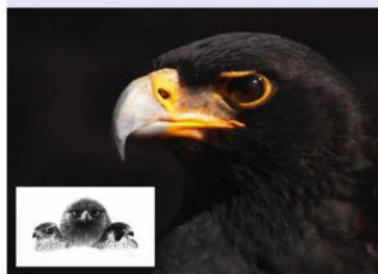


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Fife | 01592 722 143 | elitefalconry.com

9. TEASSES ESTATE



Teasses Estate is a family-owned rural estate in East Fife combining organic farming, country sporting, conservation, horticulture and hospitality. It offers weddings and events in its restored Victorian Walled Garden, welcomes visitors to its RHS Partnership garden, and provides self-catering accommodation

for guests seeking a peaceful countryside retreat rooted in heritage, landscape and seasonal experience.

Fife | 01234 567890 | teasses.com

10. DOLPHIN SPIRIT

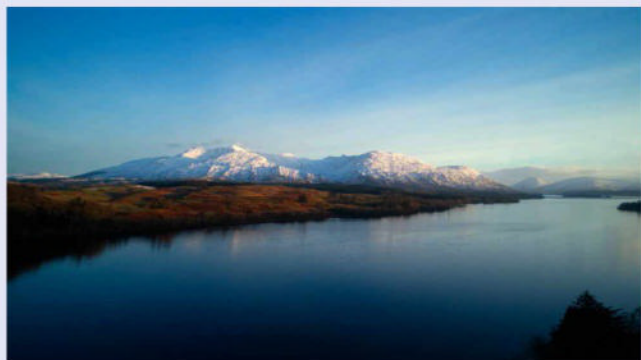


Dolphin Spirit's boat tours in Inverness is a hidden gem for spotting wildlife, including our residential pod of bottlenose dolphins, along with seals, sea birds and seasonal opportunities for spotting basking sharks, and the occasional variety of visiting whales. We have two boats, the family-friendly and more

comfortable Cruiser *Dolphin Spirit* and the fast, thrill-seeking and adventurous RIB *Mischief*.

Inverness | 07544 800620 | dolphinspirit.co.uk

11. PORTSONACHAN HOTEL



Nestled on the tranquil shores of Loch Awe, Portsonachan Hotel offers the perfect escape into the heart of the Scottish Highlands. Surrounded by breathtaking scenery, it's an ideal base for those seeking relaxation, adventure, or a bit of both. Choose from a range of accommodation options, from cosy rooms to self-catering lodges, all designed to suit couples, families and groups. Enjoy peaceful walks, wildlife spotting, or take advantage of fishing opportunities right on your doorstep. With pet-friendly stays available, no one has to miss out on the experience. Whether you're unwinding by the water or exploring the surrounding landscape, Portsonachan is a place to slow down, recharge, and enjoy Scotland at its most beautiful.



Argyll and Bute | portsonachan.com

12. CAMBO ESTATE



Cambo Country House and Estate is near the historic town of St Andrews in the East Neuk of Fife. At the heart of the estate sits Cambo House. It's surrounded by parkland and ancient woodlands that run down to a beautiful beach. Cambo Estate is also world famous for snowdrops and home to the Plant Heritage national collection. Explore Cambo's Georgian walled garden, visitor centre, cafe and gift shop. Book a woodland walk or a tour of Cambo House. Stay in Cambo House or one of its off-grid cabins. Visit Kingsbarns Distillery, play a round of golf at Kingsbarns Golf Links, or relax and unwind in the beachside sauna. Whatever you choose, Cambo welcomes you throughout the seasons.

Fife | camboestate.com

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Most honeybees in Britain are hybrids,
like this one descended from those
bred at Buckfast Abbey in Devon

Back from *the brink*

Small, frugal and resilient, Britain's black bee is fighting back. **Anna Fielding** explores how this native survivor could shape the future of beekeeping in the UK



The British black bee isn't just darker than other subspecies – it also has a larger body and longer hairs

Fourteen years ago, the British black bee supposedly came back from the dead. The UK's native honeybee was briefly a media superstar, having seemingly cheated extinction. In the past decade, this bee has been both heralded as a solution to climate-created colony collapse and slammed as an aggressive attacker of humans. But bees are mysterious, even to their keepers, and the truth is both more complicated and more interesting.

The British black bee goes by several names. Its Latin (scientific) designation is *Apis mellifera mellifera* (AMM), but it's also known as the European dark bee, its relatives living in hives and wild colonies across northern Europe. Germany claims it as the *Deutsche Schwarzbienen* (German black bee),

while elsewhere it's called the native Irish honey bee, the Nordic brown bee and other location-specific monikers.

Unlike the boldly striped bee of children's picture books, it generally appears black or dark brown from a distance, though stripes can sometimes be made out when up close. It's a little larger than its more common yellow-and-black counterparts and, compared with the sleek Italian honeybee that's widely managed in the UK, looks sensibly solid and stocky.

"Bees have been imported, mostly from southern Europe, but it's maybe the case that those bees from warmer climes don't do as well in our climate, and that our black bees are actually at an advantage," says Francis Ratnieks, emeritus professor at the Laboratory of Apiculture and Social Insects at the University of Sussex.

The black bee, which first arrived in Britain after the last Ice Age, is adapted to life in cooler, damper climes. Despite greatly exaggerated reports of its death, it has survived here ever since. Yet, back in 2012, when the subspecies was supposedly rediscovered here, it was estimated that just 1% of the roughly 250,000 hives in the UK were home to animals carrying black bee genes.

CANNY COLONIES

Black bees are often described as frugal. They produce less honey than bees from southern Europe, but they also consume it at a slower rate, and their colonies are smaller.

"For at least three months of the year, the air temperature here is below that at which bees can forage – and, even if they could, there are very few flowers anyway," observes Ratnieks. "A bee that is somewhat frugal is at an advantage, because perhaps they can survive in suboptimal conditions."

"Italian honeybees don't have much of a concept of winter because there's an almost constant source of hot,

"The black bee, which first arrived in Britain after the last Ice Age, is adapted to cooler, damper climes"

“Black bees produce and eat less honey”

sunny forage available [in their native habitat],” adds Karl Colyer of the Bee Improvement and Bee Breeders Association (BIBBA). “Very often you will see these bees create a whole box of honey in a week – but, when the weather turns, they will consume that honey in another week, and you end up with the risk of having to support them with sugar syrup.”

So why isn't our native, weather-resilient black bee more common here? Well, it has other vulnerabilities. The population took a significant hit from 1906, when what was then called Isle of Wight disease emerged; the affliction jumped across the Solent and moved northward, leaving dead colony after dead colony in its wake. This condition is thought to have been acarine disease, an infestation of tiny mites in the bees' tracheae (breathing tubes).

In 1915, the disease reached Buckfast Abbey on the edge of Dartmoor in Devon, where bees were overseen by one of the Benedictine abbey's monks, Brother Adam. His notes describe the “final extermination” of the native

honeybee. Brother Adam went on to become an influential beekeeper and breeder, developing the still-popular hybrid Buckfast bee. The new strains at Buckfast Abbey were bred with imported queen bees, and the monks sent their hybrid bees and brought-in queens out across Britain. Other beekeepers also started to buy from abroad, and a whole tranche of new genetic material entered the United Kingdom's bee world.

“Different strains of bees have been imported into the UK for hundreds of years, but the process accelerated in the aftermath of the Isle of Wight disease,” says Paul Barton of the Bee Farmers Association. “Restocking was largely from Europe, with a variety of strains of bees, leaving pockets of AMM-strain bees in isolated areas. The rest had a mix of genetic material – a situation that persists today.”

LOCAL HEROES

The distinction between local and native is a useful one. A ‘local’ bee comes from a colony in Britain but could be of any subspecies or any mix. The term ‘native’ is usually used to describe the black bee, *Apis mellifera mellifera*. ‘Near-native’ bees are those with a very high percentage of AMM genetic material. The vast majority of what most people would describe as

FIVE BEES TO SPOT

There are around 270 species of bee in Britain. Here are Anna's favourite five to look out for

TREE BUMBLEBEE

Furry and round-looking, this common tree-dweller can be identified by its ginger thorax and white tail. Find it in open woodland, parks and gardens between March and July.



RED MASON BEE

This solitary species is the bee you're most likely to have as a housemate because it likes to nest in crumbling mortar. Look for its dense orange hair between March and June.



PATCHWORK LEAF-CUTTER BEE

The holes in your rose leaves may well be the work of this bee, which cuts out semi-circular shapes from leaves and uses them to seal the cells in its nesting tunnels. The UK's most common leaf-cutter bee, it can be recognised by its bright orange underside.



SHRILL CARDER BEE

You'll be lucky to see this rare bumblebee, which lives in only a few scattered populations in England and Wales. Search tussocky grassland between May and September for a bee with pale yellow and grey bands.



TAWNY MINING BEE

Look out for the homes of this ground-nester – small mountains of soil – on lawns and grassy banks. This orange and black bee can mostly be sighted between March and June.



The deadly microscopic tracheal mite *Acarapis woodi* can ravage whole colonies of black bees

Black bee haven Colonsay boasts glorious white-sand beaches and dramatic views of nearby Jura



black bees are actually near-natives. Without isolated colonies or artificial help, it's nigh-on impossible to have a genetically pure bee – and that's because of the remarkable way bees breed.

Mating queens will take flight only on dry, calm days with a temperature of around 20°C. It's tempting to paint this as the diva behaviour of a royal female, but it has a practical, biological basis. Bees cannot fly in the rain, and wind and cold weather also present significant challenges. But on a good day in late spring or early summer, a young queen will leave the hive and head to an area where drones – male bees – congregate. There the queen will mate with between five and 20 drones, one male at a time, storing their sperm in an organ called the spermatheca.

Mating is a one-time ritual for all concerned. Unable to remove their reproductive organs from the queen, the drones die. And the queen will not fly out to mate again: instead, she will use the stored sperm for the rest of her

life, fertilising the eggs destined to become future queens and workers, and leaving other eggs unfertilised to produce drones.

GENETIC DIVERSITY

Luke and Suzie Hutchinson run the Northumberland Honey Company. “We are commercial beekeepers with around 300 colonies,” says Luke. “We operate a near-enough closed system. If you take the product – the jar of honey – we manage the whole system, right the way back to the queen bee.” The Hutchinsons breed queens, including black bee queens. A mated queen can be bought for £49 and posted via Royal Mail.

Because multiple drones join each mating flight, “very quickly you can have a lot of desirable genetics – and bees need diversity, which is key to maintaining resilience,” explains Luke. “But if you are trying to preserve a type such as the UK native... well, very quickly, within a season, you can lose everything you've worked towards.” Due to the way they mate, it's

easy for bee genetics to become mixed.

On Colonsay and the smaller neighbouring island of Oronsay in the Inner Hebrides, British black bees live in splendid isolation. Thanks to the remoteness of this location, the black bees here are among the most genetically pure surviving today. Indeed, the Colonsay colonies of black bees are mentioned in hushed tones by other beekeepers. They were established by Andrew Abrahams, who collected colonies from across Scotland in the 1980s.

Abrahams isn't the first person to make use of the islands' isolation. Joseph Tinsley of the West of Scotland College of Agriculture set up a breeding station for black bees here, which operated from 1946 to 1966. Arriving on Colonsay in 1978, initially intending to farm oysters, Abrahams found the discarded hives and other equipment and was inspired.

After what he describes as “10 years of hard graft” and support from scientists across Europe, Abrahams persuaded the Scottish parliament to pass the *Bee Keeping Colonsay and Oronsay Order 2013*, prohibiting the keeping of any honeybee other than *Apis mellifera mellifera* on the islands.

The Colonsay black bees are important from a conservation perspective, as well as producing honey of “exceptional quality”, as Abraham observes. Being free from the Varroa mites that have ravaged so many other colonies, they also function as the control group for scientific experiments involving mainland black bees.

Abrahams has an eye on the future, too. “As we move forward, climate change is going to hammer nature massively,” he says, “and the black bee in its native form may well be better equipped to deal with what comes.”

If the Colonsay hives survived on the island all along, why was there so much fuss about the ‘rediscovery’ of the subspecies in Britain in 2012? Black bee experts are somewhat dismissive of that “media hype” and “over-excitement”. But the black bee is still rare, local bees both farmed and wild are largely of mixed genetics, and



If a black bee colony's honey stock runs low, its queen will lay fewer eggs – a clever way of managing resources

Brother Adam's words had stuck. So when a wild colony was discovered living in a church in Northumberland, the excitement was understandable.

HYBRID STRAINS

Enthusiasts and farmers around the country are now working with the black bee. The subspecies' reputation for aggression is a matter of debate: many keepers say that defensive and aggressive colonies arise only when AMM strains intermingle with others. It's established, however, that the black bee will generally produce less honey than other imported subspecies.

Even so, "though it is true that many bee farmers utilise high-yielding and docile strains such as Buckfast lines, many use 'local' hybrid strains of bees, and some keep 'near-native' AMM on a large scale," says Paul Barton.

"Black bees are less commercially viable than other species due to their lower honey production rates," says Ali Alzein, who runs the Bees & Refugees project in Kent and has several hives of black bees. "Many

"The British black bee has held on, fighting disease, loss of habitat and a changing climate"

beekeepers prefer more productive species for economic reasons, though this is starting to change with a growing interest in conservation."

Imported bees can arrive with imported diseases, including the Varroa mite – which beekeepers must tackle or face near-complete colony losses. Thanks to the ban on other subspecies on the islands, the Colonsay bees are free from Varroa, but have also not built up resistance to the mites and could easily succumb if they are taken to the mainland.

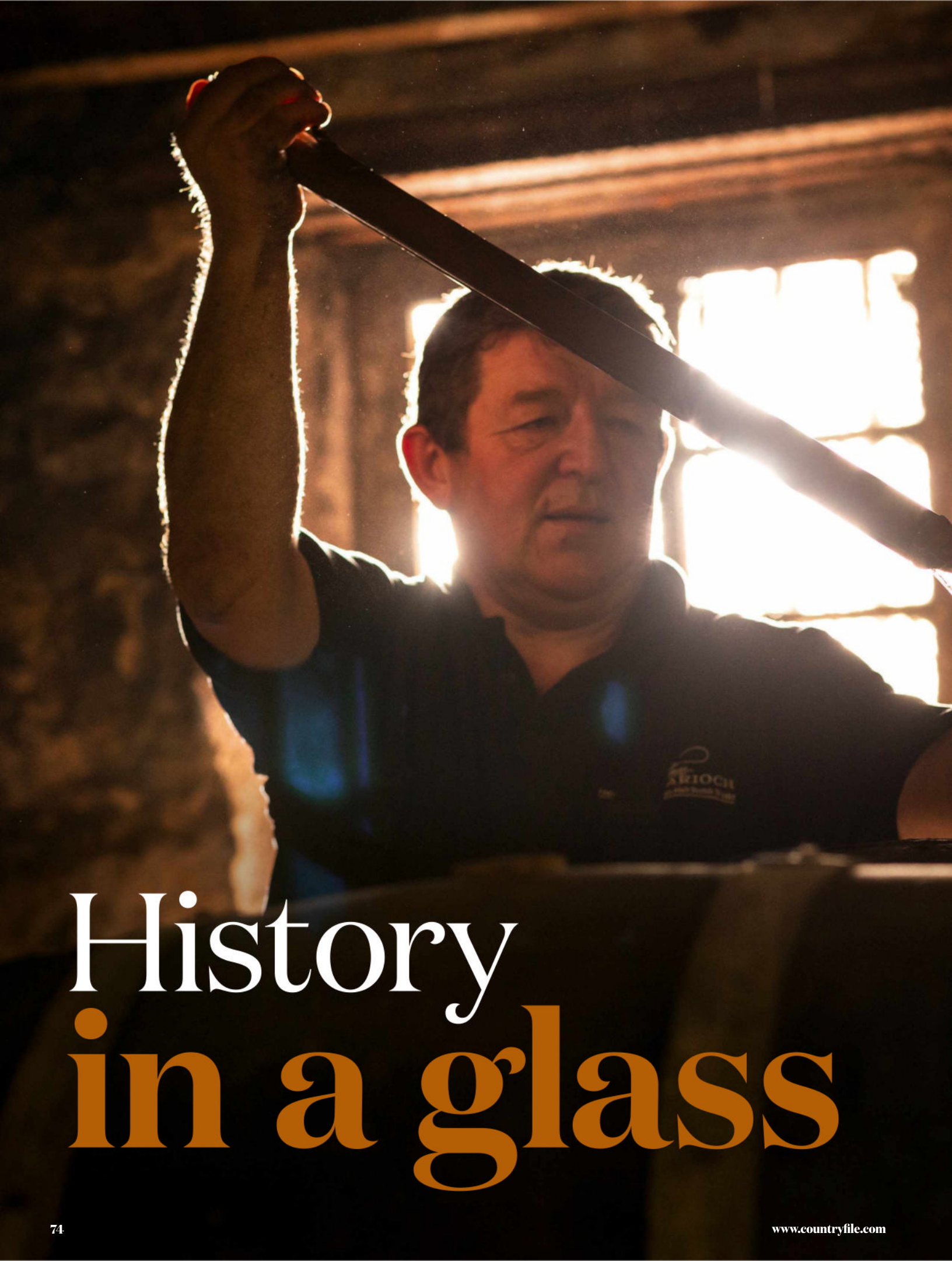
A total ban on imported bees would cause difficulties for many commercial farmers, though the idea is supported by many, including BIBBA, which sees it as a way of protecting all of the UK's bees from disease. Such a ban, however, would

also be difficult to enforce. As Luke Hutchinson points out, "Thousands of queens come into the country every year under the radar – queens that DEFRA [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs] doesn't know about."

The British black bee has held on through some tough times, fighting disease, loss of habitat and a changing climate. Now, with the assistance of its supporters, this stocky, frugal bee will hopefully become a more common sight in our skies and on the labels of our honey jars. 



Anna Fielding is a writer and editor who has written for *The Guardian*, *The Observer* and the *New Statesman*.



History in a glass



A Glen Garioch distiller uses a valinch to take a sample of whisky direct from the cask to test maturation; Scotch whiskies are aged for a minimum of three years

In search of a 'wee dram', **Matt Havercroft** heads to the Highlands to discover the secrets of Scotland's most famous export and the distilleries keeping ancient traditions alive

I'm standing in a stifflingly hot room that could have been straight out of the pages of *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*.

Either side of me are two huge, balloon-bottomed copper whisky stills, with panelled sides and portholes. Together, they look like a pair of steampunk spaceships.

Along the wall between them is a tangle of pipes, dials and gauges leading to a smart, glass-fronted oak and brass cabinet. Inside, the freshly distilled spirits flow like water into bottomless glass bowls before disappearing mysteriously out of sight. Watching, fascinated, I half expect an everlasting gobstopper to pop out of a tray in the side.

As the temperature in the Still House reaches tropical levels, I'm ushered out into the sanctuary of a cool, stone-walled warehouse, where the whisky is sent to mature in bourbon and sherry casks. This is where it will remain until one day, many years later, it's deemed ready to be supped. The oldest batch, maturing in a huge sherry cask that could have just rolled off the deck of a pirate ship, was brought here in 1979 and still has pride of place.

FIT FOR A KING

Earlier that morning, I'd arrived at the Glen Garioch distillery (pronounced 'Glen Geery' in the local Doric dialect) in the pretty Aberdeenshire village of Oldmeldrum to take a tour and discover how a traditional Scotch whisky is produced. Founded by enterprising local farmer John Manson in 1797, this is one of Scotland's oldest and most easterly distilleries,

built on the edge of the Highlands where much of the barley used to make the whisky is still grown today.

Over the centuries, a village has grown up around the distillery, with Glen Garioch's jumble of buildings arranged around the aptly named Distillery Road. Along one side of the distillery are a series of named rooms, such as the Filling Store, Meter Room and Boiler House, denoting the different stages of the whisky-making process that happen within. Walking past them to the visitor centre, the heady aroma of barley and yeast drifts tantalisingly across the road.

Like other whisky distilleries, Glen Garioch's story flits between periods of success and survival, having endured both world wars, the temperance and prohibition years, and even a quest to find a new water source after its original spring dried up. Since Manson's day, the distillery has also passed between multiple owners, with current custodians, Suntory Global Spirits, buying it in 1997.

With the new owners came a whopping £6 million investment to upgrade the facility, along with a commitment to using traditional whisky-making techniques. In 2021, the distillery's visitor centre was reopened by none other than King Charles – then the Prince of Wales – who once gifted a bottle of Glen Garioch whisky to Emperor Naruhito of Japan during a state visit.

MONKEY SHOULDER

Among the restored traditions at the distillery is floor malting, a process in which wet barley is spread out on



Built from Aberdeen granite, Glen Garioch's Still House was modernised in 2021-2022



Soaked barley is spread out on the floor of the Malt Barn and left to germinate for five to seven days



Copper stills are essential for making Scottish malt whisky; the copper strips the distillate of impurities

a smooth stone or concrete floor and left to germinate. This encourages the barley to produce the natural sugars the yeast can then convert into alcohol. Although many distilleries now use barley that's pre-malted industrially, floor malting is said to give the grain a richer, more aromatic flavour.

As the first step in the whisky-making process, the Malt Barn is the first stop on our tour, where our guide, Hazel, leads me and my tour companions – a family from Germany – to see the barley being prepared. “The barley comes from Aberdeen Grain, who are five minutes away,” says Hazel. “It's delivered by lorry and put in steeping tanks to soak in water for three days before it's laid out here.”

After being spread out across the floor, the soaked grain then needs to be turned regularly to assist the malting process and prevent the germinating barley from thatching together. Originally, this would have been done manually with huge shovels, causing the unfortunate malt-house workers to develop a painful condition called ‘monkey shoulder’ – an injury that resulted in one shoulder hanging lower than the other. Today, the shovels

“For Scotland, whisky is big business”

have been replaced by a machine, with rows of spinning paddles designed to flip the barley at the push of button.

Between five to seven days later, the barley is dried to halt the germination process and get it ready for milling. This was traditionally done using a peat-fired kiln to add a smoky flavour to the barley. However, as part of Suntory's investment, Glen Garioch's old peat kiln was replaced with an air-drying system, using recirculated heat from the gas-fired stills.

When the moisture content of the grain has been reduced to 5%, it's de-stoned and milled into a coarse powder called ‘grist’. This is then mixed with hot water in a mash tun – essentially a large water tank containing rotating arms – to produce a sweet, sugary liquid known as ‘wort’.

From the mash tun, the wort is transferred into Glen Garioch's ‘washback’ – a room with nine

stainless-steel tanks, where a combination of distillery and brewery yeasts are added to kickstart the fermentation process. After 72 hours of bubbling and foaming, the resulting ‘beer’ is ready to be distilled in the giant copper stills, which are heated to separate the alcohol from the water.

THE TASTE TEST

After seeing the rows of casked whiskies in the warehouse, we head back to the visitor centre to sample three – Glen Garioch's best-selling Founder's Reserve, its 12-year-old whisky and a 16-year-old called The Renaissance. After being shown how to ‘nose’ (smell) a whisky by holding the glass up to my chin, then taste by allowing the whisky to coat my mouth and tongue, I'm invited to compare the flavours and properties of each. Perhaps it's Hazel's vivid descriptions of their flavour notes, but even to my uneducated palate the difference is striking, with hints of sherry, citrus fruits, honey and caramel; each whisky gets progressively smoother and deeper in flavour with age.

“Walking through a distillery and smelling that malt on the floor, then going right through the process, from the Still House to the warehouse, makes what's in your glass even more impactful,” says assistant visitor centre manager Cat Leiper.

For Scotland, whisky is big business, with around 150 distilleries employing more than 41,000 people and providing £7.1bn in gross value added (GVA) to the UK economy, according to the Scotch Whisky Association. In 2024, there were over two million visits to Scotch Whisky distilleries, making them the country's most popular tourist attraction. Helped by a huge international fanbase, Scotch whisky continues to outsell all American, Japanese and Irish whiskies combined.

SPIRIT OF REVIVAL

If Glen Garioch is one of Scotland's oldest distilleries, then the Cabrach Distillery, which opened in 2024 in Moray, on the northern edge of the Cairngorms, is one of its youngest. Created by The Cabrach Trust –

DISTILLERY DISCOVERY

Five more famous and noteworthy whisky producers in Scotland

GLENFIDDICH DISTILLERY

In the Scotch whisky heartland of Speyside, Glenfiddich has been family-run since 1886 and is famed for its “fruit-forward” and “approachable” single malts.

glenfiddich.com



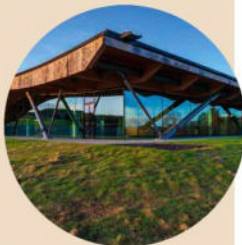
THE DALMORE

Further north in Alness, The Dalmore is renowned for producing luxurious, sherry-finished malts and a visitor experience steeped in tradition. thedalmore.com

THE MACALLAN

In Craigellachie, The Macallan combines sherry-cask maturation with an attractive, modern visitor centre (right) that looks more like an art gallery than a distillery.

themacallan.com



TALISKER

On the Isle of Skye, Talisker produces maritime malts with peppery spice, reflecting its rugged coastal setting. Its distillery tours pair perfectly with an exploration of Skye's dramatic landscapes. malts.com

LAPHROAIG AND LAGAVULIN

On Scotland's 'whisky island' Islay, the Laphroaig (laphroaig.com) and Lagavulin (malts.com) distilleries deliver

famously smoky, peaty whiskies shaped by the island's windswept peat bogs. Both distilleries welcome visitors, with immersive tours and tastings by the sea.



HIGHLAND PARK

In Orkney, Highland Park blends Viking heritage with heather-smoked whiskies, offering tours that weave fascinating stories and flavour together. highlandparkwhisky.com

“Before 1823, every farm in the Cabrach would have had a still”

a charity established to preserve the cultural heritage of this remote region – the distillery is a community-owned project, built to create jobs, attract visitors and end a long pause in whisky production. “The Cabrach Trust came out of an opportunity in 2011 to buy 180 acres of land in the centre of the Cabrach with the idea and vision it would provide the opportunity to think about regeneration,” explains chairman Grant Gordon. “So, with time and many discussions with the local community, this regeneration mission started to take life.”

As a descendant of the William Grant & Sons whisky dynasty, who grew up locally at Reekimlane, Gordon has a personal connection to both the whisky industry and the region. So, it's perhaps unsurprising the mission to reinstate a distillery in this once revered whisky-making region was at the heart of the regeneration plans.

“Before the *Excise Act* was passed in 1823, small farm distilling was a mainstay of the community, and every farm, every croft house in the Cabrach would have had a still,” says Jonathan Christie, Cabrach Trust's chief executive. “When the Act came into play, three families were encouraged to start legal production, and so the Blackmiddens, Lesmurdie and Tomnaven Distilleries were created.”

Along with the Glenlivet distillery in neighbouring Speyside, the Cabrach distilleries gained a stellar reputation

for their whiskies in the mid-1800s. However, the rise of the temperance movement, which began in 1829, and a downturn in sales eventually forced each one to close.

KEEPING TRADITION ALIVE

Over 170 years later, that history has been reversed, after the Trust transformed farm buildings dating from 1849 into the Cabrach Distillery, café and heritage centre. Ahead of the opening, they launched The Feering, a series of three Speyside blended malts named after the Doric word for the first furrow ploughed in a field. Also launched was The Cabrach Collective, a founding members' group limited to 1,849 people, granting access to exclusive bottlings and other benefits.

With former Glenlivet master distiller Alan Winchester overseeing production, the distillery features a half-tonne mash tun, six wooden washbacks and two small stills. These sit alongside ‘The Buck’, a third pot still, designed to produce a whisky akin to the illicit spirit made by 18th-century smugglers.

With the first spirits maturing in casks donated by other distilleries, it's now a waiting game to see if they will restore the Cabrach's reputation among whisky lovers. “The choice of the casks in which we're maturing the whisky has been made,” says Gordon. “As soon as it's judged to be the quality one would expect from a great whisky in this part of Scotland, we're looking forward to releasing it to the public.”

Given the investment and efforts of both the Glen Garioch and Cabrach distilleries to preserve traditional craftsmanship and produce high quality, small-batch whiskies, the drams should be worth the wait. **CF**



Cabrach Distillery uses locally grown barley



Matt Havercroft is an editor and journalist specialising in travel, history and the natural world.

Photos: Alamy, Matt Havercroft

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May

Q&A The big questions answered



“It’s a legacy of war that’s probably never going to be solved”

bombs, shells and chemical weapons. The Ministry of Defence has estimated that it holds in excess of a million tons’ worth of unexploded munitions, including bombs surrendered by German forces.

SHORT-DUMPING

The trench – located close to the site of the key Second World War port, Cairnryan Military Harbour, from where much of the dumping took place – was seen as a conveniently massive receptacle for disposing of dangerous materials at a depth that would minimise the impact of any unforeseen explosions. Among the munitions left in the dyke were around 14,500 tons of 130mm artillery rockets filled with the toxic gas phosgene. It’s also been reported that two tons of concrete-sealed radioactive waste were deposited in the 1950s. Things must be pretty cluttered down there.

“It was identified originally as a relatively safe and low-risk disposal area,” explains Keith Higgins, an unexploded ordnance (UXO) consultant at specialist company Ordtek. “A lot of the munitions dumped in the area were defused, but the reality – and what makes things troublesome – is that there was also a lot that was dumped that was non-compliant.”

This means not only that some bombs were deposited with their fuses still intact, but that not everything intended for the trench made it to its designated resting place. There’s evidence that when crews carrying the munitions were

What is Beaufort’s Dyke?

On a clear summer’s day, the view looking west from the Rhins of Galloway peninsula is a beautiful one. You see the green and rocks of the Scottish foreshore, the wide sunlit blue of the Irish Sea and, on the horizon, the craggy outline of Northern Ireland some 20 miles away. It’s a scene to calm the mind. But, hidden from view, there’s a story under the waves.

On the seabed here, running roughly northwest to southeast, stretches an enormous underwater trench. It was formed by glacial

activity in the dim and distant past and measures around 30 miles in length, two miles in width and up to 300 metres in depth. Today it goes by the name Beaufort’s Dyke.

Ordinarily, a sea trench of this size would chiefly be seen as a natural wonder, but Beaufort’s Dyke – one of the very deepest points in British waters – has a rather different claim to fame. Beginning in the early 20th century, and most notably in the aftermath of the Second World War, the trench was used as an offshore dump site for stockpiles of unused

Dangerous wrecks

Of the 37,000 shipwrecks in British waters, only two are officially designated as dangerous: the SS *Castilian* in Anglesey and the SS *Richard Montgomery* in Kent (more in issue 239).

Coastal erosion saw unexploded ordnance exposed at Cowden in East Yorkshire in 2014



pressed for time or hit bad weather, they engaged in “short-dumping”. This involved dropping the waste in shallower waters, in some cases just hundred of metres from the shoreline in Galloway.

It’s the likely explanation as to why, shortly after work began on laying an undersea pipeline close to the dyke in the mid-1990s, thousands of incendiary devices were washed ashore. They contained phosphorus, cellulose and benzene. A four-year-old on the Mull of Kintyre received burns after picking one up, and bomb disposal teams were hurriedly dispatched to remedy the situation

MARINE RISK

There are also environmental considerations. Studies have generally found no widespread

Munitions misfire

An attempt in 1967 to clear the SS *Kielce*, a Polish munitions ship sunk in Kent in 1946, created an explosion that measured 4.5 on the Richter scale and damaged property in Folkestone, four miles away.

contamination of the surrounding seabed or marine life, and leakage from chemical munitions is likely to be localised rather than extensive. Yet the greater practical concern is disturbance – whether by fishing, anchoring or seabed construction. Similarly, the dangers from terrorism cannot be overlooked.

The main issue, however, remains the unknown but significant quantities of munitions that were short-dumped. When ex-Prime Minister Boris Johnson championed the idea of a road bridge between Galloway and County Antrim in Northern Ireland, the risks posed by these weapons were an obvious hurdle. The whole area also exists under a shipping lane, ferry routes and fishing grounds.

So what can be done, in relation to both the armaments in the trench

and those in shallower waters?

“The answer to that, unfortunately, is another question,” continues Keith. “What’s in the interest of public safety and clearing up the seabed, versus taxpayer cost? That’s the reality. We’d all like to see the munitions removed, but even just based on the water depth, let alone the breadth of contamination, the cost of mitigation means it’s probably never going to be solved. It’s one of those legacies of war.”

The dyke itself takes its name from Sir Francis Beaufort, the Irish hydrographer who developed the Beaufort Scale in 1805, a system still widely used for measuring high wind speeds at sea. Are there stormy waters ahead for this enormous trench and its contents? Only time will tell. **Ben Lerwill**

2

Are there downsides to feeding birds?

It has been estimated that 40–50% of UK households feed birds in the garden. The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) reports that this amounts to 50,000–60,000 tonnes of bird food a year – a market worth between £200 million and £300 million, including bird feeders and other accessories.

Anecdotally, people who feed birds report delight and a connection with nature; this is backed up by numerous scientific findings. For example, a 2016 study reported in the *US Public Library of Science* (PLOS) journal “found that people who fed birds regularly felt more relaxed and connected to nature when they watched garden birds” and that, for many people, especially in urban areas, bird feeding is the

closest they get to regularly observing wild animal behaviour.

The studies strongly suggest that feeding and watching birds may also have a positive impact on mental health. But though it clearly benefits us, is this vast bird-feeding industry actually good for the birds and the wider environment?

Bird feeding does have an impact on populations of wild birds. The BTO has found that the populations of “feeder-using species [such as great tits and blue tits] have increased significantly in urban areas of Britain, while those of other urban birds (which do not use feeders) have remained stable on average”. Comfortingly, the studies also found that birds did not become dependent on food provided by

humans but used it to supplement a wild diet. So if you have to stop feeding your birds for any reason, they will not suddenly go hungry.

RIVAL SPECIES

Over the past 40 years or so, bird feeding has, however, had some impacts on rarer species that do not frequent gardens. Research using BTO data in 2023 suggests that increased food availability from garden feeding may benefit common species, potentially putting pressure on less adaptable birds such as willow tits. But that’s only one factor



Refill bird baths with clean water each day



Acrobatic birds such as great tits love fat-rich, high-energy coconut feeders



For more on birdfeeding, watch David Attenborough's new series *Secret Garden*, from 5 April on BBC One and iPlayer



Providing food can help birds such as house sparrows; since 1970, their numbers have fallen 60% in the UK

“It’s important to clean the ground beneath bird feeders”

among several behind that species’ long-term and sharp decline.

James Robinson, chief operating officer for the RSPB, spoke about this on *BBC Countryfile Magazine’s* Plodcast in January 2026. He recognised that bird feeding could negatively impact some species but said that, in areas of special concern such as breeding sites of willow tits, the RSPB intervened to advise local households on how to feed birds without causing further problems.

Robinson raised another major issue. When birds congregate around a feeder, avian diseases spread more easily, especially if feeders are dirty or uneaten food becomes mouldy. He highlighted trichomonosis, a parasite that infects respiratory organs; it is especially deadly in greenfinches but also impacts other species. The RSPB now advises

against using bird tables or feeders with saucers or bases in which food and waste can accumulate, and has stopped selling flat feeders. Its latest advice is also to pause filling your bird feeders between 1 May and 31 October to prevent too many birds gathering in one place. It’s okay to offer small amounts of mealworms, fat balls or suet year-round.

The BTO and RSPB recommend regularly moving feeders around the garden to prevent any build-up of waste, as well as cleaning the ground beneath feeders. It is also important to provide fresh water for drinking and bathing every day. But Robinson was keen to stress that the RSPB encourages responsible bird feeding, which plays a vital role in the organisation’s Big Garden Birdwatch held every January.

SEED SOURCES

One area that perhaps deserves closer consideration is the provenance of the bird food itself. It’s commendable helping your local birdlife – but not if it damages wildlife and human communities elsewhere in the world. For instance, though

CLEAN FEED

The BTO and RSPB both recommend cleaning feeders weekly with soapy water or a mild, animal-safe disinfectant. Rinse with clean water and allow feeders to dry fully before refilling.

many seeds are produced in the UK, peanuts and more exotic foods have to be transported from overseas, involving the use of fossil fuels, and may have been grown using pesticides and artificial fertilisers. Worse still, they may have been grown at the expense of a vital local food crop. So it’s worth looking for labels that guarantee sustainably produced products. Locally grown food is best of all.

Finally, the very best thing you can do for your birds is to provide a rich and varied garden environment that offers plenty of wild food, as well as shelter and potential nest sites. Both the RSPB and the BTO provide plenty of advice on planting and garden design to make your plot more attractive to wildlife. If you can anticipate birds’ needs you will have a healthy, varied and endlessly entertaining stream of visitors to brighten your life. **Fergus Collins**



Listen to episode 336 of *BBC Countryfile Magazine’s* Plodcast to hear more about the RSPB’s Big Garden Birdwatch.



Edward III chose St George's cross as the symbol for his new Order of the Garter, founded in 1348



The myth of George's dragon-slaying feat emerged in the Middle Ages

3

Who was the real St George?

The patron saint of England never set foot in that country – which didn't exist when St George is reputed to have lived. In fact, very little is known about this mysterious figure whose symbol – a red cross on a white background – is on the English flag.

Popular images of St George show him dressed as a medieval knight, rescuing a princess from a dragon. However, what little evidence there is suggests that George lived in the Roman Empire in the third century CE – several centuries before the earliest 'knights', in the Carolingian Empire. If, as is believed, he was an officer in the Roman army, George would likely have worn armour. However, the dragon-slaying story is an early medieval embellishment, perhaps symbolising the battle between good and evil.

In the Middle Ages, George came to be invoked in hope of protection from plagues or for armies in battle.

When Edward III (ruled 1327–77) created his great chivalric Order of the Garter for his noblest knights, he adopted St George's cross as its symbol; George became England's patron saint around this time.

Some of the earliest references to George appear in fourth-century sources, including a Syrian inscription from around 350 CE referring to his martyrdom. He was purportedly a Christian who was tortured and executed for his beliefs by Roman authorities under the Emperor Diocletian around 303 – possibly on 23 April, now celebrated as St George's Day.

Certainly, many Christian shrines and early churches in the Near and Middle East were dedicated to George soon after this time, under the more sympathetic Constantine the Great (ruled 306–37) and his successors; clearly, the story became popular very quickly.

Moveable feast

St George's Day is usually celebrated on 23 April in England but can be moved by the Church of England if it falls within Holy Week or the Octave of Easter.

By tradition, George was born in Cappadocia, in what is now central Turkey. His father was probably also a soldier, and his mother may have come from what's now Israel. Some reports of early pilgrimages to his tomb locate it in Palestine.

Though it's impossible to pin down facts with any certainty, George's influence has spread widely. He's venerated not only in England but also in Lithuania, Portugal, Germany, Greece and Palestine, as well as in the Spanish regions of Catalonia and Aragon and the Italian cities of Venice and Genoa in Italy. He's also, unsurprisingly, the patron saint of Georgia – which is, however, not believed to be named after him.

There may have been no dragons or shining bright armour, but the historical echoes of George's life suggest he was a person of note whose life and death impressed his contemporaries. **Fergus Collins**

4

How dangerous are stingrays?

The epic tale of the travels and travails of Odysseus, king of Ithaca and a Greek hero of the Trojan War, is one of the greatest in the canon of ancient Greek mythology. It also contains one of the most curious deaths. After the end of that decade-long conflict, Odysseus famously wandered for another 10 years as he attempted to travel home to his wife, Penelope. On that journey, he had a son, Telegonus, with the sorceress Circe. And on his eventual return to Ithaca, Odysseus was killed by Telegonus, stabbed with a spear that – in some versions of the tale – was tipped with a venomous barb from a stingray.

The stingray is also revered as a totem among indigenous cultures in many parts of the world. It appears as a symbol on pottery and clothing created by tribes of the Amazon

basin; in Māori, Aboriginal and Pacific Island cultures, stingrays are regarded as guardians of the sea.

The reverence in which the stingray is so widely held is due in part to the fact that it can inflict serious injury – and, occasionally, death – with its venom-loaded, tail-mounted spines. Not that any of the 220-plus species of stingray throughout the world will attack a human unless handled or provoked. Incidents do occur – the death of naturalist Steve Irwin in 2006 after his chest was pierced by a short-tailed stingray barb on the Great Barrier Reef was much publicised – but are rare.

Encounters are unusual outside subtropical waters. That said, the common stingray (*Dasyatis pastinaca*) is found in UK waters including the English Channel and

Shrinking stingrays

More than 20% of the world's stingray species are listed as 'Vulnerable' or 'Endangered', largely as a result of overfishing.



Odysseus was slain by a spear tipped with a venomous stingray spine

Irish Sea, and is likely to move farther north as sea temperatures rise. Those most at risk from a sting are anglers; in 2016, a beach fisher in Herne Bay, Kent, required hospital treatment after being stabbed by a stingray he had caught. Many anglers here are unaware of any such threat.

The common stingray has a rounded body, a less-pronounced snout than the similar-looking flapper skate – also found in UK waters – and smooth skin that is typically dark brown or olive in colour. It averages around 60cm across the wings and 5kg in weight, but can grow to 150cm and 35kg.

The stinger is located roughly halfway along the tail, which will be raised if the fish is threatened, in a pose not unlike that of a scorpion. The dagger-like stinger, which can grow to more than 30cm long on adult fish, has barbed edges and pockets of venom that are released on impact. If the stinger breaks off, a replacement will grow.

Like all rays, the common stingray's skeleton is cartilaginous. The male has claspers either side of the tail that are used to channel sperm into a female during mating. Embryos develop inside a female and are delivered live after a four-month gestation period. A female will bear between eight and 18 young in a calendar year, and lives to around 10–16 years old. Classed as 'Vulnerable', the common stingray's population is declining across much of its range. **Kevin Parr**

The common stingray is found in Mediterranean and eastern Atlantic coastal waters



Masterclass

To build fitness and maintain good health throughout your life, take to the trails



Build your walking fitness

Seeking a healthier, happier life without living like a monk? Here's how to defy ageing, burn belly fat and reduce the chances of disease – all by placing one foot in front of the other

Words: James Witts



James Witts is a freelance writer and author specialising in endurance sports, sports science and nutrition.

Tread carefully

At home or the gym, a treadmill is a far more forgiving surface than Tarmac for walking or running. In a study published in 2020, the treadmill provided 71.3% shock absorption (compared with 0% for asphalt) for runners, reducing the impact on joints. When using a treadmill inside, select the 1% gradient setting to compensate for reduced air resistance; it also deters over-striding, which can place extra stress on your knees.



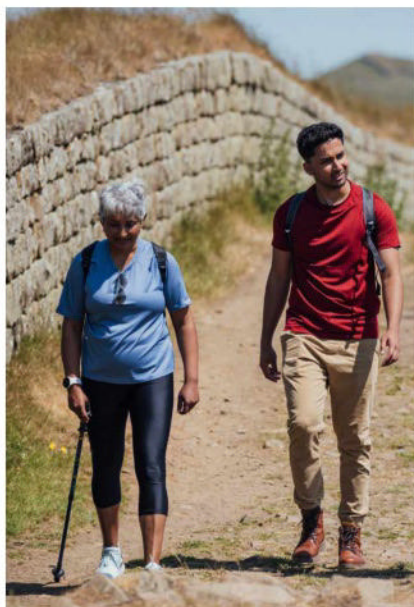


2 Muscle up

From around your mid-30s, muscle mass declines. Particularly in later years, hormonal changes – lower oestrogen in women, testosterone in men – are among the key causes. Weight-based exercise, which can include tasks such as gardening, is arguably the best way to mitigate muscle loss. “Walking or running several miles each week is an effective option, too,” says endurance coach Joe Friel. “Research also suggests that walking improves bone health.”

4 Pole prancing

Cross-country skiers are among the fittest athletes, because their sport provides an all-body workout. You can enjoy some of the same benefits by using walking poles: they help recruit upper-body muscles, increase oxygen consumption and boost calorie burn. In fact, a 2017 study showed that walkers’ energy expenditure and heart rate was 20% and 18% higher, respectively, when using poles than without them.



3 Strength in numbers



A growing body of evidence shows that maintaining social connections is one of the greatest protective factors for healthy ageing. Research published in 2025 found that social isolation was associated with a 35% increased risk of all-cause mortality; living alone is linked with a 21% increase; loneliness with a 14% increase. So get out there and join a walking group – there are many around the country, including some specifically for over-50s.



5 Track your progress

There’s no shortage of free walking apps for both iPhone and Android, including NHS Active 10. Another of the most widely used apps is Strava, which tracks more activities than you can shake a walking pole at. Using GPS, it records handy stats including distance, elevation gain, calories burned and the route you’ve ticked off. It’s also a great platform for sharing walks with friends or browsing heatmaps to find popular paths nearby.

6 **Fast fuelling**

Dehydration increases fatigue, slows pace and impairs decision-making. So drink plenty of water – around 400–600ml per hour for moderate walking, depending on climate and terrain – plus electrolytes. A hydration bladder helps you carry and drink larger volumes. Fuel up before walking with low-glycaemic-index foods such as porridge with seeds. You won't need to eat during a short walk, but on tramps over an hour, aim to take in about 60g of easily digestible carbohydrates – cereal bars, rice cakes or sandwiches – for each hour on the trail.



7 **Sleep easy, walk strong**

"Adequate sleep – in terms of quantity, quality and regularity – is vital, because recovery processes occur during rest," says Friel. "Compromising sleep to fit in more activities harms performance. A simple test: if you need an alarm to wake up, you haven't slept enough. Go to bed earlier to allow your body to fully recuperate and cope with walking stresses."



8 **Vest to impress**

Wearing a weighted vest or backpack while walking increases the effort involved, helping build strength and endurance. Studies also suggest that wearing a weighted vest during exercise can help maintain bone density in post-menopausal women with osteoporosis. Ensure your base fitness is good before donning the vest, and don't wear one if you have neck or back pain.





9

Ace of pace

Your walking pace is key to boosting your fitness levels. Maintaining a brisk pace (over 4mph) can help cut the risk of heart problems by nearly half, according to 2025 research analysing data from 81,956 participants in the UK Biobank who provided detail on the time they spent walking at different paces. Over an average tracking period of 13 years, the researchers concluded that the chances of developing abnormal heart rhythms was 43% lower among those who walked at 4mph or faster.

10

And relax...

After a hard walk, focus on gentle stretching to aid recovery. This is especially important as the years roll by, because our muscle fibres and ligaments become less pliable. Target calves, hamstrings, quadriceps, hips and lower back. Hold each stretch for 20 to 30 seconds without bouncing. Finish with deep breathing to relax your muscles and mind. **CF**

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THREE AMIGOS

By: Alan Hooper

Where: Ross-on-Wye,
Herefordshire

"The riverbank below these sand martins was full of nests. These three were taking a well-earned rest after skimming the River Wye for insects. I waited over an hour for them to settle before I got the shot."



➤ BLUEBELL BLISS

By: Sarah Mills

Where: Watford,
Hertfordshire

"This woodland is a secret haven that lies hidden from view by the M1. The rumble of motorway traffic is absorbed by the trees and when the bluebells are on display the colours are so vibrant it's breathtaking, especially as the morning light filters through the trees."



◀ A MOTHER'S LOVE

By: Jason Vernon

**Where: Fordcombe,
Tunbridge Wells, Kent**

"At around 5am on a May morning, I went to sit in a field with the sheep and lambs. I thought I'd let them get used to me, and within an hour they were getting within range. I was taking a shot of this lamb when its mum joined in – this was my shot of the year!"

▼ CHUFFED TO BITS

By: Lewis Bibby

**Where:Sizergh Castle,
Helsington, Cumbria**

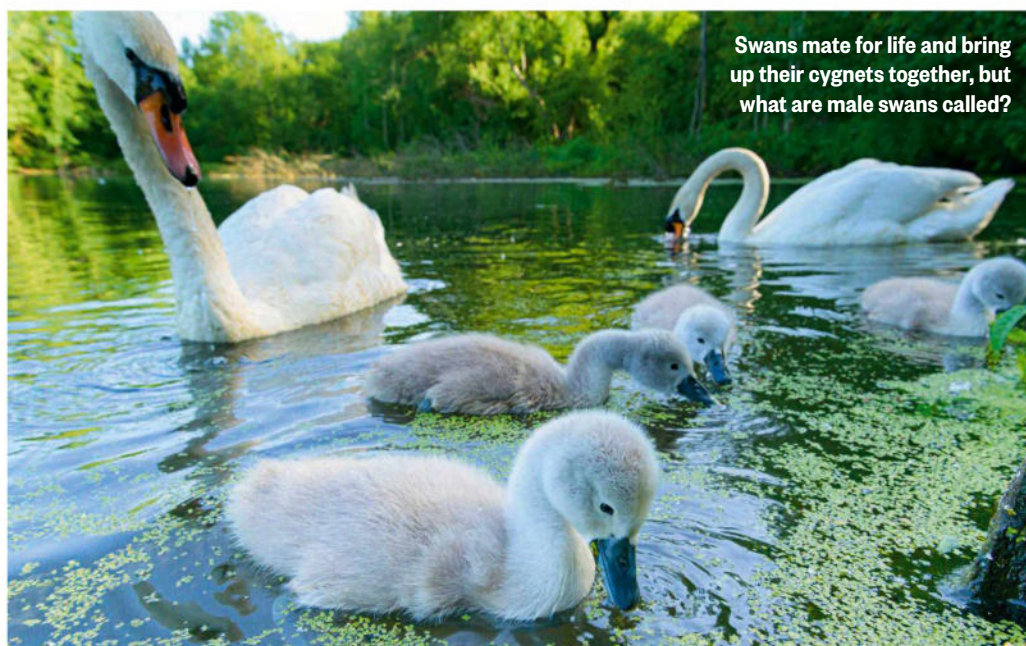
"To shoot this chaffinch, I had to get low to the ground discreetly without attracting too much attention from my nephews in case they startled the bird. I'm relatively new to the hobby so I had the joy of checking my bird book later to work out what I'd found."



Country puzzles

COUNTRYSIDE QUIZ

Answers at the bottom of page 96



Swans mate for life and bring up their cygnets together, but what are male swans called?

1. Who featured on the £5 banknote before Winston Churchill?

- ☐ a. Charles Dickens
- ☐ b. Florence Nightingale
- ☐ c. Elizabeth Fry
- ☐ d. Charles Darwin

2. Which play by William Shakespeare reaches its climax with the dawning of May Day?

- ☐ a. *Romeo and Juliet*
- ☐ b. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
- ☐ c. *Hamlet*
- ☐ d. *Richard III*

3. Which English village celebrates Garland Day and holds a procession every 29 May?

- ☐ a. Whitney, Oxfordshire
- ☐ b. Chale, Isle of Wight
- ☐ c. Castleton, Derbyshire
- ☐ d. Bedlam, Shropshire

4. There are over 270 species of bee in the UK; how many are honey bees?

- ☐ a. 1
- ☐ b. 24
- ☐ c. 129
- ☐ d. 238

5. Which animals were the first to evolve flight?

- ☐ a. Pterosaurs
- ☐ b. Birds
- ☐ c. Bats
- ☐ d. Insects

6. When did Sir David Attenborough receive his first knighthood?

- ☐ a. 1979
- ☐ b. 1985
- ☐ c. 1996
- ☐ d. 2012

7. Which Scottish island became community owned in 1997?

- ☐ a. Coll
- ☐ b. Eigg
- ☐ c. Shetland Mainland
- ☐ d. Kerrera

8. There are around 40 species of slug in the UK; which one predated on living creatures?

- ☐ a. Ghost slug
- ☐ b. Ash-black slug
- ☐ c. Lemon slug
- ☐ d. Cellar slug

9. A female swan is called a pen, a baby is a cygnet. What is a male swan called?

- ☐ a. A tiercel
- ☐ b. A gander
- ☐ c. A drake
- ☐ d. A cob

10. Which whale species suffers the most mass strandings worldwide?

- ☐ a. Humpback whales
- ☐ b. Sperm whales
- ☐ c. Long-finned pilot whales
- ☐ d. Cuvier's beaked whales

11. BBC series *Wildlife on One* aired between 1977 and 2005; how many episodes were made?

- ☐ a. 220
- ☐ b. 253
- ☐ c. 301
- ☐ d. 342

12. To be called a Scotch Whisky, the spirit must be matured in casks for at least three years. What must the casks be made from?

- ☐ a. Acacia wood
- ☐ b. Stainless steel
- ☐ c. Copper
- ☐ d. Oak wood

13. Gaelic poet Sorley MacLean (1911–1996) was born on which Scottish island?

- ☐ a. Raasay
- ☐ b. Barra
- ☐ c. Holy Island
- ☐ d. Iona

14. Which butterfly is pictured below?

- ☐ a. Peacock
- ☐ b. Comma
- ☐ c. Brimstone
- ☐ d. Small tortoiseshell



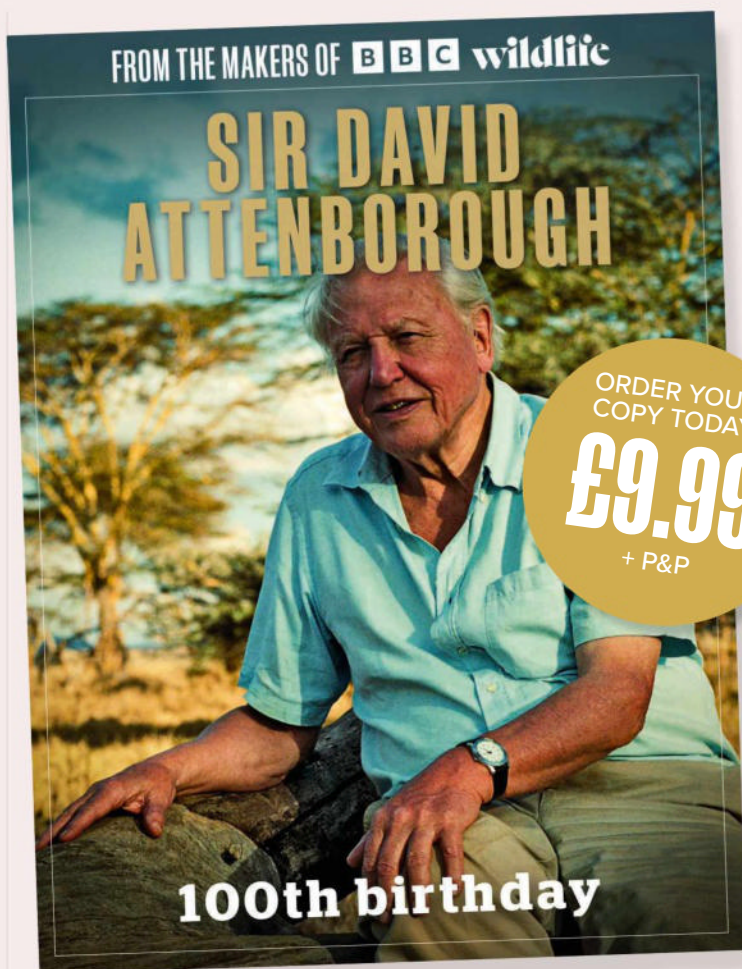
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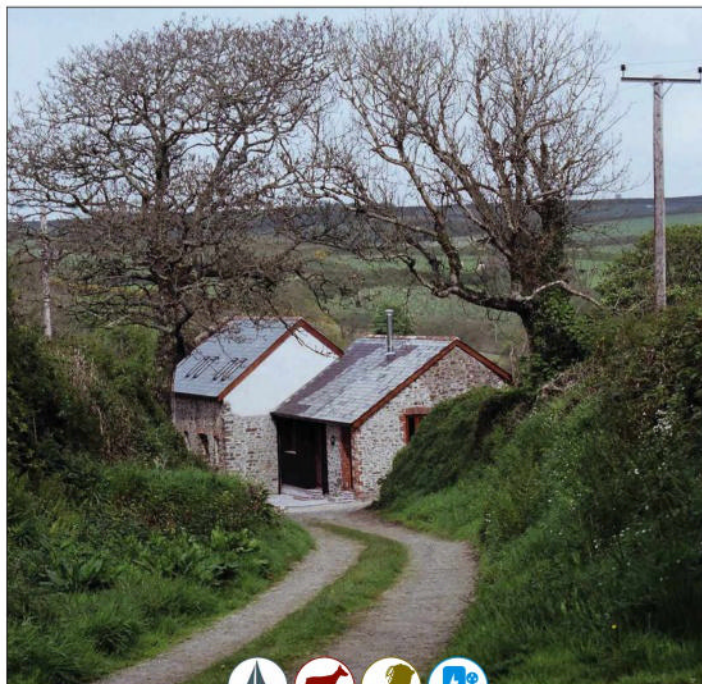
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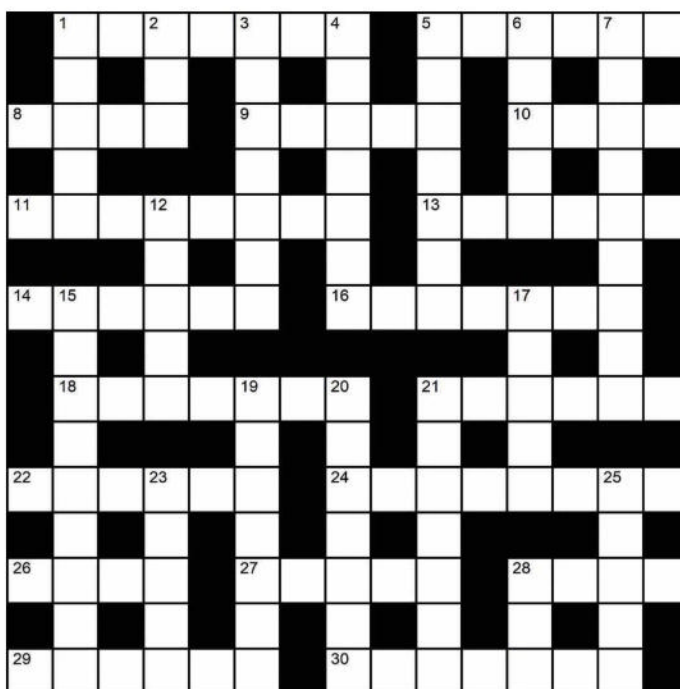
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COUNTRYSIDE CROSSWORD

by Eddie James

ACROSS

- 1** Marshy area like Wicken Fen, Cambridgeshire (7)
5 Steal orchard fruit – and endless West Country cider! (6)
8 *Countryfile*'s farmer Henson... reveals a horse's mother (4)
9 Bird of rail family – might be after corn (5)
10/11 Annual decoration of Derbyshire springs, etc. (4, 8)
13 Tree bark substance used in making leather (6)
14 A variant within a biological species – in rats, perhaps (6)
16 Dramatic venue, e.g. on Minack headland, SW Coast Path (7)
18 Ridge connecting Snowdonian summits – tell Ann differently (7)
21 Gave birth to a young horse (6)
22 A time of the year... to add a bit of spice! (6)
24 Tree with blackberry-type fruit, genus *Morus* (8)
26 Lazy river of Nottinghamshire? (4)
27 Shetland island RSPB reserve – in enormous archipelago (5)
28 *Dad's Army* character's voracious fish! (4)
29 Think Pennines includes a Berkshire beacon? (6)



30 Married man to manage land resources (7)

DOWN

- 1** Long-legged shorebird such as stilt (5)
2 Cat – in potato maincrop? (3)
3 Lots sold at this public sale (7)
4 Shire horse for example – and air current (7)
5 Scottish sheepdog's wayward: "Heel, sit!" (7)
6 In hedgerow another mountain ash tree (5)
7 Little creature with exoskeleton and

- many legs (9)
12 Mass of eggs laid in water (5)
15 Kent village 'Jewel of the Weald' – teen trend perhaps (9)
17 Separate wool fibres for spinning (5)
19 Chalk figure on Wilmington Downs (4, 3)
20 East Devon port/resort on Jurassic Coast (7)
21 Gull-like birds of petrel family (7)
23 E.g. Lonk and Soay (5)
25 Removed moss etc. from a lawn? (5)
28 Vegetable – flower if sweet! (3)

CROSSWORD SOLUTIONS

MARCH

ACROSS: 1 Scab 4 Forest Park
 9 Pilgrim 10 Canary 11 Mayo
 12 Roots 13 Ruby 14 Berwyns
 15 Ash-key 16 Sorrel 18 Hogweed
 20 Snag 21 Motte 22 Rush
 24 Labour 25 Heather
 27 Fertiliser 28 Puss

DOWN: 2 Copra 3 Belvoir
 4 Fir 5 Ramsons 6 Sacks
 7 Penarth 8 Rare breed 12 Royal
 14 Brown hare 15 Algae
 17 Ragwort 18 Hatches
 19 Earth up 21 Morel
 23 Sires 26 Air

APRIL

ACROSS: 1 Clutch 5 Bristol
 9 Flea 10 Tawny 11 Dove
 12 College 13 Grouse 14 Spades
 17 Loose box 18 Knotweed
 21 Strike 23 Annual 24 Venison
 27 Yurt 28 Edale 29 Rail
 30 Aintree 31 Sussex

DOWN: 2 Lilac 3 Trailed
 4 Hythe 5 Bowfell 6 Ivy
 7 Tadpole 8 Livestock 13 Grows
 15 Peninsula 16 Smell
 19 Taunton 20 Deviate
 22 Resorts 25 Neeps
 26 Noise 28 Ear

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE



Arriving in Britain from Africa from late March, the cuckoo's song is said to herald the arrival of spring. Due to their striped undersides and blue-grey backs, cuckoos are often mistaken for sparrowhawks. Can you spot the five differences between these two photos? See page 97 for the answers.

Your countryside

HAVE YOUR SAY ON RURAL ISSUES

Share your views and opinions by writing to us at:

Have your say: *BBC Countryfile Magazine*, Eagle House, Bristol BS1 4ST; or email editor@countryfile.com, tweet us [@CountryfileMag](https://twitter.com/CountryfileMag) or via Facebook facebook.com/countryfilemagazine

*We reserve the right to edit correspondence



A combination of surplus stock from 2025's bumper yield and low demand has left UK potato farmers with tonnes of unsold crops

POTATO CROPS GOING TO WASTE

I'm writing to you because my father, a second-generation British farmer based in Lincolnshire, is currently sitting on nearly 500 tonnes of perfectly edible potatoes that he cannot sell.

These aren't niche crops – they are the great British staples used for chips, mash and roast potatoes. The kind of food found on dinner tables across the country. Yet despite months of trying, the large buyers and processors say they are already fully supplied. As a result, hundreds of tonnes of good food are at risk of being diverted to stock feed or wasted. My father is 65 and has worked the land his entire life. Watching

tens of thousands of pounds worth of food he grew with care become essentially worthless has been heartbreaking for him. He would far rather see it feeding people than animals, especially at a time when food banks across the UK are under immense pressure.

Surely there is something wrong in a system where farmers cannot sell staple food, tonnes of it risk going to waste, and yet so many people are struggling to afford basic meals.

This isn't just about one farm – we know other potato growers are facing similar challenges this season.

Bianca Spendlove, via email

SEARCH FOR VEGAN BOOTS

I'm struggling to find plastic-free vegan walking boots in the UK. Do you have any suggestions please?

Sally Lemsfod, via email

Managing editor Matt Baird replies:

Hi Sally. Keen, Inov-8, Arc'teryx, Hoka and Vivobarefoot offer vegan-friendly walking boots. For plastic-free options, Vivobarefoot makes a biobased outsole, while brands such as Arc'teryx offer resale and repair initiatives. Most Vibram soles use a rubberised compound made of natural and synthetic materials, but these aren't biodegradable. Read more in a future Q&A.

GRAIN CONFUSION

I am sure Adam Henson was not proofreading when on page 27 of the April issue you captioned a photo of a field of barley as one of wheat!

Graeme Kidd, via email

Managing editor Matt Baird replies:

Agh, Adam wasn't proofreading that day, Graeme! My apologies for the error.

TOAD PATROL

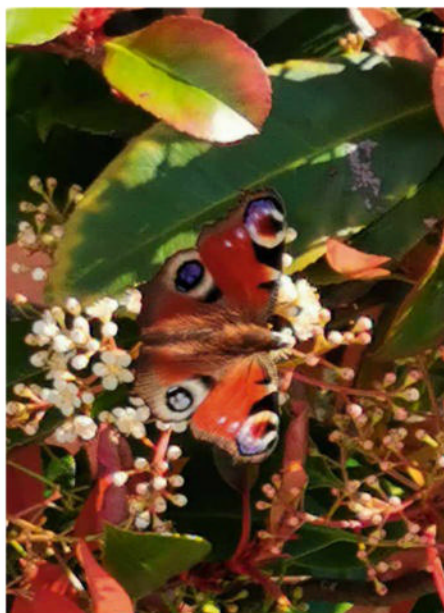
I am contacting you as an enthusiastic toad patroller in Thetford, Norfolk. I am a newbie, just started this year, but thought you might find it interesting to know that, so far this season, we have rescued in excess of 3,500 toads. I'm aware there are many areas across the nation doing the same work, and, with the population of toads having declined by 41% since 1985, it would be good to understand what difference we are all making?

During our patrols, we've been asked by many motorists what we are doing. The police have even been called re: suspicious folk in hi-vis jackets wandering up and down a remote road in the dark. The

surprise and positive response in both these events is really heartwarming. Most people don't realise the essential role that toads play in our ecosystem.

If you are ever passing The Devil's Punchbowl in Thetford, don't be alarmed by a flock of oddly attired folk, of all ages, ambling along, with torches on their heads and trusty buckets in hand.

Dr Dawn Heather, via email



BUTTERFLY ID QUERY

This butterfly (above) landed in my brother's garden recently. Can you tell us the name of it and where it is from please?

Zoe Jane, via email

Managing editor Matt Baird replies:

The peacock butterfly is a widespread UK native, named for its showy eyespots that deter and confuse its predators. The undersides of the wings are dark and look like dead leaves.



SPOT THE DIFFERENCE ANSWERS, FROM PAGE 95 Tail feather is missing; black bar feathers are missing; second wing is missing; eye is different colour; beak is longer.

Next month *The relics of war*

Explore the remarkable reminders of conflict in all corners of the UK



Built between the wars, the Denge Sounds Mirrors at Greatstone Lakes, Kent, were an experiment in coastal defence

Don't miss our Special issue, on sale 21 May

Plus...

- Breathing new life into ballads of old
- The real Battle of Hastings story
- A masterclass in coastal foraging



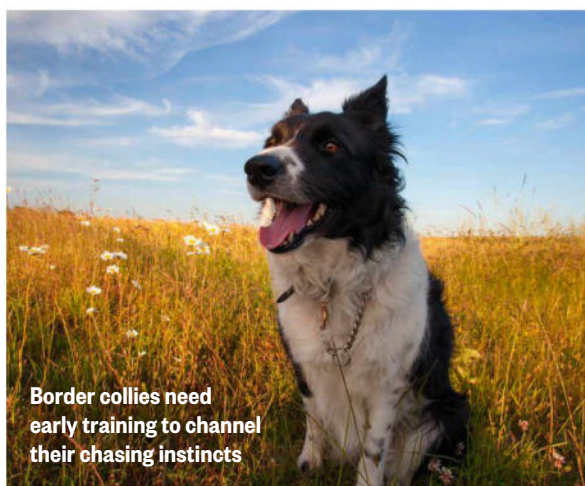
Dog licensing has the potential to benefit both owners and pets

With around 36% of UK householders owning at least one dog, how many of us think about the impact an estimated 13.5 million dogs has on the countryside, or anywhere we share outdoor spaces and neighbourhoods?

Licensing for dog ownership, introduced in 1878, continues to operate in Northern Ireland but was abandoned across the rest of the UK in 1987. More of a tax than an animal welfare, monitoring or responsibility order, less than half of dog owners complied. Enforcement and associated admin by dog wardens had become untenable. It was replaced by the *Dangerous Dogs Act 1991*, with over 20 further pieces of legislation addressing welfare, public safety, accountability, anti-social behaviour, livestock and control. Picking up after your dog in a public place, identity tags and collars, and compulsory microchipping all became a legal requirement. But, with ownership still rising, is it time to reintroduce licensing?

Owning a dog is a joy as well as a connection with the outdoors and nature. But it is a big commitment, for the dog's health and wellbeing and responsibility for it in public. Anyone can own a dog, regardless of experience or suitability of any given breed to a person's situation. This can lead to out of control or badly behaved dogs, through no fault of their own.

Having a dog that jumps up, barks or pulls on the lead can be miserable, but having one with poor or unreliable recall that chases people, wildlife,



Border collies need early training to channel their chasing instincts

horses or livestock is a danger to everyone, including the pet itself. With licensing comes the potential to inform and support, so the impact of those 13.5 million dogs isn't felt unfairly.

While The Kennel Club opposes the reintroduction of licensing due to a variety of factors including cost and a lack of compliance, both the Green Party and Right to Roam Campaign advocate for it. Green Party policy would introduce a two-tier system of licensing – one for breeders, one for owners – to eliminate puppy farming and regulate care and conditions for dog breeders, and implement good animal warden schemes.

The Right to Roam Campaign, emphatic that a right to roam for people does not automatically mean their pets too, has a clear, comprehensive dog policy. Advocating for restrictions on access, when and where appropriate, it acknowledges disturbance, livestock worrying and fouling are far from the only issues.

No one knows exactly how many dogs there are in the UK or who owns them. Current laws are often disjointed,

poorly communicated and increasingly inadequate. Applying for licences in a similar way to the Driving Theory Test could include guidance on the responsibilities of dog ownership, match potential owners with a breed-type best suited to their circumstances or cover the considerations of taking on a rescue dog. Guidance on puppy ownership and welfare, socialisation, training and behaviour, could include the reasons for close control around livestock and wildlife. Disturbance can cause death or local extinction of ground-nesting bird species;

dog poo left in pasture can spread fatal diseases to grazing animals.

Licensing could also inform owners on the toxicity of preventative flea and tick treatments, encouraged by many vets and pet plans (rather than acting when an animal is affected). One monthly flea treatment contains enough imidacloprid to kill 25 million bees.

Additionally, licensing could signpost training opportunities via existing expertise, such as puppy classes, or advice from the RSPCA or Dogs Trust. We have a deep and relaxed relationship with our own dog, who has completed the The Kennel Club's Good Citizen Dog Training Scheme with us. If licences can deliver and support that access for all dog owners, shouldn't we embrace that? **CF**

“Have your say What do you think about the themes raised here? Write to the address on page four or email editor@countryfile.com

Nicola Chester's new book *Ghosts of the Farm: Two Women's Journeys Through Land, Time and Community* is out now (Chelsea Green).



ONWARD, VOYAGER

to Orkney and Shetland

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Mousa Broch, Shetland – One of the best-preserved Iron Age brochs, built 2,000 years ago.



Skara Brae, Orkney – A settlement of houses which were occupied 5,000 years ago.