

SOUTH DOWNS NEWS

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SOUTH DOWNS
NATIONAL PARK

WORK AND PLAY IN YOUR NATIONAL PARK

This month:

- **Into the night!** Dark Skies season returns and we're encouraging people to go out and take some breathtaking images of the moon, stars, landscape and nocturnal wildlife.
- **Pond life** Discover how restoring ponds is increasing biodiversity.
- **COMPETITION!** Win a free ranger-led guided tour of a beautiful estate in Sussex.
- **WIN a South Downs hamper!** Our popular Advent Calendar Quiz returns!

As always, please send your comments and ideas to us at newsletter@southdowns.gov.uk

Embrace the darkness as photo competition is back!

The National Park's popular astrophotography competition returns bigger and better than ever to mark 10 years of the South Downs becoming an International Dark Sky Reserve.

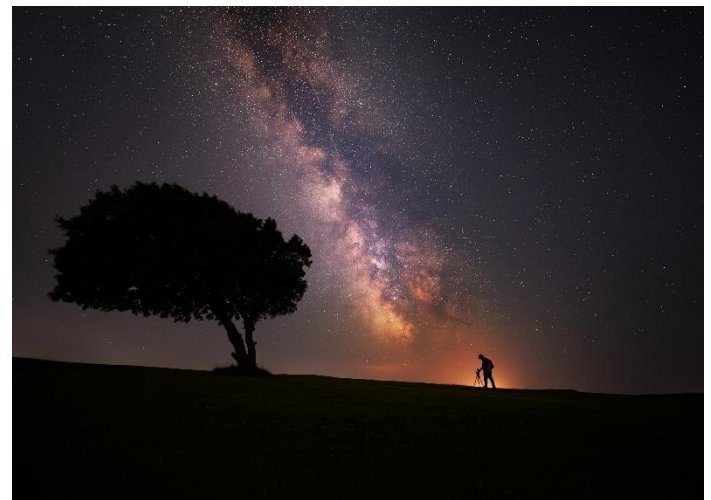
As the clocks have gone back, days are shorter for exploring the National Park, but the night-time offers its own celestial charms.

Look up on a clear night and you'll be treated to one of the best views of the stars anywhere in England. The South Downs National Park is one of only 24 International Dark Sky Reserves in the world because of its particularly "dark" and accessible sites away from light pollution, with other reserves including Idaho, USA, and the River Murray in Australia.

To mark a decade of the coveted status, the prizes in this year's astrophotography competition are bigger, with an overall winner prize of £250 for an out-of-this-world image that truly encapsulates why the dark skies are so special and are worth protecting.

This year there are four categories:

South Downs Dark Skyscapes – Can you capture



a dramatic star-studded or moon-lit photograph of the landscape showing the cosmos above it? Photographs of the "Northern Lights" are also very welcome!

South Downs Life at Night – Can you capture an amazing shot of living things in the National Park? This could include wildlife, people, trees, plants or fungi! It could be a picture of people stargazing or an evening or night-time community event.

From the South Downs to Deep Space – One for the serious galactic adventurer! Can you capture a breathtaking telescopic image showing constellations, galaxies, nebulas, planets and more taken from within the South Downs National Park?

The Meteoric Mobile Phone Category – Can you take a wonderful shot of the South Downs dark skies on your

World recognition for coast



A large semi-urban “biosphere” covering a swathe of the National Park in Sussex has been expanded.

The designation of **The Living Coast Biosphere** has been renewed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

The Living Coast has been a UNESCO biosphere since 2014, recognised for its unique chalk land and seascape.

The renewed designation has expanded The Living Coast area from Worthing in the west, to Seaford in the east and stretching north over the National Park to Wivelsfield and Newick in the Low Weald.

Operating as a partnership of over 40 organisations with Brighton & Hove City Council as lead partner, The Living Coast aims to protect and enhance local wildlife and habitats, promote a sustainable economy and communities, and champion environmental education, training and research.

Zoe Gowers, Youth Representative for The Living Coast Biosphere Partnership, said: “The Living Coast has created so many opportunities for young people to connect with nature, learn about the environment and be part of the solution to changing climates and biodiversity loss. Expanding the Biosphere means more communities, including more young voices, can help protect and sustain our amazing local area.”



Claire Kerr, Countryside and Policy Manager for the National Park Authority, added: “The biosphere is a place where nature and people come together and embrace sustainable living, so I’m really pleased that the designation has been expanded and strengthened.

“The new area includes some of the most iconic spots in the National Park such as Cuckmere Haven and Cissbury Ring and it’s great that we can work together to further protect and enhance these special places.”

Every 10 years biospheres must renew their designation status with UNESCO. The decision to renew The Living Coast status for the next 10 years was taken at the World Congress of Biosphere Reserves held in Hangzhou, China.

mobile? We’re looking for all kinds of night-time shots, from selfies to landscapes, buildings, wildlife, moons, stars, and group shots – whatever your phone can capture!

The category winner will receive £100, with runners-up taking £50. All photos must be taken within the National Park.

Judging the contest will be Elinor Newman, who organises the National Park’s Dark Skies Festival, “Dark Skies” Dan Oakley, an expert on the South Downs International Dark Sky Reserve, and Vicki Wells, a National Park Authority Member and former producer for BBC Sky at Night.



Elinor, who has a background in astrophysics, said: “It’s so exciting to be launching our competition for the 10th anniversary as we’re preparing a bumper line-up across 11 days for the Dark Skies Festival in February 2026. Watch this space!

“We’d really love to get some out-of-this-world astrophotography this year to show off how amazing the International Dark Sky Reserve is and why it’s worth protecting, both for people and nature.”

A selection of the winning images will be shared on social media and exhibited at National Park events during the festival.

Full details of the upcoming festival, running from 12 to 22 February, will be released in early January.

The deadline for entries to the competition is midnight on Sunday, 18 January 2026.

For entry details and to download an application form visit www.southdowns.gov.uk/AstroPhotoComp

Details of the Dark Sky Discovery Sites can be found [here](#).



Last year’s “life at night” winner – Chanctonbury Coven by Giles Embleton-Smith

The power of ponds to help nature flourish once again



Eleven much-needed wildlife ponds will be created across the South Downs National Park to help nature bounce back, thanks to a £75,000 funding boost.

The **“Pounds for Ponds”** initiative continues to go from strength to strength and is now entering its second phase after already restoring 10 dew ponds across Sussex and Hampshire.

Dew ponds are synonymous with the chalk grassland of the South Downs, historically being dug by farmers as a watering hole for livestock and some dating back several hundred years.

However, over many decades and due to changes in farming practices, scores of these wildlife oases have fallen into disrepair or been lost completely. Climate change, with warmer, drier summers, has worsened the problem, meaning these bodies of water are more important than ever in providing refuge and drinking water for insects, birds, amphibians and mammals.

The South Downs National Park Trust, the official independent charity for the National Park, launched Pounds for Ponds two years ago with the aim of reversing the decline and has been working with the National Park Authority and a variety of landowners and farmers. The initiative is being run in partnership with pond specialist and wildlife charity Froglife, with the aim of raising £1m to restore 100 ponds in total. Funding so far has come from public donations and support from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, Bannister Trust and BMW.

Early ecological surveys show the ponds are increasing biodiversity. In Hampshire, a recent pond dip at Magdalen Hill Down revealed an assortment of important species, including the great diving beetle, dragonfly larvae, water boatmen, freshwater snails, whirligig beetles, and damselfly larvae.



This summer the scarce blue-tailed damselfly was discovered at one of Seven Sisters Country Park’s newly-

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restored ponds. The ‘spot’ has been confirmed by the Sussex Dragonfly Society and is only the second colony found in Sussex this year, and only the sixth in the county’s history, dating back to 1900.

The ponds now completed are:

- Magdalen Hill Down, near Winchester
- Henly’s Sow Bench, Church Farm, Singleton,
- Pond Field, Church Farm, Singleton
- Rewell Wood, Arundel
- Chantry Hill, near Storrington
- Nepcote Green, Findon, Worthing
- Gallops Farm, Findon, Worthing
- The Rails, Alfriston
- Foxhole Pond, Seven Sisters
- Newbarn Pond, Seven Sisters

New ponds being created or restored are:

- Manor House, Greatham – restore a Victorian pond
- Merritts Meadow Nature Reserve, Petersfield – create new wildlife pond (subject to planning permission)
- Hazelbank Farm, Milland – reinstate pond dating back to 1860
- A woodland pond, Alresford – restore neglected attenuation pond
- Middle Barn pond, near Singleton – restore dew pond
- Amberley Pond, Amberley – restoration of village pond
- Balmer Down dew pond, overlooking Ashcombe Bottom and Black Cap, near Lewes – restore dew pond and install pond plants.
- Two new ponds at a community farm in Kingston, near Lewes (subject to planning permission)
- Drove Park, Newhaven – restore two ponds, including increasing pond depth and creating wildflower margins.

Jan Knowlson, Biodiversity Officer for the National Park, said: “We think a century ago there may have been more than 1,000 ponds across the South Downs region, but this number has drastically reduced, so you can only imagine the impact this has had on wildlife.

“These bodies of water are vital for all manner of flora and fauna, supporting 70 per cent of all freshwater species.

“It’s been wonderful to see the ponds come to fruition and wildlife returning. Given half a chance, it proves nature can thrive anywhere!”

To donate to Pounds for Ponds, visit

<https://southdownstrust.org.uk/pounds-for-ponds/>

The Trust will be inviting applications next year for a third round of funding.

Big win for National Parks

A major victory has been won in the fight to protect the South Downs for future generations.

Last month more than 200 organisations wrote to the government urging them not to weaken or remove a legal duty to support National Parks and their nature and landscapes.

And, following a meeting with Vanessa Rowlands, Chair of the National Park Authority, Winchester MP Danny Chambers presented a petition with over 1,200 signatures to the government.

It came after it was mooted that the government was considering amendments to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill that could water down the duty, downgrading consideration for National Parks among partners and developers.

On 13 October, it was confirmed that the government was not pressing ahead with the idea.



Vanessa Rowlands, Chair of the National Park Authority, said: "As our very first National Parks look toward a celebration of 75 years since their designation next year, repealing such a hard-fought duty now would have been completely out of step with Government's ambitions for nature recovery, climate resilience and wider 30by30 targets.

"It is vital that such proposals remain off the table and the duty can continue to enable partnership, collaboration and cross-government working throughout these cherished landscapes."

And Vanessa added: "This is a galvanising moment - an opportunity to reflect on the purpose of the strengthened duty. In legal terms it should influence how public bodies approach planning applications in Protected Landscapes. But really, the dream is something much more fundamental than that. It should be a catalyst for deeper, more positive partnership working between Protected Landscapes and the public organisations that operate within them.

"We need to keep pushing for these designated areas to be recognised as the vital environmental assets for the nation that they truly are. Places delivering essential ecosystem services and nurturing growth that's measured not in profit, but in natural capital. A holistic approach that benefits both people and nature."

The current government has declared the protection and enhancement of National Parks to be vital to its mission to restore nature and boost the nation's health through access to green spaces.

Festive market returns



A Christmas extravaganza is coming to Seven Sisters for an action-packed weekend of festive fun.

With mince pies and mulled wine aplenty, the visitor facilities are being transformed into a winter wonderland of more than 40 stalls, with locally-produced fare that will make glorious gifts for loved ones.

The annual Christmas Market returns bigger and better than in previous years, with stalls across the site at the visitor centre, Pump Barn, Turkey Barn and Saltmarsh Farmhouse.

The event, which has free entry, will take place on the weekend of 6 and 7 December between 10am and 4pm.

The event is being run in partnership with Saltmarsh Farmhouse.

A range of seasonal specials will be available, including gingerbread lattes, Bailey's hot chocolates, and turkey sandwiches.

The National Park's Events Van will also be on site, giving people information on walks and stargazing opportunities in the South Downs over the festive period.

Claire Onslow, who manages Seven Sisters Country Park, said: "We're super excited for the return of our Christmas Market and this year promises to be bigger than ever!

"It's often quite daunting thinking what you're going to buy for loved ones, but our market should have something for everyone and include some of those hand-made bespoke presents that can be hard to find.



"The doors are open to all and it's also a great opportunity to find out more about Seven Sisters and this gateway to the wider National Park."

Car parking charges apply in the visitor centre car parks. The country park is well served by regular 12, 12A and 12X Coaster service between Brighton/Seaford/Eastbourne. All buses stop at the visitor centre and connect with mainline railway stations at Seaford, Brighton and Eastbourne.

Celebrating humble hedge



The wonders of the humble hedge were celebrated as people gathered for "HedgeFest".

The event at Windmill Farm, near Selborne, was an opportunity for farmers, landowners and partner organisations to get together and learn about the benefits of hedges for nature.

Small but mighty, a well-managed hedge will not only provide a home and food for wildlife but will also clean our air, capture carbon, reduce flooding and give clues to historic land management.



Hedges come in a variety of shapes and sizes and can include many different species. Rural hedges are often a mix of shrub and tree species, such as hawthorn, blackthorn, hazel, ash and oak.

In more urban and landscaped settings, they are likely to include species like box, yew, privet and holly.

More than 100 people attended HedgeFest and there were several demonstrations around hedgelaying, best practice for trimming, and coppicing techniques.

Alongside the event was a hedge laying taster day for volunteers and members of the public.

Paul Bushell, Ranger for the Western Ranger Team, which helped to organise the event, said: "It's such a lovely farm with mainly sheep and many differing hedges, so a great example to showcase, get inspiration and demonstrate the wonder that these little habitats punch! They really are little powerhouses within our farms.



"From what I've heard, everyone really enjoyed the event and found it truly inspirational.

"I'd hedge my bets on another one happening at some point!"

Restoration of paintings

Unique panel paintings showing eight female cultural heroines are to be fully conserved over the next two years and then put on display at The Novium Museum in Chichester.



'The Worthy Women', also known as The Amberley Panels, were originally part of the elaborate panelling that decorated the 'Queen's Room' at Amberley Castle.

Commissioned around 1526 by Robert Sherborne, Bishop of Chichester, who lived at the castle at the time, the paintings are the work of artist Lambert Barnard (c. 1490-1567).

They are thought to have been specially painted in honour of Queen Katharine of Aragon, who was meant to stay on a visit with her husband, King Henry VIII during his Royal Progress through Sussex. While it's thought very likely that King Henry VIII saw the panels, his wife had not joined him on the trip. It is from 1526 that the royal marriage began to collapse, as Henry sought to pursue his relationship with Anne Boleyn.

The panels were bought by Chichester District Council in 1983 and displayed at Pallant House Gallery until the early 2010s, then more recently at Bishops Palace.

The panels are now in need of urgent conservation work and the council has agreed to spend just over £248,000 on their full restoration and for them to be displayed.

Councillor John Cross, who oversees Culture, Sport and Place in Chichester District, said: "For those people lucky enough to have seen these panels up close, they are truly magnificent and very beautiful works of art.

"The panels are nationally and internationally significant and once conserved and displayed, have the potential for a huge amount of local pride."

Anooshka Rawden, Cultural Heritage Lead for the National Park, provided support for the proposals assessed by the Council.

She said: "These panels are a rare survival, showing the relationship between an artist and patron in the 16th century and also mark a significant moment in history, when the process of pursuing divorce fundamentally changed England. The panel images embody women who are battle-ready, and celebrate a queen who was very much loved by the English public. Their creation a reminder that national stories play out locally.



"It's a testament to the museum team, and the council's commitment to its cultural offer, that more people will be able to see these extremely rare survivals." Learn more [here](#).

New nature vision for estate



Becky Hiorns is Project Manager for Woolbeding Reimagined, which is working to improve the West Sussex estate for nature and people. Here Becky writes about the exciting project.

Woolbeding Reimagined is a bold new vision for the Woolbeding estate; working with partners we aim to support nature recovery, address the climate crisis and provide better access to nature for all. Our initiative across the 530-hectare estate will improve soil quality, significantly reduce soil erosion and help restore the unique character and habitats of the River Rother valley.

The vision is for Woolbeding to evolve into diverse mosaic of habitats rich in biodiversity, accessible for everyone to enjoy. We're excited about the project's potential and are eager to work with our neighbours to support nature recovery across the wider landscape.



We're allowing nature to take the lead, enabling plants and animal species to reestablish themselves naturally. This process happens quickly; in just five

years Ash Field Wood has developed from an arable field to a young woodland with over 14,000 trees the majority of which have self-seeded. Over time complex wood pasture habitats will develop, grazed by our rare breed Sussex and Belted Galloway cattle (*pictured above*), with locally produced meat available to the community.

To create the rich diversity of habitats we're aiming for we need to give nature a helping hand as many vital species that would naturally balance the ecosystem are missing. To support nature recovery, we will graze our livestock, coppice, create disturbance, collect and distribute seeds and manage deer populations. As the project progresses, we plan to introduce other herbivores, such as pigs and ponies, to mimic natural grazing patterns and further enhance habitats.

To better understand how we can support nature we are working with local experts to compile a list of 100 species

which should be thriving here but are either missing or struggling. For each species we will develop a recovery plan. This could be as simple as installing barn owl nest boxes, to provide these captivating birds with suitable nesting sites in their new hunting ground.

This year marked the beginning of significant changes across the estate. We plan to develop a wide variety of volunteer opportunities, including one-off day events so everyone can get involved. We are also trialling new permissive footpaths and bridleways to allow visitors to explore more of the area and enjoy nature and fine views. If you would like to find out more please see our [webpage](#).

COMPETITION!

We've teamed up with Woolbeding to offer a ranger-led tour of the project next spring. The prize is for a maximum of four people and also includes a piece of beaver-chewed wood as a prize.

People signing up to the newsletter during November will be automatically entered into the draw to win the guided tour. Those who are already signed up can email "Woolbeding Reimagined" to newsletter@southdowns.gov.uk before midnight on 30 November.

Sign up to the newsletter [here](#) and see competition T&Cs [here](#).

New calendar for 2026!



Can you believe it's nearly the end of 2025?! Looking ahead to the new year, we're proud to announce that brand-new and beautiful 2026 South Downs National Park Calendar is now available to buy.

Perfect for a Christmas gift or just to treat yourself!

The calendar includes stunning photography from the South Downs to brighten your day.

Buy one calendar at this [online link](#), or two calendars [here](#).

For orders of more than two calendars, and for overseas orders, or for any other queries relating to the South Downs National Park Calendar 2026, please phone (44)1730 814810 or send an email to:

info@southdowns.gov.uk

ADVENT CALENDAR – WIN A LUXURY HAMPER!

Our popular South Downs Advent Calendar Quiz returns online from 1 December with some fantastic prizes.



Make sure you sign up beforehand [here](#) to ensure you're ready to open each door! 😊 Good luck!

Things to do in the South Downs this November

Please follow the links as booking may be necessary. Find these and more events across the National Park and submit your own events at southdowns.gov.uk/events/



Seven Sisters Christmas Market

Saturday 6 - Sunday 7 December
10am - 4pm. Free entry

Return of our popular Christmas Market with over 40 local artist and maker stalls at Seven Sisters Visitor Centre and Saltmarsh Farmhouse. Pick up unique seasonal gifts and enjoy festive mulled wine and mince pies.

Seven Sisters Visitor Centre, East Dean Road,
Seaford, BN25 4AD
www.sevensisters.org.uk

SEVEN SISTERS
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- A programme of free practical ecology sessions begins later this month at Railway Land Wildlife Trust. The sessions, led by experts, are specifically for young people 14-25 years old. Sessions include fungi, birdsong, plants and their uses, aquatic invertebrates, land invertebrates, and bats. A great opportunity for young nature lovers to hear from a range of knowledgeable ecologists and great for a CV! Find out [more](#).
- Celebrate Christmas with a little piece of Stansted Park to decorate your front door or dining table! Enjoy a glass of fizz, hot drink, and a mince pie as you create your own beautiful festive wreath in the stunning setting of Stansted House's historic Blue Drawing Room. The sessions take place from 28 November to 30 November and will use foliage collected from [Stansted Forest](#).
- [Glow Marwell](#) returns for another year of winter wonder, inviting you to explore Marwell Zoo in a whole new light. Taking place on selected evenings from late November through early January, this after-dark experience transforms the zoo into a magical landscape of glowing displays.
- Head to [Arundel Wetland Centre](#) on 29 November to experience wildlife in stunning detail? Optics Days are a chance to help you find the perfect binoculars or scope, for your birding and wildlife adventures. Taking place on the last Saturday of the month in the Discovery Hide, overlooking the Arundel Riverlife Lagoon. These events are designed for nature lovers at every level.
- Looking ahead, a [Dark Skies guided walk](#) is taking place at Bignor Hill on 5 December, led by Pied A Terre Adventures. This is a gentle night-time adventure at one of the most beautiful spots in the National Park.

Pic credits:

P1 (Main Image) Lorcan Taylor-Hood; P1 (crab) Anthony Whitbourn; P2 Emily Birtwisle; P2 Living Coast BHCC; P3 Sylvia King and Tim Squire (dragonfly); P5 (left) Charlie Hellewell and Andy Reeves; P5 right Chichester District Council' P6 left National Trust