

SOUTH DOWNS NEWS

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NATIONAL PARK

WORK AND PLAY IN YOUR NATIONAL PARK

This month:

- **Picture perfect!** Find out the winners of our annual photo competition and get to have your say on your favourite image in The People's Choice.
- **Embrace the darkness!** Our Dark Skies Festival returns to celebrate 10 years as a reserve.
- **Gentle January** Let's face it...this month can be tough! We share some useful wellbeing ideas.
- **WIN a free day-out!** Win a family ticket to Butser Ancient Farm to step back 10,000 years.

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

Eerie treescape and stunning butterfly win photo contest

A hauntingly beautiful photograph of gnarly giant trees and a quintessentially South Downs image of a colourful butterfly are the winners of this year's photography competition.

Almost 500 images were submitted by members of the public for this year's contest, which marked the 15th anniversary of the National Park and celebrated people's favourite things about the South Downs.

The judging panel had a line-up of acclaimed photographers, including Rachael Talibart, Finn Hopson, Carlotta Luke and Howard Klein, alongside Jan Knowlson, Biodiversity Officer for the National Park, and Vanessa Rowlands, Chair of the National Park Authority.

Taking the top spot in the wildlife category was a stunning photo of an orange-tip butterfly, taken by Thomas Moore.

Commenting on the winning wildlife shot, Vanessa said: "I just love the colours in this image and it really captures the beauty of the South Downs."



Rachael said: "It's technically an excellent photograph and the detail is incredible around the butterfly's eye, antennae and wings. It's a beautiful image to look at."



Thomas, who lives in Slindon and picks up a £150 prize, said: "When I'm not working, you'll normally find me camera in hand with macro lens attached, photographing and learning about the huge variety of invertebrates that call the South Downs their home. I find photographing wildlife an excellent way to switch off from work as your entire focus is on what you see through the viewfinder – everything else, for that moment, is irrelevant."

"This photograph of the beautiful orange tip was actually taken in my own back garden. I never tire of photographing butterflies!"

Richard Murray was crowned the winner in the landscape-based main category of the competition with a stunning, misty photo of London Plane trees near Midhurst.

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Finn said: "I've been helping to judge the competition for several years and I haven't seen anything like this before. It shows a different side to the South Downs National Park and is a fantastic image."

Rachael said: "I really appreciate the effort and care the photographer has taken to compose this photo."

Vanessa said: "I love this image and it's great to see water held in the landscape. It's something we have to get more familiar with as we adapt to climate change, which is giving us more extreme weather and wetter winters."

Richard, who is from Waterloo and wins £250 for his "Three Giants" image, said: "The South Downs National Park is renowned for its rolling chalk hills, sweeping valleys, and dramatic sea cliffs, offering truly iconic landscapes. Yet it is the many smaller, more intimate scenes that come together to form these vistas that I love to photograph the most. Along countless public rights of way there are these hidden gems, providing unique opportunities to capture the woodlands, fields, and wildlife that inhabit the South Downs and are the true beating heart of the National Park."



Taking the runner-up spot in the main category was "Beam Me Up", a dark, moody photograph by Ian

Price showing a shaft of light over Belle Tout lighthouse after a heavy downpour.

Carlotta said: "I love how moody and atmospheric this photograph is – it's unmistakably South Downs and you can just see the white chalk of the cliffs peeking through."

Howard said: "This photo gives me the feeling of being there in that moment, so it's a wonderful photograph."

Ian, who lives in Eastbourne and wins £150, said: "I was born here, so the South Downs has always been a big part of my life – from exploring as a child, to mountain biking, to photography as I got older. I love the contours, the shapes, the colours, the hawthorns battered by the elements, the ever-changing coastline, the forest – the list goes on."



Runner-up in the wildlife category was a charming photograph of a young stonechat in the Cuckmere Valley, taken by John Lauper.

Carlotta said: "The bird is looking straight at the camera! It's got the cute factor."

Rachael said: "This is a sweet, characterful photograph and such an adorable bird. The claws are amazing and very dinosaur-like, even though it's such a small bird!"

Jan added: "It's rare to find a juvenile like this and capture such an incredible photo of this bird."

John, who lives in Pevensey Bay and wins £75, said: "I was fortunate to see this young stonechat sitting on top of some brambles waiting for its parent to return and was lucky that it looked straight at me as I took the photo. I feel fortunate to live so close to the South Downs National Park as it has so many beautiful and diverse locations to visit both from a landscape and nature perspective."



Winning third prize in the wildlife category was Ian Wood for his photography "Summer Loving", showing a pair of mating six-spot burnet moths.

Howard said: "I love the fact this photograph has captured the moment and there's so much detail in these insects."

Ian, who lives in Dorset and wins £50, said: "Lullington Heath is nationally important as it conserves one of the largest areas of chalk heath remaining in Britain. It's such a great place to see lots of insects including the six-spot burnet which is a type of moth that feed on nectar from flowers thistles and knapweed."



Taking the third place spot in the landscape-based category was Simon Newman for his image "A Hobbit Hole in Hampshire", which captured early morning sunlight at a woodland tunnel near Cheriton.

Finn said: "There's a subtlety to this image that I really like – it's serene and calm. It's nice to show off the beauty of Hampshire as a lot of people don't realise a big chunk of the South Downs is in Hampshire."

Carlotta said: "It's so tranquil and evokes an emotional response – I love it."

Simon, from Cheriton, wins a prize of £75.

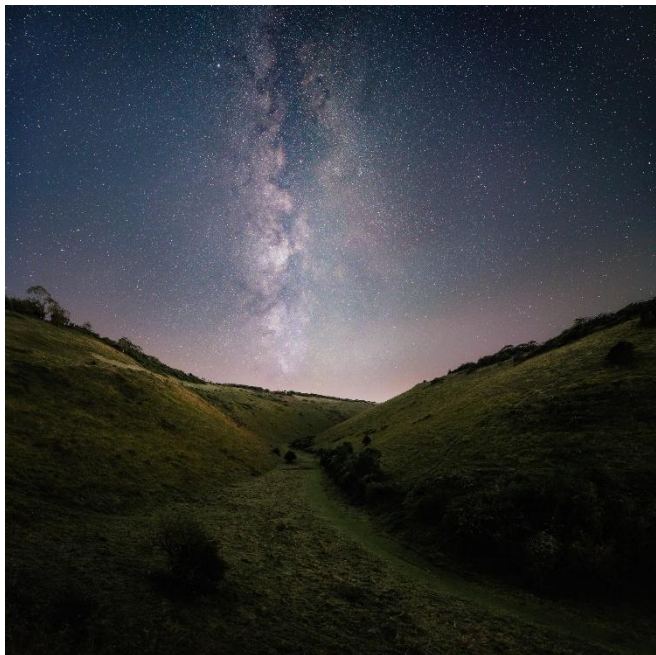
Four photographs were highly commended by the judges: "Blue at Sunset" by Emma Varley; "Feeling Sheepish" by Ian Cairns; "Heavenly Heath" by Ian Brierley; and "Hungry Pecker" by Richard Murray. Ian Brierley has won a prize of a workshop with the landscape group of the Royal Photographic Society, kindly offered by Howard Klein.



All the winning and commended images, as well as other shortlisted images, will now be put forward to the People's Choice. People will be able to vote online from Wednesday, 14 January for their favourite photograph and the winning photographer will receive £100. The online poll closes at midnight on 31 January.

Visit www.southdowns.gov.uk to cast your vote.

Dark Skies Festival returns!



Awe-inspiring, otherworldly, special.

Just some of the words you might use to describe a dark sky glistening with twinkly stars in every direction.

Dark skies are one of the most amazing things about the South Downs National Park – located next to some of the busiest cities and towns in the UK and yet with an amazing core of dark sky that make it every stargazer's dream.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the South Downs National Park becoming an International Dark Sky Reserve, which is also called "The Moore's Reserve" after the late Sir Patrick Moore, the famous Sussex astronomer.

To celebrate, the National Park's **Dark Skies Festival** returns bigger and better than ever, with a bumper line-up of events across Sussex and Hampshire between **12 and 22 February**.

This year will include stargazing events at Seven Sisters and Queen Elizabeth Country Parks, Amberley Museum, Alice Holt Forest, Winchester Science Centre and on Brighton seafront.

Meanwhile, the new Dark Skies Explorer Trail will launch, giving people the opportunity to listen to the story of Great Bear as she visits different constellations.

Expert-led nightwalks about nocturnal wildlife and animals and plants that glow in the dark



(biofluorescence), talks, podcasts, and cosmic storytelling sessions will complete the action-packed schedule. Stunning photography of the dark skies will also

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be celebrated in this year's festival, with exhibitions and astrophotography workshops.

Acclaimed travel author and DarkSky International editor Megan Eaves-Egenes will be launching her new book *Nightfaring: In Search of the Disappearing Darkness* at a special 10th anniversary celebration evening at the South Downs Centre.

It comes as the National Park Authority is strengthening its commitment to dark skies in its forthcoming Partnership Management Plan, which lays out priorities for the National Park and its partners over the next five years.

Among the goals is expanding the current dark sky core – the very darkest areas – of the International Dark Sky Reserve by 10 per cent by 2031 by working with lighting authorities and local communities to further reduce light pollution.

Siôn McGeever, Chief Executive of the National Park Authority, said: "Dark, starry skies are such an integral part of what makes the South Downs National Park so special and it's wonderful to be celebrating the 10th anniversary as an international reserve. We're still one of only 25 International Dark Sky Reserves in the world and it's something we really want to protect.

"We have big ambitions for nature recovery across the region and that can only be achieved by having skies with low levels of light pollution as so many animals and plants rely on the darkness.

"We're also committed to our goal that every child should be able to experience the wonder of a star-filled night sky."



Elinor Newman, Dark Skies Festival organiser, said: "We're so excited for this year's festival and are really pulling out all the stops to make it extra special for our 10th birthday. As well as being vital for wildlife, there's mounting evidence that dark

skies are important for our natural rhythm and boosting your mental wellbeing.

"We really want to inspire people of all ages to embrace the darkness and learn more about why dark skies are so important for people and nature.

"As always we're reliant on the weather, so it's worth checking out our social media feeds before any events for useful updates."

[See the full programme here.](#) Please note some events need to be booked in advance 😊

Vital work is completed



Much-needed improvements at RSPB Pulborough Brooks and RSPB Pagham Harbour have been completed as thousands of migrating birds settle down for their winter stay.

The £300,000 works have improved vital new wetland havens for birds, mammals, and invertebrates, while new pathways, viewing platforms and benches will enhance the visitor experience at both destinations.

The project is the first big milestone in the £2.4m Downs to the Sea project, which started last year with ambitious goals of restoring and creating a network of “blue spaces” across the region. The project is supported by a £1.7m grant from The National Lottery Heritage Fund, while Southern Water and DPD are also providing significant additional funding.

The work at RSPB Pulborough Brooks has fixed an ongoing problem of the wetlands drying out when rainfall is low.

Meanwhile, the large pond next to the site’s visitor centre has been given a huge makeover, with a new viewing area, pond dipping benches, a photography post and a new nature trail.

At RSPB Pagham Harbour, a large site called Ferry Wetlands has been significantly improved for nature, with a new solar-powered water pump and new islands within the saline lagoon to provide nesting areas for birds, including avocet and little-ringed plover.



Natacha Bricks-Yonow, Project Manager for Downs to the Sea, said: “Water is the foundation for all life and as a National Park one of our big ambitions is to work with partners to create cleaner and more biodiverse waterways right across the region.”

The initiative is a partnership between the South Downs National Park Authority, South Downs National Park Trust, RSPB, Brighton & Hove City Council, Western Sussex Rivers Trust, and Writing Our Legacy.

Economic study is published



The South Downs National Park is the “economic powerhouse” of England’s protected landscapes, a major new independent study has shown.

With protected landscapes covering a quarter of England, the report shows the South Downs is the economic leader, with the highest GVA of £3.84 billion and hosting around a third of all businesses across the 10 English National Parks. Collectively, the National Parks bring almost £10bn GVA, bringing significant value to the nation’s economy.

GVA stands for Gross Value Added and is the measure of the value of goods and services produced in an area, industry or sector of an economy.

The new study showed the South Downs experienced around 10 per cent growth in productivity since the Covid pandemic – higher than the wider South East area.

The **South Downs National Park 2025 Economic Profile** is now on our website and can be read [here](#).

The report shows that 41 per cent of all employment in English National Parks is in the South Downs.

The South Downs National Park, which is home to almost 6,000 businesses, has more than double the amount of the next biggest National Park by GVA.

Siôn McGeever, Chief Executive of the South Downs National Park Authority, said: “This is a really significant study for us and shows that National Parks are bigger players in the UK economy than many realise – and we’re growing fast.”



“It’s actually the manufacturing and knowledge-based technical sectors that are growing most quickly, challenging assumptions that Britain’s beautiful landscapes are purely about tourism and farming. This is partly fuelled by the fact that National Parks are places where people want to work and that enhance workers’ wellbeing.”

“However, farmers continue to be the lifeblood of the South Downs National Park and many other rural economies. They’re struggling, so we’d like to see greater support to help them thrive, including expanding opportunities for innovation, diversification and nature-friendly farming.”

Embrace gentle January



January can be such a mixed bag of emotions – an eagerness for the new year ahead, recovering from the excitement of the festive season and the seasonal blues as the purse strings are tightened for many.

It can come with a lot of pressures, so with that in mind we're embracing the notion of "gentle January" at the National Park.

It's the idea of being gentle to yourself during these colder months, taking time to recuperate and doing simple, inexpensive things to help your wellbeing.

One of the easiest things to do is simply going for a gentle, or brisk if you prefer, winter walk. As little as 30 minutes can do wonders for your happy hormones, giving you a much-needed boost of serotonin – as well as the fresh air of course!

With its beautiful landscape and winter birds, the National Park can provide such an uplifting boost – and we have dozens of gentle walks that are easy on the joints and provide just enough effort to get the heart pumping.

Kate Drake, our health and wellbeing officer, says: "One in four people will experience a mental health problem in their life and everybody has mental health that needs looking after. January can be a particularly hard month for a lot of people and it's fine to acknowledge that you may be feeling a bit low.

"Fortunately, there are so many simple joys to be experienced during the winter that don't cost the earth. Simply getting out into the fresh air and going for a walk is a very powerful way of releasing stress. You may need to wrap up warm, but you'll be surprised how much better you feel after being out in nature to enjoy a moment of calm."

Here are five ways to embrace gentle January:

Try a Miles Without Stiles walk

These strolls have been created for people of all fitness and mobility levels and offer some incredible uplifting views of the National Park. Wheelchair users, families with pushchairs, dog walkers and less agile walkers can choose from a list of routes from across the South Downs.

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Over the past decade, we've worked with Gatwick Airport to remove stiles, replace gates and resurface rough tracks to create some wonderful routes.

There are seven routes currently available and more will be created in the future as part of our plan to make the South Downs the most accessible National Park in the UK.

Films are also available online to help prepare you and look at the terrain. Find out more [here](#)

Keep a nature diary

While you're out and about, why not jot down things you see, words that come to mind and even make a quick sketch of wildlife you see? It's a great way to be mindful and you'll be surprised how much you notice 😊



Night walking

Winter nights can be long and dark but that doesn't mean you have to stay indoors! It can be really exciting, as well as mentally soothing, to explore outside at night time.

Looking up at a sky full of stars is a truly humbling experience and one we'd recommend! Here are some top tips for stargazing from "[Dark Skies](#)" [Dan Oakley](#), a South Downs dark skies expert. There's lots of information on the National Park's 10 Dark Sky Discovery sites and how to get the most of your visit on our

[YouTube channel](#).



Get light in your eyes!

It's amazing how much better the sun can make us feel. Natural sunlight helps to replenish Vitamin D that in turn can help

your mood and getting light in your eyes during the day also helps set your circadian rhythm (just don't look at the sun directly) Many experts recommend daylight exposure in the first hour of your day and again in the afternoon or at dusk to help sleep quality.

After a hard day, why not enjoy a stroll in the National Park at sunset?

One uplifting fact: Did you know every day we gain approximately two minutes of daylight?

Look down and look up!

It can be so easy to go outdoors and not really notice what's beneath your feet or above your head. Notice the patterns and shapes you see on the ground when you are out walking, such as shapes of puddles, ice, leaves, and roots. You might even see some footprints. Are they human or non-human?!

Take a moment to look up and cloud watch. Notice the shapes of the clouds and how the sky changes with time.

For walking ideas check out our hub [here](#)

Meet the National Park ranger



To kick off 2026, we meet Lawrence Leather, a Ranger at Seven Sisters Country Park and find out about his life, work and passions.

What inspired you to become a ranger and what drew you to the South Downs?

I grew up in Sussex, my mum was an infant schoolteacher and led nature conservation sessions for the children at her school. They were so popular all the children would line up at lunchtime to come and help!

There is a photo of me as a baby, less than one year old, out in the woods with the children of my mum's school, so I started quite young.

My dad was an electrical engineer and immensely practical. Both my parents semi-retired when I was about 13 and bought a small woodland to manage for nature. I would join them most weeks to help with clearing invasive species and planting trees. By the time I got to A-levels I was very focused on the environment and steered all my subjects towards ecological sciences. Then in my gap year before university I completed a B-tec level 3 in Countryside Management. This course was very inspiring and equipped me with the skills to consider working professionally outdoors.

Being outdoors and working with nature has felt like my habitat for as long as I can remember. I find great joy in looking back after a day of work to see a patch of landscape slightly more loved than it was before.

Do you have a favourite spot and species in the South Downs?

It feels like cheating to not say Seven Sisters Country Park as this is where I have worked as a Ranger for the last three years for the South Downs National Park after



graduating Brighton University. My favourite spot and species here at Seven Sisters vary through the year. In summer I love being out on the eastern corner of the park (an area called New Barn) which has a beautiful array of chalk grassland wildflowers, my favourite being

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clustered bellflower. In the winter my favourite place is down by the lagoons bordering the sea, the greys, blues, and light green spectrum of colours is mesmerising. The lagoons host a diverse mix of migrant wading birds in the winter. My favourite being the curlew, a distinctive wading bird with a large, curved bill. Outside of Seven Sisters Country Park there is a magical ridgeline of wood fringed pasture and chalk grassland called Graffham Down (pictured below), which I am often drawn to in my mind.



What is one thing you wish people would be more mindful of when they are out spending time in nature?

This is a difficult question as it's such a special and important thing to feel fully immersed in nature and you don't want people to feel like they have to tip toe around a 'pristine' environment.

I would say people should be mindful of how shared and loved our landscapes are, many spots in the countryside have been known and loved by regular visitors, volunteers and land workers for generations. When we enter wild spaces we should bring with us the same respect and care that has protected these places for centuries. Shared responsibility!

How does climate change impact your work?

Hugely. The past year has been exceptionally dry, meaning our wetlands have not held the water needed to support a diverse mix of breeding bird species.

We have been adapting our infrastructure to cope with these situations, creating structures that can capture more water in the winter so we have better reserves through the year.

It's increasingly hard to know when species will be exhibiting 'usual' behaviour, for example, birds nesting earlier changes our schedules for when we stop clearing scrub and vegetation.

All of our work in this river valley at Seven Sisters Country Park is about adapting to a changing coastline.

The anxiety around the impacts of climate breakdown also has an impact on my mental wellbeing, which can take quite a bit of additional motivation to move past and address.

In one sentence what does nature mean to you?

A refuge and inspiration to keep going, despite the challenges, always giving what you have to offer. Nature gives us everything freely!

Exhibition opens at gallery



A captivating set of chalk pastel drawings reflecting the fragile beauty of the South Downs goes on display this month in a new exhibition.

“Sara Lee: Chalk Lines. Drawings from the South Downs” opens at Petersfield Museum and Art Gallery on 14 January and will run until 18 April.

It comes after Lee walked the South Downs Way, drawing, writing and documenting her journey.

The resulting new chalk pastel drawings will be featured alongside Lee’s rarely seen field notes and sketchbooks and a new short film about her.

Lee is the first recipient of the South Downs Open held at Petersfield Museum and Art Gallery in 2024 and was awarded a solo exhibition.



Louise Weller, Head of Collections and Exhibitions, said: “We’re delighted to be showing new work by Sara Lee, an artist with a national reputation whose work connects to our mission to bring history, art and landscape into vibrant dialogue, celebrating creativity, collaboration and community.”

It comes as the gallery has been awarded £35,000 from the national Art Fund to realise a long-held ambition to create a community-led platform dedicated to the artist Flora Twort (1893–1985).

Twort was an English painter who specialised in watercolours and pastels of the scenes and people of Petersfield.

The project will reimagine how we care for and share the extensive art collection she produced over six decades.

Louise added: ‘It has been a challenging few years for the museum sector, and as Petersfield Museum and Art Gallery looks ahead to the next 25 years, we are eager to reimagine how people can access the collections in our care and use them as a source of inspiration. This crucial funding from Art Fund will enable us to take the next steps in essential conservation, cataloguing, and digitisation efforts to establish a digital platform accessible to everyone.’

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Nestled in a serene valley just a stone’s throw from the busy south coast is a fascinating venue that brings the past to life.

Butser Ancient Farm, near Waterlooville, Hampshire, allows visitors to travel back through 10,000 years of human history and discover what life was like for people in our ancient past.

The farm’s buildings are all based on evidence from archaeological excavations. Butser staff and volunteers are continually testing theories about the technologies, building techniques and ways of life of ancient people by reconstructing elements of their homes and lives.

The story of Butser Ancient Farm began with a decision in 1970 by the Council for British Archaeology to establish a working ‘ancient farm’ where archaeologists could experiment to test their theories on how people lived in Iron Age times.

The site now welcomes over 35,000 schoolchildren a year, as well as scores of other visitors, who come for a fun and unique day out to learn about traditional skills, archaeology and Britain’s prehistory.

It’s a regular filming location for many documentaries, TV dramas and movies.

Butser has a bumper line-up of events for 2026, including special activities for half-terms, storytelling, bronze casting, stone-age sewing and its ever-popular Beltain Festival.

We’ve teamed up with Butser Ancient Farm to offer a free family ticket (covering two adults and two children).

People signing up to the newsletter during January will be automatically entered into the draw to win the tickets. Those who are already signed up can email “roundhouses” to newsletter@southdowns.gov.uk before midnight on 31 January.

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



Things to do in the South Downs this January

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/



Winter morning mist at Petworth Park by Chester Tugwell

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- A **new photography exhibition** starts at Gilbert White's House in Gardens from 20 January, running until 12 April. "South Downs Portraits – Lives in a Landscape" presents a selection of portraits of people whose lives and work relate to the landscape of the South Downs. The exhibition is part of a long-term project that the photographer Anne-Katrin Purkiss began in 2002, when the creation of a South Downs National Park was first announced.
- **Arundel Museum** will be holding a special talk on 22 January about Sussex farming life in the 1950s. Ian Everest's interest in the history of Sussex farming dates to his childhood, which was spent living on a 1,000-acre downland farm on which his father worked. In his teenage years, Ian worked on farms in the River Ouse Valley before attended Plumpton Agricultural College. His talk looks at life on Manor Farm, Bishopstone, during the 1950's and is based on a cine film made by farmer John Willett.
- How do volunteers help conserve a beautiful river to help wildlife? Find out as the River Meon Conservation Volunteers hold a **special event** on 22 January to find out more about what they do and why. They'll also share their role in citizen science and how the group was formed, with a special focus on its importance to Bishops Waltham and the River Hamble.
- The **Big Garden Birdwatch** returns this month! Sit back, relax and watch your garden birds for an hour over the weekend of 23 to 25 January. Whether you're a newcomer or a regular, it all counts. The RSPB would love to know what you see so please remember to report your sightings online!