

SOUTH DOWNS NEWS

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SOUTH DOWNS
NATIONAL PARK

WORK AND PLAY IN YOUR NATIONAL PARK

This month:

- **Bird bounces back from brink** This month find out about the truly inspiring story of the nightjar, which is flourishing once again in the South Downs thanks to conservation efforts.
- **Picture perfect** Find out the winners of the youth photo competition and People's Choice poll.
- **Spring stomps** Discover some of the best walks as the weather warms up!
- **WIN South Downs-inspired homeware** Win a handcrafted piece worth over £400 😊

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

Mythical “goatsucker” bird makes a big comeback

They are one of Britain’s most elusive birds, known for their “churring” song when darkness falls and a supernatural reputation thanks to their mythical ability to steal milk from goats.

Now the nightjar is making a remarkable comeback in the South Downs National Park, thanks to nature recovery efforts and better habitat management.

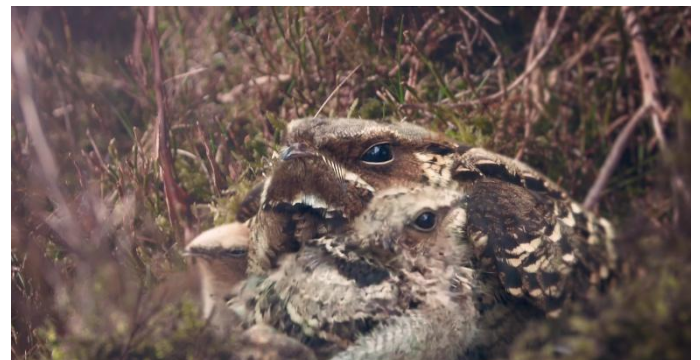
Since recording began in the late 1990s, 2025 was a record year for the camouflaged bird, which migrates every spring to fly 4,000 miles from the Democratic Republic of Congo to the lowland heaths of East Hampshire in the National Park.

An ecological survey revealed 109 nightjar territories – the most ever recorded in the “Special Protection Area” that includes Woolmer Forest and the Commons of Shortheath, Bramshott, Ludshott, Broxhead and Kingsley.

The population is estimated to have doubled in the past five years and there has been a significant increase from just last year when 78 were recorded.



The boom is being put down to sustained efforts by a heathland restoration initiative led by the National Park Authority, East Hampshire District Council, Whitehill Town Council,



Amphibian and Reptile Conservation, the MoD, the Deadwater Valley Trust and several other partners.

Work has focused on protecting and increasing lowland heath, which provides perfect ground-nesting sites for nightjars.

Engagement rangers have also been out in the landscape over the past decade, encouraging people to care for the landscape, including keeping dogs on leads, picking up dog poo and sticking to pathways to avoid disturbing the nightjars and other wildlife.

The resurgence of nightjars has been paralleled by revivals in woodlarks and Dartford warblers, which are also showing promising increases in numbers.

As ground-nesting bird season begins this March, Kirsty Murray, an engagement ranger for heathlands, encouraged people to keep on caring for these rare habitats, which are also havens for some of Britain’s rarest snakes, lizards, frogs and toads.

“The results of the ecological report are so inspiring and really show what we can achieve together to help

Young people show off talent

biodiversity bounce back. It's largely down to the hard work of the land managers on these sites," said Kirsty.

"These lowland heaths were once widespread across the South Downs but now make up just one per cent of the National Park. They are actually as rare as the rainforest, supporting some of the UK's rarest species, so it's really important we care for the habitats that remain.

"It's wonderful to hear the nightjars churring away as dusk falls and we're looking forward to continuing this incredibly positive conservation work alongside local communities and our partners."



Many of the sites are owned by the MoD and actively used for military training, but the MoD facilitate conservation work on the Defence Training Estate. Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust and Amphibian and Reptile Conservation directly manage some MoD land, like Broxhead Common, for wildlife, benefitting species such as the nightjar.

The nightjar is listed as an Amber species under the Red List for Birds, meaning it is a species of conservation concern. Nightjars were once much more common and widespread than today. The loss of open woodland and heathland to agriculture and development caused numbers to dramatically fall by 51 per cent across the UK between 1972 and 1992.

Nightjars are crepuscular birds and can be seen hunting for food at dusk and dawn. It comes to breed in Britain normally between April and August.

The bird is known by many names – the Fern Owl, the Wheeler, the Nightchurr and the Dor-Hawk. But the oddest is the Goatsucker.



Long ago it was thought nightjars would drink milk directly from goats, poisoning them so their udders wasted away and they went blind. The myth was once common in many countries all

over Europe. The legend probably arose from the fact that nightjars were coming close to livestock because they were hunting insects nearby.

For more information about heathlands and events and activities coming up visit www.southdowns.gov.uk/help-your-heaths/

For more information about the National Park's Take The Lead campaign around responsible dog walking visit www.southdowns.gov.uk/take-the-lead/ Follow social media #TaketheLead to keep up with campaign news.



Young photographers who captured the beauty of the natural world on camera were crowned winners of the National Park's annual photo competition.

The contest this year celebrated the 15th anniversary of the National Park and asked children to submit images of their favourite aspects of the South Downs.

Jaxon Head, eight, wowed judges with his amazing photograph of a Small Copper butterfly on a flower.

Jaxon, from Portsmouth, said: "The butterfly kept flying around and I waited for it to sit still on a flower, then I took the photo.



"I like the South Downs woods and there is a lot of nature in it."

Meanwhile, in the category for older children, Eirinn Matthews, 12, who lives near Arundel, impressed judges with the intricate detail and aspect of her photograph called "Quite The Fungi".

Eirinn's dad Jasper Matthews said: "She seemed to think that toadstools are commonly feared but also rarely viewed from below so wanted to see what a small mushroom the size of her hand looked like from ground level. On the day in question she asked to borrow my phone and disappeared over to a fallen tree for a few minutes and came back with that snap!

"Eirinn is fortunate enough to have her school overlooking the South Downs so knows how pretty it can be year-round."



Jaxon has won a family trip to Marwell Zoo and Eirinn has won a Go Ape adventure.

Jakob Komaier-Peeters, 16, was highly-commended in the competition for his image of a goldcrest – the UK's smallest bird. Arthur Knipe, seven, was also highly-commended for his photograph of sheep on the downland with Belle Tout lighthouse in the background.

Go on a spring stomp!



There's a kaleidoscope of colour in every direction, bluebells are blooming and the sweet smell of cherry blossom fills the air.

Welcome to spring! After a long winter, the warmth of spring is finally upon us and that means more wonderful walks in the National Park, admiring all the sights, sounds and scents of the new life-giving season.

It's a wonderful time to get out and see nature rising from its winter slumber, with butterflies emerging, reptiles basking in the sun and newborn lambs bouncing around in the fields.

Here are some inspiring spring stomps you might like to consider!

River Itchen circular routes

4-5 miles / 2-3 hours

The River Itchen is considered to be one of the best chalk rivers in Britain and renowned for its fly-fishing. With two figure-of-eight routes to choose from, stroll along its edges and cross over footbridges while soaking up the tranquil hamlets along the way. Take binoculars to see what wildlife you can spot enroute.

[Download the route.](#)

Haslemere to Liphook - Rail to Ramble

5-6 miles / 3-4 hours

Explore the heathland of Marley, Lynchmere and Stanley Commons. Catch a train to Haslemere railway station where this walk begins and follow lanes, tracks and footpaths to finish in Liphook Railway Station for your return journey. Heaths are home to some amazing wildlife, including the Dartford warbler and the sand lizard. Keep an eye out for basking sand lizards amongst the heather. Listen out for the rich, mellow whistle of the woodlark in early spring.

[Download the route here.](#)

Riverside walk for all at Bramber

1-3 miles / 0.5-1 hour

The historic village of Bramber with its medieval castle is the starting point for this riverside route.

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Wheelchair users, motorised buggies and families with pushchairs will find the wide, newly laid surface on the Route for All easy to negotiate with different options on distance and length depending on time and mood. Look out for a kingfisher or egret along the way!

[Download the route here.](#)

Cissbury Ring circular

3-4 miles / 1-2 hours

Enjoy the views out to the coast and explore the largest hill-fort in Sussex. One of the jewels in the crown of the National Park the 5,000-year-old Cissbury Ring is set high up on a chalk promontory. On a clear day you can see for miles!

[Download the route here.](#)

Arundel to South Stoke - circular

6-7 miles / 4 hours

Gaze down at the stunningly clear waters of Swanbourne Lake, soak up the bird song and spring flowers at St Leonard's Church and enjoy sweeping views towards Arundel Castle as you stroll along the banks of the River Arun.



Keep a look out for water voles when you're walking along Mill Road. These small, furry mammals, made famous by the character 'Ratty' in the book *Wind in the Willows*, can be seen along the banks of the stream or you might even hear them as they 'plop' back into the water.

[Download the route here.](#)

Devil's Dyke circular

2.5 miles / 1-1.5 hours

Soak up far reaching views across the weald and out to the English Channel from the top of Ditchling Beacon and Devil's Dyke. At nearly one mile long the Dyke valley is the longest, deepest and widest 'dry valley' in the UK. Venture into the valley during spring or summer and you will discover a living carpet of flowers and a myriad of colourful insects including orchids, wild thyme, horseshoe vetch and birdsfoot trefoil.

[Download the route here.](#)

The Chattri Memorial - circular

4-5 miles / 1-2 hours

This Miles Without Stiles circular route is suitable for off-road class 3 all-terrain mobility scooters, and also makes for a gentle walk on a loose stone path. Enjoy stunning views from the historic Jack and Jill windmills and pay your respects at the peaceful Chattri war memorial. Following this trail takes you along a section of the South Downs Way National Trail. Look out for buzzards and red kites soaring above.

[Download the route here.](#)

For bluebell walk see **[here](#)**. Remember to stick to the path and not trample these floral gems! 😊

Enjoying the Western Downs



An exciting initiative to connect schoolchildren with the wonders of the Hampshire Downs returns for 2026.

Last year more than 600 children benefitted from school trips and learning opportunities in the National Park, thanks to a generous grant from Friends of the South Downs.

The project, called Explorers of the South Downs, is now back and calling on applications from primary and secondary schools with more than 25% of pupils eligible for Free School Meals.

The project is particularly aimed at urban areas such as Portsmouth, Havant, Gosport and Southampton where many children may not have had the opportunity to visit wide open green spaces like the South Downs.

The feedback from children last year was glowing.

Frankie, aged 10, said: 'It's so peaceful being outside. My favourite part was closing my eyes on the hill and using my senses. I felt like the only person in the world.'



Omer, aged 10: 'I felt educated about the South Downs and enjoyed the 360-degree view as that was amazing. I enjoyed seeing the wildlife all around me.'

Emma Bruce, the National Park's Youth Engagement Officer, said: "We are so grateful to Friends of the South Downs for funding another year of this incredibly worthwhile initiative.

"A visit to a National Park can be transformative for any child, perhaps inspiring a lifelong connection with the environment."

Among the partners that help the project are Butser Ancient Farm, the Sustainability Centre, Queen Elizabeth Country Park and Schools Without Walls, an outdoor education provider.

Any schools interested should contact learning@southdowns.gov.uk. Applications are based on eligibility and on a first-come, first-served basis.



The simple things we can all do to help tackle climate change and reduce carbon emissions have been the focus of an innovative training programme.

Staff from across the National Park Authority have been taking part in training to understand the causes and impacts of climate change. It comes as businesses, organisations and schools across the region are becoming "carbon literate" by undertaking accredited training through the Carbon Literacy Project.

The training aims to help people understand how reducing carbon emissions can lead to cleaner air, soils and water, more biodiversity, improve human health and provide greater resilience to extreme weather.

More than 60 staff have completed the training at the South Downs National Park Authority, with many more signed up.

The National Park Authority is the first National Park in the UK to achieve Silver Carbon Literacy Organisation (CLO) status.

It comes as we recently launched our Partnership Management Plan – outlining shared priorities with partners for the next five years – and climate change was one of the key actions.

Sara Osman, Climate Change Officer for the National Park, said: "This has been such a worthwhile initiative and it has motivated real behaviour change both at home and at work. The training has created a buzz that will drive the climate action that is emerging as part of our new commitment in the Partnership Management Plan."

Simple things learned on the course as examples of how to reduce your carbon footprint include:

- Lift share with your colleagues, friends and family
- Lower the thermostat: Reduce your heating by 1C
- Turn off TVs, computers, and chargers when not in use to stop "vampire" energy drain
- Walk or cycle when you are able to instead of driving
- Shop locally
- Growing more of your own food

The Meaning of Water in Our Lives



Pauline Rutter is a programme manager for Writing Our Legacy, an arts and heritage organisation enabling Black, Asian and ethnically diverse people to tell their story through writing and the creative arts. Here she writes about an initiative to explore people's connections with water in the landscape.

For those of us lucky enough to live in Sussex near the coast, it may be that being close to a large body of water has become a fundamental part of our lives. Perhaps we take for granted that the beach is a walk or a bus ride away and have become so accustomed to gazing out across blue grey waves, that we barely notice how soothed we are by the rise and fall of the tides. Too many, however, will rarely make a visit. Do we ask why within UK deprivation statistics young people of our coastal regions continue to live on the edge and many do not have this familiarity?



It is a privilege for some of us to be near to the Cuckmere River that meanders across the Weald or by the River Ouse with headwaters that surface on the Ashdown Forest. Then

there is the River Adur, starting its journey as chalk springs to become tidal as it nears the coast, as does the River Arun that flows from the High Weald to the sea at Littlehampton. We encounter these magnificent 'blue spaces' of East and West Sussex in many different ways. We notice them degraded, polluted and diverted but do we ever fully contemplate the meaning of such water in our lives?

As **a partner of the Downs to the Sea** (DTTS) programme, Writing Our Legacy has been inviting people to be creative and speculative during a series of guided walks and writer-facilitated creative water days that are free, accessible and inclusive. Experienced and new writers alike are drawn to these events in locations where water nestles in the landscape or reaches out to the horizon from the coast. Over its fourteen years as an arts and heritage organisation, Writing Our Legacy has

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ensured that these experiences are inviting and accessible, especially to Black, Asian and ethnically diverse people. WOL workshops provide a warm welcome and creative connection to locations that are sometimes hard to reach. This February, a shared minibus journey to RSPB Pulborough Brooks brought **WOL's bursary and commissioned DTTS artists and facilitators** to experience the flooded wetlands as signs of spring began to appear. Their imaginative new creative work evoking connections to water in people's lives will be shared later in 2026.

Inspired by Shoreham Nature Reserve

In March 2025, a guided walk to Shoreham Nature Reserve crossed the bridge over the River Adur Estuary, where wading birds were feeding at low tide. This rare and fragile habitat of beach flowers not yet in bloom, land herbs and other



plants inspired conversations. What of the sensitivity of this environment to pollution, disturbance and construction? How would our shared snippets of botanical and ornithological knowledge help us connect with care and humility to the wildlife, the land, the river and the sea? What might our senses tell us when we are still and open to nature in all its complexity?

Creative Writing in Stanmer Park

A summer Creative Water Day led another group to the unassuming Stanmer Church Pond. This freshwater habitat offered the occasional glimpse of dragonflies and moorhens, just some of the regular visitors that move between the wildlife ponds across Stanmer Park. Immersing oneself in nature, surrounded by mature trees and the sound of summer, always brings a present sense of rest from pressured lives, of freedom, and of relaxation in good company.

Up on the South Downs at Saddlescombe Farm

As autumn became winter, our visit to Saddlescombe Farm offered observations of a pond cradled by the South Downs. Resident ducks, wandering guinea fowl and sheep grazing nearby share this water with crickets, butterflies and bumblebees. This was the backdrop to peaceful walking, writing and honouring of M'Other Water.

So many questions came to mind. For all our understanding of the paths and fluxes of water through Earth's ecosystems, did we really appreciate the precariousness of just 2.5% of Earth's water being freshwater? Water is the life source. How can we lose even one drop?

Dew ponds are a feature across the chalk grassland of the South Downs, with some dug in over several hundred

Hurray as hedge nears finishing line!



A huge hedgerow connecting the South Downs National Park and the New Forest National Park is inching closer to completion.

More than 13,724m of new hedgerow has now been planted in Hampshire, edging closer to the target of 15,000m.

CPRE Hampshire marked the near completion of its flagship project **The Hampshire Hedge** with a dedicated Hedgefest event hosted on the Broadlands Estate, near Romsey.

The event brought together landowners, funders, partners and community collaborators for a day of demonstrations, activities and a showcase of traditional hedge laying skills.

The project aims to create a continuous wildlife corridor linking the South Downs and the New Forest National Parks, strengthening nature recovery across the county.

To date 68,620 whips have been planted by a dedicated team of volunteers who have contributed over 13,678 volunteer hours to the project. The final target is 75,000.

Over 2,700 young people and 35 schools across Hampshire have helped with the project.



Ellie Banks, CPRE's Hampshire Hedgerow Project Officer, said: "Hedgerows are powerful connectors in our landscape. Wildlife increasingly exists in

isolated pockets, and hedgerows play a crucial role in linking these habitats. It has been inspiring to see so many people - from volunteers to farmers to community groups - come together to support this project. We simply couldn't have achieved this without them.

Elaina Whittaker-Slark, Lead Ranger for the Western Team at the National Park Authority, said: "The South Downs and New Forest are two incredibly important hubs for biodiversity restoration in the south of England and to have them joined up with a wildlife corridor is so exciting.

"This hedgerow will provide much-needed havens for all kinds of birds, insects and mammals."

years ago as watering holes for livestock. Was a Saxon farmer here lining a pond with compacted clay or chalk? Do we sense the mystery of those who named these 'mist ponds', 'fog ponds', 'cloud ponds' and 'sheep ponds'?

More Creative Water Days to Come

Two or three hours never feels quite long enough for the groups that join Writing Our Legacy on their Downs to the Sea creative adventures. This is reflected in comments, which in turn inspire the planning of future events. What is evident is the enjoyment people experience along with the health and wellbeing benefits of being in a community and of enhancing skills and knowledge that encourage the next stage of their writer journeys.

Here is some of the feedback we've had:

'Thank you so much for organising such a magical and informative workshop. Water is such a powerful force to move with and embody. I truly appreciate the love and effort put into enriching our creative lives.'

'Many thanks for providing such a safe, warm and creative space. Opportunities like this are precious and much appreciated.'

As the programme moves into its second year, Writing Our Legacy will continue to welcome people to walks and Creative Water Days.

New creative commissions and bursaries are soon to be announced, enabling artists to research and create original work inspired by the Downs to the Sea programme. Writers are also being encouraged to reflect upon water in their lives by submitting work for publication in the forthcoming Writing Our Legacy Covert 6 Literary Magazine or by booking a place on a water-themed online writing workshop. For events and other information, please see <https://writingourlegacy.org.uk> or our social media [Instagram](#) or [Facebook](#).

About Downs to the Sea

The £2.4m Downs to the Sea project started last year with ambitious goals of restoring and creating a network of "blue spaces" across the region.

The scheme is supported by a £1.7m grant from The National Lottery Heritage Fund, while Southern Water and DPD are also providing significant additional funding.

In the first year, much-needed improvements have been completed at RSPB Pulborough Brooks and RSPB Pagham Harbour including major habitat restoration, as well as new pathways, viewing platforms and benches to enhance the visitor experience at both destinations.

For more information visit www.southdowns.gov.uk/downs-to-the-sea

Win a timber creation for home!

Ewe herd it here first! Winner of public vote is revealed



An “assertive” ewe has won the hearts of the public in our annual photo competition.

“Feeling Sheepish”, by Ian Cairns, took the top spot in The People’s Choice poll, which attracted over 800 votes.

Ian, who lives in Seaford and wins £100, said: “I came across this assertive ewe at Chyngton Farm, a National Trust farm on the side of the Cuckmere Valley.

“It’s unusual to get close enough to sheep for a proper portrait, but she seemed as interested in me as I was in her.

“In spite of the picture title, she doesn’t look very sheepish - I think she is a Suffolk, known for being protective of their lambs, so perhaps I was being warned off!”

Ian added: “The South Downs National Park contains a huge variety of landscapes and heritage sites and it’s great to have the diversity of a busy lowland and coastal area recognised and protected in this way.”

Following the National Park’s Dark Skies Festival last month, people can now vote for their favourite astrophotography image among a shortlist of 25.

The public have until the end of March to vote. Visit www.southdowns.gov.uk/astrophotography-peoples-choice/

The winner, who will win £100, will be announced during International Dark Sky Week which begins on 13 April.

Good luck to everyone!

Our main photo competition will return in May with a brand-new theme and the chance to win up to £250. Watch this space for further details! 😊



By Paul Staden, Founder & Maker at Pilgrim House

I’m surrounded by the beauty and shifting shades of the South Downs National Park, in the quiet folds between chalk paths and hedgerows, where colours sit naturally in perfect harmony, and where I call home. It was this bucolic beauty and local vernacular that inspired me to establish Pilgrim House. From our workshop in Chichester, we hand-make authentic, uncomplicated cabinets and homewares.

All the pieces are designed with restraint, bringing a sense of calm and function to the home, perhaps offering an antidote to the hectic world: a simpler, slower, more thoughtful way of living.

Timeless, versatile and full of character, made with the kind of craftsmanship that feels increasingly rare today. We aim to create pieces that feel settled from the beginning and only improve with time, combining traditional craft techniques with considered proportions and design restraint.



Our wood is all sourced from a local mill within the National Park, and our collaborators are dotted throughout the South Downs. Our inaugural signature colour palette was inspired by the South Downs environment, with colours taking their names from the local nature, such as Chalk Stream, Dew Pond, Sussex White and, of course, Flint. To celebrate the work the South Downs National Park does for the community, Pilgrim House is offering newsletter readers the opportunity to win a handcrafted piece from our “Weft” collection, in their choice of ash or oak, worth £449.

Weft echoes a simpler, more honest time. Each piece features a hand-woven back, bringing structure and softness into balance while showcasing the natural richness of the timber. Contemporary yet quietly enduring, it is suffused with purpose and functionality.

Like all our furniture, the piece will be made by hand especially for its new owner. Anyone who signs up to receive the **Pilgrim House newsletter** during March will be automatically entered the draw, as will any new subscribers to **South Downs News**. Good luck to everyone! See Ts and Cs [here](#).

Things to do in the South Downs this March

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/



Midhurst on a beautiful March day by Christopher Ison

Discover our amazing water habitats on World Water Day!
Saturday 21 - Sunday 22 March
A weekend of guided walks, talks and events to celebrate World Water Day.

Family Fun Day
Sun 22 March
10am - 4pm
FREE
Celebrate World Water Day with hands-on activities. Fun for all the family!
Visitor Centre, Seven Sisters Country Park, East Dean Road, BN25 4AD

Talks - Sun 22 March
Pre-booking required.
Dew Ponds - an illustrated talk by David Riviere
10.30am & 12noon
Chalk Reef of the Beachy Head West Marine Conservation Zone by Sussex Wildlife Trust
2pm
FREE

Guided Walks
Sat 21 & Sun 22 March
FREE
Various start times.
Discover local landscapes on a guided tour with expert rangers at:
• Seaford Head
• Seven Sisters Downland
• Beachy Head
• Lullington Heath
• Eastbourne Downland
• Seven Sisters Dew Ponds
Pre-booking required.

Book tickets and find out more:
sevensisters.org.uk/celebrating-world-water-day

- Head to Seven Sisters for a weekend of guided walks, talks and a fun family event to celebrate **World Water Day**. All the action takes place on the weekend of 21 and 22 March and includes guided tours with rangers from Sussex Wildlife Trust, South Downs National Park, National Trust, Eastbourne Downland, Beachy Head Ambassadors and Natural England. Pre-booking is required. There will also be a fascinating talks and a fun, family day at the visitor centre, including make your own aquifer, test your water knowledge and learn how to conserve water.
- Can you read maps? It's not something that comes easily to all of us so a special day has been organised to help people get to grips with the age-old skill! Take part in a one-day **navigation for beginners session** for a relaxed, practical day learning the ins and outs of map reading and compass use in the beautiful South Downs countryside. This is perfect for you if you are a beginner or feel you have forgotten the art of map reading. This course is designed to build your confidence and skills, enabling you to safely and independently explore our beautiful countryside.
- Head to **Gilbert White's House and Gardens**, Selborne, for their "Timothy's Tots - Bugs and bees" session on 24 March. You can join Timothy the Tortoise for an interactive preschool sessions connecting your child to nature and the changing seasons. Sessions include stories, songs, craft and sensory activities.
- Head to Arundel for all things tulips! From 28 March to 23 April, an exhibition will be taking place at **Arundel Museum**, led by the Arun Creative Stitchers. They are a friendly group of sewing enthusiasts who gather regularly to share ideas, exchange techniques, and inspire one another. The exhibition will run alongside the highly-anticipated Tulip Festival at Arundel Castle.