



# SOUTH DOWNS NEWS

## WORK AND PLAY IN YOUR NATIONAL PARK

Welcome to the newsletter for the South Downs.

Send your comments and ideas to us at [newsletter@southdowns.gov.uk](mailto:newsletter@southdowns.gov.uk)

## DON'T GO CHASING WATER VOLES

*In 2013 the first water voles were released at Titchfield Haven as part of an ambitious project to reintroduce these locally-extinct animals to the River Meon. Five years and almost 2,500 water voles later we asked some of the people involved what the project has meant to them.*

Once a common sight in the Meon Valley, water voles are thought to have become locally-extinct by 2008. We are pleased to say that the water voles are settling well into their new homes and the final release will take place on the Meon this August.

The plan to bring them back, all the way from the river's source, along the length of the Meon Valley and to the coast, would be the largest scale water vole release ever attempted in the country. One that would need the support of landowners, river users and volunteers as well as the main project partners.

### The landowners

"We live close to the head of the river and when we first moved here in 1969 it was full of water voles. It was very sad when the mink came and cleared the river of pretty much everything.



*"It was lovely to hear that there was a plan to bring water voles back."*

"It was lovely to hear that there was a plan to bring water voles back. We put mink rafts in about five years ago and I've been keeping an eye on them ever since.

"We had our first release this June with 59 water voles released into the river. The river has steep banks and lots of vegetation here but I've seen footprints and droppings. Long may they continue!"

*Rosemary*

"Several hundred water voles turned up last summer. We offered a cool place for them to stay overnight and recover from their journey up from Devon (where the voles were bred).

"Around 130 water voles were released into our stretch of river in 2016. On most days I'll hear a 'plop' as I walk

our dog down by the river. I stumbled across one the other day; I'm not sure which of us was more surprised to see the other."

"It feels good to be part of this project and give something back to nature."

Sally

## The National Park ranger



*"The Meon's river system just didn't function properly without water voles. Now it can."*

"This project ticks every box for why the South Downs became a National Park – bringing volunteers, landowners and the local community together to care for landscapes and support wildlife.

"I was asked to take on the water voles project in my first few months at the National Park in 2011. My first priority was to look at why they'd become extinct here, then prove that the mink were under control and look for potential water vole release sites. We started with organising and training the volunteers who have been so vital to the project.

"The Meon's river system just didn't function properly without water voles. Now it can."

Elaina Whittaker-Slark, Project Manager and Lead Ranger for South Downs National Park Authority

## The volunteer



*"..it sounded like a unique chance to participate in something very worthwhile – and enjoy myself in the process."*

"I knew nothing about water voles when I volunteered for this project, but it sounded like a unique chance to

## SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

participate in something very worthwhile – and enjoy myself in the process.

"Our training covered many aspects especially in how to identify the presence of water voles in the river, water safety training, their ideal river bank habitat and the importance of controlling mink, their main predator. We go out regularly to look for evidence of how the voles are doing – looking for their droppings, burrows, feeding "larders" etc. so we can see whether they're around and breeding.

"I enjoy reporting back to the landowners once a year to discuss and feedback to them our views on the suitability of the habitat on their stretch of the river as well as any evidence we may have found on the presence of water voles."

Nevill Brooke, South Downs Volunteer Ranger

## The Angler



*"...this is about so much more than just one species- if you make the river better for water vole, all the other wildlife benefits."*

"The type of fishing we do on the river is not necessarily about catching fish - if that was all we cared about we'd go to a well-stocked lake. Our members fishing experience is enhanced by the natural environment around them."

"I was first approached by Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust to see if we could help with monitoring for mink in preparation for the water vole reintroduction and so we started installing mink rafts on our beats, we then began to look at how we could best manage the habitat. We released the first voles on our patch in 2015 with more following in 2016.

"It has on occasion been a challenge to strike the right balance between conservation and the needs of our members, but on the whole the work has been well-received. I regularly get members contacting me to let me know they've spotted a water vole or heard the 'plop' of one dropping into the water and they often express how these sights and sounds take them back to their childhood days on the river.

"Our rivers are under huge pressures and angling is just one of the demands we place upon them. Being part of the water vole project has enabled us to take a wider look at how we manage these habitats for everyone."

*Matt Owen-Farmer is Environment Officer for Portsmouth Services Fly Fishing Association*

## The conservationist

*"...this is about so much more than just one species- if you make the river better for water vole, all the other wildlife benefits."*

"I've been working towards the return of water vole to the Meon Valley for nearly ten years, when we first started looking for funding to help with mink control.

"Once the project was underway I also helped train volunteers to carry out water vole surveys to detect any last-remaining voles (there were none...), and then to find suitable areas of habitat for releases to take place. The volunteers now survey for animals after release, to see how the populations are establishing, and I also get involved with the releases themselves.

"For us the water vole is a great way to get more people involved in caring for their river. It's the difference between suggesting someone makes general improvements to a site or saying: if you do this then you'll be able to see water voles here. It's been great to work with the landowners and fishing clubs. Whether they remember seeing water voles here in the past or are new to the area, it really means something to them to see water voles now.

"But this is about so much more than just one species- if you make the river better for water vole, all the other wildlife benefits."

*Ali Morse, Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust*

## The Environment Agency



"It's been one of the best projects that I have worked on since joining the Environment Agency, so very rewarding, and it is great when people tell me that they have seen a Water vole on the Meon, or heard the classic "plop" of a Water vole entering the water.

This gives me a great deal of satisfaction.

## SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

"I have been very lucky and humbled by the dedication and commitment of those working on the project, including Elaina, and her team of volunteers, HIWWT, HCC rangers, local community and landowners, Derek Gow and his team, and so many others."

*Adam Cave is a Biodiversity Technical Specialist at the Environment Agency*

## The National Nature Reserve ranger/ volunteer

"As a teenager I remember seeing water voles along Titchfield Canal in the 1970's. Twenty years later they were all gone. The project was a fantastic opportunity to see these endearing, iconic animals brought back into the local landscape.

"It has been very rewarding to be part of a project that has been so successful at delivering its aims and returning the water vole to Meon Valley. The fact that Titchfield Haven, as the initial release site, was the catalyst for this success makes all the more special."

*Richard Levett, former senior ranger with Hampshire County Council and current volunteer at Titchfield Haven*

The final water vole release of the project will take place in the second week of August 2017.

Keep an eye on our SDNPA Facebook page for details of our Facebook Live broadcasts from the release site. [www.facebook.com/sdnpa/](http://www.facebook.com/sdnpa/)

The Meon Valley Water Vole project is a partnership between the South Downs National Park Authority, the Environment Agency, Natural England and the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust.



*Children from West Meon school meeting and feeding water voles ahead of their release in June 2017*



## CYCLISTS & WALKERS WELCOME

*You're out on your bike and run out of water... You want to hide from the rain with a pint but your walking boots are covered in mud... A pilot scheme starting in the South Downs this summer will help walkers and cyclists find a warm welcome and support the local businesses who offer it.*

Us walkers and cyclists sometimes need a bit of help – whether it's a top-up for our water bottles, a safe place to lock up our bike, or a friendly face that will tolerate a bit of mud or even provide some plasters.

If you're in or around Lewes or Petersfield from this August a new scheme being trialled by the National Park Authority will help you to find what you need. Any business displaying a Cyclists and Walkers Welcome badge will give you a warm, friendly welcome and be able to accommodate kit and backpacks.

Some will even go a bit further offering Welcome Support – with first aid essentials for you or your bike, tool kits, access to local maps and free water refills

Some will even go a bit further offering Welcome Support – with first aid essentials for you or your bike, tool kits, access to local maps and free water refills, or Welcome Enhanced – offering cycle parking and kit to clean your muddy boots.

The Cyclists and Walkers Welcome scheme is part of Go South Downs, a new online resource launching later this summer. But as a South Downs News reader you can get a special early peek at some of the businesses who have signed up.

Dedicated to car-free days out and holidays in the South Downs National Park, Go South Downs will help you plan every element of your visit or holiday, from

## SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

how to get to your destination by public transport, where to stay, where to eat and ideas for things to do while you're here.

We hope to expand Go South Downs and Cyclists and Walkers Welcome to more locations across the National Park in the future so that more people can enjoy a car-free adventure.

### Sign up your business

If you're a local business in the Lewes or Petersfield areas of the South Downs that welcomes to cyclists and walkers, sign up to the Cyclists & Walkers Welcome scheme.

If you're quick you can also request a free Welcome Pack and cycle-friendly kit (like puncture repair kits and ponchos) to make your welcome even warmer; and a host of materials to help you promote your business to cyclists and walkers. But be warned, these are limited so only available while stocks last.

Find local businesses who welcome walkers & cyclists or sign yours up at [southdowns.gov.uk/directory/](https://southdowns.gov.uk/directory/)

**MAKE A BEE HOUSE**

The South Downs National Park is home to lots of curious insects like the red mason bee, leaf cutter bees and sand wasps. Sometimes insects need our help. Follow these instructions to make a home where bees and insects, like the red mason bee, can stay warm and sheltered over winter.

**YOU WILL NEED:**

- 1 or 2 litre clean plastic bottle (e.g. a fizzy drink or milk bottle)
- A pair of scissors
- Some bamboo canes or sticks cut shorter than the length of your plastic bottle. Ask an adult to saw or cut them for you.
- String
- Straw/grass/sticks/stones (optional)

**Step 1:** Cut off the top of the bottle with some help from an adult.

**Step 2:** Pack the bamboo canes into your bottle. Make sure the open ends of the bamboo canes face outwards, this is where the bees will live. Use other natural materials (straw, grass, sticks and stones) to pack the bottle tightly.

**Step 3:** Find a sheltered south-facing sunny spot and hang your bee house at least a metre off the ground. You could hang your bee house from a tree, but make sure the open end is slightly lower to keep out the rain!

Your bees will lay their eggs in your bee house and the larvae will overwinter in the warm and comfy house you've made, ready to emerge next spring!

## SUMMER FUN IN THE SOUTH DOWNS

*Keeping everyone entertained during the school holidays is a perennial problem. Here are six ideas for having fun in the South Downs National Park this summer that shouldn't break the bank.*

### 1. Big Butterfly Count

If the weather is clear and calm with a bit of sunshine, find a meadow or chalk grassland and see how many butterflies you can count.

Butterfly Conservation are running their annual Big Butterfly Count (from July 14 – August 6) aiming to get a feel for the health of the butterfly population around

the country. Do your bit to help by noting the number of any species you spot and then logging the results.

Don't worry if you don't know your Peacock from your Red Admiral, BC have thought of that and have a handy butterfly chart to download or a free app for iOS and Android to help identify and record the butterflies you spot. You'll probably find that the children pick it up faster than you do! Every entry counts so see how many you can see.

[bigbutterflycount.org](http://bigbutterflycount.org)

## 2. Rock-pooling at Birling Gap

From the beach at Birling Gap you get a very different view of the Seven Sisters cliffs. There are regular buses from Eastbourne during the summer holidays. Take a picnic and head down the steps from the car park to spend the day on the beach. As the tide goes out there's a myriad of sea creatures such as baby fish, pink anemones and small crabs living in the pools left at the shore side. You may even be lucky enough to spot a starfish. Tracker packs for rock pooling can be picked up from the Visitor Centre. Check tide timetables and bus timetables to plan your day.

[nationaltrust.org.uk/birling-gap-and-the-seven-sisters](http://nationaltrust.org.uk/birling-gap-and-the-seven-sisters)

## 3. Make a bee house

The South Downs National Park is home to lots of curious insects like the red mason bee, leaf cutter bees and sand wasps.

You can make a home for bees in your own home and put it up in a sheltered location in your garden or outside space. Bees and other insects will enjoy taking up residence in the spaces provided to keep them warm until next spring.

[southdowns.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Event-handouts-Make-a-Bee-House.pdf](http://southdowns.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Event-handouts-Make-a-Bee-House.pdf)

## 4. Secrets of the Heath

Summer is a fantastic time to visit our heathlands – with the heather in full purple bloom. There are heathland reserves such as Iping and Stedham Common, Harting Down, Lavington Common or Petersfield heath.

You can visit these at any time but if you prefer an organised event why not join one of our Reptile Encounters? Just before the kids go back to school we have the Secrets of the Heath event at Petersfield Heath over the weekend of 2 & 3 September. A FREE community event with fun activities for the whole

## SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

family that highlight what makes these rare and beautiful heathlands so special.

[southdowns.gov.uk/event/secrets-of-the-heath/](http://southdowns.gov.uk/event/secrets-of-the-heath/)

## 5. Geocaching

Geocaching is a real-world treasure hunt that combines being outdoors, exercise and technology. It has become a hugely popular activity for families – particularly those with older children. We have created the South Downs GeoTour (England's first GeoTour) to help you to discover the hidden gems in the National Park.

There are 30 geocaches in the tour. Join in the challenge to earn your own souvenir GeoCoin. Collect points by visiting geocaches, attending special events, travelling sustainably, eating and staying locally. You can now also grab bonus points for cycling to caches on the cycle network.

[southdowns.gov.uk/enjoy/geocaching/south-downs-geotour/](http://southdowns.gov.uk/enjoy/geocaching/south-downs-geotour/)

## 6. Enjoy some history

As well as castles (Arundel and Lewes) and numerous museums you can also discover hidden landscapes and forgotten stories that make up our National Park.

Old Winchester Hill National Nature Reserve is known not only for its stunning views and rich variety of wildlife and plants, it is also an important archaeological site with Bronze Age burial mounds and well preserved Iron Age hill fort ramparts.

Near Amberley in West Sussex and worth a visit is Bignor Roman Villa – where you'll find the remains of a Roman home with world-class mosaic floors in a beautiful downland setting. A family ticket for two adults and two children costs £16.

The "Bloomsbury group" were some of the 20th Century's most influential artists, writers and thinkers and made Charleston House their home. Visit the house and see how the South Downs' landscape influenced their art and writing, experience the extraordinary interior decoration of the house and the beautiful artists' garden.

Join in this year's celebration of the life and works of Jane Austen – who spent her final years living and writing in the South. There are lots of Jane Austen inspired events around the Chawton and Winchester areas where Jane spent the final years of her life.

[bignorromanvilla.co.uk](http://bignorromanvilla.co.uk)

[charleston.org.uk](http://charleston.org.uk)

[janeausten200.co.uk](http://janeausten200.co.uk)

## FIVE THINGS TO DO IN THE SOUTH DOWNS THIS MONTH

Find these & more events across the National Park and submit your own events at [southdowns.gov.uk/events/](https://southdowns.gov.uk/events/)



- Discover deadly heathlands at RSPB Pulborough Brooks
- Enjoy live music at Langhams
- Nap flints at Butser Ancient Farm
- Bring your dog to the Dog Fun Day at Woolbeding
- Find out why cattle are hairy, not scary

## ON THE GROUND

Don't forget to say hello if you spot our rangers and volunteers out working in the National Park. Here's a taste of what they achieved in July 2017.



- Worked with the East Meon Cub Group **planting sedges, water mint, brooklime, water forget-me-not and marsh marigold** into stream berms.
- Carried out **butterfly surveys on three key chalk grassland sites** – highlights included Brown Argus and Essex Skipper.
- **Trained staff and volunteers in water safety** – vital for river fly monitoring and water vole surveys.
- Organised more than **40 teenagers to pull invasive Himalayan balsam and other tasks** as part of their National Citizens Service scheme.
- With Historic England **completed Heritage at Risk surveys** over the Western area to monitor the management and status of sites.
- **Ringed barn owl chicks** on four farms in Winchester and Selborne clusters, five barn owl chicks in central downs and 11 in eastern downs.

- **Ran a wildflowers and pollinators event** for the Winchester and Selborne Farm clusters.
- Supported sessions on **identification and ecology of bats and moths** at South Pond with South Pond Group and the Sussex Bat Group.
- Completed **pulling invasive ragwort** on Chapel Common.
- **Ran 'Rangers on Tour' events** for National Parks Week in Brighton, Littlehampton, Bordon and Haslemere.
- **Joined community events** included Graffham Downs picnic, Discovery Days, Summer Buzz at Bignor, Connect with the Countryside, Binsted Strawberry Fair and MIND health & wellbeing volunteering event.
- Installed **two new cycle parking posts at Kingley Vale**.
- **Cleared vegetation from a medieval field system** Scheduled Monument near Jevington and a cross dyke at Heyshott.
- **Led 16 people on a Heartsmart walk** at Petworth.
- Carried out **chalk grassland surveys with Kew which show encouraging signs** that species are returning.

[southdowns.gov.uk/national-park-authority/our-work/on-the-ground](https://southdowns.gov.uk/national-park-authority/our-work/on-the-ground)

## MOST ASKED...

Send us your questions about a particular area of work in the National Park.

Answering this month is: **Trevor Beattie, Chief Executive for the South Downs National Park Authority**



### QUESTION

Do farmers have enough of a voice in the National Park?

### TREVOR ANSWERS

When the National Park first came into being the Authority agreed to work closely with the South Downs Land Manager's Group to provide expert advice on farming and land management issues. This Group played a central role in the creation of the Partnership Management Plan and will have an equally important part to play as we come to review it.

We have regular meetings with the NFU and the CLA, and an annual series of farmers' breakfasts. Over this summer we have been holding an extra series of workshops with farmers to look at how exiting the EU and the Common Agriculture Policy might affect their ability to look after the National Park whilst running profitable businesses, with the aim of going to Defra in the Autumn with a proposal for a farmer-led pilot for a new support scheme.

Our 27 SDNPA Members do include people with a farming background but I would like to see more. I

would urge members of our farming community to come forward when nationally appointed positions are advertised (there will be a number coming up in 2018) or to step forward to stand as elected parish members.

### QUESTION

Why don't you do more to 'sign' the National Park?

### TREVOR ANSWERS

Since we are a new National Park I've always thought that it was important to first develop our identity, presence, process and partnerships before erecting signs. With this now achieved and our shared identity already being used by nearly 100 organisations the time is right to look at introducing tailored and sensitive locational signage. We will be piloting 18 sites by the end of this year, each carefully considered to fit within the landscape as part of a wider programme to reduce street clutter. If these are considered successful by residents and visitors we will introduce more in the future.

Read more of Trevor's answers

[www.southdowns.gov.uk/most-asked-trevor-beattie-chief-executive-for-the-sdnpa/](http://www.southdowns.gov.uk/most-asked-trevor-beattie-chief-executive-for-the-sdnpa/)

### NEXT MONTH:

What is the South Downs National Park Citizens Panel? How will we be using it?

Send your questions for Tanya Hibberd, Performance and Research Lead for the South Downs National Park Authority  
[newsletter@southdowns.gov.uk](mailto:newsletter@southdowns.gov.uk)



## YOU SAY:

Do you have a story you want to tell about the National Park?  
A burning issue that you think needs to be addressed?

To submit a comment for our newsletter please email  
[newsletter@southdowns.gov.uk](mailto:newsletter@southdowns.gov.uk)



Please note that only contributors who submit their full name and address can be considered for publication though we will not publish your full address. Please make it clear whether you are speaking on your own behalf or that of an organisation you represent. We reserve the right to shorten comments and edit where necessary.



## NATIONAL PARK HEROES

Do you know someone who has made an outstanding significant contribution to the South Downs National Park? Nominations for the National Park Hero award close on 29 August 2017. The winners – one from each of the UK's 15 National Parks – will be announced at the UK National Park's Conference in October with each winner receiving a special bottle of wine kindly donated by Ridgeview Estate.

Send your nominations to  
[NPUKconference@southdowns.gov.uk](mailto:NPUKconference@southdowns.gov.uk)



## FIND A FARMERS MARKET

Planning a picnic? We have delicious farmers' markets across the National Park where you can meet the people who produce the food and tuck into some delicious local treats. You'll find them all over the Downs, in Winchester, Alton, Petersfield, Slindon, Steyning and more. Check [SouthDownsFood.org](http://SouthDownsFood.org) to find your nearest.

Locals and visitors can find out where to eat, buy and enjoy local food at [southdownsfood.org](http://southdownsfood.org)

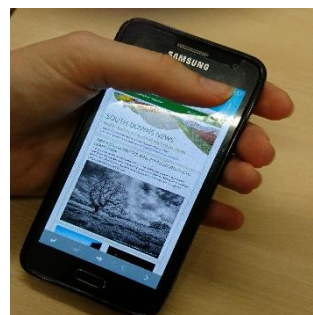


## UNCOVER LOCAL HISTORY

Wanted! Volunteers interested in archive research (e.g. photographs, written records, press releases) and/or interviewing people to collect oral histories as part of our Heathlands Reunited project. Training will be provided.

The histories collected by our volunteers will be used to: tell the stories of our heathland, inspire an artist to create seven pieces linked to local heaths, create an online book about the project and create materials for local schools.

Find out more at [southdowns.gov.uk/heaths-need-people/](http://southdowns.gov.uk/heaths-need-people/)



## GET OUR NEWS BY EMAIL

Get this newsletter delivered directly to your phone or tablet.

Sign up at [southdowns.gov.uk/join-the-newsletter/](http://southdowns.gov.uk/join-the-newsletter/)