

A photograph of a forest path in autumn. The path is covered in fallen orange and yellow leaves. Two children, a girl in a grey coat and a boy in a blue jacket, are walking towards the camera. The background is filled with large trees whose leaves are also in autumn colors. The text is overlaid on the top half of the image.

Visiting the West Sussex countryside

a guide for parents and teachers
of children with autism

David Blakesley and Tharada Blakesley

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Foreword by Nick Baker



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www.autismandnature.org.uk

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Foreword

New technology, inanimate objects and electronic devices are everywhere in the modern world, alienating many of us, and especially our children, from nature. As a result, many people see the natural world as little more than another commodity – something to possess, to look at from a distance. This disconnection with the environment has been a gradual thing, which has crept up on us, imperceptibly, one generation at a time. Now, the majority of us cannot recognise the song of a Blackbird, know which berries we can eat in the hedgerow or indeed even feel comfortable in the countryside.

Being brought up in the Sussex countryside, surrounded by fields, rivers, lakes and hedgerows, I appreciate that I was particularly lucky, not only in having these things close to hand, but also in having a family that encouraged me to be outside – to turn off the TV, to play in the woods and make my own entertainment and take my own risks. I had a childhood that gave me the time to just be, to think and play in nature.

I am now only just beginning to understand the value of this upbringing. No matter who you are, being outside allows natural curiosity to take shape, it gives us a sense of calm, a place where we are not judged by anybody and where we can simply be in control of the moment. On top of all this, of course, there are health benefits, both physical and mental, and time outside can empower us, giving us the inspiration to tackle and deal with some of life's other challenges.

For those who live in West Sussex, and indeed visitors from outside, this book is really the beginning of all these things, a kick-start where it is most needed. It offers parents, carers and teachers an insight into many of the finest wild and natural places in West Sussex and what they have to offer. Although this book targets those with, or caring for those with autism, the messages, guidance and information it provides are applicable to every single one of us. The value of being outside and reconnecting with nature, particularly while growing up and developing life skills, is known to be of huge value to all children, and especially to those with special educational needs. Being outside has the ability to soothe and heal, to fascinate and inspire, with the added bonus of developing a life-long connection to nature, which will nurture the need to look after and protect these special places. These values will then be passed on to future generations – this book plugs us all back into our roots and gives us a much-needed sense of place.

Enjoy the best that West Sussex has to offer!

Nick Baker
Devon
2013

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We would also like to acknowledge all the organisations who have supported Autism and Nature's work to enrich the lives of children with autism, through experiences of the countryside and nature; they include BTCV, East Sussex County Council, Eden Project, Ernest Cook Trust, Kent Autistic Trust, Kent Downs AONB, Kent Wildlife Trust, National Autistic Society, National Trust, Natural England, Nineveh Charitable Trust, Ownwood Trust, PiDesign Co Ltd., RSPB, Sensory Trust, Sussex Wildlife Trust, VisitWoods and West Sussex County Council.

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Preface

Why read this book?

This guide represents the third in a series of local guides being produced by Autism and Nature. It is designed to help parents, carers and teachers in West Sussex to engage children on the autistic spectrum with the natural environment. It should also prove useful to those living and working with adults with autism. Part 1 discusses some of the benefits of visiting the countryside with children on the autistic spectrum. Part 2 presents a guide to 'natural' places to visit in the West Sussex countryside, which we believe many children with autism might enjoy. Twenty-four places are described, although we visited many more, all of which were excellent for wildlife. The final selection is spread across the county, from the South Downs National Park to the High Weald. They represent many of the habitats found in West Sussex, and include sites owned or managed by the National Trust, Natural England, RSPB, Sussex Wildlife Trust, Woodland Trust, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, Horsham District Council and Plantlife. Several private woods and estates are also included. Part 3 presents a series of case stories, featuring visits to nature reserves by small groups of school children with autism. Each case story describes the children's activities and how, in the eyes of their teachers, they benefited from the experience. Six visits were arranged for children from Palatine Primary School, Manor Green Primary School and St Anthony's School. The visits were hosted by the RSPB, Sussex Wildlife Trust and Natural England.

Whilst the guide does not set out to provide solutions to the many difficulties associated with autism and related conditions, it does seek to offer appropriate information to make visits to the natural places as relaxed and enjoyable as possible, so that the restorative benefits can be accessed by all. For some children, there may be a need to make trips more structured and meaningful, for example, looking out for things whilst walking may provide many opportunities to communicate and develop a shared interest for the natural environment. One issue which we have been particularly concerned about is dogs, as some children with autism are very wary of dogs, whilst a small minority of children might be terrified by them. The guide includes several sites where assistance dogs only are allowed, and other sites where dogs are required to be kept on leads.

The description of each location should help parents, carers and teachers to judge its suitability for their children. Before visiting a new place, many children with autism appreciate being shown pictures of their destination, so we have included photographs and illustrations in the guide, that we hope children will find attractive. We have also published a story book for younger children with speech and language difficulties, which describes, using Widgit symbols, the adventures of two children, Alex and Rosie, who visit the places included in the present guide. The story book is called Alex and Rosie's Adventures in West Sussex. It is freely available from the Short Breaks Team West Sussex County Council, Autism Sussex, West Sussex Parents Forum and as an e-book on the Autism and Nature website (www.autismandnature.org.uk).

Part 1 Introduction

Experiences of the natural environment, such as visits to nature reserves and contact with nature have been shown to have considerable benefits for people's health and well-being. The same is thought to be true for people with disabilities and special educational needs (SEN), especially children and young people. Benefits for children with SEN include sensory experiences, new relationships with adults and peers, enhanced self-confidence and pride, and the development of life skills (Rickinson, 2010). The Council for Learning Outside the Classroom, along with other organisations, recognises that children with SEN have much to gain from "frequent opportunities to get out into the school grounds or local community" (Rickinson, 2010).

In a recent Insight Study undertaken by Autism and Nature, in collaboration with Dr Mark Rickinson and King's College, London, teachers and school leaders at ten special schools in England were interviewed about their views on the benefits of engaging children on the autistic spectrum with the natural environment (Blakesley *et al.*, 2013). Whilst there were clear differences between schools in the degree of engagement with the natural environment, all schools were practicing some kind of outdoor learning. All interviewees identified benefits to social skills and personal well-being as being particularly compelling reasons for engaging children on the autistic spectrum with nature. Others have turned to horticultural therapy and gardening to make a connection with nature, and several inspirational project reports are cited in the Further Reading section at the end of this guide.

We have written about some of the benefits of engaging with nature in Part 3 of this guide, which describes visits to the West Sussex countryside, with classes of school children with autism from three West Sussex schools. Accounts of other school visits can be found in our published guides to places to visit in East Sussex and Kent, both of which can be freely downloaded from the Autism and Nature website. All of these visits were arranged for schools, but children with autism should also benefit from engaging with the natural environment outside of school, with family and friends.



Many people are aware of the benefits of fresh air and exercise, and engaging with the natural world, but sadly, there are still children with autism who have few opportunities to visit the countryside. In West Sussex, there are so many beautiful places to visit and so much of interest to see when walking in the woods or following a nature trail. There are also new smells, tactile sensations, and sounds you may not have heard before. The sense of exhilaration that can be felt on the South Downs or the Greensand Hills on a windy day is an experience that is wonderful to share.

Such experiences are especially valuable for people with autism, because they can provide:

- Quiet walks in a calming environment which helps to reduce stress and anxiety
- Opportunities to take part in activities with family and friends, developing social and communication skills and confidence
- Opportunities to develop fine and gross motor skills
- New sensory experiences that are soothing
- Opportunities to find plants, birds, animals and rocks that could become a focus of special interest
- Opportunities to participate in activities such as rock pooling or pond dipping
- Artistic inspiration from colours and forms seen in the landscape and clouds
- A sense of freedom and independence which children do not have indoors
- Opportunities to learn about the natural world
- Health-giving exercise.

Simon Payne, who is an Assistant Headteacher at a special school in Devon commented that “regular access to walks in the open countryside has been a regular feature throughout my teaching career, working with children and young people with autism. Nature can provide wonderful sensory stimuli, including natural sounds, smells and textures. For example, many of our more complex youngsters enjoy the pleasure of looking through their fingers into the sky or through tree canopies, providing visual stimuli that they can control. Others love to walk barefooted along the beach or across sand dunes, whilst breathing in fresh sea air.”



Planning

As with any activity, risk needs to be assessed. For all children, there are real risks associated with the outdoor environment, such as cliff edges, steep slopes, open water etc. Most children like to run, and few places in the countryside offer the security of a fence to stop children running into dangerous areas. Visiting a new place often brings particular anxieties for children with autism, such as whether there will be dogs, how long the walk might be, will they get back in time for the next activity, or whether there are toilets. We have tried to provide information for each of the places included in this guide, to help with these issues.

Here are a few tips on how to prepare for an outing to the countryside with your child, pupil or friend with autism. Careful planning means that as far as possible, you can select suitable locations, avoid the unexpected and reduce anxiety for the person with autism. For example:

- Do the necessary risk assessments – essential if you are a support worker
- Check the distance of walks, the terrain and whether there are any steep climbs
- Use visual supports and timetables to prepare the person with autism before the outing, for example, the photographs and illustrations in this guide or the illustrations in our story book for children *'Alex and Rosie's Adventures in West Sussex'*, or perhaps a sketch map of a circular walk might help
- Estimate how long to go from one stage to another – “in so many minutes we'll be at X”
- Plan where you will make your stops for refreshments and toilets
- Build in rewards
- Have some games to play or activities that you can do while going along, e.g. play I Spy or make a crown with flowers and leaves. Olivia Brown wrote about taking her severely autistic son on family walks in the Lake District in *Communication* (Brown, 2005). She describes how an older sister rushed on ahead during their walk, to place a fruit pastille on a rock for her brother, who has autism, to find.

More ideas for outdoor activities can be found in the descriptions of our school visits in Part 3.



Research evidence

Many people have described how children are becoming disconnected with nature, which Richard Louv, in his seminal book *Last Child in the Woods* described as “nature-deficit disorder”. There has been a lot of research and evidence presented on the beneficial effects of engaging with the natural environment, especially for people in general and those with mental health problems. These include particularly informative reviews by Justin Dillon and colleagues (2006), Penny Travlou (2006) and Stephen Moss (2012).

However, while the prevalence of autism appears to be increasing in Britain, studies on autistic children and the natural environment are lagging far behind. There are some useful insights that can be drawn from various sources of evidence, which are considered in detail in a recent Evidence Review (Blakesley *et al.*, 2013). These include reports of school visits such as those described in Autism and Nature’s series of local guides for parents and teachers, and anecdotal evidence provided by teachers and school leaders in Autism and Nature’s Insight Study. Some studies, such as the Royal Horticultural Society Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools project, worked with classes with a wide range of conditions, including autism. Through learning gardening skills, the children were able to connect with the natural world, and benefited in many ways. Andrea Faber Taylor’s work with children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in North America is widely quoted (e.g. Faber Taylor and Kuo, 2009). ADHD is a condition which makes people inattentive, impulsive and hyperactive. According to the National Autistic Society, an increasing number of children are being diagnosed with both ADHD and autism. Faber Taylor presents a compelling case for regular engagement with nature for children with ADHD, reporting many benefits, even after relatively short periods in the natural environment.

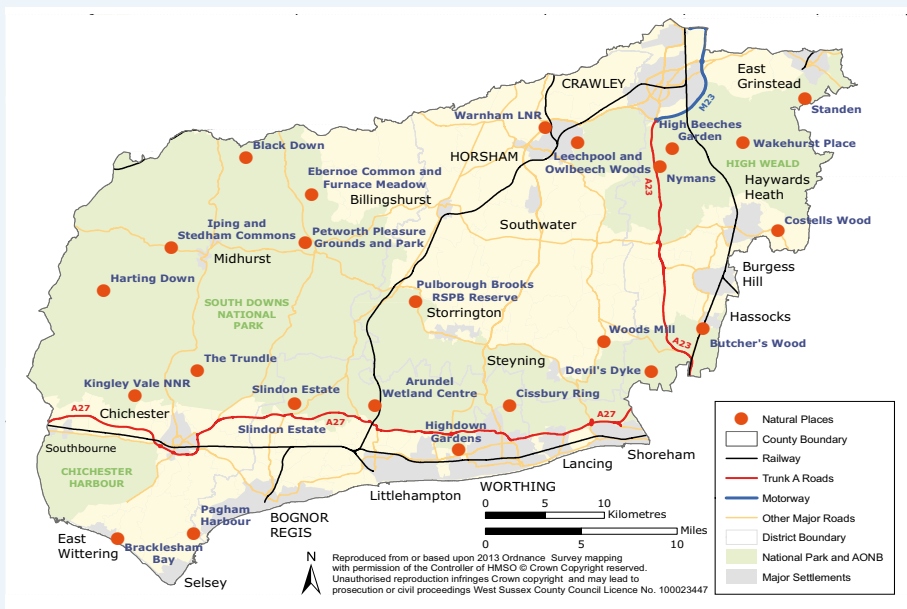
If you would like to read more about the benefits of engaging with nature, and the research which has been undertaken, the papers and reports cited in this Introduction, together with other academic papers, books and guides to nature in West Sussex, are listed at the end of this guide.



Part 2 Natural places to visit in West Sussex

West Sussex is a rural county, with beautiful landscapes and countryside, rich in wildlife. It is dominated by the South Downs National Park, designated in part to conserve and enhance the natural beauty and wildlife of the area. The National Park includes the chalk downland of the South Downs, and the Western Weald, which comprises the Low Weald and Greensand Hills. Many of the places featured in this guide are within the National Park, and represent some of the varied landscapes. For example, Cissbury Ring and the Trundle both lie on the dip slope of the Downs, overlooking the coast. Bracklesham Bay is one of two coastal sites featured in the guide, and here you may be lucky enough to find fossil sharks' teeth and other fossils. Harting Down, above the steep, north facing chalk scarp of the Downs, has spectacular views across the agricultural landscapes of the Rother Valley towards the wooded Greensand Hills. These hills, with their ancient woodlands, and rare open heaths and commons are represented in the guide by Black Down. Iping and Stedham Commons, and Petworth Gardens lie in the Rother Valley itself. Travel to the north east of the county, and you will discover the ancient wooded countryside of the High Weald, and peaceful gardens such as Standen and Wakehurst Place.

Before visiting any of the places featured in the guide, we recommend readers to look at their websites. Many include trail leaflets or maps, and details of public transport. More information to help plan journeys by public transport is available on the West Sussex County Council website (www.westsussex.gov.uk/living/roads_and_transport/public_transport.aspx). Ordnance Survey (OS) maps can also be useful for longer walks if you plan to explore places such as Ebernoe Common. The 1:25,000 Explorer Series (orange cover) give the best detail, but the 1:50,000 Landranger maps (fuchsia pink cover) are also useful. OS maps are freely available on Streetmap (www.streetmap.co.uk/) and from OS Getamap (www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/). Woodlands are also featured on the VisitWoods website (www.visitwoods.org.uk). We hope that readers will visit some, or all of the places featured in the guide.





“I enjoyed walking down the valley”



Take the A286 north from Chichester, then follow the B2141 just after Lavant and the car park is on the right after about 7 miles; from Petersfield, take the B2146 to South Harting, fork left just after the village and follow the B2141, where the car park is on the left at the top of the hill (SU790180)

- No public transport
- RingGo car parking payment (free to National Trust members)
- No facilities, toilets in South Harting, next to White Hart Inn (1.2 miles) and National Trust's Uppark House (1.3 miles)
- Terrain: firm chalk paths along the scarp, with no steep slopes for the first kilometre; very steep slopes in places on longer walks
- Steep, grassy scarp slope close to the South Downs Way is unfenced
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Livestock grazing at certain times of year
- Horse riders and cyclists occasionally encountered
- Information board and trail leaflets in the car park

Harting Down

flower-rich chalk grassland and lots of exercise...

The National Trust car park at Harting Down is at the top of the hill, so you will be immediately greeted by magnificent views, and the prospect of a fairly gentle stroll along the scarp of the South Downs. The path east along the Downs from the car park climbs just 20 m in elevation over 400 m or so, before descending by 20 m over the next 300 m. You can then walk for another 300 m before it descends more steeply; at this point you could choose to retrace your steps. The trail follows the South Downs Way, and provides breathtaking views across the foot slopes of the Downs to the Greensand Hills in the distance. Bring binoculars and let your children explore the landscape which unfolds in front of them. Some children with autism will love to run along this path, taking in the view and the wide open spaces. But you should be aware that in places, the grassy scarp slope falls steeply away, close to the trail.

In the summer, the trail offers far more than just the view. Ask your child to listen to the Skylarks singing, and see if they can spot the birds as they hover high in the sky. You may see a Kestrel, hovering at eye level, almost motionless on the wind, hunting for voles on the grassy slopes below. Look out for some of the many wildflowers which love the chalky soils here, such as the bright



yellow Lady's Bedstraw, the pink flowers of Marjoram and the numerous spikes of Common Spotted-orchid, which vary from deep to light pink. On warm summer's days, butterflies characteristic of chalk downland should be plentiful, and you might see species such as Marbled White and Chalkhill Blue.

If you pick up a trail leaflet, you will find suggestions for a short and long walk, both of which involve steeper climbs. The short route takes you across Harting Hill, and down a short, but steep wooded path into Whitcombe Bottom. The trail then climbs again out of the dry valley to join the South Downs Way. The long route is suitable for children with plenty of energy, as it covers a distance of 5.5 km and includes a climb of about 80 m to the top of Beacon Hill (site of an Iron Age hill fort). Alternatively, for a circular walk which avoids the very steepest slopes, you could follow the South Downs Way east past Round Down, walk down Bramshott Bottom and return along Whitcombe Bottom. Both of these dry valleys are quiet and children should be able to run along the path in safety, although there may be grazing animals at certain times of the year. This walk is just over 4 km, but it still involves walking up a steeper slope at the northern end of Whitcombe Bottom.

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/harting-down/





“I found fossil sharks’ teeth on the beach”



From the A27 south of Chichester, take the A286 to Birdham, and then follow the B2198 which leads directly to the beach car park (SZ805963)

- Buses daily from Chichester to Bracklesham village
- Pay and display car park
- Toilets and café in car park
- Terrain: sloping shingle beach, sandy foreshore
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Horse riders occasionally on the foreshore
- Kite surfers and other water sports users may be on the foreshore, and should be avoided for safety reasons
- Weather: it can be very cold if there is an offshore wind, even in summer, and there is no shelter from wind and rain
- Excellent and inexpensive fossil guide available from West Sussex Geology (see website address opposite)

Bracklesham Bay

sharks’ teeth and other fossils...

With so many coastal locations to choose from in West Sussex, Bracklesham Bay may not be the first place which comes to mind when planning a day by the sea. However, the beach at Bracklesham is special, because it is one of the safer places to collect fossils in West Sussex: there are no dangers of rock falls from cliffs; no slippery rocks to scramble over; and fossils may be found within a few metres of the car park. Children with autism who have an interest in prehistory, particularly fossils, may be very excited to have the opportunity to visit Bracklesham to find fossils for themselves. The fossils here are about 45 million years old, about 20 million years after dinosaurs became extinct. Whilst there are no dinosaur bones to be found, there are some very interesting fossils.

At Bracklesham, it is perhaps fossil sharks’ teeth which most children (and adults) would like to find. Even children who are not interested in fossils might enjoy hunting for sharks’ teeth. The number of teeth you might collect is dependent on beach conditions, but even when there are fewer fossils to find, you may still pick up one or two. The fossil teeth are shiny and black, and quite sharp. They range in size from just a few millimetres to 5 cm or more. Ask your child to imagine sharks hunting in a tropical sea, some 45 million years ago, in the very spot where you are standing. Fossils shells are much more common, and many look



like modern shells, although they can be quite brittle. Fossil shells will have lost their original colours (unlike modern shells), so they can be readily identified by their creamy coffee colour, as shown in the pictures below. Fossil shells can be found just lying on the sand. You should also find 'nummulites' – these are single-celled organisms whose shells are rather like coins, and fun to collect. If you are lucky, there are other fossils which a child might find exciting to discover, such as crocodile teeth and fragments of turtle shell.

The best time to visit is just before low tide, when the sandy foreshore is fully exposed. From the car park, cross the shingle and walk east along the beach. Fossils, including teeth may also be found in the shingle itself, although they may be in poorer condition due to abrasion against the flint pebbles. Beach conditions do vary, and it is better to go when there have been some rough seas, which can wash fossils out of the offshore fossil beds. However, even on a calm summer's day, you should find something of interest. The beach is popular with kite surfers, so for safety reasons, it is best to avoid areas where kites are being launched and flown.

www.westsussexgeology.co.uk



Fossil ray tooth



Fossil gastropods



Fossil shark's tooth



“the Yew trees are 2,000 years old!”



Take the minor road west from the A286 in Mid Lavant (just north of Chichester) to West Stoke, continue through the village, take the next right turn after the church, following a small brown National Nature Reserve sign, and the car park is on the right after 30 m (SU824087)

- No public transport
- Free admission, reserve open daily, free car park
- History hut with mural depicting history of the site
- Public toilets in Chichester (just over 4 miles)
- Terrain: firm track from the car park to the nature reserve entrance (2.2 km return); woodland paths uneven and muddy in places, mostly flat; paths up to the plateau are steep in places along the clearly waymarked Nature Trail (3.3 km loop from nature reserve entrance)
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Livestock grazing at certain times of year
- Information boards along the Nature Trail
- Visitor information leaflet and more detailed nature trail leaflet on the website, and in the ‘history hut’

Kingley Vale NNR

invigorating walks, and ancient trees...

Kingley Vale is best suited to families whose children enjoy walking. The entrance to the nature reserve is 1 km from the car park, along a farm track with hedgerows and farmland on either side. This is a very pleasant walk in its own right, although there is little shade on a warm summer’s day. In spring, look out for Bluebells where the track passes a private woodland. Kingley Vale is a steep sided dry valley carved out by melt waters following the last ice age. If your child enjoys longer walks, including steep climbs, then follow the Nature Trail which starts at the entrance to the nature reserve. This 3.3 km loop takes you through ancient Yew woodland and chalk grassland, up the side of the valley to the plateau.

Initially, the Nature Trail slopes very gently, along the valley bottom, through ancient Yew woodland, with Yew trees of great age. If your child understands the concept of age, they might be amazed to hear that some of the trees are thought to be at least 2,000 years old. These trees are well worth a hug! But it is best not to allow children to climb on them, due to their great age.



Also remember that if your child likes to eat plants, Yew is very poisonous. As you walk through the woodland, you may come across feeding parties of birds. Suddenly the silence of the wood will be filled with the calls of different birds, but as quickly as they appear, they can move on, and the wood is silent once more. In late autumn large numbers of thrushes descend on the reserve to feed on the Yew's red fruit. This first part of the Nature Trail covers a distance of about 750 m, and emerges to give clear views up the dry valley. You may see Buzzards, Red Kites and even Ravens circling overhead from here. Walking to the plateau, high above the valley, is the challenge which awaits you, following the Nature Trail as it winds its way up through dense Yew woodland.

The chalk grassland of the valley is species-rich, with a wide diversity of chalk-loving wildflowers. If you have a field guide, look out for Salad Burnet, Wild Thyme, Wild Basil and Marjoram. There are orchids too, such as Common Spotted-orchid. On the plateau, the chalk is covered with an acidic clay, resulting in a rare habitat called chalk heath. Here you will find chalk-loving plants such as Wild Thyme alongside acid-loving plants such as Devil's-bit Scabious. In the autumn you may find the delicate purple flowers of Autumn Gentian, when most of the other flowers are over. The view from the plateau is spectacular, and if you have binoculars, you can explore the Sussex and Hampshire coastline, from Chichester Cathedral in the East to Chichester Harbour and the Isle of Wight in the west. The trail passes the 'Devil's Humps', a series of Bronze Age burial barrows, before descending down a more gentle incline through the Yew woodland to the entrance to the nature reserve.

www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/conservation/designations/nnr/1006085.aspx



Iping and Stedham Commons

open heathland walks...



“the hillside was purple”



From the A272, approximately 2 miles west of Midhurst, turn onto Elsted Road, the car park is on the right after 0.15 miles (SU852220)

- Bus service along the A272 from Midhurst to Petersfield stops at Elsted Road (not Sundays or Public Holidays)
- Free admission, reserve open daily, free car park
- No facilities, toilets in Midhurst, by the Tourist Information Centre on the A272 (2.5 miles)
- Terrain: sandy paths, firm in the summer, muddy in places in wet periods; very gentle slopes on Stedham Common, slopes a little steeper in places on Iping Common; return walk across Stedham Common 1.6 to 2 km, typical walk around Iping Common 2 to 2.5 km
- Wet, boggy areas are not fenced
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Livestock grazing at certain times of year
- Horse riders and cyclists occasionally encountered
- Information board in car park, information leaflet and map on Sussex Wildlife Trust website

Sussex Wildlife Trust manages the Commons to protect important heathland flora and fauna. From the car park you can walk directly onto Iping Common to the west, or cross the minor road to visit Stedham Common. Some families with a child with autism may prefer Stedham Common on their first visit, as it is much smaller, and therefore easier to explore. Follow the path crossing the middle of the Common (800 m), after which you can retrace your steps, explore one of the paths which run parallel to it, or follow a loop through the open heathland. In mid-summer, Silver-studded Blue butterflies seem to be everywhere on warm, sunny days. Explain to your children that the caterpillars of these butterflies are tended to by ants, which protect them in return for a sugary liquid secreted by the caterpillars. In damp spots, you may find Cotton Grass, with its fluffy white seed heads, constantly waving in the breeze. From the path, look for sundews, which might interest some children, because they are carnivorous; look closely at the red-tinged hairs, as each has a droplet of sticky gel, waiting to trap and digest unsuspecting insects, but take care not to harm the plants.

In high summer, Bell Heather and Cross-leaved Heath will be flowering, but it is later in the summer when the Common turns pink and purple as Ling Heather bursts into flower. A conspicuous bird here in spring and summer is the Yellowhammer, with its bright yellow plumage, which most adults will know from its



song, which is said to repeat the words “a little bit of bread and no cheese”. Perhaps your children will imagine the bird is singing something different? If you hear the sound of two stones being tapped together, then you are probably close to a Stonechat, which usually sit in the open, often on gorse bushes. If you follow the path through an area of tall conifers, the ground may be littered with pine cones, just waiting to be collected.

Iping Common covers a much larger area, and you may encounter more dog walkers here. The main path heads due west across the Common for about one kilometre, crossing an old Roman road after about 300 m. The road is marked on OS maps, but it is not easy to find on the ground. A map is useful if you venture away from the main track, as there are many different paths to follow. The wildlife here is similar to Stedham Common, with one of the highlights being the butterflies in summer. Common Lizards may be found basking along the sandy trails, but they are always alert, and if they detect your footsteps, you may just hear them scurrying into the undergrowth. There are also Adders on the Commons, but remember that these snakes are venomous, and should not be approached.

www.sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/reserves/page00018.htm



Pagham Harbour

walks around a natural harbour...



“birds and fossils!”



From the A27 (Chichester), follow the B2145 south to the RSPB car park after 5 miles (SZ856965); for Church Norton car park, continue along B2145 for 1.3 miles, take the minor road left (Rectory Lane) and the car park is at the end of the lane (SZ871956)

- Buses from Chichester Bus Station to Selsey daily, stop by the Visitor Centre
- Free admission, reserve and car parks open daily
- Visitor Centre open 10 am to 4 pm daily, except Christmas and Boxing Days
- Toilets and hot drinks machine in Visitor Centre; picnic area adjacent
- Terrain: Sidlesham Ferry Trail is waymarked from the Visitor Centre and level, but may be wet and muddy after wet weather (1.1 or 2.2 km); Ferry Pool hide is 270 m from Visitor Centre, along the trail to Church Norton car park and hide (5.2 km return); beach is 500 m from Church Norton car park
- Ponds in Discovery Area unfenced, and low harbour wall unfenced
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Trail leaflets available from the Visitor Centre

Pagham Harbour Local Nature Reserve is managed by the RSPB, in partnership with West Sussex County Council. It is a natural harbour, which is undeveloped, and protected as an internationally important wetland for wildlife. From the Visitor Centre car park, the nature trail takes you past the Discovery Area – an educational area for schools, with a pond – before heading out along the harbour wall. From here there are excellent views across the bay. At low tide, the water will be quite distant, and you will see extensive areas of saltmarsh and water channels. However, at high tide, the water can come right up to the harbour wall. After about 800 m, you have the option to return to the Visitor Centre along a short track (300 m), or continue along the nature trail to complete the 2.2 km walk. The nature trail takes you through a meadow in which you will find beautiful Southern Marsh-orchids in the summer. Look out for wild rose and Honeysuckle along the hedgerows at this time of year.

If your children like wide open skies and a sense of being in a ‘wild place’, then they will enjoy Pagham Harbour. In the winter, up to 20,000 birds feed and roost across the nature reserve. These include Brent Geese, ducks and large numbers of waders such as Lapwings and Black-tailed Godwits. On a cold winter’s day, the air may be filled with the calls of birds as they move between the fields and mudflats, or look for areas to roost at high tide. If you visit in winter, your walk may be particularly invigorating. You will



need to wrap up warm, especially for the walk along the exposed harbour wall.

There is also a trail which follows the harbour wall south to the Church Norton car park, by the church. Unless you have someone meeting you, the return walk is over 5 km, and may be too far for many children with autism, especially if there is a cold wind. Most of the route follows the harbour wall, and is therefore very exposed. However, on a warm summer's day, it can be a very pleasant walk, you might stop for a while and watch the tide, or the constant movement of birds across the harbour. If you drive to Church Norton, you can take a shorter walk along the harbour wall to the north, or head south to the beach, which is only 500 m from the car park. Just after the decaying boardwalk, a clear path follows the coastline, north to the harbour entrance, and south towards Selsey. If your child is interested in fossils, there are trace fossils of sea urchins to be found here in the flint pebbles. But they can be very hard to find, and you need patience and a keen eye to spot them. The car park at Church Norton is smaller than the main car park, and because of the access to the beach, it can be busy in the summer months.

www.rspb.org.uk/reserves/guide/p/paghamharbour/index.aspx





“I explored the fort but the wind nearly blew me away”



Take the minor road from Westhampton (Chichester) towards Singleton; approximately 0.7 miles after the Racecourse grandstand, on a sharp right hand bend, take the unsigned lane to the left, Seven Points car park is at the end of the lane after 0.4 miles (SU871109); Triangle car park is just after the racecourse (SU879113)

- No public transport
- Free admission and car parks open daily in daylight hours (Goodwood Estate and Chichester District Council)
- No facilities, toilets in Chichester (4 miles)
- Terrain: track up to the hill from Seven Points car park (a climb of 40 m elevation over 400 m); firm path around the hill fort ramparts, return walk from the car park and round the hill fort 1.6 km; track from Triangle car park is shorter, but much steeper
- Dogs may be encountered off lead, but should be under the owner's control
- Livestock grazing at certain times of year in the area
- Horse riders and cyclists occasionally encountered
- Avoid the area when there are events at the racecourse or Chichester Aerodrome and Motor Racing Circuit

The Trundle

an ancient hill fort with pristine chalk grassland...

‘The Trundle’, on St Roche’s Hill is part of the Goodwood Estate. The location of the car park itself should interest children, because of the wide-ranging views across the coastal plain to the sea. Bring binoculars, and ask your child to try and spot the boats in Chichester Harbour, or the Isle of Wight in the far distance. If you are familiar with Portsmouth, look out for the Spinnaker Tower in the distance. From the car park, there is a steady walk up a track to an Iron Age hill fort, constructed in the 1st millennium BC. The earthworks are still intact, with an embankment and ditch circling the site. Visit in summer, and you will discover a rich chalk grassland flora on the embankment. If you have a wildflower guide, help your child to find some of the species most characteristic of this habitat, such as the bright yellow Lady’s Bedstraw, tangles of purple flowers of Wild Thyme, and the deep blue flowers of the rare Round-headed Rampion. Pyramidal and Common Spotted-orchids are common along the ramparts. Also look out for Kidney Vetch, easily recognisable by its clusters of small yellow flowers, which appear to have cotton wool wrapped around their base. If you see a small, dull brown butterfly on these flowers, it is probably a Small Blue, an increasingly rare sight in Sussex.

On a warm summer’s day, there may be a lot of butterflies on the wing, and children with autism may find it fascinating to watch these insects fluttering from flower to flower. See how many different colours they can find. Marbled Whites for example are very distinctive, with their black and white patterned wings;



Chalkhill Blues are much smaller, with pale blue 'chalky' wings; and skippers are even smaller and bright orange in colour. You might also see day-flying Burnet moths, black insects with bright red spots on their wings.

As you walk around the ramparts, the racecourse and grandstands suddenly come into view. This is a great vantage point to watch the races, but children with autism are likely to find the whole area far too busy on race days. Keep your eyes in the air in case a Buzzard, or a Red Kite, with its distinctive forked tail, drifts overhead. If you are walking anticlockwise, then beyond the racecourse, the view changes dramatically. The coastal plain is replaced by the wooded valleys of the South Downs, with the villages of Singleton and Levin Down in the distance. Along the path here, look out for the spherical seed clocks of Goat's-beard, which resemble giant dandelions, waiting for a child to blow their seed into the breeze. When you finally return to the car park, there are other footpaths to explore if your child still has some energy left. A shaded woodland path heads west, downhill from the car park, following the Monarch's Way. But if you have someone to meet you, stroll down Chalkpit Lane to the village of East Lavant, about 2.5 km down the dry chalk valley.

www.english-heritage.org.uk/discover/south-downs/explore/trundle/

www.westsussex.info/trundle-view.shtml



Burnet moth



Goat's-beard



“the view of the South Downs is spectacular”



From the A286 in Haselmere, take the B2131 east to Haste Hill. After 0.3 miles, turn right into Haste Hill and follow the road round to Tennyson's Lane, the two Upper car parks are on the right, 1 mile along Tennyson's Lane (SU920308); the Lower car park is 300 m further along the lane on a sharp U bend (SU922306)

- No public transport along Tennyson's Lane
- Free admission, reserve open daily, three car parks
- No facilities, toilets in High Street car park, Haselmere (1.8 miles)
- Terrain: sandy paths, firm in the summer, muddy in places in wet periods, some moderate slopes; circular walk from the Upper car park to the Temple of the Winds viewpoint 3.5 km; steep slopes on longer walks descending down the ridge
- Two small ponds unfenced
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Livestock grazing at certain times of year
- Horse riders and cyclists occasionally encountered
- Information board and trail leaflet along the track from the Upper car parks

Black Down

could this be the best view in West Sussex?

Black Down is a National Trust property nestling high in the Sussex Greensand Hills. It is the highest point in both West Sussex and the South Downs National Park. It is not well signposted from the road, so you will need to consult a map before venturing out, but it is well worth the effort. There are three car parks, but the lower car park involves a steeper climb to the ridge walk, which might be difficult for some children. From the first Upper car park, a gentle slope climbs 15 m in elevation over 500 m or so. After this, the path continues to climb gently towards the Temple of the Winds viewpoint, at 275 m asl. A National Trust trail leaflet, or an OS map is very useful at this site, although some of the paths are signed. A map of the walk described here is available on the National Trust website.

As you follow the sunken lane up the slope, beyond the second Upper car park, look out for the view point on the left. Surprisingly, this is easy to miss unless you walk on the path next to the sunken lane, which you may prefer if conditions are particularly wet underfoot. The view here is spectacular, looking down across the woodland canopy to the countryside beyond. But the trees do limit the view, so it is worth persuading your children to continue their walk to the Temple of the Winds viewpoint.



This is a pleasant walk along ancient sandy lanes and droveways, used by shepherds and drovers for thousands of years. On a warm summer's day, the tall conifers and beech trees offer welcome shade. The ground is often littered with pine cones, and bilberries are common in the summer months. There will be tantalising glimpses of the view through the trees, but keep going to the viewpoint. You should perhaps explain to your children that there is no actual temple... a stone seat and a plaque point out places in the landscape. The view across the wooded Wealden landscape is spectacular, to the distant High Weald and South Downs, and even the sea on a clear day. Bring binoculars if you can, and see what your child can find in the landscape below.

From the viewpoint, continue along the track west, and then north, heading along the western side of Black Down, marked and signposted as the Serpent Trail. Here you cross more open heathland, a blaze of purple in late summer. Another viewpoint offers far reaching views west across the Hampshire countryside. If you start to descend more steeply, then you have followed the wrong trail, and must retrace your steps. If you have an OS map, you will see that there is a point where five trails meet. From here you should follow the path to the northeast. This passes two small bog ponds on your left (unfenced), likely to be patrolled by dragonflies and damselflies during the summer months. Shortly afterwards you will rejoin the main trail which takes you back down to the Upper car parks.

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/black-down/





**“there were
daffodils
everywhere”**



Pleasure Grounds car park is off the A283 in Petworth, just north of the A272 (SU974227); additional car park for the Park is one mile north along the A283 (SU966238)

- Buses to Petworth village from Horsham, Worthing and Midhurst (not Sundays or Public Holidays)
- Free admission to the Pleasure Grounds and Park (admission charge for Petworth House, includes adjacent toilets and café area); open daily (10.30 am) in spring, summer and autumn; open 5 days per week in winter (check website for details); pay and display car parks (free for National Trust members)
- Fully accessible toilets in the Pleasure Grounds car park
- Terrain: Pleasure Grounds have partly accessible paths, some slopes and undulating terrain, good path surfaces; Park trails have slopes, may be undulating and muddy during wet periods; typical walk around Pleasure Grounds 1.5 km
- Lakes unfenced in the Park
- Assistance dogs only in the Pleasure Grounds; dogs may be encountered off lead in the Park
- Information boards

Petworth Pleasure Grounds and Park

extensive gardens and parkland to explore...

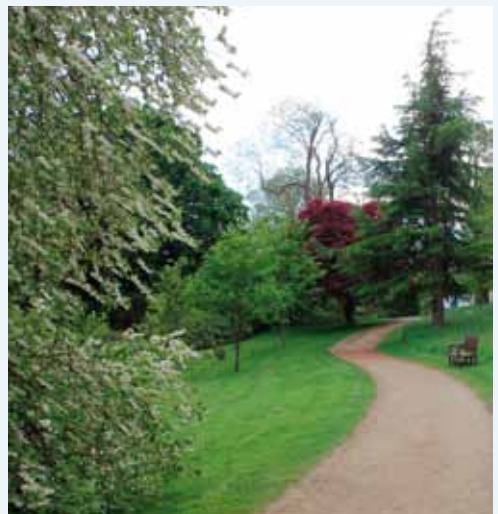
Petworth Park and Pleasure Grounds is an ideal location for many families with children on the autistic spectrum. Families may choose to visit the landscaped Pleasure Grounds, with their network of accessible paths, or explore the wider estate with its lakes, wide vistas and herds of deer. For children who fear dogs, the Pleasure Grounds should provide a relaxing, and often tranquil setting for a gentle stroll along meandering paths. The garden will appeal especially to children who enjoy lots of colour. The woodland garden still retains elements of a natural woodland flora, with fine displays of Wood Anemones in April, followed by Bluebells and other woodland flowers in May. Throughout the spring, the woodland floor is carpeted with a palette of yellows and creams, reflecting the drifts of daffodils planted under the trees. Later in the spring, rhododendrons and azaleas provide bolder splashes of colour. Children may enjoy running up the grassy slope just beyond the car park, to the Ionic Rotunda, which offers fine views across the Park, and the West Weald landscape. There are quiet corners to sit and talk, or perhaps to read a story to your children. Families can also enjoy searching for carved woodland animals hidden throughout the Pleasure Grounds.



When you reach Petworth House, a gateway to the front of the house takes you into the Park. Once in the Park, you are likely to encounter people walking their dogs. The Upper Pond, which is actually a sizeable lake, is just 400 m from the house, and from this vantage point, your children will certainly appreciate the grandeur of Petworth House. Once you reach the Upper Pond, your children may be keen to explore more of the Park; a circular route from the house, walking all the way round the lake shore is just over 2 km. There are usually plenty of ducks and geese on the lake, and you might find Canada, Greylag and even exotic Egyptian Geese grazing or resting on the grass close to the path. There is also a large herd of Fallow Deer in the Park, and you may catch a glimpse of these along this route.

Alternatively, you can explore more of the Park, by heading away from the house and Upper Pond towards the Lower Pond, a much smaller body of water which is approximately half way between the two car parks. A walk through the Pleasure Grounds, returning to the car park via the Upper and Lower Ponds is about 4 km, but it should give you a much better chance of seeing the herd of deer. You may also come across some of the veteran trees on the estate, that are many hundreds of years old, including an oak thought to be 1,000 years old. Download the National Trust's 'Petworth ancient tree walk' for more details. You might ask your children who is the oldest person they know, before revealing the age of the trees you encounter.

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/petworth-house/





“I saw a snake on the path in front of me”



From the A283, 3.7 miles north of Petworth, take the minor road east (Streel's Lane), signposted to Ball's Cross and Ebernoe; after 1.5 miles (after crossing the cricket pitch) turn right along a short track close to a telephone box; the car park is by the church (SU975278)

- No public transport
- Free admission, open daily, free car park by the church
- No facilities, toilets in the National Trust car park for Petworth House off the A283 (4.8 miles)
- Terrain: woodland trails may be very soft and muddy in places (wellies useful during wet periods), mainly flat with occasional slopes (circular walks vary from 400 m to 4 km)
- Lake close to the car park unfenced; several woodland ponds unfenced
- Adders are found in the area, particularly Furnace Meadow
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Livestock grazing at certain times of the year
- Trail leaflets on websites

Ebernoe Common

one of the quieter woods in West Sussex...

Ebernoe Common (Sussex Wildlife Trust) was once a place where commoners would graze their animals. It is well off the beaten track and the church car park is often quiet. In summer, the churchyard is full of wildflowers, including many Common Spotted-orchids. The main trail heads south into the wood along a track, but if you follow the path to the west of the church, you soon reach Furnace Pond, a lake surrounded by trees and covered with water lilies in the summer months. The pond was created by damming a stream in the late 16th century to provide water for a local blast furnace. Turn left at the pond to join the main trail. For a relatively short walk, follow the track to the Brickworks, where the recently restored buildings can be seen, returning through Plantlife's Brick Kiln Rough and Furnace Meadow reserves (1.5 km).

In spring your children will discover a rich woodland flora, particularly in Brick Kiln Rough, where Early-purple Orchids, Primroses and Wood Sorrel can be found amongst the Bluebells. In the summer, Furnace Meadow supports a rich variety of wildflowers, so take a flower guide with you. On warm, sunny days, butterflies such as Marbled White and Meadow Brown seem to be everywhere, a reminder to your children of the English countryside before so many meadows were improved for agriculture. If your children have a sense of adventure, and are happy to follow often muddy paths, there are more trails to explore, which take you deeper into this historic landscape. A map and a compass might be useful if you leave the signposted 'Heritage' trail (a distance of 4 km).

www.sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/naturereserves

www.plantlife.org.uk/nature_reserves



Cowslips



Early-purple Orchid



“the bluebells are like a sparkling sea”



From the A29 eastbound carriageway, just east of the A27/A29 roundabout near Slindon, follow Park Lane for 0.4 miles, where the car park is on the left (SU960077); an alternative car park is nearby on Duke's Road, accessed from the eastbound A27 (SU950073)

- Nearest bus stop in Fontwell village (on the Compass Chichester to Worthing route, Mon to Sat); walk up London Road and go under the subway to reach the wood
- Free admission, reserve open daily, two car parks
- No facilities, toilets for patrons of Slindon village pub, and public toilets in Crown Yard car park, Arundel (4.5 miles)
- Terrain around Slindon Wood: generally firm and accessible, but may be muddy in places when wet; gradual climb towards the village of Slindon (35 m over 1 km); circular trail (not waymarked) of 3.3 km includes 500 m along the roadside, of which 230 m has no pavement; shorter walks through the woods around the car parks
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Information boards in car parks
- Trail leaflets on National Trust website

Slindon Estate

bluebells and a pleasant circular walk...

Slindon Wood is at the southern end of the National Trust's extensive Slindon Estate. From the car park in Park Lane you can wander freely along numerous paths through the woodland. For children with autism who are fond of the colour blue, visit in early May, and they will be thrilled to see the woodland floor carpeted with Bluebells. Occasionally you will come across 'white' Bluebells, which children might enjoy looking for amongst the many thousands of blue flowers.

The National Trust website has details of a longer, circular walk which takes you around Slindon Park, returning through the village of Slindon. Follow the route in a clockwise direction from the car park and you will reach the medieval park 'pale' after about 600 m. This is a low embankment which was used to stop deer or domestic animals escaping from the park. The walk follows the pale, initially west and then north for about 800 m. In spring there are Bluebells along much of the way, both in the woodland and on the pale itself. As you come towards the point where the route leaves the pale, stop for a while to admire the magnificent Beech trees. Sadly, most of the Estate's Beeches were blown down in the great storm of 1987. At this point, retrace your steps if you do not wish to walk along the road with your children. If you continue, the route joins the road by the entrance to Slindon College. The walk through the village is pleasant, but the first 230 m past the church has no pavement. Thereafter, walk down Church Hill, a quiet road with a pavement, until you reach the village pond, and once again enter Slindon Wood. You then have a short walk back to the car park.

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/slindon-estate/



Bluebell



“I really enjoy looking at all the different ducks”



From the A27 Arundel Bypass, follow the brown duck signs down Mill Road to the car park (TQ020081)

- Buses to Arundel from Brighton, Worthing and the East (weekdays) and from Worthing (Mon-Sat); note it is about 1.2 km walk along Mill Road, part of which has no pavement
- Car park free; admission charge (free for children under four and carers of children with autism); open daily (except Christmas Day)
- Accessible toilets and café in Visitor Centre; picnic area
- Two play areas
- Terrain: level access hard surfaced paths on main routes; boardwalks with anti-slip netting surfaces; suitable for pushchairs and wheelchairs (circular walk around the whole site about 1.3 km)
- Low-level viewing and level access to most hides
- Wheelchairs for free loan
- Some ponds unfenced, boardwalk over boggy ground unfenced
- Guide dogs only
- Information boards
- Trail leaflets on WWT website and provided at the Visitor Centre

Arundel Wetland Centre

tranquil wetland with ducks from around the world...

Arundel Wetland Centre, run by the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT), is an excellent place for children with autism to engage with the natural world. The WWT was founded by Sir Peter Scott, and its wetland centre at Arundel aims to educate people, particularly children, about wetlands and allow them to experience a wide diversity of wetland wildlife at close quarters. The Centre houses a collection of wildfowl from around the world, and natural wetland habitat characteristic of the Arun Valley. Children can join pond dipping sessions at weekends and school holidays.

To explore the whole site involves a walk of about 1.3 km. At the entrance you will be offered the opportunity to purchase inexpensive bags of grain to feed the ducks in signed areas of the reserve. Feeding is a very popular activity, and there are always hungry ducks, even late in the day. Most families head straight for the World Wildfowl area, adjacent to the Visitor Centre. Here, a feeding bay allows access to ducks from around the world, which come to the water's edge to be fed, allowing excellent views. Save some seed, because you will encounter many more hungry bills as you wander round. The trail takes you past further collections of



wildfowl from Iraq and North America, before you reach the boardwalk. Follow the boardwalk through an area of reedbeds and channels. In the spring and summer, wait a while, and let your children listen to the song of Sedge Warblers and Reed Warblers. Water Voles are found across the site, but the boardwalk is a particularly good place to see them at close quarters. It is always a privilege to see these delightful creatures, swimming in the water or feeding on young leaves at the water's edge. If your children are familiar with Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*, remind them that 'Ratty' was actually a Water Vole.

There are several hides overlooking 'wild' scrapes and ponds, so bring binoculars, or hire a pair from the Visitor Centre. Here you will see wild ducks, geese and swans. You may also see waders such as Oystercatchers and Lapwings which breed on the reserve. The site is set against the steep woods of Offham Hanger, over which Buzzards soar on warm days. If you have a keen eye, you may also see Red Kites or a Peregrine falcon floating along the ridge. Returning to the Visitor Centre you will pass the 'Icelandic Lake' – a small pen housing ducks which breed in deep lakes, some of which also winter off the coasts of Britain. The waters are crystal clear, so children can watch these birds swimming under water at close quarters, especially at 2 pm each day, when they are fed. There are two play areas, but some children may just prefer to feed the ducks.

www.wwt.org.uk/visit/arundel/





“there is a green post box in the garden”



Access from the eastbound carriageway only of the A259 just west of Worthing; take the minor road signposted to the left, 1.25 miles after the A280 roundabout, the car park is at the top of the lane after 0.3 miles (TQ098041)

- No public transport
- Free admission, gardens open every day from April to September, but only open weekdays from October to March (check website for opening times); public car park free
- Toilets by the entrance
- Highdown Tea Rooms are next to the gardens and has its own car park
- Terrain: easy walking paths in the gardens, slopes and steps in places (typical circular walk around 1 km)
- Pond unfenced
- Guide dogs only in the gardens; dogs may be off lead in the car park, and the Tea Rooms are dog friendly
- Information board, trail map and children’s leaflet available at the entrance, and on the website

Highdown Gardens

a peaceful garden...

Highdown Gardens is a delightful place for children with autism, close to Worthing on the West Sussex coast. The gardens extend over just 3.5 hectares, so this is a place which can be comfortably explored in an hour or two. They are one of the quieter gardens open to the public in West Sussex. For children who like to walk slowly, and not too far, this place would be ideal. Only guide dogs are allowed, which makes them particularly attractive for families with children with autism. The gardens will also appeal to children who like to explore, and let winding paths take them on an adventure of discovery. As you enter the gardens, look out for the green Edward VII pillar box – your child might be interested to know that all pillar boxes in Britain used to be painted green, but people complained that they could not see them, and kept walking into them, so in 1874 the red colour was adopted.

For a more structured route through the gardens, follow the trail in the children’s leaflet, which can be downloaded in advance from the Highdown Gardens website, to help prepare your child for their visit. The leaflet is colourful, and introduces two cartoon characters, Henry and Harriet, who are both Hedgehogs living in Highdown Gardens. There are ten locations to find along the trail, with a few words written about each. For example, the first



location, close to the pillar box, is a line of cherry trees from China. Their bark is shiny, and the trunks knobbly, which children with autism may find interesting to touch. Another location is the pond, where Henry invites children to tick the things that they can see, such as fish, dragonflies and lily pads. Narrow, winding stone steps lead you away from the pond into another part of the garden. As you walk around, you will find flowers of every colour; some, like Jasmine, have a strong fragrance which children might find soothing. There are garden seats at almost every turn, some along shady paths, and others on sunlit lawns. You might sit and look at Henry's puzzles, or maybe read a story you have brought with you, perhaps about a Hedgehog.

Although only guide dogs are allowed in the gardens, the car park is popular with dog walkers visiting nearby Highdown Hill, so if your child fears dogs, park to the left as you enter the car park, close to the entrance to the gardens. If dogs are not a concern, you may wish to walk up onto Highdown Hill after visiting the gardens, a popular walk with local people. The hilltop offers good views across Worthing to the sea, it is 500 m from the car park, and the path climbs about 35 m.

www.highdowngardens.co.uk/





“I enjoyed listening to the Nightingales”



On the A283 Pulborough to Storrington road, approximately 2 miles from Pulborough village (TQ060164)

- Buses from Burgess Hill to Horsham pass the site Mon to Sat (request stop); train station in Pulborough (2 miles away)
- Large car park, free; small admission charge (free for carers of children with autism and RSPB members); open daily (except Christmas and Boxing Days)
- Disabled toilets and café in Visitor Centre; picnic area
- Adventure play area by the Visitor Centre
- Terrain: Wetland Trail (3.5 km) follows a stone path (with gradients); shorter return walk to the first hide (2 km); two heathland trails are not suitable for disabled access (1 and 2 km)
- Four hides and three viewpoints along the Wetland Trail
- A wheelchair for free loan
- Registered assistance dogs only (except in the heathland area)
- Information boards
- Trail leaflets on RSPB website, also available from the Visitor Centre

Pulborough Brooks RSPB Reserve

a great place for children to engage with nature...

Families visiting Pulborough Brooks may feel that this is an ideal place for children with autism to experience the natural world. There are opportunities for short or longer walks, friendly staff to offer guidance on where to go and what to look out for, and a relaxed atmosphere. The car park can be busy, but once on the reserve, it is usually relatively quiet, and for children who fear dogs, only registered assistance dogs are allowed. Before starting a walk, you can sit outside the Visitor Centre and watch garden birds at close quarters, at the feeding stations. Ducks, Jackdaws and pigeons are regular visitors to the feeders. A small adventure playground and picnic area nearby are ideally suited for many children with autism (see also the accounts of our school visits to Pulborough Brooks in Part 3). Events such as pond dipping are held regularly for families during the summer months; see the RSPB website for details.

Time could easily slip by in the vicinity of the Visitor Centre, but there is much more to see. Spring is one of the most exciting times at Pulborough Brooks. Nightingales return in mid April, and for the next month or so, their sublime song can be heard across the reserve, particularly in the area close to the Visitor Centre.



If your child has an ear for music, or finds birdsong particularly soothing, then a visit at this time of year should provide them with a very rich experience. Despite their name, Nightingales sing throughout the day; visit the 'Autism and Nature' website to familiarise yourself with their song. As you follow the trail to the first hide, you will pass meadows, ponds and old hedgerows with woodland flowers such as Primroses and Bluebells in the shady areas. Close to the first hide, there is a second picnic area in a quiet glade, and a viewpoint across the water meadows. In spring the water is relatively quiet, with small numbers of ducks and the occasional Lapwing swooping over the water as they perform their aerial displays. The trail continues past three more hides, before returning to the Visitor Centre.

In summer, the atmosphere is quite different. Butterflies such as Meadow Brown and Gatekeeper feed on wildflowers in the meadow areas, and dragonflies patrol the ponds and trails. You may see ducklings in the pools and ditches, whilst Swallows and House Martins will be busy hawking for insects low over the fields and pools to feed hungry chicks. Visit in late autumn or winter and the scene will be very different. You may need to wrap up warm, but there should be large numbers of wild ducks, geese and swans to look at on the flooded meadows. So you will need to walk at least to the first hide, a distance of 2 km there and back. Bring binoculars if you can, and see what species your child can identify using the identification guides in the hides.

www.rspb.org.uk/reserves/guide/p/pulboroughbrooks/





“I found wild strawberries, but they were very small”



From the A24 Worthing to Horsham Road, follow the ‘Cissbury Ring parking’ sign into May Tree Avenue, just south of Findon; take the first left into Storrington Rise and the main car park is along this road (TQ129076); there is also a small, unofficial car park closer to the hill fort, along a no through road which takes you east from Nephote Lane in Findon village (TQ139085)

- Buses from Worthing to Findon pass May Tree Avenue
- Free admission, reserve open daily, free car park
- No facilities, toilets on the A24 at the junction with Coombe Rise (1 mile)
- Terrain: from Storrington Rise, it is a steady climb to the ramparts of the hill fort; the paths are undulating and may be muddy during wet periods; a shorter, more direct route to the hill fort has steeper slopes in places (1 km); typical walk all the way round the hill fort is 3.7 km
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Livestock grazing at certain times of the year
- Information boards

Cissbury Ring

impressive hill fort, chalk grassland and lots of exercise...

If you take your child to Cissbury Ring, which is managed by the National Trust, you must be prepared for some healthy exercise. Wherever you start from, you have to climb to reach the hill fort. However, it is a rewarding journey and well worth the effort. The shortest route from Storrington Rise car park takes you to the southern corner of the hill fort. This route is not signposted, so with the hill fort in front of you, follow one of the well worn tracks across the meadow towards the fort. Over a distance of about 1 km, you will climb about 100 m in elevation. There are steps at various points along the ramparts to the top of the ring. Alternatively, there is a public footpath which takes you from the car park along the western slopes of the hill fort; when you reach an unofficial car park at the northern edge of the fort, follow the trail southeast to a path which cuts through the ramparts, taking you into the fort itself. From here it is a short walk to the highest point at 184 m above sea level. Taking this longer route, the climb of 120 m elevation is more gradual, over a distance of 2 km from the car park to the ramparts. If these walks are too far, or involve too much climbing, there is an alternative route. There is a small, unofficial parking area just to the north of the ring. From here, paths to the ramparts are just 200–600 m in length, and the climb is significantly less (50 m elevation).



Some children with autism love to feel the wind on their face, so if there is more than just a breeze, they may find Cissbury Ring exhilarating. However, the site is high above the sea, and exposed, so in very windy conditions some children might be worried or frightened by the wind. On calmer days, if the air is clear, binoculars will enable you to explore the West Sussex coastline, from Selsey and the Isle of Wight in the west, to the white cliffs of Beachy Head in the east.

Many children will be interested in the history of the site, which goes back a long way (see the website links below). In the Neolithic period, about 5,000 years ago, Stone Age people visited Cissbury to excavate flint using tools made from Red Deer antlers. Flint was used to make arrowheads and knives. Cissbury Ring is also one of the largest hill forts in Europe, built in the Iron Age, around 250 BC. Maybe your children can imagine Iron Age people, defending the ramparts against their enemies advancing up the steep slopes below. Today, Cissbury Ring is a peaceful place, known for its wildlife, as well as its archaeological interest. The slopes and ramparts have a rich chalk grassland flora, with many flowers to look out for in the summer months, such as the pink flowers of Wild Thyme, with their fragrant leaves (crush one for your child to smell) and delicate blue Harebells, dancing in the wind. On sunny days, look out for chalk grassland butterflies, such as Marbled White and the electric blue Adonis Blue.

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/cissbury-ring/

www.sussexarch.org.uk/saaf/cissbury.html





“dragonflies hovered right in front of me”



From the A24 just west of Horsham, take the B2237 towards the town centre, and the reserve is on the left after 0.1 miles (TQ167323)

- Local buses and rail station in Horsham
- Car park free; small admission charge for adults; open daily (except Christmas Day and Boxing Day)
- Toilets with disabled access and café in Visitor Centre
- Picnic area by Visitor Centre, but no picnics allowed in the nature reserve itself
- Terrain: mostly flat with the exception of Mill Pond Plantation, which has one steady climb; easy access paths and boardwalks; trail through Mill Pond Plantation and across the meadow can be muddy during wet periods; Walnut Tree trail (1.2 km), Willow Carr Walk (2.1 km) and Mill Pond trail (2.4 km)
- Two hides by the lake, and a hide overlooking the Bird Feeding Station
- Ponds unfenced, boardwalk over boggy ground unfenced
- Assistance dogs only
- Information boards
- Trail leaflets available at the Visitor Centre

Warnham LNR

meadows, woods and a tranquil lake...

Warnham Local Nature Reserve is managed by Horsham District Council's Countryside Services Unit. It is a popular, well managed nature reserve, offering relaxing walks which many families with children on the autistic spectrum may find attractive. The Visitor Centre, picnic area and café are all close to the car park. Look out for boxes which provide safe shelter and hibernation places for bugs, aptly named 'Btingham Palace'. The Visitor Centre itself is located at the southern end of the Mill Pond, which is actually a sizable lake, fringed with reeds, against the backdrop of Millpond Wood. You can get a good view of the lake from the Tern Hide, just beyond the Visitor Centre. Bring binoculars, and see what birds your child can identify, using the identification charts provided in the hide. In the spring and summer you should see ducks and geese, together with Great Crested Grebes and Herons. You may also see the exotic Mandarin Duck, and Common Terns which have recently bred on the reserve. The nearby Woodpecker Hide allows close views of a range of woodland birds at the Bird Feeding Station, including species such as Great Spotted Woodpecker, Nuthatch and various tits and finches. Pheasants also visit the feeding area.

After the Tern Hide, the trail takes you across Mill Meadow, an area of unimproved grassland which is rich in wildflowers, such as the bright yellow flowers of Bird's-foot-Trefoil (also known as 'Eggs and Bacon') and the attractive daisy-like flowers of Sneezewort. Beyond the meadow are a series of 'dipping ponds' with platforms, but these are not fenced. As spring turns to summer, this is a good



place to look for dragonflies and damselflies, and you will often find an Emperor Dragonfly patrolling the dipping ponds. The male is a striking insect, with a distinct 'Kingfisher' blue abdomen. Look out also for metallic green Emerald Dragonflies, and the smaller and more delicate blue damselflies. For a shorter walk, continue along the trail to Walnut Tree Plantation. This is a small area of woodland with conifers and native trees, including several Yews. When you return, make sure that you visit the Bird Feeding Station at the Woodpecker Hide.

For a longer walk, follow the trail past Heron Hide, which takes you through woodland and an area of reedbed and willow carr. Your child may enjoy walking on the extensive boardwalk here, however, this is not fenced, except where it crosses the streams. You also have the option to extend your walk through Millpond Plantation, which involves one steady climb over a distance of 100 m or so. This is a relatively recent planting of mixed conifers and broadleaved species. Returning to Visitor Centre, there is an opportunity to end the visit with light refreshments, and perhaps an ice cream!

<http://www.horsham.gov.uk/leisure/WarnhamNatureReserve.aspx>
www.friendsofwarnhamlnr.org.uk/index.html



Leechpool & Owlbeech Woods

walks through woodland and heathland...



“I collected Broom seed to grow in my garden”



Just off the B2195 (Harwood Road) on the eastern side of Horsham (TQ193313)

- Local bus service along Harwood Road; short walk along a busy road from the bus stop
- Free admission, reserve open daily; small car park
- No facilities, toilets in Horsham town centre (1.5 miles) and Warnham LNR (2 miles)
- Picnic area adjacent to Harwood Road car park
- Play area in Owlbeech Way, adjacent to Leechpool Wood
- Terrain: uneven and muddy in places when wet, steep slopes in both woods; waymarked trails around Leechpool Wood 3 km (start from Harwood Road car park), Owlbeech Wood 2 km (start from Owlbeech Way car park), and around both woods 3 km (from either car park)
- Optional boardwalk over boggy ground in Leechpool Wood unfenced
- Livestock grazing in fenced areas
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Several information boards
- Trail leaflet available with map of five walks

Waymarked trails take you through a variety of different habitats, as you walk through the two woods managed by Horsham District Council. Leechpool Wood is predominantly ancient deciduous woodland, with wetter areas along the Alder Gill stream. In May, you will find Bluebells along much of the route, with delightful posies of Primroses and Wood Anemones scattered amongst them. If you have a plant guide, look out for the delicate white flowers of Wood Sorrel. As you enter Owlbeech Wood, the habitat changes dramatically, as tall Scots Pines replace the oaks and other deciduous trees. Here, children may enjoy collecting pine cones from the forest floor. Look out for the sculpture of an Adder as the trail takes you up a slope into an area of heathland. The heathers give a fine display of pink flowers in late summer. You may see Hebridean Sheep or other animals here, introduced to help restore the heathland flora.

A beautifully carved oak ‘Art Bench’ in Owlbeech Wood provides an opportunity to rest, listen to the birdsong and perhaps to talk with your children about the plants, birds and animals carved into the back of the seat. However, if you follow the optional ‘pine heath trail’ you will miss the bench, and add about 200 m to your walk. As you enter Leechpool Wood once more, and return along the stream, there is a second optional trail, which follows a boardwalk along the meandering stream. This adds just a 100 m or so to the walk, and many children enjoy walking along boardwalks. As this wood is on the edge of town, it is popular with dog walkers, and you are likely to encounter dogs off lead, particularly in Leechpool Wood.

www.horsham.gov.uk/leisure/352.aspx



High Beeches Garden

colour in spring, summer and autumn...



**"I collected leaves
of lots of colours"**



From the London to Brighton M23/A23, take the Pease Pottage Services exit (just South of Crawley) and follow signs to Handcross; take the B2110 east just before the village, High Beeches is on the right after 0.8 miles (TQ277309)

- No public transport
- Car park free; admission charge for the gardens and house (free for children under 14 and carers of children with autism); check website for opening times
- Toilets and tearoom/restaurant by the entrance
- Terrain: some paths can be soft and muddy when wet, with steeper slopes in places (marked on the trail map); typical walk around the gardens 1.5–2 km
- Ponds and streams and small bridges unfenced
- Assistance dogs only
- Trail map available

High Beeches Garden is managed by a Conservation Trust. The gardens may be of particular interest to families with children with autism, because they are often quiet and only assistance dogs are allowed. The gardens are only open in the afternoons, but this is not a large site, so there is plenty of time to walk around. Explain to your children that many of the plants here were collected by 'plant hunters' who travelled the world collecting wild plants. Plants were sometimes selected for the colour of their foliage or flowers, and sometimes for their fragrance. So for children with autism who are fascinated by different colours, or children who find the fragrance of plants particularly soothing, High Beeches should offer a very positive experience.

Daffodils flower in early spring, followed by drifts of Bluebells in the woodland glades; in summer, the wildflower meadow is white with Oxeye Daisies, and hidden amongst these are beautiful Common Spotted-orchids. The more exotic flowers of rhododendrons also bring a splash of colour to the gardens in late spring. Autumn is also a good time of year to visit High Beeches, as the gardens are well known for their autumn colour. Leaves of so many shades of red, orange, yellow and green can be collected from the woodland floor. Children with autism might find it fun to make a crown of autumn leaves, to wear on their head. Simply take a strip of card, about 3 cm wide, and stick the two ends together to fit your child's head. Then put a strip of double-sided sticky tape around this, and your child can stick different coloured leaves to the crown as they walk around. Or they may just enjoy picking up handfuls of coloured leaves and throwing them up into the air...

www.highbeeches.com/index.php





“I made pictures with flower petals and bark”



From junction 11 of the M23, follow signs to Handcross, Nymans is immediately south of Handcross along the B2114; it can also be reached from the Handcross exit of the A23 (TQ263294)

- Metrobus services from Crawley, Brighton, Burgess Hill and Hurstpierpoint stop nearby (see Metrobus website)
- Car park free; admission charge for the gardens and house (free for carers of autistic children and children under five), opening times on website; no charge for woodland walks
- Toilets and café by the entrance, toilets in the gardens
- Terrain: easy walking paths in the gardens (typical walk 1.5 km), with accessible route; woodland walks may be very soft and muddy in places, with steeper slopes and steps in places (1.6 to 4 km); mobility buggy tours
- Ponds, stream and lake in woodland unfenced
- Guide dogs only in the gardens, dogs may be off lead in woodland
- Trail maps available at Visitor Reception, including children's adventure map of gardens; explorer trails for children in school holidays

Nymans

formal gardens, a quiet 'wild' garden and extensive woodland to explore...

Nymans is a National Trust property with formal gardens and a pinetum, a wild garden and longer, more challenging woodland walks. A leaflet available at the Visitor Reception guides you along the Nymans Adventure trail through the pinetum, to the house at the far end of the gardens. At the start, there is a large area of grass to run around on, and a small temple where families can sit quietly and take in the views across the High Weald. As you follow the trail, you will find a place to stand quietly to see how many sounds you can hear. Look out for the Giant Redwood tree nearby. Once in the gardens, there is colour, space to run around and places to hide, such as the bamboo jungle. There are lichen encrusted seats to sit and talk or read stories. The gardens are colourful throughout the year, particularly in autumn, as the seasonal colour develops and the heath garden bursts into flower. Ask your children to collect leaves of as many colours as they can. On sunny autumn days, the heathers can be alive with butterflies such as Red Admiral and Comma. On the first weekend of every month there are free ARTventure drop-in workshops for children in the garden studio. For children with more severe disabilities there is an easy access path around the gardens.

Across the road from the formal gardens is the 'wild' garden. Far fewer people visit this area, so it will suit some children with



autism. This area is delightful, particularly in spring when first the daffodils, and then the Bluebells come into flower. You will find other woodland flowers here too, such as Primrose and Wood Anemone, alongside planted magnolias and rhododendrons. Your children could collect fallen flower petals, pine cones and leaves to make artwork, such as that illustrated opposite.

For more adventurous children, there are more challenging woodland walks. The shortest of these is just 1.6 km, and takes you through very pleasant ancient woodland; the track descends about 50 m in elevation. If you take a short detour into Pookchurch Wood in spring, you will be rewarded with carpets of bluebells and other woodland flowers. The Millennium Walk via Pookchurch Wood descends further into the valley bottom (a further 25 m elevation). Along the way, Coastal Redwoods and the tallest tree in Sussex – a Giant Redwood – tower over you. The tallest is 50 m, but your children may be amazed to learn that in California, they grow to twice this height! Their deep red bark is surprisingly soft, and children with autism may enjoy touching this. In the valley bottom you will discover a quiet lake, once a hammer pond created for the iron industry, and a small bridge with a series of weirs. Close by, a chestnut bird hide offers an opportunity to look for wildlife by the lake. If your children like gadgets and hunting for treasure – borrow a GPS device from the Visitor Reception, and seek out six treasure boxes (Geocaches) along the Millennium Walk. The longer Centenary Walk takes you beyond the Lake, along ancient trackways which are steep and very muddy in places.

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/nymans/





“pond dipping is exciting”



Just off the A2037 between Henfield and Small Dole; take the minor road (Horn Lane) signposted Woods Mill, and the car park is immediately on the right (TQ218138)

- No public transport
- Free admission and car park, open every day except for two weeks at Christmas
- Toilets suitable for disabled visitors in the car park
- Picnic area close to the car park
- Terrain: all weather path and boardwalk around the lake (circular route approximately 850 m); some of the woodland and meadow paths may be muddy after wet weather (circular walk around whole reserve including the meadows approximately 1.5 km)
- Lake and several ponds with very low guard rail
- Cattle may be grazing in meadows at certain times of the year
- Registered assistance dogs only
- Information boards with trail map

Woods Mill

a quiet nature reserve...

Woods Mill is the headquarters of Sussex Wildlife Trust, set in a nature reserve with a variety of different habitats to explore, including woodland, meadows, a lake, a stream and several ponds. It is an important education facility, and in term time, school children visit almost every weekday, especially in the spring and summer months. You can read about some of the educational activities on offer in Part 3, where we write about the visit of a class of children with autism from Palatine Primary School. Pond dipping is especially popular with schools, and this is sometimes available at weekends. Visitors interested in pond dipping at the weekends should ring the main reception before visiting (01273 492630) to check if the activity is available. If not, Sussex Wildlife Trust Wardens usually offer other activities such as clay modelling or making wooden name discs.

An all weather path takes you from the old water mill by the car park, around the lake and reedbed, into woodland. This is a relatively short, level walk of 850 m or so, but there is a lot of wildlife to experience. In late April, May and early June your child may hear the beautiful song of a Nightingale, coming from deep within the hedgerow. Nightingales can be very difficult to see, but if the trees are late to come into leaf, you might be lucky enough to see the bird itself. Many other birds will be singing too, for example, Willow Warblers, Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps compete in the spring chorus. As the days lengthen, and summer arrives,



damselflies and dragonflies may seem to be everywhere along this trail. Larger dragonflies such as Southern Hawker and Migrant Hawker patrol the paths, hawking for insects, whilst the more delicate 'blue' damselflies and the brilliant metallic Beautiful and Banded Demoiselles flutter along the stream and lakeside. It can be fun for children to see how many different 'dragons' they can find. At this time of year, there are fewer flowers in the woodland, but visit in spring and you will find the woodland floor is carpeted with flowers; delicate white Wood Anemones in April, followed by more familiar Bluebells in early May.

Some children may enjoy walking or running through the open meadows, where cattle may be grazing at certain times of the year. The grass may be tall in early summer, but a path is usually mown to guide you through. The grassland here is not as rich in wildflowers as some places described in this guide, but you should still see butterflies such as Meadow Brown, Gatekeeper and skippers. Remember to point out to your children the steep scarp face of the South Downs, which dominates the skyline just a mile or so to the south of Woods Mill.

www.sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/reserves/page00028.htm





“the meadows were full of flowers”



From the A27 at Westdene, Brighton, take the minor road northeast towards Poynings, after 2 miles where the road turns sharply right, take the side road to the main car park (TQ258109); if you continue along the Poynings road, there are smaller car parks after 0.7 miles (TQ269110) and 1 mile, opposite Saddlescombe Farm (TQ270114)

- Bus service from Brighton daily in summer, and weekends and bank holidays at other times of the year
- Free admission, reserve open daily, main car park is pay and display, smaller car parks are free
- Toilets and pub by the main car park
- Terrain: areas around the car parks are relatively level, and allow views of the Weald and Devil's Dyke itself; other footpaths may involve steep slopes; the paths may be undulating and muddy during wet periods; typical circular walk from the main car park avoiding steep slopes is 1.5 km
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Livestock grazing at certain times of the year
- Information board near the main car park

Devil's Dyke

long walks on the roof of West Sussex...

Devil's Dyke, managed by the National Trust, offers an opportunity for great views across the Low Weald for those families for whom walking uphill to reach a viewpoint would be too challenging. From the main car park, you only have to walk for 200 m or so to the north, to enjoy outstanding views. John Constable described this as “the grandest view in the world”. If you head south from the car park for 100 m, there are equally good views down the dry valley of the ‘Devil's Dyke’ itself. Remember to explain to your children that this is now a ‘dry valley’, but it was formed during the last Ice Age, not by the ice itself, but by vast amounts of melt water running off the South Downs. Your children may be impressed that water can carve out such a spectacular valley! A footpath runs northeast along the valley side, descending by just 20 m over a distance of 560 m. This path allows you to enjoy the landscape of the Devil's Dyke without walking too far, or negotiating any steep paths. At this point, you can retrace your steps, or turn left and follow a short, but steeper path which takes you back to the summit, and then to the car park (a circular walk of 1.5 km).

Alternatively, more adventurous and energetic families may choose to continue along the side of the valley, following the path down to the foot of the scarp, a descent of a further 100 m elevation, which is steep in places (a distance of 1.2 km from the car park). From here, you can return along the valley floor of the Devil's Dyke, or take a shorter, but much steeper route back up the scarp



slope, ascending 125 m over just 500 m. In the summer, the chalk grassland of the Devil's Dyke is rich in wildflowers. If you have a wildflower guide, look out for the bright yellow flowers of Rock Rose, the deep pink flower buds of Dropwort which open to reveal feathery white flowers. There are orchids here too, such as the distinctive Pyramidal Orchid, so-called because of the pyramid-shaped head of pink flowers, and the taller, more obvious spikes of Common Spotted-orchid. You will also see a variety of chalk grassland butterflies, such as Marbled White, Adonis Blue and Small Heath.

If you park in the small car park opposite Saddlescombe Farm, you can walk along the other side of Devil's Dyke, or cross the road to explore Newtimber Hill to the north, which is much quieter than the area around the main car park. The lower slopes of the hill afford excellent views of the Devil's Dyke. Sit amongst the profusion of wildflowers with your children, and perhaps read a story, or have a picnic.

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/devils-dyke/

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/saddlescombe-farm-and-newtimber-hill/



Rock Rose



Dropwort



“I enjoyed walking along the fallen tree trunks”



Butcher's Wood is located 400 m south of Hassocks Station; access via a public footpath alongside the railway line, which can also be accessed from Clayton Avenue and Ockenden Way to the south of the B2116 (the wood is at TQ302149)

- Buses and trains to Hassocks
- Free admission, reserve open daily; limited parking in the residential area to the north of the wood
- No facilities; toilets in Hassocks next to Adastra Hall on the B2116, about 0.25 miles east of the Station Approach
- Terrain: mostly flat, but trails can be muddy and waterlogged during wet periods
- Dogs may be encountered off lead

Butcher's Wood

woodland walks so close to town...

Butcher's Wood is a relatively small wood (7 ha), owned by the Woodland Trust. It is perhaps of greatest interest to families living locally, in the Hurstpierpoint, Burgess Hill and Haywards Heath area. The wood is located on the edge of Hassocks village, and can be reached via a public footpath alongside the railway embankment. The footpath climbs gently, although the terrain in the wood is flat, making it easy to walk around. During periods of wet weather, some of the internal woodland paths can become very muddy. Despite its size, Butcher's Wood is ancient in origin – at least 400 years old – and has a rich diversity of woodland plants. Perhaps the best time to visit is in spring, when Bluebells are flowering. Children with autism may delight in searching for posies of pastel yellow Primroses along the trails, and other woodland flowers such as Greater Stitchwort and the white, starry flowers of Wild Garlic. In springtime, you may detect the sweet scent of Wild Garlic before you come across the actual plants. Try crushing a small piece of leaf for your child, but the smell can be especially pungent. As you walk through the wood, you might encounter birds typical of old woodland, such as woodpeckers, Nuthatch and Treecreeper. When you reach the southern boundary, you can extend your walk by following the footpath around a large meadow.

Of particular interest to some children with autism will be the busy London to Brighton railway line which runs alongside the wood and the meadow beyond. At first, as you walk along the footpath from Hassocks village, the trains are out of sight, but when you reach Butcher's Wood, the trains are clearly visible. The passing trains may just prove to be more popular than the woodland itself.

www.visitwoods.org.uk (search for Butcher's Wood under wood name)



Wild Garlic



Treecreeper

©David Kjaer



“I saw a woodpecker fly into its nest hole in a tree”

Costells Wood

woodland for young explorers...

Costells Wood is also owned by the Woodland Trust. From the car park, walk across Scaynes Hill Common to reach the main entrance to the wood, a distance of about 250 m. The Common itself is an interesting fragment of unimproved grassland, which supports a range of wildflowers such as Heath Bedstraw and Common Knapweed. An Information Board at the entrance to the wood shows a network of trails, but in practice a compass might be useful as the trails are not waymarked. However, you may wish to set off on an adventure, and see where the trails take you. If it is important for your child to know where they are, walk along the public footpath along the northern boundary of the wood, perhaps taking short detours into the wood, and retracing your steps. Parents should note that some trails follow, or cross, steep-sided ghylls.

In May, as the delicate white flowers of Wood Anemones die back, patches of Bluebells come into flower throughout the woodland. As you follow the trails, you may come across other woodland flowers, such as the diminutive Yellow Pimpernel, the white flowered Wood Sorrel and nettle-like Yellow Archangels. You can explain to your child that these plants are usually found in woods that are ‘ancient’, and have been present for at least 400 years. As you walk around, listen carefully and you will hear woodland birds; perhaps a Great Spotted Woodpecker drumming on a dead tree trunk or the repetitive “chiff chaff” of the aptly named Chiffchaff as it moves through the canopy. As you walk along the public footpath, look out for a footpath which heads west. When you have explored the wood, you can follow this footpath out of the wood, past paddocks and gardens, and back to the car park.

i From the A272, take the minor road north in Scaynes Hill, signposted Church Road, and the ‘unmarked’ car park is on the left after 0.3 miles (TQ370235)

- Buses to Scaynes Hill from Hayward’s Heath
- Free admission, reserve open daily; small car park (you should also be able to park on Church Road)
- No facilities, toilets in Haywards Heath on Hazelgrove Road (B2112), off the A272 (3 miles)
- Terrain: some steeper slopes (elevation across the wood varies from 50 to 75 m asl); typical walk around the wood 2 km, but many trails to explore (unmarked)
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Information board

www.visitwoods.org.uk (search for Costells Wood under wood name)



©David Kjaer

Great Spotted Woodpecker



“I had a close encounter with a Pheasant”



On the B2028 just south of Turners Hill (TQ342316)

- Buses from Crawley and Haywards Heath (Monday to Saturday) pass the railway station in Haywards Heath
- Large car park free; admission charge for the gardens (free for carers of children with autism and all children under 17); open daily from 10.00 am except Christmas Eve and Christmas Day
- Visitor Centre with café and shop; restaurant nearby
- Adapted toilets in the Visitor Centre, by the restaurant and in the Millennium Building
- Terrain: gardens with hard surface and gravel paths; more extensive gardens, woodland and meadows have steep slopes and steps; garden walk can be just a few hundred metres; longer walks to Westwood Lake and Bloomers Valley 3 km (descent to the lake is 70 m in elevation)
- Manual wheelchairs at the Visitor Centre (subject to availability)
- Ponds and lakes unfenced
- Assistance dogs only
- Children's trails and family guide available in the Visitor Centre
- Free trail map in the Visitor Centre (highlights areas suitable for wheelchairs)

Wakehurst Place

relaxed gardens and woodland walks...

Wakehurst Place is owned by the National Trust, and managed by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. The grounds feature extensive woodland gardens, ponds, natural woodland and meadows. Close to the Visitor Centre is the Millennium Seed Bank, the world's largest seed conservation project. An exhibition describes work to collect and store seeds, and you can look through glass walls to see the Seed Bank staff at work. The seeds of many rare plants are stored in the Seed Bank, a concept which is likely to interest some children with autism.

Although Wakehurst Place is a popular destination with high visitor numbers, it never seems crowded, and it is quite possible to enjoy a relaxed walk with your children. The gardens offer a feast for the senses for many children with autism, without being too overwhelming. Colours change with the seasons, from spring displays of Bluebells and other woodland flowers, to the winter display of cyclamen by the Visitor Centre. In early summer there are Bee Orchids here too. Autumn colour is also impressive at Wakehurst, and some of the Japanese maples have coloured foliage throughout the summer. Wakehurst also has a series of natural play features, starting close to the Visitor Centre with living willow tunnels, which children might enjoy running through. Of particular interest for children with autism is the spiral maze, made up of containers of scented plants, offering a safe place for children to interact with the plants. Close by, there are always a few hungry



ducks and gulls to feed around the Mansion Pond, with Jackdaws and Magpies keen to clear up any leftovers. If you continue past the water garden, with the valley to your right, you will come to a labyrinth of natural spirals, where children can follow a winding brick path through the grass. Your children may also want to explore the water gardens and streams, with the attraction of flowing water and a colourful palette of foliage and flowers. An information post by the bog garden provides descriptions of some of the dragonflies and damselflies which populate the area in the summer months.

If you continue your walk down the wooded valley, you will eventually reach Westwood Lake, although the descent past the Himalayan Garden becomes much steeper after the water gardens. Returning through Horsebridge Wood and Bloomers Valley, the incline is gentler, although the final path up to the Millennium Building is quite steep, past sandstone walls covered with tree roots, mosses and lichens. Along the woodland edge you will find Bluebells in spring and Foxgloves in summer, and the meadows of Bloomers Valley are being restored to their former glory by sowing seed of native wildflowers. Just before the Millennium Seed Bank, look out for the stepping logs to your left which many children with autism will enjoy.

www.kew.org/visit-wakehurst/index.htm

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/wakehurst-place/





“I had a lot of fun building a den”



Signposted from East Grinstead town centre, and from the B2110 just south west of the town (TQ389356)

- Metrobus service from East Grinstead to Crawley stops at the end of the drive (500 m walk down the drive, which is a narrow lane also serving other properties)
- Car park for National Trust members and paying visitors; admission charge for the gardens and house (free for carers of children with autism and children under five), check website for opening times
- Toilets and café by the entrance; compost toilets in the Plantation play area
- Picnic area close to car park
- Terrain: easy walking paths in the gardens (typical walk 1 km), with some steps; moderate slope from lower car park, though disabled parking spaces avoid this; wider countryside walks may be soft and muddy, with moderate slopes and steps in places
- Several small ponds unfenced
- Dogs required to be kept on leads in the garden
- Map of garden and walks in the wider countryside can be purchased from visitor reception

Standen

so many possibilities for adventures...

Standen is a National Trust property with friendly, helpful staff, which you may wish to return to again and again. If you head first to the Apple Store, close to visitor reception, you will find a large map of the grounds, and various activity leaflets and games. There really are some lovely traditional games here which you can take out and play with on the lawns, including bottle fishing, skittles, quoits and the intriguingly named ‘beanbag duckstone’. For younger children there are skipping ropes and coloured bricks. There are also clipboards with a spotter trail, which should suit many children with autism because it helps them to find various plants, objects and views around the grounds using photographs and various colouring sheets.

Having looked at the map with your child, your first stop might be the Plantation adventure play area (300 m from the Apple Store, including steps). On your way, stop in the sun house along the west terrace, for a spectacular view across Weir Wood Reservoir and Ashdown Forest. The play area itself is a great place for adventures; there are opportunities for climbing and the area is dominated by the ‘higgledy piggledy fence’ and a den building area. You may spend some time here! Afterwards, you could explore the gardens, which are more formally laid out, but there are lots of opportunities to run around. If your child likes bold colours, then the flower borders should be a delight. Later in the summer,



butterflies such as Red Admiral and Comma are attracted to the flower borders. There are beehives in the orchard and kitchen garden, so you should be aware that if your child fears bees, some of the flowers will be 'buzzing' with activity. There are also lots of places to sit and talk, or maybe read a story. Close to the house, a very small quarry has been incorporated into the garden, but if you go into this area, there are some steep and slippery steps; and if your child has any concerns about heights, avoid the short footbridge over the quarry.

Another surprise for younger children is the Sixpenny Room, next to the Conservatory. This really is a delightful little room, up a small flight of steps, where the children of the house used to play. Here there are traditional toys for younger children, such as a doll in a wooden cradle, hats to dress up in and a Rupert Annual. For many children with autism, visiting the play area and exploring the gardens may be more than enough for one day. However, if you still have some energy, consider one of six waymarked walks around the wider estate. The shortest walks are around Hollybush Wood (1.5 km) and Rockinghill Wood (1.25 km), but much longer walks take you down to Weir Wood Reservoir and the Bluebell Railway. Note only visitors to the house and gardens may use the car park. To save having to request a carers free entry, an 'Access for All Admit One Card' is available for all National Trust properties (see website article below).

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/standen/

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/article-1356394063324/



Educational Access Farms

experience farming in West Sussex...

In addition to the natural places described in this guide, Natural England has set up Educational Access agreements with farmers, which helps them to provide opportunities for schools to visit farms to learn more about the countryside, farming and where our food comes from. There may be opportunities to see livestock farming in action, wildlife or historic landscape features. Although this scheme is mostly aimed at schools, families and other groups may be able to visit by arrangement with individual farmers. Farms may have a teachers' information pack and/or Farm Fact Leaflets for other groups. Search for West Sussex on Natural England's Educational Access webpage to find a list of Educational Access Farms and their locations. Each farm has a separate page on the website, describing what there is to see and do. Information presented includes: farm activities, facilities, wildlife, other features and conservation on the farm. Contact details for the farmer are also provided. Another useful website relating to farm visits is 'Let nature feed your senses', a Big Lottery funded project run by the Sensory Trust and LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming). You can learn about historic rural life, visit rescued farm buildings and see traditional rare breeds at the Weald & Downland Open Air Museum near Chichester. The Museum is set in 20 hectares of farmland, orchards, woodland and gardens (admission charges apply).

Educational Access Farms: <http://cwr.naturalengland.org.uk/educational-access.aspx>

Let nature feed your senses: www.letnaturefeedyoursenses.org/letnature/home.eb

Weald & Downland Open Air Museum: www.wealddown.co.uk/



Part 3 Case Stories

In Part 2, we focused on natural places in West Sussex which families with children on the autistic spectrum might enjoy visiting. Here, we present a series of case stories, about visits to the countryside by small groups of school children with autism, accompanied by their teachers. Six visits were arranged by Autism and Nature in the summer of 2013, with three schools in West Sussex. Palatine Primary School in Worthing caters for pupils aged 4 to 11, with a range of special educational needs, many of whom have autism. Manor Green Primary School in Crawley caters for pupils aged 2 to 11, all of whom have learning difficulties and additional needs, including some children with autism. St Anthony's School in Chichester is an all-age special school designated for pupils with moderate learning difficulties, which takes pupils with a range of increasingly complex needs. It has a specialist department with five classes for pupils aged 5 to 11 years with autism.

Each school visit was accompanied by teachers, staff from Autism and Nature, and led by Education Officers from one of our conservation partners: the RSPB, Natural England and Sussex Wildlife Trust. All three of the sites visited by schools are featured in Part 2 of this guide. The length of the visits varied from 2 to 4 hours, and all included a packed lunch.

The primary purpose of these visits was to give children with autism and related disorders the opportunity to engage with the natural environment during outdoor learning sessions. The visits were also designed to demonstrate some of the benefits for the children's learning, the development of social skills and their personal well-being. As the visits were led by Education Officers, teachers had more of a support role, allowing them the opportunity to watch and see what their children were doing more objectively. They were also able to learn more about the natural environment, and outdoor activities, giving them more confidence to take their pupils out into the countryside in the future. The teachers completed a short questionnaire after each visit, providing valuable comments on the children's experiences and the ways in which the children benefited from engaging with the natural environment. The case stories which follow describe the visits and the activities which the children took part in, and the observations of the teachers and Education Officers.



Years 3–6 visit Pulborough Brooks RSPB Reserve

A class of six boys and one girl, accompanied by five teachers arrived at Pulborough Brooks on a beautiful spring day, with hardly a cloud in the sky. The children, aged 8 to 11 years old, were all on the autistic spectrum, and some had additional needs and challenging behaviours. They were met in the car park by Sue Gee (RSPB) and David Blakesley (Autism and Nature). The children were taken first to a viewpoint close to the Visitor Centre, overlooking the flooded meadows of the Arun Valley. The children sat on the grass to have a snack, which allowed them time to settle. They then had the rare opportunity to see Slow Worms, hiding under a piece of corrugated metal, carefully lifted by Sue. Everyone then walked a short distance into nearby woodland, to an area surrounded by a low wooden fence. Sue had several activities prepared, which some of the more able children were able to complete with the help of a teacher. These included opening different coloured envelopes to reveal a card with a one word instruction to find something hard, soft, spongy and so on. The children were also given small soft toys, including a squirrel and a hedgehog, and set the task of building a small shelter out of twigs, again with the help of a teacher. However, it was the opportunity to explore the woodland in safety, walk along fallen branches and even climb a tree which many of the children particularly seemed to enjoy. These were not ‘planned’ activities, but the children were allowed plenty of time, to encourage them to engage with the woodland in this way.



Everyone then went for a walk, past the Visitor Centre and down the 'zigzag' path to an area known as the courtyard. Here the children sat for a while on benches, one child collected sticks while several children socialised with the teachers and each other. The air was filled with the song of Nightingales. The children then returned to the Visitor Centre for lunch, before spending some time in the play area. There was no doubt that all the children were relaxed, and enjoyed exploring the various climbing frames and rope bridges. One child was happy to sit on the wooden tractor, with another in the trailer behind. The children willingly moved to the adjacent pond, and they sat patiently with the teachers, as Sue showed them how to use a fishing net safely, and how to transfer pond animals from the net into a tray of water without hurting them. Several children were genuinely excited as Sue transferred a dragonfly nymph into a plastic container to show them. They each had an opportunity to use a net, and caught a range of aquatic creatures. Finally, the children returned to the play area, where some enjoyed an ice cream.

All the children clearly loved the natural environment at Pulborough Brooks. The visit was particularly successful because the children were allowed to explore at their own level and at their own pace, which they were keen to do. The teachers noticed that some children demonstrated increased independence during the visit, and all showed good waiting and listening skills, especially later in the day by the pond. The children coped well with the different environments, and all benefited from the relaxed atmosphere of the visit. Two children were seen to interact with each other for the first time, which was pleasing. The teachers were genuinely surprised by three of the children, who demonstrated problem solving and sharing to a much greater degree than expected. Overall, the children were less anxious than in school, and consequently showed less of the behaviours associated with their anxieties. In the more relaxed outdoor atmosphere, it was possible to give the children more time to process instructions. Sue was able to adapt the day's programme to the specific needs of the children, and this was appreciated by the teachers. Later, one parent commented that her child had talked about the day, using limited language, which was an amazing achievement.



Years 3–6 visit Woods Mill Nature Reserve

A few weeks later, the same class, with one additional child and accompanied by seven teachers, visited Woods Mill Nature Reserve. The minibuses were met by Katie Parker and her small team of volunteers from Sussex Wildlife Trust, and David Blakesley. Several children were unsettled when they arrived, so it was felt that a walk, followed by a snack would settle everyone. The group followed a trail through the wood, occasionally stopping to walk on fallen logs. They came across a piece of string tied between four trees, making a square. Here, children are usually asked to close their eyes, and follow the string, pretending to be Badgers in the night. Our children did not understand the aim of the activity, but they did follow the string, and all went round a second time. Close by was a living willow tunnel, which most of the children were keen to explore. Some sat quietly while one of the volunteers showed them tactile objects from the wood, such as ‘soft’ moss, ‘tickly’ grass and ‘sticky’ plants. The children then enjoyed following flat ‘stepping stones’ through an Alder grove; some walked on their own, some ran, while others walked with the support of an adult. This gentle stroll through the wood was an excellent way for the children to adjust to their new surroundings, after which they returned to the classroom for a quick snack.

Katie had several woodland activities planned before lunch. Some children were keen to sift through trays of woodland soil with a plastic spoon, looking for animals such as worms and woodlice. Others enjoyed smelling fragrant plants collected from the nearby garden while several children preferred to explore their surroundings. Another child clearly enjoyed looking at pictures of plants and animals. Everyone then followed the boardwalk to a platform by a pond. Again the children were given some time to take in the atmosphere. It was rewarding



to see one child playfully interacting with his teacher; five children sat on a bench, two of them playing together. One of the volunteers asked if the children knew the song 'Five little speckled frogs'. The children sat down with their teachers in a circle, and with the help of the teachers, the song was performed. This was very popular, and the performance was repeated.

After lunch in the classroom, the children returned to the wood for a short session of pond dipping. It was notable that some remembered what was involved from their visit to Pulborough, heading straight for the fishing nets. The teachers were pleased with one of the children who understood that different living things are found in different places e.g. worms in the ground and tadpoles in the pond. More activities were available, but the teachers felt that the children would benefit more from the opportunity to explore the stepping stone area again, before their journey back to school.

When asked whether any children completed any targets during the session, the teachers commented that all the children were able to listen and respond to things shown to them. Some reached the target of joining in with activities focused on a specific environment, such as finding the minibeasts in the tray of soil and collecting objects and materials around them. The teachers were particularly interested in activities which stimulated the children's senses; the differences and similarities between natural things such as soft moss and grass, and hard wood, bark and stones were explored; and the children listened to birdsong and leaves rustling in the breeze. The teachers were pleased that two children were relaxed with the unfamiliar adults, and remained with the group for most of the day. One child, who travelled separately was not expected to stay for the whole session, but was clearly happy in the nature reserve, and left only minutes before the other children. This child showed good social skills and better concentration and tolerance than was expected. The teachers commented "it was wonderful for the pupils to have this opportunity to learn through being outside; it gives them a broader view of the world than learning in a classroom and helps them to make more sense of the world they live in".



Years 3–6 visit Kingley Vale National Nature Reserve

A few weeks later, the same class of seven children, accompanied by six teachers, made a short, early afternoon visit to Kingley Vale near Chichester. The visit was led by Joanna Carter, Natural England's Community Outreach Advisor. Before the visit, the class teacher had suggested to Joanna that the first activity should be a walk, to give the children an opportunity to get used to their new surroundings, and a chance to relax. This had been successful at the previous visit to Woods Mill, where some of the children had been quite agitated upon arrival, probably as a consequence of visiting a new place. However, it was reassuring to see that after arriving in the car park at Kingley Vale, all the children were able sit quietly under a shady tree, waiting for the walk to commence. Accompanied by David Blakesley, the group walked up the 1 km gravel track to the nature reserve, where Joanna was waiting. The teachers felt that the children would benefit most from the walk if they were not expected to take part in any activities, so they were allowed to walk at their own pace, interacting with the teachers, and enjoying the fields, hedgerows and rolling countryside.

The walk took a little longer than expected, so when the group arrived at the nature reserve, Joanna laid out a large tarpaulin under the trees and everyone had lunch. The children were again very settled and some explored the surrounding woodland when they finished their lunch. Two children were attracted to a nearby ring of tree stumps, set out like stepping stones. One of the children enjoyed leaping from one tree trunk to another. One of the teachers worked with the other child, to encourage him to step down, or jump from the stump on which he was standing. After many words of encouragement, and holding just one of the teacher's fingers for support, he found the confidence to do this, which was rewarding to watch. Another child was interested to explore the texture of the bark on a nearby oak tree with his fingers.



After lunch, the children spent about 40 minutes in the woodland, before it was time to walk back down the track. The teacher commented that the children all have very short attention spans, and would not understand many verbal explanations. These children respond best to simple instructions such as “look”, “touch” or “hold”, and activities which are sensory based. Joanna gave them each a magnifying glass, which most understood was something to look through, and several children used it appropriately to look at leaves, although only briefly. Joanna then took the children to one of the many ancient Yew trees in the woodland at Kingley Vale. There was an opportunity for the children to collect bugs from the leaf litter, and to observe them in small plastic jars with magnifying glass in the lids. Several children showed some interest in this, helped by their teachers, but most preferred to explore their surroundings. One boy was happy to investigate the leaf litter, getting quite dusty in the process.

The extreme age of the Yew trees (some are as old as 2,000 years) may not have been appreciated by the children, however, with strong boughs sweeping down to the ground, one of the trees seemed destined to be climbed. Three children took up the challenge, one making particularly good progress. The teacher commented that the children were ‘problem solving’ as they carefully made their way up the tree.

All too soon it was time to return to the minibuses, and the group walked slowly down the track in hot sunshine – a dramatic contrast to the cool of the yew woodland. The teachers commented that all the children were very relaxed and tolerant of each other during the visit, which is not normally the case. One child who is extremely sensitive to noise, was much more tolerant of the noises made by the other children, than he would normally be in the classroom. Overall, the teachers commented on how well the children worked cooperatively together, pointing out how happy the children are when they have the freedom to roam, climb and run in the natural environment... “it is when they are most at ease”.



Years 4–6 visit Kingley Vale National Nature Reserve

A class of twelve children, accompanied by one teacher and four support staff arrived at Kingley Vale on a cloudy, cool spring day. The children travelled in cars, and some waited very patiently while the teacher drove the short distance back to the school to collect their friends. The children were selected from Years 4 to 6 (8 to 10 years old), all had some speech and language difficulties, and most were on the autistic spectrum. They were met in the car park by Joanna Carter and David Blakesley. The children sat on the grass, while Joanna asked them to think of an animal which began with the initial letter of their first names, and might live in the nature reserve. The children enjoyed thinking of names, from an Earwig to a Jaguar. Joanna then explained that whilst walking to the nature reserve along the farm track, they could make a crown of leaves, using a strip of card with double-sided tape. All the children were keen to take part, and as they walked, they collected leaves from as many different plants as they could. Some of the children wore their crowns all morning.

Once in the nature reserve, Joanna pointed out different tree species, and when she then called out the name of a tree, the children had to run to touch the right one. This was a popular game, and the children were clearly very excited. After a snack, Joanna told the children about the Gruffalo Nature Hunt she had planned (inspired by the popular monster story by Julia Donaldson). The children sang the Gruffalo song, before Joanna read the story to a rapt audience. The nature hunt then began, and the children enthusiastically searched for the mouse, fox, snake and the Gruffalo itself, hidden in the wood. When they found the fox, Joanna asked them to pick up a piece of chalk and write on a tree. When they discovered the snake, there was an opportunity to look for creatures that live under logs, such as woodlice, slugs and spiders. The children were given small plastic jars with a magnifying glass in the lids. After a while,



everyone sat in a circle and Joanna asked each child what they had discovered. But the Gruffalo was still to be found – it was hiding in a Yew tree. The children sat quietly again, as Joanna talked about the great age of the Yew trees (up to 2,000 years old) and legends which surround the trees. The children then had to identify the oldest tree, with the biggest trunk, which they did by seeing how many children it took to surround each tree trunk. The oldest tree had a girth of 14 children. One child remarked that “it was more exciting than I thought it would be”. This comment seemed to reflect the feelings of the group. The teacher commented that as the nature hunt was based on a book that the pupils were familiar with, they were mostly able to complete the tasks and participate fully in the activities. Without this prior knowledge, they may have found the tasks more challenging to engage with.

After lunch, there was just time for making animals out of clay, or a run around the story trail with one of the teachers. Some of those who ran would not normally choose to be more physically active. Half of the group then headed back to the car park while the remaining children sat in the field centre and listened to another Gruffalo story. Everyone then had a pleasant stroll back to the car park in the sunshine. The teacher commented that Kingley Vale is magical, and that it was highly beneficial to see the group participate fully in the activities and enjoy the outdoors, enhancing their self esteem, confidence and ability to work well in an unfamiliar environment. She saw examples of behaviour which was very encouraging, for example: one child ate sandwiches, which was a huge move forward; one child in particular waited his turn to tell a joke at lunchtime and made sure that everyone listened to his joke; and another child recalled a myth told by Joanna, to his parents, who were very impressed and let the school know about this. The visit also gave the teachers a valuable opportunity to see the problems two pupils have outdoors; one with unfamiliar situations, and both with interactions with unfamiliar adults, despite strategies which work in school. Overall, all the children enjoyed the session, and all said they would like to visit again.



Years 4–6 visit Pulborough Brooks RSPB

Six children with autism, accompanied by three teachers, arrived at Pulborough Brooks on a misty, but mild autumn day. Before the visit, a teacher mentioned that the children were learning about houses and homes, and asked for the session to be pitched at Key Stage 1 level. Three of the children who visited Kingley Vale were joined by three children new to the class (Years 4 to 6). Although the children are anxious in unfamiliar places, doing new things, they were clearly excited as Sue Gee and David Blakesley described the day's activities. After a quick snack, the children went on a short nature walk to nearby woodland. En route they saw spiders' webs covered in dew, lots of blackberries and the largest toadstools anyone had ever seen. On reaching a low fenced enclosure in the woodland, Sue asked the children to close their eyes and listen. It was pleasing that all the children were aware of the birdsong around them. Sue then gave the children a 'kit' to hunt for minibeasts, including a magnifying container, soft brush and white cloth. With adult support, the hunt for millipedes, centipedes and wood lice was underway. The children were allowed plenty of time for this activity. One child called Sue and David repeatedly to help, and look at his finds. He discovered that many creatures hide under logs, or live in rotten wood. After a while, some children preferred to explore the woodland, or build small shelters for soft toy animals. The teachers commented that the pupils really enjoyed being in the enclosure and the freedom it gave them to explore was brilliant.

The children were then each given a 'journey stick' with six elastic bands on it, to attach items they found on the walk back. The children collected acorns, small pine cones, leaves, lichens and feathers amongst other things. The adults were very impressed with the results, and the children took their journey sticks back to school. Later, the teachers remarked that the children were really proud of their journey sticks, and it gave them the opportunity to find



things they were interested in. After lunch, Sue showed everyone the skin of a Grass Snake, which was unfortunately too delicate for the children to hold. There was then time to explore the adventure playground. This was a great chance for the children to try new equipment and do things they would not normally do, for example going through a tunnel and climbing over the top of a climbing frame. Several children were encouraged to play together. After 15 minutes or so, it was time to move on, but first, each child had a 'lucky dip' into a bag of fluffy birds which sing when pressed. This brought big smiles to the children's faces. Along the short walk to the pond, everyone sat under a shady tree to sing a song, and explored a living willow shelter.

When Sue announced the pond dipping session, the children cheered in excitement. They sat quietly whilst Sue explained how to pond dip in safety. Each child had a go with a net, with the help of Sue or one of the teachers. Twelve different animal species were caught, including huge dragonfly nymphs, water boatmen, ramshorn snails and mayflies. So many animals, in fact, that it was impossible to count them. The children used special magnifying containers to study the smaller creatures. This was a relaxed session, with plenty of time allowed for the children to have several goes if they wished. When it was time to go, the children thanked Sue and David. Learning about the places where terrestrial and aquatic minibeasts live fitted in really well with the children's lessons at school.

The teachers were really happy with the day, and they commented that the children had talked about it for many days afterwards, often looking at photographs put on display. They were very pleased that one pupil coped surprisingly well in the wood, and throughout the day, even though he is very afraid of dogs, and becomes anxious in places they may be, and in new spaces generally. Another pupil managed to listen to and follow instructions well, which he usually finds challenging. Three pupils in particular made progress towards improving listening skills, working independently and taking part in structured outside activities, and one pupil displayed a great deal of knowledge about nature. Overall, this was an excellent visit, which benefited all of the children.



Larch Class visit Pulborough Brooks RSPB Reserve

Larch class teacher James Harvey made a pre-visit to Pulborough Brooks, and was shown around by Sue Gee (RSPB). Sue learned about the special needs of the children and James reviewed the activities on offer, and commented on the places where his class might be taken. Larch class had been reading *Wind in the Willows*, so this was adopted as the theme for the visit. Nine children with autism or related special needs, accompanied by three teachers, arrived on a glorious summer's morning. On the short walk to the Visitor Centre, one child asked David Blakesley if this was a nature walk... the child knew about nature walks, having seen one once before on a children's TV programme. At the Visitor Centre, Sue talked about what the children would see and do during the visit; there was genuine excitement on the children's faces, and in their voices.

The class embarked on a leisurely stroll down to the river, a distance of about 1.3 km. At the start of the walk, Sue invited two children to walk with her at the front, to enable her to get to know them better. After a while, these children suggested two of their friends to come to the front. The teachers were pleased that all the children were happy to walk with a peer, and take turns to lead the group. Each child had a clipboard, with a map of the route and sheets illustrating wildlife which they might see, and tick off. They saw willows, appropriate for the theme, and were able to put a tick besides pictures of butterflies, bugs and flowers on their sheets. A few were lucky enough to see deer disappearing into the undergrowth. It was not long before the children seemed to be finding more wildlife than the adults. The teacher commented that one child, often quiet in class, was in his element on the trip. He displayed increased involvement with all activities and was very much more vocal than normal. It



was clear that this child already knew a considerable amount about riverside and woodland habitats and the animals that lived in them. This knowledge may not have been displayed so readily and with such enjoyment in a normal classroom session. When the children reached the river, Sue talked about 'Ratty', and showed a picture of a 'Water Vole', which is difficult to see in the daytime at Pulborough. The children then walked down the river bank, through waist-high grass, with smiles on their faces. Sue had an interesting method to work out which way the river was flowing – with one exception, each child took turns to throw a dog biscuit into the river, and watch it float away. The return walk went through the cool and shady 'Wild Wood', where the children found rabbit burrows in a sandy bank, and looked for a hole which might be home to the Weasels. A very popular activity here was the 'lucky dip', where each child pulled out a fluffy bird from a bag, which sang when pressed. This prompted some very good interaction between the children.

After lunch in the Visitor Centre, there was time for one final activity, pond dipping. The children stood quietly and listened to safety instructions. They worked in two small groups and took turns to use the nets, and caught some fascinating creatures, including newt tadpoles, an adult newt and dragonfly nymphs. The teachers commented that several children have individual targets to listen carefully to instructions, take turns and share appropriately, and this was clearly achieved at the pond, and also the river. Seeing these children thriving socially and educationally on the trip highlighted for the teachers the importance of such visits for children with autism and related conditions. It showed them that well chosen and planned educational visits to the natural environment can bring topics and concepts to life in a meaningful, interactive and hugely enjoyable way. The teachers remarked that the children were impeccably behaved, and due to the calm and quiet environment, they were very relaxed and happy to take part in all of the activities. James said that he had not seen his class behave so well before; they were thoroughly engaged and therefore ready and willing to participate in all aspects of the visit.



Further reading

Popular guides and web resources

- Blakesley, D and Blakesley, T. 2013. *Visiting the East Sussex countryside: a guide for families, children and young people with autism*. Available at: www.autismandnature.org.uk.
- Blakesley, D and Blakesley T. 2013. *Alex and Rosie's Adventures in the East Sussex Countryside*. Available at: www.autismandnature.org.uk.
- Blakesley, D and Payne, S. 2012. *Visiting the Kent countryside: a guide for parents of children with autism*. Available at: www.autismandnature.org.uk.
- Howorth, R. 2012. *Natural attractions: wild walks in the West Weald Landscape*. Sussex Wildlife Trust, Henfield. Available at: www.westweald.org.uk/publications.htm
- Markam, L. 2006. *Kiddiwalks in West Sussex*. Countryside Books, Newbury.
- National Trails. *South Downs Way*. Available at: www.nationaltrail.co.uk/south-downs-way
- Sussex Wildlife Trust. 2007. *Where to see wildlife in Sussex: a visitor's guide to our best nature sites*. Sussex Wildlife Trust, Henfield. (See also www.sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/reserves/index.htm)

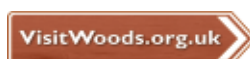
Books, articles and academic research papers

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This book is the third in a series of local guides being produced by Autism and Nature. It is designed to help parents, carers and teachers in West Sussex to engage children on the autistic spectrum with the natural environment. It should also prove useful to those living and working with adults with autism. It begins by introducing some of the benefits of nature and the countryside for children with autism. This is followed by a guide to 'natural' places to visit in the West Sussex countryside, which the authors believe many children with autism might enjoy. Twenty-four natural places are described, all of which are also good for wildlife. The guide concludes with a series of case stories set in West Sussex, which describe visits to the countryside by small groups of school children with autism and related conditions.

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