Exploring the New Forest by bus

This guide is designed to help parents, carers and teachers to engage children with autism and related disabilities with the natural world in the New Forest National Park. It focuses on natural places that can be visited using public transport. It should also prove useful to those living and working with adults with autism. The guide begins by introducing the benefits of visiting the countryside, considering why such experiences are valuable for children with autism. It also provides information on public transport in the New Forest National Park and tips on planning visits. This is followed by a guide to natural places to visit in the New Forest National Park that children with autism might enjoy.

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a guide for families with children with autism

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a guide for parents and teachers of children with autism

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Rich in wildlife and rich in natural habitats, the New Forest National Park is a beautiful place to visit. It is also a wonderful place to engage children with autism and related disabilities with the natural world. The New Forest is also a very popular area, which will become apparent if you drive through the Forest on a summer’s day. However, away from the roads you can walk for mile after mile, across heaths, through ancient woodland, and past bogs and mires, with only the ever present ponies and other animals for company. You can often find peace and quiet, even on a relatively short walk, once you leave behind the hustle and bustle of a New Forest village, or a Forestry Commission car park.

We have written this guide because we are concerned that many children are disconnected with the natural world, especially those with autism and related disabilities. Our guide presents a small selection of natural places to visit in the New Forest that we believe many children with autism might enjoy. All of the natural places featured in this guide can be visited using regular bus services or the seasonal bus services highlighted in the Introduction. There are no specified stops on the seasonal routes, enabling visitors to hop on and off wherever it is safe to do so. The description of each location in the guide should help parents, carers and teachers to judge its suitability for their children. Preparation for a visit to a new place is always important; we hope that the information provided, with the accompanying photographs and illustrations, will make visits to the natural places featured as relaxed and enjoyable as possible, so that the restorative benefits can be appreciated by all.

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Part 1 Introduction

This guide aims to help families and schools caring for children with autism or related disabilities to engage with the natural world in the New Forest National Park. For families who do not own a car, we have carefully selected natural places that can be reached by public transport. All our locations are accessible by bus, with Lymington also accessible by train. For those who do own a car, the choice of locations offers the opportunity for families to travel car-free, if their child is comfortable using public transport. In this way, transport can become part of the adventure. Public transport also takes the stress away from driving and parking for parents and carers, it can be easy and convenient for some destinations, and some services offer discounts to popular attractions, such as Buckler’s Hard, featured in this guide. Directions to car parks are also included in the guide for times when public transport is not available, and for those children for whom using public transport presents difficulties. Further information on helping a child to cope with public transport can be found on the Ambitious About Autism website (www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/understanding-autism/out-and-about/).

Visitors and residents are encouraged to travel to and around the National Park car-free by walking, cycling, or using the bus or train, to reduce the stress on the landscape and reduce congestion and carbon emissions. The southern part of the New Forest National Park in particular is well served by public transport, with a range of transport options, including regular bus and coach services, seasonal open top bus services, community transport and rail.
Getting around

‘Traveline south east and anglia’ has a very helpful map that shows the location of bus stops: on the homepage, enter a destination in the ‘From’ box and click on ‘Map’ to show if there are any bus stops nearby, and if so, hover over the red spots for timetable information. The New Forest Travel Map (www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/travel) provides a summary of public transport options to, and within, the National Park. The New Forest Bus and Rail Timetable, published annually by Hampshire County Council is a very useful source of information. The guide includes timetables and a map showing roads served by buses at least hourly up to seven days a week, roads served by at least three buses per day up to seven days a week and irregular services operating up to six days a week. Buses link destinations in the Forest to places such as Bournemouth, Ringwood, Salisbury and Southampton. Bus operators can change their timetables at any time, so it is worth obtaining the most recent edition of the guide; and when travelling with a child with autism, checking timetables online before leaving home to ensure that the trip goes smoothly. Trains run through the heart of the New Forest, with regular services to Brockenhurst from Basingstoke, Winchester and Southampton; and outside of Hampshire, from London Waterloo, Bournemouth, Poole and Weymouth. Other stations in the New Forest include Ashurst, Beaulieu Road, Hinton Admiral, Lymington, New Milton, Sway and Totton.

In addition to the regular bus services included in the Bus and Rail Timetable, seasonal routes cater for visitors to the Forest in the summer months. The exact seasonal and daily timetables may change from year to year, so the following guide is based on past schedules. The Bluestar 6 (Forest Bus) runs from Southampton to Lymington via Lyndhurst and Brockenhurst; operating an hourly service every day from late May to the end of October. The Beach Bus links Hythe Ferry with Lymington in the south-east corner of the park, operating daily from late July to the end of August. Buses on these routes are able to carry one wheelchair, and dogs are allowed on board. There are specified stops on the various routes, but buses will stop on request anywhere it is safe to do so.

The New Forest Tour operates an hourly service following three circular ‘colour coded’ routes through the Forest; buses go in one direction only, and the routes take from 2 hours to 2 hours 15 minutes. Passengers can hop between routes and use their ticket on the Beach Bus. The green route covers the south-east of the Forest, including the villages of Lymington, Brockenhurst, Lyndhurst and Hythe. The blue route visits the south-west of the Forest, including the coast and the villages of Brockenhurst, Burley, Keyhaven and Lymington. The red route focuses on the central and northern parts of the Forest, including Lyndhurst, Burley, Ringwood and Fordingbridge. Visitors can even bring their bikes with them. Passengers can get on and off the bus at any point along the route where it is safe to do so. This service typically operates daily from the end of June to mid-September (www.thenewforesttour.info). For children with autism who are not used to visiting the countryside, travelling on the open upper deck gives fantastic views of the New Forest countryside, and the ponies and other animals grazing by the roadside; this might tempt them to want to get off the bus for a walk, and make subsequent trips to the forest that much easier. Finally, Community First New Forest operates a community minibus hire service for community groups – visit the webpage for further details (www.cfnf.org.uk).
Benefits of visiting the countryside

Time spent in the countryside, engaging with the natural world can have considerable benefits for people’s health and well-being, especially children. Imagine a walk through New Forest woodland, surrounded by wildflowers and the sound of bird song in spring; butterflies to chase in the summer months and colourful leaves to collect in the autumn. At any time a child might hide behind trees or clamber over fallen logs. Naturalist Stephen Moss has written about how a ‘natural childhood’ can improve children’s health, develop their learning skills and strengthen communities; and the longer term environmental benefits, as our children learn about the natural world and how it needs to be protected for future generations (Moss, 2012).

Much has been written about the benefits of engaging children in general with the natural world. However, children and young people with autism and other special educational needs can also benefit from engaging with the natural world. Indeed, the benefits for these children might be even greater.

Autism and Nature interviewed special-school leaders and teachers about their views on engaging children with autism with the natural environment (Blakesley, et al., 2013). All schools were practicing some kind of outdoor learning and all were keen to do more. Benefits to the social skills and personal well-being of children with autism were cited as being particularly compelling reasons for engaging them with the natural world. Another important benefit was to support learning, bringing many aspects of the school curriculum to life. Horticultural therapy and learning gardening skills also helps children with special educational needs to make a connection with nature (Young, 2010).

Whilst much has been written about the benefits of engaging children with the natural world, many children have become disconnected with nature. Richard Louv (2005), in his seminal book Last Child in the Woods, described this as “nature-deficit disorder”. Many people have expressed concern that children will grow up not appreciating the importance of the natural environment. It has been suggested that their health, well-being and development may also suffer as a result. This is a particular concern for parents and carers of children with autism and related disabilities who have few opportunities to visit the countryside.
Visiting natural places such as those featured in this guide is especially valuable for children with autism, because such visits can provide:

- 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 bird watching
- Artistic inspiration from colours and forms in the landscape and clouds
- A sense of freedom and independence that children do not have indoors
- Opportunities to learn about the natural world
- Health-giving exercise.

To read more about the benefits of engaging children with nature and the research that has been undertaken, cited publications are listed in the Further Reading section at the end of this guide.

Planning

As with any activity, we recommend that parents/carers and teachers assess the risks for particular sites. For all children, there are real risks associated with the outdoor environment, such as steep slopes, open water and so on. 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 may arouse particular anxieties for some children with autism, such as: how long the walk might be; will they get back in time for the next activity; and whether there will be toilets. We have provided information for each of the natural places featured in this guide to help with these and other issues.

Here are a few tips on how you might prepare for an outing to the countryside with a child with autism. Careful planning should help you to select suitable locations and transport options, avoid the unexpected and reduce anxiety. For example:

- Do the necessary risk assessments – essential if you are a support worker
- Ensure that you are aware of the risks posed by ticks (www.nhs.uk/conditions/Lyme-disease/Pages/Introduction.aspx)
- Check up to date bus timetables
- 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; the photographs in this guide or perhaps a sketch map of a walk might help
- Estimate how long to go from one stage to another
- 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, for example make a crown with flowers and leaves, or find objects with different colours or textures.

More ideas for outdoor activities can be found in the descriptions of natural places in Part 2.
Part 2 Natural places to visit in the New Forest National Park

The New Forest became a National Park in 2005 and is overseen by the New Forest National Park Authority, which aims to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the Park. It also promotes opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the Park. When the area was designated as a hunting reserve by Norman kings, the term ‘forest’ referred to an extensive area of rural land used for hunting. The unenclosed parts of the Forest where animals are free to roam comprise a complex mosaic of habitats, including ancient oak and beech woods, heaths, lawns and mires. As a result of the long history of commoners’ rights to grazing, the New Forest has become one of the most important areas for wildlife in Britain. Visitors can walk freely across large areas of the National Park, and despite high visitor numbers, it is surprising how quickly after leaving the roadside or a car park, the peace and tranquillity of the Park returns. You might walk for miles with your family, encountering few other people, with only ponies for company. With such a rich flora and fauna, there are good opportunities to experience some of the wildlife, particularly if you have binoculars. In this guide we present a selection of natural places that we hope many families will visit. Hopefully, you will go on to explore more of the New Forest National Park.

All the natural places included in this guide can be visited by public transport; some are on seasonal bus routes, others can also be visited by service buses. Timetables and details of routes can be obtained from the relevant websites (see page 24). Before visiting the natural places suggested here, we recommend readers look at their websites. Some, such as Keyhaven Marshes and the walk from Beaulieu to Buckler’s Hard have trail maps that will help you to plan your walk; others, such as Blashford Lakes and Wilverley Inclosure are also waymarked on the ground. Ordnance Survey (OS) maps can be useful in places such as Wilverley Plain, if you decide to undertake a longer walk. The 1:25,000 Explorer Series map ‘OL22’ (orange cover) covers the whole of the New Forest and provides the most detail, but the 1:50,000 Landranger maps (fuchsia pink cover) are also useful. OS maps can be purchased, or viewed on Streetmap (www.streetmap.co.uk/). Google Earth (www.google.com/earth/) is also useful for planning walks as many paths are clearly visible on aerial photographs.
Bolton’s Bench, Lyndhurst
Lovely views across New Forest heathland...

The village of Lyndhurst is sometimes called the capital of the New Forest, and it can be very busy during the holiday season. However, it is just a short walk (400 m) from the village centre and bus station to the Forestry Commission car park at Bolton’s Bench. Bolton’s Bench itself is a natural ‘knoll’ with yew trees growing on its summit. The benches under the trees offer some respite from the sun on warm summer days. It is only about 50 m from the entrance track to the top of the knoll, up a moderate incline. Your child might prefer to stay within the immediate vicinity of the knoll itself, perhaps for a picnic, or they might enjoy short walks across the parkland.

Across the lawns of Bolton’s Bench you will find ponies, cattle and occasionally donkeys grazing. Explain to your child that New Forest ponies have roamed freely across the Forest for a thousand years, and in that sense, they are ‘wild’ animals. Bolton’s Bench provides an excellent opportunity for children who are not used to seeing animals to become more familiar with them. Families should not approach the animals though, especially stallions, or ponies and cattle with foals and calves. Immediately to the south of the knoll is a cricket pitch; the white thatched cottage in the distance is actually a pavilion belonging to the Lyndhurst and Ashurst Cricket Club. If you visit on a Sunday, or Tuesday evening, your child might experience a match in progress whilst the animals continue to graze in the outfield!

Public transport: New Forest Tour green and red routes; service bus from Lymington to Southampton (Mon to Sat)
- By car: on the B3506 Beaulieu Road on the outskirts of Lyndhurst (SU303081)
- Open daily, free admission and car park; pay-and-display car park in Lyndhurst (400 m walk)
- Toilets in the main car park in Lyndhurst by the New Forest Visitor Information Centre
- Terrain: gentle gradients across the parkland around Bolton’s Bench; stony and sandy tracks along the ridge (up to 3.6 km return)
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Livestock grazing, signs warn visitors not to touch the ponies as this can be dangerous for both visitors and the ponies
There is also an opportunity at Bolton’s Bench for your child to experience heathland and the open landscapes that characterise much of the New Forest. Follow the tarmac drive past the pavilion and then the sandy track that continues southeast, parallel with the Beaulieu road, along the ridge known as Park Pale. As you walk through a mosaic of heather and gorse, the track gradually descends, eventually meeting the Beaulieu road after about 1.8 km. The main track, which is just to the north of the actual ridge, gives excellent views across the heathland of White Moor to distant woodlands. If you want to see the heath at its most colourful, visit in late summer when the heather becomes a sea of pink, sure to delight children who love the colour pink! Look out also for the deeper purple flowers of ‘bell heather’, hidden amongst the heather. Earlier in the year, your child may enjoy the coconut-like fragrance of the bright yellow gorse flowers, but they must take care to avoid the spiny stems. You may come across a stonechat on this route – ask your child to listen for their characteristic call that sounds like two stones being hit together. There is also chance of seeing Dartford warblers along the Pale; these diminutive warblers have a distinctive long, slim tail; they are dark slaty-brown above and brown-pink below. They can be quite secretive birds, so it will be challenging for your child to see one – bring binoculars if you have a pair.

[Website Link]

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**Dartford warbler**

**Stonechat**
Beaulieu to Buckler’s Hard
a peaceful riverside walk...

This is a very pleasant walk from Beaulieu village to Buckler’s Hard, a distance of 3.6 km one way (or 3.9 km following the alternative route along the riverside path). If you have travelled on the Beach Bus or New Forest Tour, you could alight at Beaulieu and catch a later bus at Buckler’s Hard. You can also start the walk from the National Motor Museum, where parking is free of charge (800 m walk to Beaulieu village). To be sure of the route, download the trail map from the Beaulieu River website (see opposite). If you start from the car park in Beaulieu, walk to the High Street and take the footpath immediately next to Norris’s shop, signposted to Buckler’s Hard. The path passes the village recreation field and a small children’s playground, with a variety of play apparatus, which might distract some children with autism from the walk. Shortly afterwards, it joins the Solent Way, which is the trail marked on the map. From here, head south towards Buckler’s Hard.

At this point, you can just see the river in the distance through the trees. The track passes a meadow that is rich in wildflowers, some of which can be found growing along the margins of the path. If you have a flower guide, you might ask your child to see how many different species and colours they can find. The most likely in summer are fleabane (yellow), field scabious (lilac), betony (red-purple) and wild angelica (white). Your child might also find a common spotted-orchid if they are lucky. The track then passes through a small area of woodland before reaching Bailey’s Hard,
after which you have a choice; to continue on the main track or take the ‘alternative’ and more adventurous riverside woodland walk. This is a delightful walk along a sandy path with short stretches of boardwalk, a wooden bridge and a viewing platform. Many children with autism will like this little adventure; along the way they will get their first proper views of the river (assuming you started from Beaulieu). Information boards explain the importance of the mud exposed at low tide for plants and birds, and the fish that live in the river. As you follow the river, ask your child to stop and listen – they may notice the sound of the rigging on nearby boats snapping against the masts, or the sound of the breeze rustling through the reeds. There may be waders feeding on the exposed mud, calling as they move from one place to another. Bring binoculars if you have a pair, as you may see a little egret, heron, curlew or perhaps a lapwing.

Eventually the riverside walk rejoins the main track, at which point you will have walked about 2.5 km. From here it is a further 1.2 km to the maritime village of Buckler’s Hard. Your child might be excited to walk past the boat maintenance yards, where a lot of boats are out of the water; and then to discover even more boats moored in the river. The village itself is a popular tourist attraction, so there will be many more people here than you will have come across on your walk. If your child is interested in boats, there is a maritime museum and cruises along the river too. When you return to Beaulieu, there is the promise of the playground that you passed at the start of your walk.

www.bucklershard.co.uk
www.beaulieuriver.co.uk/about/riverside-walk
Wilverley Inclosure and Plain
wander through the forest or picnic on the lawns...

For a family with a child with autism, this site offers a range of opportunities: you can ‘wander’ through the forest; stroll around the ‘lawn’ of Wilverley Plain; or explore the heathland beyond. The forest of Wilverley Inclosure has been largely replanted with conifers. The ‘Wilverley Wander’, which winds its way through the forest is relatively easy to follow; ask your child to look out for the wooden posts with yellow bands that mark the trail. As you walk around, you will find places where deciduous trees still grow along the edge of the forest, whilst in other areas conifers have been planted right up to the track. Some of the Douglas firs are quite tall and impressive. You might ask your child how old the trees might be or how tall. Perhaps they will want to collect cones that litter the ground under the fir trees or the many Scots pines. Conifers can be difficult to identify, but you could ask your child to look for different deciduous trees such as oak, beech, ash, birch, sweet chestnut and sycamore. With so many trees, they might want to collect leaves and make a leaf crown, using a strip of cardboard and double-sided sticky tape. You should see the occasional den that has been constructed close to the path. Your child might want to explore one of these, or they might be inspired to construct a den of their own.

You might also come across a very large nest belonging to wood ants. Taking care not to disturb the nest, look at the materials used by the ants to construct their nest. Your child might be
fascinated to watch the feverish activity of the many hundreds of ants on the surface, but how many are there in the nest itself? The answer is probably tens of thousands! If your child finds the walk tiring (there are only small glades, and no views across the countryside on this walk), there are numerous benches along the way to rest or perhaps tell a story set in a forest. Towards the end of the trail (if you have walked in a clockwise direction) there is an extensive area of young beech trees, with a very open understorey that your child might like to run around in.

If you still have some energy after completing the Wilverley Wander, you might explore Wilverley Plain to the north of the car park (or your child might prefer to visit the Plain first). The Plain was cultivated during the Second World War, and now looks like a park that has recently been mown, but here it is grazing by New Forest ponies that is responsible for the short turf. The grassland is a popular area for picnics and family games, especially close to the car park. If you were to walk around the lawn area only, which doesn’t look that far from the car park, you would actually cover 2 km. As you explore the area, ask your child to look out for the old Scots pines that stand proudly around the edge of the Plain. Beyond the Plain is typical New Forest heathland and mire, with trails leading in all directions. In late summer the heathland beyond the Plain is particularly attractive, with dense pink flowering heather and bracken just beginning to change to its autumnal russet colouration.

www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/englandhampshirenoforestnewforestwilverleyplain
www.lymington.org/placestovisit/wilverley.html
Normandy Marsh, Lymington

oystercatchers are very noisy!

Lymington is well served by public transport; from the bus or train station, there is a 1 km walk to the Marina along roads with pavements. If your child does not like the town centre, after about 500 m you will reach the boat yards, away from the hustle and bustle. You could also mention to your child that there is a park by the Marina car park – the start of the walk – with a small children’s play area. From the car park, follow the sea wall around the open air Sea Water Baths. If your child likes boats, they will amazed at the number of yachts moored here and may never have seen so many in one place! You are also likely to see the Isle of Wight ferry sail past the marina. You then have to walk through the marina car park to rejoin the sea wall at the southern corner of the marina. From here, the Solent is on the seaward side of the path with marshes on the inland side. As you walk along, look out for lilac, daisy-like flowers along the sea wall; these are sea aster. There is also a grassy path at the bottom of the bank, between the sea wall and the marshes; this offers some shelter on a windy day, but there is open water alongside it in places.

The sea wall then continues around Normandy Lagoon. At any time of year there will be birds to look at here; many of them are relatively easy to see and often quite noisy, so bring binoculars and a bird guide if you have them. In summer, across the salt marshes, look out for sandwich terns on the shingle islands and...
colonies of black-headed gulls at various points. These birds can be quite raucous at times. You should also see waders feeding on the mudflats, or flying over the sea wall to roost on the lagoons. Curlews, redshanks and black-tailed godwits may be seen at almost any time of year. Oystercatchers might catch your child’s eye, because of their long red bill, black and white plumage and ‘piping’ call. Many birds arrive in autumn to spend the winter in the area, finding food and shelter in the marshes and lagoons. Look out for little egret, and ducks such as wigeon, teal and shoveler, which are often quite vocal. You should also see brent geese, the smallest of the wild geese that visit Britain. Explain to your child that these birds spend the winter in Britain, but they actually migrate thousands of miles to breed in northern Siberia. With so many birds at any time of year, there is always some activity to watch – birds flying to and from the marshes, and also the constant and wide variety of calls.

After about 2 km, the trail guides direct you across a field to Normandy Lane, and back to the Marina. Although it has no pavement, Normandy Lane is usually quiet, as it winds its way through open countryside, past a short footpath that leads you back to the marina. Given the distance from the centre of Lymington to the Marina car park, completing the ‘Normandy Loop’ might be too far for some families. If this is the case, walk along the sea wall for a comfortable distance, before retracing your steps.

www.hants.gov.uk/rh/lym/leaflet.pdf
www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/downloads/file/603/normandy_loop
www3.hants.gov.uk/countryside/lymington-keyhaven.htm
www.disabledgo.com (search Places to Go – Lymington-Keyhaven)
Keyhaven Marshes
exhilarating walks along the sea wall...

Keyhaven is a quiet, attractive village on the New Forest coast, with a small harbour. The Solent Way passes through Keyhaven en route from nearby Milford-on-Sea to Emsworth, some 60 miles away. From the car park head east around the harbour to the sea wall. If your child likes to look at the boats and enjoys the sound of the rigging rattling in the wind, they may want to spend some time here. You will pass another small car park before turning right and following the harbour wall and sea wall. Point out the cliffs on the Isle of Wight to your child, just 2–3 miles across the water. You should also point out the ferries crossing the Solent, from Lymington to Yarmouth.

If you visit at high tide, the sea will be up to the wall, flooding the salt marshes. As the tide retreats, extensive mudflats and creeks are exposed. In the spring, your child may enjoy the coconut fragrance of the flowering gorse that borders the first part of the sea wall. After about 1 km the sea wall passes Keyhaven lagoon; there are always plenty of birds to look at here, so bring binoculars if you have them and ask your child to see what they can spot. There are usually waders and ducks feeding, but the species depend on the time of year. In autumn for example, you may see wigeon, teal, lapwings and black-tailed godwits. This is a peaceful place, with the lagoon on one side and good views across the Solent on the other. Some families might feel safer walking on the path between...
the sea wall and the lagoon, especially on a windy day. The sheltered path and the sea wall continue past Fishtail Lagoon, a larger expanse of water that supports more waders and wildfowl. In winter, if your child can brave the cold of the exposed sea wall, there may be large numbers of brent geese and waders roosting in the sheltered marshes at high tide. But realistically, your child should be prepared at any time of the year to feel the wind in their face.

After Fishtail Lagoon you can retrace your steps along the sea wall or continue around Keyhaven Marshes, heading inland to a T-junction by a small car park (useful if you travel by car and want a short 700 m walk to the beach). Turn left to head back to Keyhaven along the ‘Ancient Highway’. This is perhaps less interesting for children, because most of the track has hedgerows on either side, although basking adders may be seen on the grassy verges. If your child is eager for more exercise there are many possible routes that explore the marshes and lagoons between Keyhaven and Lymington (see the leaflets below and Normandy Marsh in this guide). Alternatively, for families who only want a short walk, follow the sea wall to the west of Keyhaven, towards Hurst Beach and Castle. From the car park, walk along the road for 50 m and then along a gravel track past the boats to join the sea wall; turn right and walk along until it meets Salt Grass Lane. At this point, retrace your steps to the car park (distance of 1.5 km). Otherwise, Hurst Beach is another 375 m along a minor road where parking is allowed (no pavement).

www.hants.gov.uk/rh/lym/leaflet.pdf
www.hiwwt.org.uk/reserves/lymington-and-keyhaven-marshes
www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/downloads/file/383/keyhaven_marsh_loop
www.disabledgo.com(search Places to Go – Lymington-Keyhaven)

Wigeon

Brent geese
Highcliffe-on-Sea
stunning views of The Needles and Christchurch Bay...

Highcliffe-on-Sea lies just outside the boundary of the New Forest National Park, in Christchurch Bay. Arriving by bus or car, a good starting point is the cliff top car park. From here, follow one of the surfaced tracks down to the beaches; Naish Beach is to the east, Highcliffe Beach to the west. Naish Beach stretches for 1.4 km to the sea defences at Barton-on-Sea. At high tide, the sea comes up to the base of the cliffs, so make sure that you are aware of the tide times. Both beaches have areas of sand and shingle, and offer excellent views across the Solent to the Isle of Wight and the Needles – a row of three distinct chalk stacks. If you have binoculars, your child should be able to clearly see the Needles Lighthouse at the western end of the stacks, and the multi-coloured cliffs of Alum Bay to the east. Highcliffe is also known for its fossils, which get washed out of the cliffs behind Naish Beach by the sea and rain. Families should not attempt to climb the slumping cliffs, because of highly dangerous soft mud and the possibility of a landslip. However, fossil sharks’ teeth can be found by carefully searching the shingle on the beach. Sharks’ teeth are shiny, black and can have a sharp point. Children with autism who have an interest in prehistory, particularly fossils, may enjoy looking for them. Ask your child to imagine sharks swimming in a tropical sea, around 36 million years ago, exactly where they are walking today. Teeth can be difficult to spot and even experts do
not always find them, so if coming away empty-handed would upset your child, it may be best not to raise their expectations.

After a walk on the beach, you might like to take a stroll through Chewton Bunny, a local nature reserve immediately east of the cliff top car park. An accessible path runs parallel to Walkford Brook, through a narrow belt of mature woodland. The woodland shade may offer a pleasant respite from the sun on warm summers’ days. Explain to your child that in the New Forest, a ‘Bunny’ is a local name for a narrow valley or wooded ravine; although you may well see rabbits grazing on the grassland between the café and Chewton Bunny! The mix of mature trees with an understory of hazel and holly is good for woodland birds; if your child responds to sounds, the contrast of woodland bird song with the sound of the wind and waves they will have been listening to on the beach is dramatic. The path through Chewton Bunny eventually emerges on the A337 after about 900 m, although you may not wish to walk that far.

Alternatively, you can head west from the cliff top car park, along the shore to the ziz-zag path; a steep slope that leads from the shore to the car park and grounds of Highcliffe Castle, a distance of about 1 km. From here, you can explore the formal castle gardens or, if your child would prefer, continue west along the cliff top path through the wooded Steamer Point Nature Reserve. If you arrived by public transport, you can walk directly from the castle to the A337, avoiding the longer walk back via the cliff top car park.

www.lymington.org/beach/naishbeach.html
www.highclifecastle.co.uk/home
www.dorsetforyou.com/article/408591/Steamer-Point-Local-Nature-Reserve
Exbury Gardens and Steam Railway

lovely walks and steam trains too...

Exbury Gardens and Steam Railway is an excellent place to visit, with so much to stimulate the senses of a child with autism and the added bonus of a steam railway. The railway station is adjacent to the car park, so it is probably the first thing your child will notice as you enter the site. Train tickets are purchased at the visitor entrance, from where it is a short walk to the station (200 m). Trains depart regularly (seasonal timetables) for a 20 minute journey through the gardens, past animal sculptures made from a variety of materials. Use the hop-on-and-off buggy service if your child has limited mobility.

The gardens are extensive and it is easy to spend a day exploring them. They are bisected by a minor road that is crossed by a bridge. From the visitor entrance, a typical walk exploring the gardens to the north of the road, remaining on the main trails is about 1.5 km. Close to the Jubilee Ponds a short stretch of boardwalk takes you through an area dominated by bamboo and the giant leaves of gunnera. Your child may never have seen leaves this size before! Explain that these are ancient plants, known to have been around at the time of the dinosaurs, and probably eaten by them too. The paths continue through woodland planted with a wide variety of trees and shrubs. In October, the autumn colour in this part of the gardens is beautiful; if your child is attracted by different shapes and colours, they could become engrossed.
in collecting autumnal leaves. Bring a strip of card with double-sided sticky tape to enable your child to make a colourful leaf crown. You might sit on the bench at ‘Exbury North’ Station and wait for the train to pass by, or perhaps explore the nearby rock garden, although children should not climb on the rocks, which are very slippery. Look out for some very tall trees and the variety of different textured barks.

The area to the south of the visitor entrance is more extensive; there are wide open spaces for your child to run around in and numerous unsurfaced and grassy paths leading off the main paths to explore. If your child likes fish – there are giant carp and golden orfe in Top Pond. The fish swim close to the edge and are very easy to see. One tree that your child might be impressed with is the ‘Wiggly Tree’, that some people think looks like a dinosaur. This is one of twenty points on the ‘Family Trail’ that you can follow around the southern part of the garden with a leaflet from the visitor entrance (approximately 2 km). Even if your child will not follow the whole trail, there are some interesting plants that you might seek out as you wander around. From the entrance, a typical walk around the southern section, including Arromanches View Point is about 3 km. If you reach the viewpoint, there is a short (380 m) River Walk along the woodland edge (unsurfaced and uneven path) with excellent views across the Beaulieu River.

www.exbury.co.uk
Lepe Country Park

a coastline with a story to tell...

Lepe Country Park is managed by Hampshire County Council on behalf of several local Estates. It offers a range of opportunities for families with a child with autism, from walks in a quiet ‘conservation area’ to a family beach with great views across the Solent to the Isle of Wight. The Country Park itself is best accessed from the main car park. You can walk east along a compact stony path to the beach at Stansore Point (500 m), or explore the wildflower meadows adjacent to the path. The meadows will be at their best in the late spring and summer months; look out for plants such as oxeye daisies, field scabious and heath-spotted orchids. These wildflower meadows also attract a number of butterflies in the summer months. There is also a small conservation area across the road from the main car park entrance. An accessible path takes you past the dipping pond (fenced) to a hide overlooking the Dark Water estuary (260 m from the car park). To access the hide, ask at the visitor centre for the code to unlock the door. Bring binoculars if you have them and look out for water birds such as heron, little egret and various species of duck. From the hide, a more ‘adventurous’ path continues through a small area of woodland; boardwalk crosses a boggy area; with steep steps near the end (720 m circular walk).

For the beach, the sea front car park may be preferable, with its easy access to the visitor centre, café and toilets and the shoreline.
It is a short walk (250 m) from the visitor centre to the family beach. Only assistance dogs are allowed on the beach from April to September, which will be attractive to many families with a child with autism. Families with dogs can access the eastern park along the cliff top path. The low cliffs behind the beach are subject to erosion, so you should ensure that your child keeps well clear of these. Your child might also enjoy a longer walk along the shoreline; beyond the family beach you can follow the shore past the North Solent Nature Reserve through an area used during preparations for D-Day and the Normandy landings in 1944. There is still evidence of wartime activity that will interest some children, but note that the paths here are uneven in places with protruding lumps of concrete of varying sizes. In the autumn and winter months look out for turnstones roosting on the shingle. Explain to your child that these birds may have come from as far away as Canada and Greenland!

The coastal path west of the car park is more accessible for children with mobility problems, as far as the white cottage (470 m). The surface here is initially tarmac (alongside the road) and then compacted shingle. If your child is interested in fossils, look carefully at the large limestone boulders along the path – some are full of fossil shells, others have fossilised corals (they cannot be collected here). Beyond the cottage, the path becomes uneven, with protruding lumps of concrete in places; and for about 100 m there are large boulders below the sea wall. With pampas grass and tamarisk, the beach here has a tropical feel to it, especially on a warm summer’s day. Eventually, after about 1 km, you reach more cliffs, which you should again stay clear of.

www3.hants.gov.uk/lepe
www.disabledgo.com/access-guide/hampshire-county-council/lepe-country-park
Blashford Lakes, managed by Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust is a great place for children with autism to engage with the natural world at any time of the year. Staff at the Education Centre are always keen to advise families on which trail to follow and what to look out for. The site is bisected by a minor road (Ellingham Drove); the best place to start on your first visit is on the south side of the road, where the Education Centre is located. A short walk from the Centre (1.5 km) takes you to three hides; Ivy North Hide overlooks Ivy Lake, which is always busy with waterfowl, especially so in the winter months. Colourful posters will help your child to identify the various species of duck, especially if you have binoculars. The hide has one-way glass windows, enabling visitors to observe the wildlife without disturbance. This can result in good views of kingfishers at any time of the year and you may even see a bittern in the winter months. The trail takes you through wet woodland, with moss-covered trees and a ground flora rich in ferns. Ferns were around at the time of the dinosaurs – you might refer to them as dinosaur food!

The next hide on the trail is Woodland Hide. This again is mainly one-way glass, allowing visitors to watch woodland birds coming down to feeders positioned just a few metres from the hide. If your child has patience, you could sit here for a long time, watching the antics of birds attracted to the feeders. It offers a
great opportunity to familiarise your child with some of the commoner woodland (and garden) birds such as great tit, blue tit, coal tit and chaffinch. Species that are more difficult to get good views of such as nuthatch, siskin and great spotted woodpecker are also regular visitors to the feeders. Continuing on past a smaller lake, you will reach Ivy South Hide which offers further views across the Lake. Here the windows open; on a warm day, when Ivy North Hide might be a little uncomfortable for some children, this hide might be a better alternative. In the summer months, common terns nest on special rafts towed into position each year. Birds may be more distant here, so a pair of binoculars would be useful. The trail then continues along a boardwalk to Ellingham Lake, where you should turn right if you wish to remain on the trails where dogs are not allowed.

The trail to Goosander Hide and Lapwing Hide (3.25 km return from the Education Centre) initially follows the river, before crossing the minor road. Both hides overlook Ibsley Water, a much larger expanse of water that holds large numbers of waterfowl in the winter months. The reedbeds here sometimes support a large roost of starlings in the winter months; flocks or ‘murmurations’ perform spectacular aerial dances in the sky that many children with autism might find mesmerising. Telephone the Education Centre to find out whether the birds are present. At other times of the year, the trail passes through boggy ground and through reedbeds, where in the summer months the song of reed warblers fills the air and dragonflies are difficult to miss.

www.hiwwt.org.uk/reserves/blashford-lakes
http://www.disabledgo.com/access-guide/hampshire-county-council/blashford-lakes-nature-reserve

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Siskin

Banded demoiselle
Further reading

Popular guides and web resources

- Beach Bus: www.thebeachbus.info
- Forest Bus: www.forestbus.info
- Hampshire Local Offer: www.hantslocaloffer.info/en/Main_Page
- Disabled Go: www.disabledgo.com/organisations/hampshire-county-council/main-2#VenueListing
- New Forest Tour: www.thenewforesttour.info
- New Forest Travel Map: www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/travel
- Traveline south east: www.travelinesoutheast.org.uk
- Community Toilet Scheme: www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/info/20052/visitor_information/141/community_toilet_scheme
- New Forest National Park Authority – accessible visits: www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/info/20052/visitor_information/343/accessible_visits
- Accessible walks: www.thenewforest.co.uk/information/accessible-walking.aspx
- New Forest Access For All – Easy going walks: www.newforestaccessforall.org.uk/page7.html
- New Forest Disability Information Service: www.newforestdis.org.uk/
- Explore the New Forest: www.forestry.gov.uk/newforest
- Learning information – www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/infd-97rhwg
- New Forest National Park Authority: www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/downloads/20045/things_to_do
- Viewranger online trail guide: www.viewranger.com

Academic text


Caring for the New Forest National Park

By following these simple requests made by the New Forest National Park Authority you will be helping to keep the New Forest special for future generations to enjoy.

Enjoy: Make time to enjoy healthy exercise, fresh air, beautiful surroundings and the rich wildlife. Plan your route to be out of Forestry Commission car parks by dusk.

Birds: To help ground-nesting birds rear their young safely, keep yourself, dogs and ridden horses on the main tracks from the beginning of March to the end of July.

Dogs: The New Forest is great for dogs but to minimise disturbance to wildlife, livestock and other people, please keep your dogs close by you and visible at all times – if necessary use a lead. Pick up after your dog, especially around car parks, on paths and where people play or picnic.

Parking: Please park only in designated car parks, not on a verge or in gateways.

Driving: The speed limits on unfenced roads greatly reduce the number of accidents involving animals. Slow down and give walkers, cyclists, horse-riders and animals a wide berth. Be especially careful at night.

Fire: Because uncontrolled forest fires are a great threat, campfires are not allowed in the New Forest without the permission of the landowner. Barbecue sites are provided for hire at Wilverley and Anderwood car parks by the Forestry Commission (www.forestry.gov.uk/newforest) and at Lepe Country Park by Hampshire County Council (book in advance at www.hants.gov.uk/lepe).

Cycling: Do enjoy the extensive network of off-road routes, but keep to the waymarked tracks and other designated routes. When approaching people and animals call out a warning and pass slowly and wide. Try to leave gaps for overtaking vehicles and never ride more than two abreast. Keep to a safe speed, wear bright colours to be visible and always use lights in the dark.

Camping: Use designated sites to pitch your tent or caravan. Wild camping is not allowed.

Forest management: Take notice of any warning signs and keep a safe distance from work sites.

Litter: Please take your litter home.

Ponies: There is plenty of natural food for the grazing animals so please don’t feed them. It’s against the byelaws and human food can harm them. Some hand-fed ponies become aggressive with people who, quite rightly, keep their picnics to themselves. Even stroking ponies is dangerous – they may look friendly but they can bite and kick, especially mares with foals.

Unidentified objects: Areas of the New Forest were used to test bombs in World War I and II. Don’t touch objects that might be dangerous and notify the police immediately on 999.

www.newforestnpa.gov.uk
This guide is designed to help parents, carers and teachers to engage children with autism and related disabilities with the natural world in the New Forest National Park. It focuses on natural places that can be visited using public transport. It should also prove useful to those living and working with adults with autism. The guide begins by introducing the benefits of visiting the countryside, considering why such experiences are valuable for children with autism. It also provides information on public transport in the New Forest National Park and tips on planning visits. This is followed by a guide to natural places to visit in the New Forest National Park that children with autism might enjoy.