

# Autumn

**The season of morning  
mists, starry skies and  
rust coloured leaves.**

Autumn can be a wild and wonderful time of year. If we are lucky, it starts with an Indian summer and we get some more warmth and sunshine before winter. As the season moves on and the clocks go back, the weather can get windier and wetter...



# Thriving With Nature

A GUIDE FOR EVERYONE



MAKING THE MOST OF THE UK'S NATURAL SPACES  
FOR OUR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING



FOR  
YOUR  
WORLD



Mental Health  
Foundation

## Nature for everyone

Nature is for everyone. It is essential that everyone can access nature, whatever their circumstances. For someone living with loss of vision, hearing or mobility, their need to enjoy nature remains, as does the positive impact of nature on their wellbeing. However, having a disability does change how and where you can access nature, and with whom. If this is your experience, please let us know how you find using this guide. Many parks, nature reserves and forest areas have made changes to make their entrances and paths more accessible and some organisations provide activities specifically designed to be more accessible – for example, see our suggestions at the end of the guide on places to go for more information.

Struggling with your mental health can also make it much harder to leave the house, never mind finding your nearest green space. If this is you, then we hope to encourage you to think of the benefits of nature, when you feel ready to go outside.



Financial pressures are another influence that makes it harder to get time in nature, because you have so little time, energy and money for transport and other costs when you're out. We have included activities in this guide that we think could relate to nature in homes, gardens or small patches of green space in a city. Accessing bigger green spaces may require some travel costs but most of the activities themselves are completely free!

## How to use this guide

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This guide contains imaginative and simple suggestions for seasonal activities to help you engage with nature in your area throughout the year. Each activity will have different components that research suggests can be helpful for supporting your wellbeing (such as staying active, connecting with others, or spending time in green spaces). If any of these activities feel like a stretch for you right now, even just noticing more of the nature around you is a good start and there are suggestions for what you might notice in each season as well.



This guide is available and open to anyone, but we think it may be most helpful for those of us living in urban areas, with busy lifestyles and who may be experiencing stress or other strains on wellbeing. But there are plenty of activities in this guide that you can tailor to your own lifestyle and needs whoever you are and wherever you live.

The guide moves through the seasons from spring to winter to encourage you to get into the habit of getting outdoors regularly and follow the cycles of nature, but you can start it anywhere, anytime. There's no need to follow any particular order – we encourage you to get creative!



The most important parts of this guide are the blank pages, which are spread throughout. This is space for you to write or to draw or do whatever you want as part of your reflection on where you are, what you notice around you and in the way you feel there. We hope this will help you find a connection with nature and make the most of the benefits for your wellbeing.



At the end of this guide, there are some suggested further sources of ideas and inspiration in books and online. There is also a list of organisations who provide advice and even planned activities you can join that are out in nature and designed to boost wellbeing.

We want to acknowledge that on some days you may struggle with your mental health and on those days, you may find engaging with this guide a little harder and the tasks that seem simple to others may become overwhelming to you. On those days be gentle and kind to yourself and pick the guide up again in your own time whenever you feel ready.

**Now, let's get started.**

## Use your senses to...

**See** the trees around us put on a remarkable display of colour as they prepare for winter. This is a wonderful time to go for a simple woodland walk or visit one of the dozens of arboretums (collections of trees in a park or garden) around the country, like the ones at Kew Gardens, Westonbirt or Kilmun (search online for a full list). Which trees are more orange, more red, or more



yellow? Which have held onto their green hues the longest?

Can you catch a falling leaf before it hits the ground?



**Smell** the fallen autumnal leaves. Grab a handful from a pile under a grand old tree and lift them to your nose – what does it smell like to you?



**Feel** the unmistakable smooth surface of a conker or an acorn, as horse chestnuts, oaks and other trees drop their seeds before the winter.



**Hear** robins singing from hedges, trees and bushes.



They are one of the few birds left singing at this time of year, as they stake their claim to territory.

**Taste** freshly picked apples. Many fruits ripen at this time of year, notably apples. So there are chances to go and pick juicy fruits to eat fresh or try a new recipe with.



“I live near a park and adore watching the trees shift and change with the seasons. There is a line of grand tall trees as you enter, and as it turns to autumn, they take centre stage. Their bright red and orange leaves illuminate under the low set sun. As the autumn progresses the trees stand bare above a blanket of amber leaves, covering the grass below. It’s as though the trees have gifted them to the dogs and children to run and play amongst. The sound of them crunching gently under my feet is pure bliss!”



*Supporter on Instagram*



## Get outside and...

### Gaze at the moon and stars

You may wake to find morning mists out the window in the autumn, leading to bright chilly days. And the dark evenings but not-quite-winter temperatures can make this an ideal time to go outdoors to see the stars.

#### Wellbeing benefits:

Relaxation and mindfulness; connecting with others; being part of something bigger.



As we move towards winter, some of the most well-known constellations or asterisms (other shapes formed by stars) start to become visible earlier in the evening or morning – such as Orion the Hunter and his famous belt of three stars in a straight line.

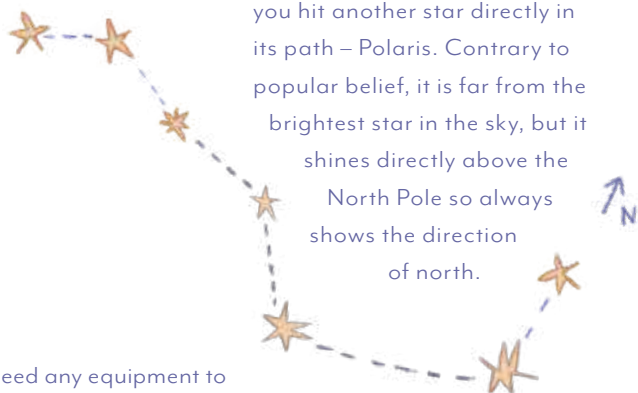
Something you can do all-year round though is navigate your way to the North Star – Polaris – from the Plough (or saucepan or ‘Big Dipper’). The Plough is an asterism that forms part of the constellation Ursa Major or ‘the Great Bear’, and is quite easily spotted and recognised with its distinct handle and hook, or saucepan base.





**Top tip:** Try to give your eyes around half an hour to adjust to the dark, after which time you will see many more stars. While out there avoid using a torch and, if you need to, it is better to either have a red-light torch or tape a red sweet wrapper over the end of an ordinary torch – this helps your eyes to stay adjusted to the dark. Also go with a friend so you are not alone at night and let someone know where you have gone in advance.

You follow the line formed by the two stars that make up the side of the hook/saucepan on the opposite side to its handle. After a distance two or three times the depth of the hook/saucepan you hit another star directly in its path – Polaris. Contrary to popular belief, it is far from the brightest star in the sky, but it shines directly above the North Pole so always shows the direction of north.



You don't need any equipment to enjoy a starry sky (except perhaps some warm clothes) but if you have a pair of binoculars this can help you see the moon in surprising detail (especially if it is not full) and look deeper into areas with lots of stars to find the many more that the naked eye cannot see.

### **Plant a tree or volunteer for conservation work**

Volunteering to help your local environment has many benefits for you and others. Autumn is the tree planting season in the UK, so you could join a local initiative to do this or even plant one in your garden if you have the space! Other activities across the year could be as varied as fixing fences, establishing wildlife ponds, sowing wildflower seeds or building 'bug hotels'. You can find out about

local opportunities by contacting a local conservation organisation such as your local 'Green Gym', Wildlife Trust, Woodland Trust or National Trust site (see 'Where to go for more' at the end of this guide for other suggestions).



If you live near the coast, you could also take the initiative to do a regular afternoon litter picking or beach clean. Bring along some friends or family to join you!

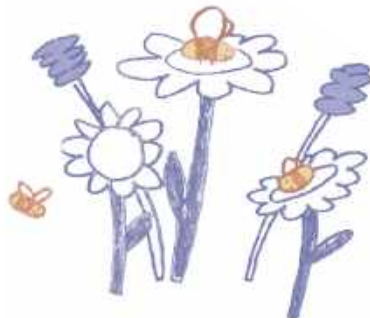




### **Wellbeing benefits:**

Time in green spaces; staying active; connecting with others; creativity; gardening, conservation and farming; being part of something bigger.

And there is a lot you can do to help nature thrive around your home, such as planting bee-friendly flowers, putting up a bird feeder and table (particularly important in the autumn and winter months) or building a hedgehog house in time for hibernation.



# Personal story

## Red squirrel stand-off

My mind is busy, tired and full.  
I need a break. So I step out  
the door into the fresh air.

Birds are singing in a pocket of pine  
woods to my left, so I wander that



way, walking alone, quietly and  
slowly. It's cool among the trees.

The soft layer of needles below my  
feet cushion and quieten my steps.  
The area has recently been disturbed  
and some trees felled, mixing dying  
golden colours with vibrant  
green regeneration.



After a couple of minutes down the  
path, I spot some movement on the  
ground in my peripheral vision. I  
freeze momentarily, excitedly yet  
sub-consciously engaging stalker  
mode. I step as silently as I can to a  
tree from which I can peer around  
and look in the direction of that  
mysterious movement...



But I am spotted first. A small, rust  
coloured creature bounces over twigs  
and skips through grass towards me.  
Can it be a red squirrel? They are so  
rare, I don't believe it...

But sure enough, as the creature  
approaches it is unmistakable. I see  
its tufty ears, big black eyes and  
bushy tail – more orange than red,  
in truth. I can't believe my luck. I've  
read and written about the threats  
to this endangered indigenous  
species, but never seen one with my  
own eyes. Here, in Scotland, are  
some of the last strongholds.

About five paces from me, this rare  
rodent pauses. I am still 'hiding'  
behind the rough barked pine trunk  
and craning my neck around, but  
there is no question my furry friend  
has seen me and is staring right at me.

Astonishingly, the squirrel rears onto  
its hind legs, stands tall and pumps  
its shoulders towards me – left, right,  
left, right... for several seconds. The  
rapid pumps reminiscent of a gorilla  
thumping its chest trying to impress  
and intimidate, only... smaller,  
and quieter.

After this display, the squirrel drops down on all fours again. It is poised on a fallen tree that lies diagonally towards me. My challenger steps forward and pointedly rubs its rear on the log as if marking its ground. A few hops closer and the squirrel is back up on its hind legs in a flash. It pumps its shoulders at me again – and for a longer spell this time. Then with a quick sniff of the air, the squirrel returns to all fours, spins and scampers up a nearby tree.

Only in this quiet and still moment of the stand-off do I notice the gentle and cool rain that has been falling, finding its way down from the thick, white clouds and through the canopy to reach my grateful face. Tuned in again to my surroundings, I also realise there is a cool breeze blowing. And I hear the chaffinches chirping, which I see in my peripheral vision moving all around us.



My red-tailed friend leaps through the air to another tree, then another – each further away from me. It leaps with skill not just strength, like a gymnast. I decide this is my cue and I turn to leave this squirrel in peace.

You never know what you will find in the woods if you look and listen carefully enough – I am grateful for that today. My mind is energetic, free and focused as I leave the pocket of trees.



***By Will Baldwin-Cantello***

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This is your space.













