



Winter

**The season of frosty
mornings, quiet woods
and murmurations.**

Despite the dark and
the cold, there are some
magical moments only
to be experienced in
the winter.

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

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 spectacular murmurations of the starlings. The murmurations are the enormous flocks of starlings that move in unison across the sky at dusk as they prepare to roost for the night. The event starts as streams of starlings return to a roost site from all directions after a day out feeding. Then, as they prepare to roost for the night, these winter visitors create extraordinary shapes as they twist and turn, often in numbers reaching the tens of thousands. There are sites all around the UK where you can hope to witness this seasonal spectacular, but nothing in nature is guaranteed.

Hear the crunch of snow or frosted ground underfoot as you walk in a park or woodland.

Feel the soft yet prickly leaves of the holly tree that is a rare flash of lush green in winter landscapes. This tree and its red berry is a seasonal favourite around Christmas.



Top tip: For a national map of murmuration sites you can visit starlingsintheuk.co.uk. The starlings don't always roost at the same place each night, so don't be disappointed if you don't catch them close up first time – keep trying!

Taste pine needle tea. You will definitely want that warm drink on a winter's day outdoors so if you plan ahead you can get an added taste of nature at the same time. Pine needles have numerous health benefits, including being rich in Vitamins A and C. Simply add pine needles to hot water and let them infuse for a few minutes.

Top tip: Do not drink pine needle tea if you are pregnant. **Do not use yew and cypress needles,** which can sometimes be confused with pine. If in doubt, go with someone who can identify pine trees confidently or give it a miss until next time.

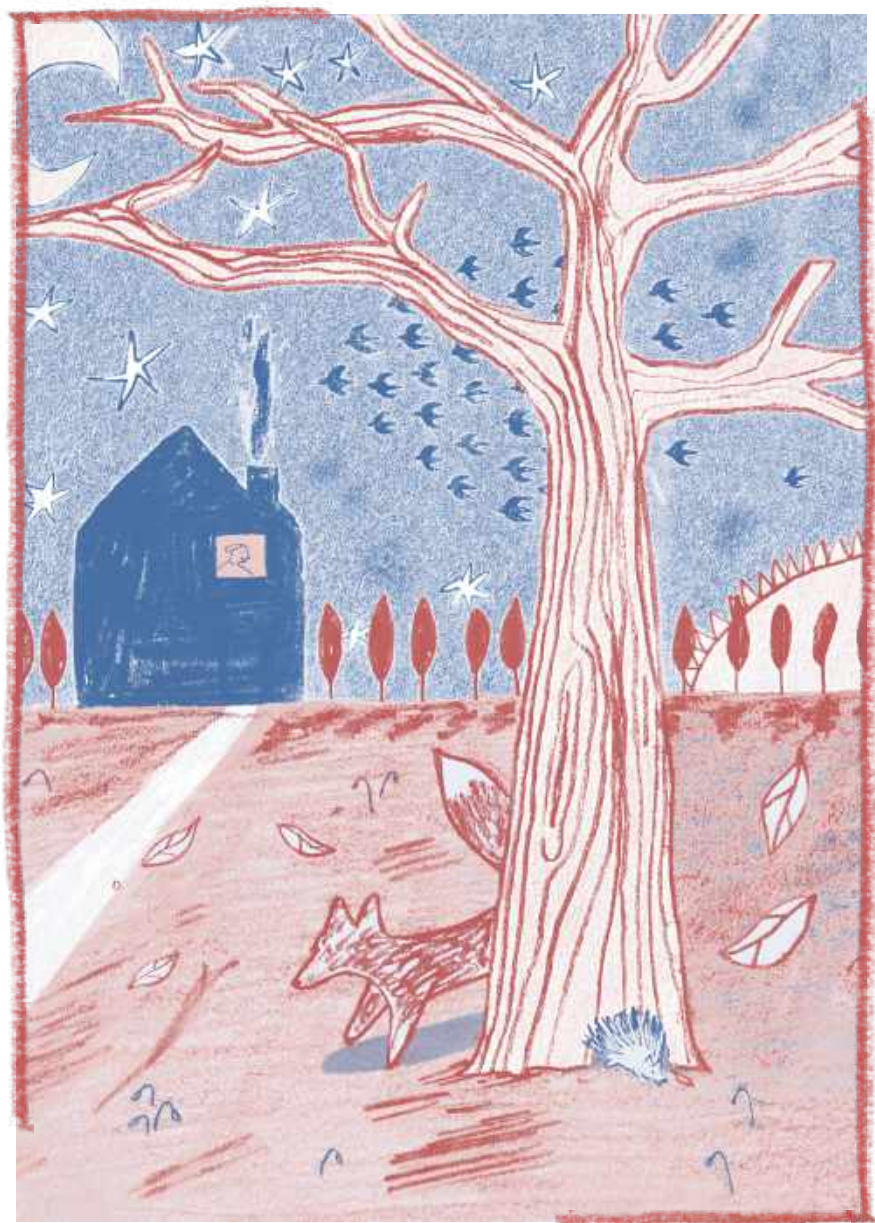


Smell... scents are a little suppressed in cold air, so you may need to pay particular attention to find the smell of winter. Can you smell damp earth in the woods, or woodsmoke from houses and canal boats nearby? Or perhaps of winter flowering plants like snowdrops?



**“I like the bleak and open landscapes of
winter and how quiet and still they are.”**

Supporter on Facebook



Get outside and...

Connect with animals

Animals are all around us all the time. From blackbirds to red foxes, and from terriers to tabby cats.



At home you might be able to attract some garden birds with a feeder and bird bath.

You can watch the different species popping up and see how they each behave. If you enjoy that, then you could

visit a nature reserve with bird hides to take a look at more

birds in the wild. Or take a walk around your local

park and try to notice more of the birds you can see

and hear around you. Find a seat and close your

eyes for a minute or two; how many different bird

calls can you hear?



Wellbeing benefits:

Relaxation and mindfulness; finding nature in the city; creativity; time in green spaces; interacting with wildlife.



And for some bigger animals, visiting a city farm can offer the chance to get up close and personal with sheep, goats, horses and more.

Many such farms will also offer you the chance to become a volunteer and help them care for the animals hands-on.



Bring nature inside

Despite all your best intentions, sometimes in winter you just won't want to go outside. We all know that feeling. So why not make sure there is some nature inside with you for those bitter cold and rainy days? You can surround yourself with sights, sounds and smells of nature.

You could start by potting up some house plants to bring some greenery and flowers into your room. Over time you can nurture and care for these.

You could print and frame some photos of the beautiful natural places you have visited and enjoyed in the past. Put them up somewhere you will regularly see and notice them.

Bring the scent of the outdoors in, including through scented candles or diffusing essential oils from trees like pine and cypress. And you could even complete the atmosphere by playing some soothing natural sounds, whether that's the gentle flow of a babbling brook, the constant swoosh of crashing waves or the melodic songs of woodland birds. Many of these are easily available online or through music streaming services. Let these sounds cast your mind back to places you have been before and remember the sights and feelings you had there.

Top tip: If you plan ahead you can plant bulbs in the autumn and have them blooming in time for Christmas. Hyacinths, for example, can be planted in September and after spending most of the autumn in the dark can be brought out just before Christmas to bloom.



Personal story

City life

I love city life. The constant buzz of activity, the diversity of people and experiences, and the fact you're never short of something to do. I find it exhilarating.

But I also find living and working in a big city can be draining sometimes, too. A stressful day at work can be compounded by a stressful commute – crammed on an overcrowded train, people rushing past – it doesn't always allow you the time to relax or recharge. There have been times in my life where I've felt hugely overwhelmed and stressed, and haven't been sure how to escape the bustle.

That's where I've found nature – even in small amounts – has helped. For me it's an escape from my thoughts and my stresses; it's almost meditative.



If I've had a rough day, on my commute I try to count the trees that I pass. I try to notice the changes each day or each week – leaves falling, the sounds of different birds, seasons changing as I look out the train window. In the winter I look at stars or the changing moon and realise just how small we all are. The more I notice, the more I slowly forget about work or the people around me and feel part of something bigger.



I find it incredibly reassuring to know that no matter what's happened in my day, nature's still there, just doing its thing, beyond our control. Even in the city we're surrounded by it. It puts things into much better perspective and helps me feel connected to the wider world – to forget my own trivial worries.

I love city life but for me nature is a crucial part of thriving amid the bustle.

By Jessica Birtles



This is your space.



