

Right Activity, Right Place

Find out more about different activities can be done in a way sensitive to the special qualities New Forest environment

The New Forest is an amazing mosaic of freshwater habitats supporting more than two thirds of all the UK's freshwater species and more than a third of the UK's rarest plants and invertebrates.

Natural processes and human activities have modified and reshaped this landscape for thousands of years but unlike elsewhere in lowland England, to date these impacts have been positive or largely recoverable, resulting today in a National Park with the highest proportion of designated land for nature conservation than any other in the country.

Freshwater habitats and species have been identified as the fastest declining group on the planet. There are two key factors that have maintained the freshwater biodiversity here in the large tracts of semi natural New Forest habitats, the clean water (rainwater and underground springs) free from pollution, and the long history of traditional grazing management by free roaming livestock.



A New Forest stream bursting with rare wetland plants.



Cows and ponies are referred to as the architects of the Forest. Grazing and the depressions made by hooves create the perfect conditions for rare species.

Clean, unpolluted water gives life to the landscape. Over thousands of years plants and animals have adapted to very low levels of nutrients, however, as soon as excess nutrients are added to the water environment this changes the quality of the water and species disappear. In the core of the Forest, clean water habitats still exist and are bursting with rare plants and wildlife.

The cattle and ponies, and other livestock are often referred to as the architects of the Forest. The grazing and the depressions made by their hooves ensures that the careful balance of species diversity is present, keeping away more dominant plants.

The New Forest landscape is an important place to visitors, in fact it is one of the most visited National Parks in the country giving people a connection to the natural environment. It's important that a visit to the Forest goes without impact and the balance of nature is maintained. For those organisations working to maintain this balance our overarching message is: the New Forest is a place for tranquil and peaceful recreation with leave no trace as the golden rule.

Here we share some tips on how your activities can be sensitive to the natural environment with suggestions of places to go to ensure your visit minimises negative impacts on habitats and wildlife:



WALKING

Walking is a tranquil activity, however there are some impacts that are associated with it, including the disturbance of wildlife.

A particularly sensitive time of year for wildlife is the bird breeding season between 1st March and 31st July. The New Forest has internationally important populations of ground nesting birds that reside in habitats such as heathlands and shingle beaches. [Forestry England](#) and other organisations place signs at key locations to alert visitors to areas that are important for these birds. The advice is to avoid these areas or keep to the main tracks. Dogs are to be kept to the tracks too and if necessary, on a lead.

The [National Park Authority](#) have provided great walking routes, but always ensure you adhere to signs when accessing the Forest.

By sticking to the tracks other impacts can also be controlled such as reducing damage to the wetland soils and preventing the spread of invasive non-native species.

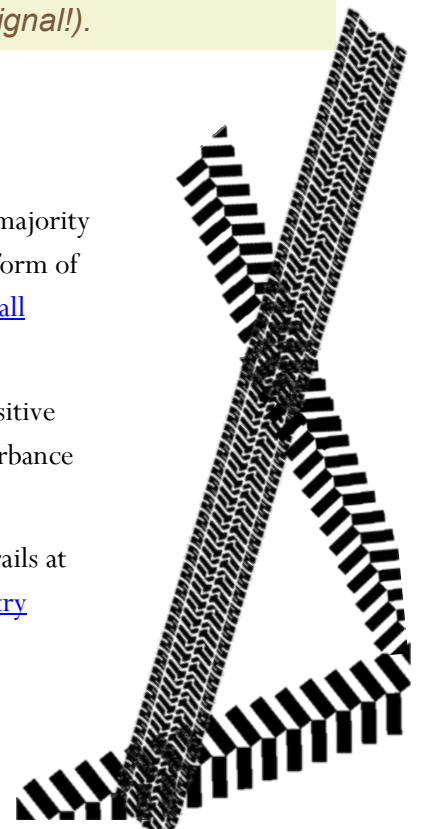
Adam Vasey (NPA Access Officer) – *The National Park is a fantastic place to come to walk and cycle. The landscape of the open forest is flat and open but this is also the most sensitive part, where the most fragile habitats survive in rare ecological niches. You have the right to walk and horse ride anywhere in the open lands of the New Forest but we ask people to stick to the main tracks to help wildlife thrive. Half the National Park is outside the designated lands where you can explore the countryside along footpaths and bridleways. If you're out exploring why not download the New Forest Walks app. It has over 40 walks along areas you'd normally not visit and provides a live map so you'll never get lost (even when not in signal!).*

CYCLING

There are more than 100 miles of [waymarked cycle routes](#) in the New Forest. The majority of which are on permitted gravel tracks and quiet roads appealing to a more gentle form of cycling. There are many places to hire bikes in and around the New Forest and [Pedall](#) makes cycling accessible to all by offering adapted bikes and guided sessions.

Using a bike off the permitted cycle route within the New Forest can impact on sensitive wetland habitats. Excessive erosion, spread of invasive non-native species and disturbance to plant and wildlife communities can lead to loss of rare species.

For those looking for more adventurous mountain biking, there are purpose-built trails at places such as [Moors Valley Country Park](#) and further afield [Queen Elizabeth Country Park](#). These Parks are better designed for mountain biking, and day long visits. Both country parks have provisions for visitors in a way that the majority of the New Forest does not. There is plenty of parking, toilets, wild play spaces, dog poo bins and cycle hire.



SWIMMING

Wild swimming is generally not permitted across the National Park due to the conservation status of the flowing and standing water bodies, however as with much of the UK coastline there are coastal bathing waters which are designated for swimming. This [website](#) will locate your nearest place for a sea swim and give an indication of the water quality.

Many water bodies in the New Forest are designated to protect wildlife which is sensitive to the disturbance from people and pets. Cleaning products and other chemicals from what we wear or from our dog's fur can leach into the water and change the water quality for the worse impacting on the plants and wildlife that live there.

There is lots to consider with an activity like open water swimming to keep yourself safe. The best way to learn about wild swimming places is through community groups such as [The Bluetit chill swimmers](#). Local knowledge not only helps you swim in safe places but also lessens the likelihood you will be within a protected area where swimming is not allowed.

There are other opportunities in and around the New Forest to access water if sea swimming isn't your thing. [Lymington Salt Water Baths](#) and [New Forest Water Park](#) are great places to experience swimming in open water, with facilities close by.



PADDLE SPORTS

There are many launch sites and resources available to those wishing to kayak, canoe or paddle board. Paddle sports are a great way to see the coastline but can present problems with disturbance to wildlife. The New Forest coastline is internationally designated for its coastal habitats and wildlife particularly wading and over wintering birds.

There is now a bespoke map, produced by [Bird Aware Solent](#), which has excellent advice including launch sites and routes which limit disturbances to wildlife.

Guided sessions are an excellent way to start or if unsure about places to paddle. Many activity centres offer tours. [New Forest activities](#) offer tours on the Beaulieu River and [New Forest Paddle Sport Company](#) offers paddleboarding to Hurst Castle. Following local knowledge and advice will help you to undertake fun activities in a responsible way for your safety and the environment. If you are unsure about a location, it is best not to paddle there.

Katie Barrow (NPA ranger) -
There's so many amazing ways to engage with nature, which can be incredible for our wellbeing. Wild swimming is my personal favourite, but this is a prime example of the importance of undertaking activities responsibly, so make sure you follow recommended guidelines to look after yourself as well as the special places you want to enjoy.



BBQS AND FIRES

The New Forest is a [No BBQ and fire zone](#) as this type of environment is at high risk to wildfires, especially during hot dry weather. BBQs, including disposable ones, campfires or fires of any kind are not permitted in car parks or other areas of the Forest. Some campsites and country parks do allow BBQs or fires under specific conditions so please check beforehand.



A Forestry England sign next to a car park in the New Forest advising about activities that are suitable and are not suitable in that area.

Biosecurity is very important and as visitors to the Forest it is essential that we all follow the national [Check Clean Dry](#) message. Invasive non native species can cause irreversible damage to the natural environment, on land and in our waterways. Before visiting the Forest and engaging in any activities ensure all equipment and footwear has been cleaned. To find out more read our [latest blog](#).



There are many ways to enjoy the New Forest. Our advice is to plan and prepare, whether visiting for the day or on holiday. There is a wealth of information out there to ensure your visit is environmentally friendly, and you can be safe in the knowledge habitats and wildlife are protected.

Freshwater Habitats Trust are dedicated to protecting the internationally important wetlands of the New Forest. With our [Water Code](#), visitors can learn how to become water and wildlife friendly by ensuring their actions are safeguarding clean water for wildlife, and space for nature.

Our project, Wilder for Water in partnership with the New Forest National Park Authority funding by the Green Recovery Challenge Fund and Environment Agency, is working with visitors, organisations and businesses to raise awareness of the special qualities of the New Forest waterscape & to champion a best practice 'clean water standard' for camping and recreation across the National Park and beyond

To find out more click here: [Wilder for Water](#)

Green Recovery Challenge Fund

By Gemma Stride and Thea Margetts Freshwater Habitats Trust - November 2022