

# Seven autumn nature activities

With shorter days and greying skies it can be easy to think that there's nothing to do outdoors during autumn. But if you stay indoors all season long, you're going to miss a magical time when British wildlife changes from the vibrant colours of summer to the serene stillness of winter.

Stay active this autumn with these great outdoor activities. They're perfect for giving yourself and your family a welcome break from your screen. You'll find something to do anywhere, whether it's in a park, the middle of a dense forest, at the beach or even in your own garden at home.





# Make a wood pile habitat

Have you got a pile of old branches hanging around your garden? Save yourself a trip to the recycling centre and build a wood pile habitat that can provide food and shelter for all sorts of local wildlife.

A long list of wildlife rely on dead wood to make their homes and find their food. Insects love to live inside old logs that still have the bark on and hedgehogs, frogs, and toads will use wood piles to hibernate through the winter months. A woodpile full of insects is also a great source of food for the birds that visit your garden

## What do I need?

- Dead wood logs with the bark still on (preferably 10cm thick)
- Thinner logs, branches, twigs and leaves
- A spade or shovel
- A corner in your garden that can stay undisturbed )



## What do I do?

- 1 Choose the spot in your garden** – try to pick somewhere with a little shade but where the sun can still reach the pile. This will help keep the pile warm enough for insects to live in but won't make the wood completely dry out in the sun
- 2 Partially bury some of your logs** – bury them horizontally with about half of the log below the ground and half above. Leave some space between them
- 3 Roughly stack your remaining logs on top** – make sure that as you stack there are gaps of a variety of sizes between the logs, they're needed to let wildlife in and out
- 4 Cover the pile** – use your remaining branches, twigs and leaves. They will provide additional shelter and food for the critters who move in

# Take it to the next level!

- 1 Open your own hotel** - Add a bee hotel to your pile. All you need is a drill, and several drill bits of different sizes (between 2mm and 10mm across). Drill a variety of holes into the sides of the logs. Make sure you drill on the sides that get the most sun, because that's where bees like to nest
- 2 Make it a Stag do** – Stag beetles require buried dead wood for their grubs to grow. Bury some of your logs vertically 30cm into the ground to encourage them. This is particularly good if you live in a Stag beetle hotspot like the New Forest, Home Counties or East Suffolk
- 3 Add a little colour** – If you'd like to combine your new wildlife habitat with your love of gardening, try planting bluebells and primroses around the pile. Wood piles are also great for flowering climbers, such as clematis or honeysuckle. The climbers can provide additional shelter and food for the animals living inside

# Take a forest bath

Throughout autumn, millions of trees in the UK go through beautiful changes. As the UK's forests fill with new colours, sights and sounds, it's the perfect time to explore.

In the 1980s, Japan introduced a national health programme called shinrin-yoku, also known as 'forest bathing'. Studies conducted by the Japanese government found that two hours of 'mindful exploration' in a forest could reduce blood pressure, lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol, and improve concentration and memory. It's even been found that trees release chemicals called phytoncides, which can boost the human immune system.

Forest bathing is as simple as spending time in your local woods. Where it differs from hiking a trail, is that forest bathing aims to practice the same principals as mindfulness. In the same way a mindfulness meditation session asks you to focus on your breathing, forest bathers focus on the sights, sounds and smells of the woods around them. In Japan, many forest bathers choose to sit against a tree, or even lie on the forest floor, in favour of walking.

## What do I need?

- Appropriate clothing. As the weather is likely to be colder and wetter in the autumn be sure that your clothes are warm and waterproof
- A place to be in nature. Even if you can't easily get to a forest, any local wooded area or green space will do, like a near-by park
- Ideally two hours free time to spend 'bathing'



## What do I do?

- 1 **Visit a forest, wood or green space** – whether it's your local common down the road or acres of forest an hour away, head outdoors
- 2 **Be mindful** – while you're visiting, try to concentrate on the things around you. If you find yourself thinking about your home, or work, or something else, gently bring your attention back to the forest and what you can see, hear, feel, and smell

# Take it to the next level!

- 1 **Detox from your device** – during your forest bath, turn off your phone and take the time to disconnect. It helps keep you away from distractions and makes it easier to be present in the moment
- 2 **Bring a bin** – keeping our greenspaces clean and beautiful is everyone's responsibility. During your forest bath bring a bin bag, gloves, and a litter picker. Take any rubbish you find home with you to dispose of it correctly
- 3 **Make it a forest workout** – combine forest bathing with your exercise routine. Use forest bathing as your cool-down after a run or practice yoga outdoors for a winning combination



# Experience a murmuration

A murmuration is like a dark reflection of the Northern Lights. Great black clouds, hanging low to the ground, that twist and turn into fantastic ever-changing shapes. But, unlike the Northern Lights, a murmuration isn't a light display caused by solar winds. They are, in fact, made of thousands of starlings, flying together in formation.

Murmurations are one of the most breath-taking animal displays to be seen in the UK. And they are also one of the easiest to witness. They occur as starlings migrate to the UK from the continent during the autumn and winter months. Thousands of starlings will gather at the same roost sight, as many as 100,000 at once. Before they roost for the night, the starlings will take to the sky at early dusk to perform this aerial display.

The murmuration isn't just for our benefit. Gathering together in the sky helps protect the starlings against predators, like the peregrine falcon. Starlings also use the murmuration to share vital information between them, like showing each other good feeding sites.

## What do I need?

- Appropriate clothing. Starling murmurations occur as the sun is setting so be sure to stay warm as the cold night draws in
- A hot drink and maybe a snack (you might be waiting a little while)
- Binoculars and camera (optional)

## What do I do?

- 1 **Find the right place** – starlings like to roost somewhere with shelter from bad weather and predators, like woodlands, reedbeds, cliffs, and large industrial structures. Even seaside piers, with Brighton Pier being a very popular spot
- 2 **Find the right time** – murmurations tend to form in November, but some can be spotted earlier in the autumn. They take place towards the end of the day so it's best to look out between 4pm and 5pm
- 3 **Have a little patience** – spotting a murmuration of starlings is like any bird watching, you're probably going to have to wait a little

# Take it to the next level!

- 1 **Look for other visitors** – now you're watching for starlings, keep an eye out for other migrant birds visiting in autumn, like the short-eared owl, the waxwing and the fieldfare
- 2 **Protect the performers** – sadly, the spectacle of the murmurations is disappearing from the UK, with our starling population falling by more than 80% in recent years. Supporting organisations like the RSPB and Wildlife Trust can help protect these amazing animals
- 3 **Build it into your routine** – as murmurations take place over the starlings' roost you'll most likely see it again in the same place. You could alter your walk home from work or school to see a murmuration every evening



# Visit a Grey Seal colony

It's not just new birds that appear in the UK by their thousands during the autumn. Grey Seals come onto shore during autumn and winter to give birth to their pups and breed. These breeding colonies can hold thousands of seals, and are one of the greatest opportunities to see Britain's wildlife up close.

Looking at one particular colony that settles in Donna Nook National Nature Reserve, in Lincolnshire, you can see a great example of a wildlife adventure. In 2018, Donna Nook reported a peak seal population in November of 3,840 Grey Seals – that's 639 bulls, 1590 cows and 1611 pups. In total last year, 2066 adorable seal pups were born at Donna Nook, hundreds of them mere feet away from the public viewing area!

Grey Seals spend most of their life at sea, and for the rest of the year you're most likely to only see their head bobbing in the water. They come to shore between mid-October and late-December, with the majority of pups being born in November.



## What do I need?

- Appropriate clothing. The UK coast can be bitterly cold as we get closer to winter. Keeping yourself wrapped up warm is a must
- Binoculars. At a colony like Donna Nook the seals are close enough that you won't need binoculars but at others the seals may be a little further away
- Bring a donation. Many Grey Seal breeding colonies are free to visit but the trusts working to keep the public and the animals safe rely on donations

## What do I do?

- 1 **Follow the visitor guidelines** – Grey Seals are very cute but they are wild predators, and very large ones at that. Stay within the public viewing area and observe all safety guidelines
- 2 **Ask questions** – it's not every day you get to observe animals like this outside of captivity. Take the chance to learn more about them, the wardens at the colony will be happy to help
- 3 **Leave the dog at home** – while combining your seal visit with a bracing dog walk on the beach may sound like a great idea, it's best for both the safety of the seals and your pets that you don't bring any dogs with you to the colony

# Take it to the next level!

- 1 **Get to know your sea life** – why not combine your colony visit, with a trip to a sea life centre or aquarium and get to know the fantastic creatures living in the waters around Britain
- 2 **Clean your local beach** – washed-up rubbish, like old ropes and nets, can cause a real danger to our visiting Grey Seals. Take a walk on your beach with a bucket or a bin bag and take away any rubbish you find
- 3 **Volunteer** – if you can stand the cold, your nearest colony may be looking for volunteer wardens to help keep the seals and other visitors safe

# Make your own bird feeders

Bird feeders are a great way to help your local wildlife stay healthy through the leaner months in autumn and winter. Hanging bird feeders is also a wonderful way to bring some more life into your garden at a time when less flowers are blooming.

Here are two recipes to make your own bird feeders at home.



## Cheesy pine cones

### What do I need?

- Pine cones (why not gather these while forest bathing?)
- String or wool
- 1 part lard, or vegetable shortening, at room temperature
- 2 parts wild bird seed
- A handful of mild, grated cheese
- Large mixing bowl

### What do I do?

- 1 **Tie a length of string to your pine cones** – tie the string to the narrow end at the top
- 2 **Add the lard, bird seed and cheese to your mixing bowl** – cut up the lard into smaller pieces first
- 3 **Mix the lard, seed and cheese together** – using your hands is the easiest way
- 4 **Squish your mixture into the gaps of the pine cone** – make sure you pack it in tight so it doesn't fall out
- 5 **Hang your pine cones outside** – you're ready to start feeding your garden visitors

## Cookie cutter bird feeders

### What do I need?

- Cookie/biscuit cutters in any shapes you want
- One part lard, or vegetable shortening, at room temperature
- Two parts wild bird seed
- Ribbons in any colours you want
- Large mixing bowl and baking tray lined with grease proof paper

### What do I do?

- 1 **Add the lard and your bird seed to a mixing bowl** – cut the lard into pieces before adding to the bowl
- 2 **Mix the lard and seed together** – it's easiest to mix them together with your hands
- 3 **Lay out your cookie cutters on the baking tray**
- 4 **Pack each cutter with your lard/seed mixture** – make sure to poke a hole through the lard/seed mix packed in each cutter
- 5 **Put them in the fridge to set**
- 6 **Once set, they're ready to hang outside** – tie your ribbons through the holes you made earlier so you can hang them up





# Grow your own food

Looking out the window in these colder months might make the thought of venturing into the garden an unwelcome prospect – but some time spent planting now can see you harvesting vegetables from your own garden throughout the year.

Growing your own food is an excellent way to encourage yourself and your family to eat a little healthier, try new things, and get outdoors. Plus, it comes with the added benefit that you know exactly where your food has come from.



## Plant outdoors

### Broad Beans

- Sow in October and November, sowing seeds 4-5cm deep in the soil
- Push canes into the soil next to each plant to provide support as they grow
- Plants are ready to harvest in the spring from May onwards

### 'Red Duke' Garlic

- Plant this variety in November, planting cloves 2cm deep in soil and 10cm apart
- Bulbs are ready to harvest from June onwards

### 'Meteor' Peas

- Sow this variety in October and November, with peas 4cm deep, and 5cm apart
- For best success, sow peas every 10 days
- Plants are ready to harvest in the spring from May onwards

## Plant in a green house

### 'Adelaide' Carrots

- Sow the seeds for this variety thinly 1cm deep in the soil in drills 30cm apart
- When the seedlings are large enough to handle, thin them out so they're 5cm apart
- If sown early enough carrots can be harvested as soon as February

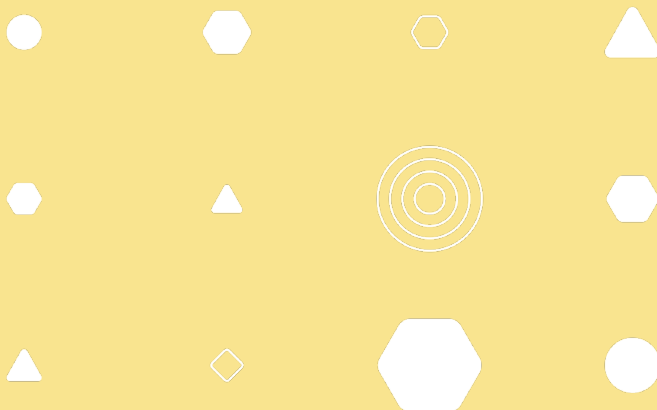
### Winter Salad Leaves

- Lots of salad leaf varieties, such as **Komatsuna**, **Mizuna**, **Mustard 'Red Lion'** and **Pak Choi 'Red Wizard'** can be sown in your greenhouse during November
- These are great 'cut-and-come-back' plants so you can harvest early and still keep them for more leaves in later months

## Plant indoors

### Chilli Peppers

- Chilli varieties like **'Apache'** and **'Medusa'** can be sown at any time of year indoors
- When the seedlings are large enough to handle thin them out so they're 5cm apart



# Taste the wild foods of autumn

Autumn is a delight for the senses, with a treasure trove of new sights, smells and sounds. We don't often think of the great outdoors as something that can be tasted but autumn brings an abundance of free wild food to be enjoyed.

With a little care and some exploring you can forage this food yourself in your local green areas and woods. Before you run out to start eating, make sure you're familiar with what's safe to eat and what's not. If you're not sure about anything, ask an expert for guidance.



## Chestnuts

These seasonal treats are best found in late autumn around the base of their trees. You'll find them still inside their cases that look like green, spiky tennis balls. To cook, score a cross in the nut to prevent it from exploding then bake, boil, roast or microwave.

## Sloes

A perfect pick for those who enjoy a Christmas tipple. These fruit of blackthorn trees grown along hedgerows and can easily make sloe gin. They're best picked after the first frost, but if picked early simply freeze at home after harvesting.

## Nettles

Yes, even this childhood menace can be put to good use in the kitchen. Nettles are also a great for a first time forager as the plants are abundant and easy to identify. They're packed with vitamin C so nettle tea is a great remedy for winter colds.

## Bullace

This variety of wild plum ripens much later than most fruits in October and November. The small oval fruit is a blue or purple colour and can be found growing in hedgerows. Once picked, they're perfect for crumbles and jams.

## Dandelions

These hardy weeds are still easy to find in fields during colder months. They're a foraging favourite as every part of the plant is edible, both raw and cooked. For a quick start to your foraging adventure, try adding dandelion leaves to a salad.

## Rosehips

Something you might even find in your own garden, rosehips are the red fleshy seed pods that grow on rose plants. They're excellent for making jellies and syrups. Just be sure to remove the hairy seeds inside, either before or during cooking.

This is just a fraction of the food you can find growing wild in the UK. If you'd like to learn more about the foraging opportunities near you, your local Wildlife Trust is a great source of information, and may even run guided foraging events.

