A woman wearing a blue cap and a colorful striped shirt is crouching in a grassy field. A young child wearing a tan hat and a black and white striped shirt is standing next to her, holding binoculars to their eyes. The background is a lush green field with a wooden fence and dense foliage.

Visiting the East Sussex countryside

**A guide for families, children and
young people with autism**

David Blakesley and Tharada Blakesley

Visiting the East Sussex countryside

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and young people with autism

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Introduction by Simon Payne

Foreword by Nick Baker



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www.autismandnature.org.uk

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Foreword

In our modern world, we have surrounded ourselves with new technology and inanimate objects and devices, which have alienated many of us from nature. As a result, the natural world has become little more than another commodity to many of us – something to possess, to look at from a distance. This disconnection with the environment has been a gradual thing, which has crept up on us, imperceptibly, one generation at a time. Now, the majority of us cannot recognise the song of a Blackbird, know which berries we can eat in the hedgerow or indeed even feel comfortable in the countryside.

Being brought up in the Sussex countryside, surrounded by fields, rivers, lakes and hedgerows, I appreciate that I was particularly lucky, not only in having these things close to hand, but also in having a family that encouraged me to be outside – to turn off the TV, to play in the woods and make my own entertainment and take my own risks. I had a childhood that gave me the time to just be, to think and play in nature.

I'm now only just beginning to understand the value of this upbringing. No matter who you are, being outside allows natural curiosity to take shape, it gives us a sense of calm, a place where we are not judged by anybody and where we can simply be in control of the moment. On top of all this of course there are health benefits, both physical and mental, and time outside can empower us, giving us the inspiration to tackle and deal with some of life's other challenges.

This book is really the beginning of all these things, a kick-start where it is most needed. It gives the reader an insight into many of the county's finest wild and natural places and what they have to offer. Although this book targets those with, or caring for those with autism, the messages, guidance and information given within are applicable to every single one of us. The value of being outside and reconnecting with nature, particularly while growing up and developing life skills, is known to be of huge value to absolutely everyone, but especially to those with special educational needs. Being outside has the ability to sooth and heal, to fascinate and inspire, with the added bonus of developing a life-long connection to nature, which will nurture the need to look after and protect these special places. These values will then be passed on to future generations – this book plugs us all back into our roots and gives us a much-needed sense of place.

Enjoy the best that East Sussex has to offer.

Nick Baker
Naturalist, author and broadcaster
Devon
2013

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We would also like to acknowledge a number of organisations for their continued support of Autism and Nature's work to enrich the lives of children with autism, through experiences of the countryside and nature; they include East Sussex County Council, Eden Project, Kent Autistic Trust, National Autistic Society, National Trust, Natural England, Nineveh Charitable Trust, Ownwood Trust, RSPB, Sensory Trust, Sussex Wildlife Trust and VisitWoods.

Finally, we would especially like to thank Tone Blakesley for his valuable quotes, after visiting all of the places featured in the guide. We are indebted to Peter and Barbara Creed (Pisces Publications) for the design of the guide and we would like to thank David Kjaer, who kindly provided the photographs of birds.

Preface

Why read this book?

This guide represents the second in a series of local guides being produced by Autism and Nature. It is designed to help parents, carers and teachers in East Sussex to engage children on the autism spectrum with the natural environment. It should also prove useful to those living and working with adults with autism. Part 1 discusses some of the benefits of visiting the countryside with children on the autism spectrum. Part 2 presents a guide to 'natural' places to visit in the East Sussex countryside, which we believe many children with autism might enjoy. Twenty-two sites are described, although we visited many more, all of which were excellent for wildlife. The final selection represents many of the habitats found in East Sussex, and includes sites owned or managed by some of the key conservation organisations, including East Sussex County Council, Forestry Commission, National Trust, Natural England, RSPB, Sussex Wildlife Trust and the Woodland Trust. Several private woods and estates are also included. Part 3 presents a series of case stories, featuring visits to the countryside by small groups of school children with autism. Each case story describes the children's activities and how, in the eyes of their teachers, they benefited from the experience. Six visits were arranged for children from The Lindfield School, Torfield School and Saxon Mount School. The visits were hosted by Sussex Wildlife Trust and Sunrise Bushcraft on behalf of the Woodland Trust.

Whilst the guide does not set out to provide solutions to the many difficulties associated with autism and related conditions, it does seek to offer appropriate information to make visits to the natural places included as relaxed and enjoyable as possible, so that the restorative benefits can be accessed by all. For some children, there may be a need to make trips more structured and meaningful, for example, looking out for things whilst walking may provide many opportunities to communicate and develop a shared interest for the natural environment.

The description of each location should help parents, carers and teachers to judge its suitability for their children. Before visiting a new place, many children with autism appreciate being shown pictures of their destination, so we have included photographs and illustrations in the guide which we hope children will find attractive. One issue which we have been particularly concerned about is dogs, as some children with autism are wary of dogs, whilst a small minority of children might be terrified by them. The guide includes one site, Bateman's, where guide dogs only are allowed, and several sites where dogs are required to be kept on leads.

Part 1 Introduction

Contact with nature can benefit our health and well-being, especially children with special educational needs (SEN) such as autism. Benefits include sensory experiences, new relationships with adults and peers, enhanced self-confidence and pride, and the development of life skills (Rickinson, 2010). The freedom to experience new activities and explore new situations is also significant. Indeed, most people are aware of the benefits of fresh air and exercise, and although we can experience these from a run round the local park, it is so much more rewarding to go out into the countryside to find quieter settings, away from the bustle of the town. There are beautiful places to visit in East Sussex and so much of interest to see when walking in the woods or following a nature trail. There are also new smells, tactile sensations, and sounds you may not have heard before. The sense of exhilaration that can be felt on the South Downs on a windy day is an experience that is wonderful to share.

Such experiences are especially valuable for people with autism, because they can provide:

- a calming environment which helps to reduce stress and anxiety;
- opportunities to take part in activities with family and friends, developing social skills;
- new sensory experiences that are soothing;
- opportunities to find plants, birds, animals and rocks that could become a focus of special interest;
- artistic inspiration from colours and forms seen in the landscape and clouds;
- a sense of freedom and independence which children do not have indoors;
- health-giving exercise.

Living in a close-to-nature environment is something that many people looking after those with autism have felt is desirable for their quality of life. Some families with children on the autism spectrum have deliberately moved to remote places such as the Highlands and Islands to get away from the stress of city life. Many of the Camphill communities (www.camphill.org.uk/) that provide for people with autism and learning disabilities are in quiet rural settings. Others have turned to horticultural therapy and gardening to make a connection with nature.



Experiences of teaching children at a National Autistic Society special school

Regular access to walks in the open countryside has been a regular feature throughout Simon Payne's teaching career, working with children and young people with autism. Often the focus was deemed to be a physical one, particularly with the yearly Ten Tors Jubilee Challenge (in Devon) or The Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme. These events provided opportunities for children to benefit from daily exercise, but in reality the benefits were more far-reaching. Access to an activity during which demands and expectations can be reduced provides opportunities for children to reflect on the awe and wonder of natural surroundings. Nature can provide wonderful sensory stimuli, including natural sounds, smells and textures. For example, many of our more complex youngsters enjoy the pleasure of looking through their fingers into the sky or through tree canopies, providing visual stimuli that they can control. Others love to walk barefooted along the beach or across sand dunes, whilst breathing in fresh sea air.

One year, a group of Simon's Key Stage 4 pupils, with staff support, completed the whole of the southern circuit of the Tarka Trail in Devon over the course of 14 weeks, in stages of 4 to 8 miles. As an activity, the opportunities for learning were vast. For example, social skills were developed, with individuals able to take it in turns to lead the group; problem-solving skills were practiced when they needed to discuss which direction to go in next; and physical fitness benefitted from surmounting the next hill. And there was a true sense of wonder, when, at the top of a hill, students were able to survey the vast landscape around them. Students also felt a sense of pride in the knowledge that they had completed a challenge that they had all enjoyed. It was the one activity during the week that all students would ask about, looking at maps to see where they would be going the following week, and looking at



photos taken in previous weeks to remind themselves and staff of what they had seen during their walks. From an educational view, there were many opportunities to support the curriculum for children with a wide range of abilities, such as: describing what they could see or feel (literacy); looking at shapes in the environment (maths); map reading (geography); looking at historic remains (history); and using a camera to record what they saw and what they did (ICT).



However, as with any activity, risk needs to be assessed. For all children, there are real risks associated with the outdoor environment, such as cliff edges, steep slopes, open water etc. 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 often brings particular anxieties for children with autism, such as whether there will be dogs, how long the walk might be, whether they will get back in time for the next activity, or whether there is easy access to a toilet.

Planning

Here are a few tips on how to prepare for an outing to the countryside with your child or friend with autism. Careful planning means that as far as possible, you can select suitable locations, avoid the unexpected and reduce anxiety for the person with autism. For example:

- do the necessary risk assessments – essential if you are a support worker (see <https://czone.eastsussex.gov.uk/teachinglearning/curriculum/offsiteactivities/riskassessments/Pages/main.aspx>);
- use visual supports and timetables to prepare the person with autism before the outing, for example, the pictures in this guide or a sketch map of a circular walk might help;
- estimate how long to go from one stage to another – “in so many minutes we’ll be at X”;
- plan where you will make your stops for refreshments and the toilets;
- build in rewards;
- have some games to play that you can do while going along, e.g. I Spy.

Olivia Brown wrote about taking her severely autistic son on family walks in the Lake District in *Communication* (Brown, 2005). She describes how an older sister rushed on ahead during their walk, to place a fruit pastille on a rock for her brother, who has autism, to find.

Research evidence

There has been a lot of research on the beneficial effects of engaging with the natural environment, particularly for people in general and those with mental health problems. Many people have described how children are becoming disconnected with nature, which Richard Louv, in his seminal book *Last Child in the Woods* described as 'Nature-deficit Disorder'. However, relatively little has been written specifically about children with autism, although many professionals, parents and carers will attest to the benefits of engaging with nature. We have written about some of the benefits in Part 3 of this guide, which describes six visits to the East Sussex countryside with classes of school children with autism. Some studies, such as the Royal Horticultural Society Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools project, worked with classes with a wide range of conditions, including autism. Through learning gardening skills, the children were able to connect with the natural world, and benefited in many ways. Andrea Faber Taylor's work with children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in North America is widely quoted (e.g. Faber Taylor and Kuo, 2009). ADHD is a condition which makes people inattentive, impulsive and hyperactive. According to the National Autistic Society, an increasing number of children are being diagnosed with both ADHD and autism. Faber Taylor presents a compelling case for regular engagement with nature for children with ADHD, reporting many benefits, even after relatively short periods in the natural environment.

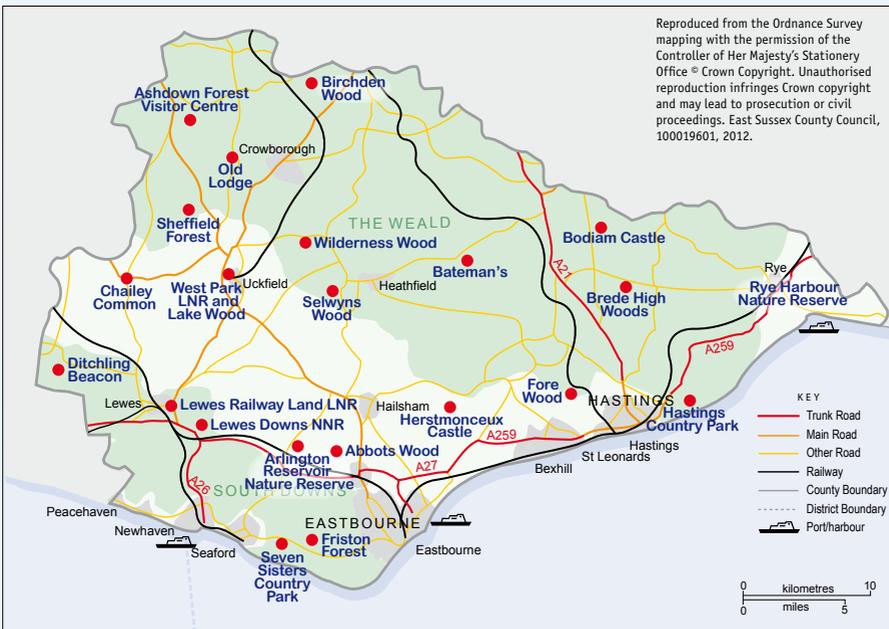
If you would like to read more about the benefits of engaging with nature, and the research which has been undertaken, there are very useful literature reviews by Professor Justin Dillon and colleagues (2006), Penny Travlou (2006) and Stephen Moss (2012). These reviews, together with other academic papers, books and guides to nature in East Sussex, are listed at the end of this guide.



Part 2 Natural places to visit in East Sussex

East Sussex is a rural county, with beautiful countryside, rich in wildlife. The long spine of the South Downs chalk, now protected as a National Park, reaches the sea in East Sussex, in a series of precipitous cliffs. Sites in the National Park featured in this guide include Seven Sisters Country Park, well known for its chalk grassland flowers and Ditchling Beacon, which offers some of the best views in the county. To the east of the Downs are the Pevensey Levels, an area of grazing marsh and reeds, with open countryside and big skies, overlooked from the north by Herstmonceux Castle. To the north of the Downs is the Low Weald, an area of low lying, gently undulating countryside, wooded in places. Arlington Reservoir and Abbots Wood both lie in this region, at the foot of the Downs. Further north, the land rises once again onto the High Weald, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, with rolling countryside, deep valleys and Ashdown Forest at its heart. Two prominent sandstone ridges are dissected by the River Rother, which flows past Bodiam Castle to the sea at Rye Harbour. Many of the natural places featured in the guide lie within the High Weald.

Before visiting any of the places featured in the guide, we recommend readers to look at their websites. Many include trail leaflets or maps, and details of public transport. More information to help plan journeys by public transport is available on the East Sussex County Council website (www.eastsussex.gov.uk/roadsandtransport/public/default.htm). Ordnance Survey (OS) maps can also be useful for longer walks if you plan to explore places such as Ashdown Forest. The 1:25,000 Explorer Series (orange cover) give the best detail, but the 1:50,000 Landranger maps (fuchsia pink cover) are also useful. OS maps are also freely available on Streetmap (www.streetmap.co.uk/) and from OS Getamap (www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/). Woodlands are also featured on the VisitWoods website (www.visitwoods.org.uk). We hope that readers will visit some, or all of the places featured in the guide.





“the view is superb and the sheep are so cute”



Two miles south of Ditchling on the B2116 (car park at the summit); from the A27 at Stanmer follow the B2116 for approximately 2.5 miles (TQ333130)

- Bus service from Brighton on spring/summer weekends and bank holidays
- Free admission, open daily; pay and display car park can be very busy on summer afternoons
- No facilities; toilets in Ditchling village (2 miles)
- Many opportunities for picnics
- Terrain: relatively easy walking along the plateau; steep grassy slopes are unfenced; circular route through the Sussex Wildlife Trust nature reserve (2.3 km) includes steep slopes which can be slippery when wet, with a return ascent of 120 m
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Grazing animals
- Information board by the car park

Ditchling Beacon

could this be the best view in East Sussex?

When you arrive at the National Trust Car Park, you will immediately appreciate why we have included Ditchling Beacon in this guide. It is the highest point in East Sussex (248 m), offering one of the best, and most accessible views in the county. Children with autism may find it exciting to approach the site from Ditchling village, to the north. Over a distance of just under a mile, the road winds its way up the steep scarp, through the Sussex Wildlife Trust nature reserve, climbing over 140 m. As you ascend, the view gets better and better, although tantalisingly, it can only be glimpsed through the trees. However, just a few metres walk from the car park, a wonderful clear view awaits you. Arriving from the south, the view comes as a complete surprise.

From the car park, follow the path to the west, initially across National Trust land and into the nature reserve. Some children with autism love to feel the wind in their face; for them, Ditchling Beacon can be truly exhilarating on a windy day. Bring binoculars if you can, and explore the panorama of the East Sussex Low Weald, with the hills of the High Weald in the far distance. An information board illustrates the view, directing you to landmarks such as Mount Caburn (Lewes Downs NNR), Ashdown Forest and Chailey Common, all featured in this guide. On a clear day you should even be able to see the white cliffs at Seaford, about



15 miles to the south east. As the path continues west along the South Downs Way, there are many opportunities for picnics. After about 850 m, you come to a gate. From here you can continue along the top of the scarp, crossing into National Trust land once more, or retrace your steps to the car park. In late spring and summer, look out for chalk grassland flowers, and butterflies characteristic of the chalk downland, such as Chalkhill Blue and Brown Argus. The vegetation here is not as species-rich as other sites featured in this guide, as it was ploughed in the past, and farmed until 1976.

Plants and insects more typical of chalk grassland may be found on the slopes of the scarp, but to explore this area involves a far more strenuous walk, following a footpath down the wooded scarp, with steep slopes in places. The descent is about 120 m in elevation, so your family must feel comfortable about the prospect of the return ascent, although there is also a small car park at the foot of the scarp, if you can arrange to be picked up. The circular route crosses into National Trust land as you climb up the scarp face. An Ordnance Survey map would be useful to navigate through the reserve. It is too dangerous to return along the road. You can also follow the South Downs Way east from the car park, towards the National Trust's Blackcap reserve (3.7 km from the car park).

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/ditchling-beacon/

www.sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/reserves/page00012.htm





“when the dragonfly landed on a leaf, it was so colourfully patterned”

i Main entrance on Railway Lane, at the east end of Lewes High Street (TQ420100)

- Local buses and trains
- Free admission, open daily; pay and display car park in Court Road (150 m from reserve)
- Toilets in car park, cafés and shops nearby
- Terrain: mostly flat and accessible (typical walk 1–1.5 km), with good access for wheelchair users around the Heart of Reeds; a longer circular route (1.5–2 km) crosses wet grazing meadows beyond the reserve, which can be soft and muddy in places
- River Ouse, Winterbourne Stream and unsigned water courses are unfenced; deep silt in Winterbourne Stream
- Dogs preferred on lead
- Grazing animals may be present in the wet meadows
- Information board at entrance includes a trail map

Lewes Railway Land LNR

so much wildlife, so close to town...

Lewes Railway Land Local Nature Reserve, and the Linklater Environmental Education Centre is a partnership between Lewes District Council and the Railway Land Wildlife Trust. The nature reserve is just a stone's throw from the busy High Street in Lewes, and yet when you enter the reserve, it is easy to imagine that you are in the heart of the countryside. Although the reserve covers just 10 hectares, there is an interesting diversity of habitats to explore, including deciduous woodland, several ponds, reedbeds and grassland. The site is enhanced by neighbouring wet grazing meadows, the River Ouse and the towering chalk cliffs beyond. As its name suggests, the area was once dominated by railway infrastructure. As you walk around today, bits of coal and railway sleepers remain as evidence of the site's industrial heritage. Children on the autism spectrum with a 'special' interest in trains may find this fascinating, and should also appreciate the close proximity of the modern railway line.

The site's railway heritage is fascinating, but it is the opportunity to experience wildlife which is what makes this a special place. Being so close to the town, the birds may be more used to people, and therefore easier to see. As you walk through the woodland, look out for typical woodland species such as Green and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Robin, Wren and thrushes. The woodland paths are also good for butterflies, particularly in the summer



months when masses of Buddleia flowers attract species such as Comma, Small Tortoiseshell and Red Admiral. You may also come across Leighside Pond, recently restored, and fringed with colourful wetland plants including Ragged Robin, Purple Loosestrife and Yellow Flag.

Beyond the Winterbourne Stream a boardwalk winds its way through the Heart of Reeds. This is a land art project, designed to create a series of ditches fringed by reeds. You can also view the area from a small mound at one end. Here, in spring and summer, enjoy the song of Reed and Sedge Warblers or watch the antics of bumblebees and other insects, attracted to nectar-rich Teasel flowers. With so much water, this is a great place to go on a dragon hunt. Larger dragonflies such as Southern Hawker and Migrant Hawker patrol the woodland rides, hawking for insects whilst more delicate 'blue' damselflies flutter over the ponds and open water. The area is also home to amphibians and reptiles, such as Palmate Newt and Grass Snake, although these are much more difficult to see. Beyond the Heart of Reeds, the path takes you past the site of the old sidings, and alongside the main railway line. If you follow the footpath across the wet meadows (not part of the reserve and sometimes grazed), look out for Peregrines as they patrol the chalk cliffs opposite. If you are really lucky, you may see a bird drop from the sky, stooping on its unsuspecting prey below. It is always a privilege to see these birds, and worth having binoculars with you.

www.railwaylandproject.org/

www.lewes.gov.uk/community/11008.asp





“the flowers in the meadow are very colourful”



From the A27 east of Lewes, take the minor road signposted to Glynde; use the public car park on the left after 0.5 miles, just after the Station car park (TQ457087)

- Local buses and rail station nearby
- Free admission, reserve open daily; public car park nearby
- Toilets in the car park
- Children’s play area next to the car park
- Terrain: 250 m walk from the car park to the footpath (TQ456089), along the roadside pavement; path climbs steadily up hill for 1.2 km to the nature reserve; paths may be soft and muddy under foot during wet periods, with several stiles; steep slopes around the hill fort
- River next to the car park is unfenced
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Livestock grazing
- Information board at reserve entrance (TQ445090)

Lewes Downs NNR

Iron Age fort, chalk grassland and lots of exercise...

Lewes Downs is an isolated block of the South Downs, with three nature reserves, well known for their rich diversity of chalk grassland flowers. If your child enjoys a good uphill walk, far reaching views, and loves to feel the wind in their face, then they will love this area. Here we focus on Lewes Downs National Nature Reserve or Mount Caburn, as being the place which families with children on the autism spectrum may find most comfortable to visit. Nearby, Malling Down and Southerham nature reserves can be reached on foot from Lewes town centre, but Malling Down in particular involves walking along busy roads. Malling Down can also be accessed from Mill Road and a small lay-by on the B2192 to Ringmer (see Sussex Wildlife Trust website for details).

To visit Mount Caburn, use the public car park in Glynde. From here, walk north along the road (with pavement) and take the first left into Ranscombe Lane, where the footpath onto the Downs is immediately next to the last garden on the right (250 m from the car park). In the village, some children with autism may be distracted by the nearby railway line (you can see the trains as you walk up onto the Downs), the river by the car park or the play area



Chalk grassland

next to the car park. Once you reach the footpath, it is a steady climb to Mount Caburn. By the time you reach the stile after 700 m, you will have already climbed to a height of 75 m above sea level, and should be enjoying fine views of the Low Weald and South Downs. The meadow which you cross next is rich in chalk grassland flowers. When you reach the nature reserve, you will have walked 1.4 km from the car park and climbed to 140 m above sea level.

At the entrance, you will see the 'Caburn' or Iron Age hill fort which gives the reserve its name. Some archaeologists have questioned the assumption that the earthworks represent a fort; ask your child's opinion – maybe they can imagine Iron Age people defending the hill against enemies advancing up the steep slopes below. If you visit in the summer months, look out for the many types of flowers which love the chalky soils here, such as the dainty white flowers of Fairy Flax and the bright yellow Lady's Bedstraw. If you explore the steep slopes around the fort, you may find the rare Round-headed Rampion, also known as the Pride of Sussex. Marjoram is abundant in places, and attracts a lot of butterflies. Amongst the many Common and Chalkhill Blues, look out for the rarer Adonis Blue, so called because of its electric blue coloration. And if your child is feeling tired on the return journey, they have the play area to look forward to.

www.sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/uploads/lewes%20downs_09.pdf

www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/conservation/designatedareas/nnr/1006091.aspx





“the white cliffs are amazingly tall”



Car park on the A259 at Exceat, with a second car park on the minor road to Litlington, 60 m north of the junction with the A259 (TV518994)

- Buses pass the car parks
- Free admission, park open daily; two pay and display car parks
- Visitor Centre with toilets and restaurant
- Terrain: easy access trail to the beach (3.7–4.5 km return); two signed trails over the downs may be soft and muddy in places after wet weather, some steep slopes
- Cliff top path is unfenced, and danger of rock falls beneath the cliffs
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Grazing animals
- The busy A259 separates the Visitor Centre, toilets and car park on Litlington Road, from the main car park and the Country Park
- Trail leaflet available from the Visitor Centre

Seven Sisters Country Park

dramatic scenery, rock pools and chalk grassland...

The Seven Sisters are a series of dramatic chalk cliffs and one of the most photographed coastal landscapes in East Sussex. The Country Park itself is managed by East Sussex County Council. Take the easy access trail south from the main car park, and you will come to a fork in the path after 1.25 km. Both paths lead to the beach. If you follow the left hand path, your children will arrive at the beach to suddenly find the chalk cliffs towering above them. Take a moment to explain that chalk is largely made up of the remains of trillions of plankton which accumulated on the seabed, some 60–95 million years ago. Remember that rocks can fall at any time, so stand well back from the cliff base. At high tide, many children will love to throw pebbles into the sea. As the tide goes out, there are chalk rock pools to explore.

Chalk grassland is one of the richest habitats in Britain, with a greater variety of plants than any other grassland. It covers much of the Country Park, but it is most comfortably explored along the grassy slopes adjacent to the easy access path. If you visit in the summer months, ask your children to find as many different flowers, and colours as they can (taking care not to pick them).



To help you, inexpensive fold-out charts can be purchased in the Visitor Centre. Some of the easier plants to find include Lady's Bedstraw with its feathery yellow flowers; tangles of pink-purple flowers of Wild Thyme (crush a leaf and let your child smell the fragrance); and the deep yellow flowers of Bird's-foot Trefoil (comically known as 'Eggs and Bacon'). Less common, are the beautiful Dropwort flowers, distinguished by their deep pink flower buds which open to reveal delicate white flowers with long yellow stamens. With so many flowers, chalk grassland is excellent for butterflies too, and you might be lucky enough to find Marbled White and Chalkhill Blue butterflies.

To really appreciate the chalk grassland, and the Park's more spectacular views, you need to climb. From the car park, follow the South Downs Way, which gradually climbs up the hillside to Coombe Bottom. Sit for a while amongst the flowers, and let your children take in the view across the meanders of the River Cuckmere below. They might ask why rivers meander like this, so you may want to read up about erosion and deposition. The path descends to the valley floor, before rising again and following the cliff top for 3.5 km to Birling Gap. The views are spectacular, but there is no fence here, and the cliffs are very high, so it may be too dangerous for children, especially those with autism.

www.sevensisters.org.uk/





**“there were
blue butterflies
everywhere”**



North of the A259 between Exceat and Friston; Butchershole car park on the minor road to Jevington (TV556994); Litlington Road car park on the minor road to Litlington (TQ517001); Seven Sisters Country Park car park on the A259 at Exceat (TV517995)

- Buses pass Exceat car park
- Free admission, open daily; 3 pay and display car parks
- Toilets in Litlington Road car park and Seven Sisters Country Park
- Visitor Centre at Seven Sisters Country Park
- Terrain: trails may be soft and muddy in places after wet weather, some steep slopes; way marked trails from each car park (1.3 to 2.7 km)
- Cyclists and horse riders
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Information boards in car parks show details of trails

Friston Forest

forest walks, chalk grassland and lovely views...

Friston Forest is an extensive beechwood, with some conifers, planted by the Forestry Commission on open downland in the 1940s. It has matured into a haven for wildlife, particularly the rides and glades. Beechwood plantations often have an open understorey, which is easy to walk through, and pleasing to the eye. The Forest has three car parks, each with a way marked walking trail, in addition to the wider network of walking and cycling trails. The Butchers Trudge is not well named, because this is the shortest (1.3 km), and easiest of the way marked trails. Shortly after leaving Butchershole Car Park, there is a gentle slope to climb through the beechwood, but the path soon levels out as it follows the forest edge. Here, wildflowers more typical of chalk grassland attract insects hungry for their nectar. Look out for the bold purple flowers of Greater Knapweed, yellow flowered St John's Wort and the feathery white flowers of Hedge Bedstraw. The trail then descends through the beechwood once more, before returning to the car park along a wide avenue of Beech trees. If you have a map, consider a short detour to Friston Hill, where you will find chalk grassland in pristine condition – rich in wildflowers and butterflies such as Chalkhill Blue and Meadow Brown; a sight which children rarely get to see these days.



White Horse View Trail (2.7 km), which starts from Litlington Road car park, follows a gentle, but sustained climb (ascending about 60 m over 1 km or so) through the beechwood, until it emerges high above the Cuckmere Valley. As you follow the path along the scarp, it is hard to take your eyes off the view, across the busy farmland landscape and the distant Cuckmere Valley. With keen eyes, your child might be able to spot the Litlington White Horse. And if you stand quietly for a few moments, use a sound map to record what your child can hear. Birdsong and the sound of the wind rustling through the Beech leaves are most likely, and maybe the mewing call of Buzzards overhead. This is such a peaceful place, that sounds generated by human activity will be difficult to hear. Look out for the chalk grassland flowers along the track, and the many butterflies and insects attracted to them.

The car park at the Seven Sisters Country Park is the busiest of the three. From here, the way marked 'Exceat Walk' is short (1.3 km), but challenging. The trail follows the edge of the forest to West Dean village, before cutting back through the forest up a long steep set of steps. There is a reward for your efforts, with spectacular views across the Cuckmere Meanders. The trail then descends through a meadow to the car park. If the climb is too much for your child, retrace your steps, or perhaps continue on the track past the village (signposted to Exceat Hill). The trail is flat, and passes through very pleasant Beech woodland. Look out for Dark Green Fritillaries in the summer months.

www.forestry.gov.uk/ (search for Friston Forest)



Buzzard

©David Kjaer

Abbots Wood

nightingales in spring...



“people like to bring their dogs here”



From the A22 Hailsham bypass, take the minor road signposted to Upper Dicker and Abbots Wood, the car park is on the left after 2 miles; from the A27 Polegate to Lewes road, at Wilmington, take the minor road signposted to Upper Dicker, the car park is on the right after 1.8 miles (TQ554072)

- No local public transport
- Free admission, forest open daily; large pay and display car park
- Toilets, picnic area and bookable barbecues (see website)
- Woodland adventure playground
- Terrain: mix of surfaces, but paths can be very muddy after rainfall; two way marked trails; Oak Walk with red signs (1.3 km) and Abbot's Amble in yellow (2.5 km, passing the lake)
- Lake (unfenced) and numerous shallow streams
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Information board in the car park

Abbots Wood is a large area of woodland, managed by the Forestry Commission. Two way marked trails are popular with visitors and dog walkers, but if you have a map, there are quieter trails and opportunities for longer walks. Oak Walk is the shorter of the two way marked trails and takes a circular route through a plantation of mature Oak trees, for just over 1 km. Although there is little variety in the canopy, the wood has a rich understorey of small trees and shrubs, which provide excellent habitat for Nightingales. If your child has an ear for music, or finds birdsong soothing, then a visit in late April or May should provide a very rich experience for them. Abbots Wood is arguably the best site in East Sussex for Nightingales, and despite their name, the birds sing throughout the day, and often within a few metres of the trail. Visit the Autism and Nature website to familiarise yourself with their song, before visiting the site.

For a longer walk, the yellow signs lead you along the Abbots Amble, through a variety of woodland types, including Oak woodland, coppiced Hornbeam and Hazel woodland, and conifer plantations. In late April and May you will find carpets of Bluebells along the way, and Nightingales where the habitat is suitable. Deep in the forest you will discover a lake, hidden amongst the trees. Dragonflies are easy to see here, and you may be lucky enough to spot a grass snake swimming through the water. If you



wish for more solitude, try one of the numerous rides leading from the way marked route. Some of these have been widened to benefit wildlife, resulting in attractive Bluebell borders, where trees have been removed. In spring look out for Pearl-bordered Fritillary butterflies, nectaring on Bugle flowers. Later in the summer, other woodland butterflies such as the White Admiral patrol the rides and glades, whilst their caterpillars feed on Honeysuckle. On a warm sunny morning, you may come across a Lizard or even an Adder along these quieter rides, basking in the warm sunshine. However, your children will need to walk quietly, and look several metres ahead, otherwise you may just hear the rustle of leaves as an animal disappears into the undergrowth.

Towards the end of the Abbots Amble, you will pass several plantations of 'exotic' Douglas Firs, planted for timber and pulp. If you leave the way marked trail for a moment and follow one of the rides alongside the plantations, you will notice that despite their dark interior, native trees and shrubs are returning. The habitat does not support Nightingales, but if you have a very keen eye, you may spot a Roe Deer. And when you return to the car park, there is a woodland adventure playground to look forward to.

www.forestry.gov.uk/abbotswood

<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/EnglandEastSussexAbbotsWoodAbbotsWoodAbbotsWoodCarParkOakWalk>





“the geese are very tame”



From the A27 Polegate to Lewes road, take the minor road north signposted to Berwick Station and Arlington Reservoir, the car park is on the right after 1.5 miles (TQ528074)

- Berwick railway station is 0.5 mile from car park (pavement only part of the way)
- Free admission, reserve open daily; pay and display car park
- Toilets and refreshment kiosk in car park; picnic area with tables nearby
- Terrain: trail can be soft in places after rain, and muddy in winter; circular route (3 km); longer trail avoiding the dam (4 km); relatively flat
- Reservoir and Cuckmere River unfenced in places
- Dogs permitted on lead
- Information boards
- Trail guide available on South East Water website and in car park

Arlington Reservoir Nature Reserve

open water and a gentle stroll...

Arlington Reservoir is a pleasant location for a stroll on a warm summer's day. A way marked trail circles the reservoir, although hedges and woodland obscure the view in places. Walking across the dam crescent (1 km in length) gives the best views of the reservoir, and some children with autism will love to look at the vast expanse of sparkling water. There are several benches where you can sit and relax. However, the reservoir is deep and the dam, which slopes gently into the water, is unfenced and out of bounds. If this is likely cause difficulties, a slightly longer route avoids the dam, taking you through the water works and across meadows, close to the Cuckmere River. Look out for dragonflies and damselflies on warm summer's days.

The car park can be busy on sunny afternoons, so it might be worth bringing a picnic, and arriving a little earlier. A kiosk sells light refreshments and ice cream, something to look forward to on your return. Visit in the winter and your walk may be much more invigorating. You may need to wrap up warm, especially for the walk across the exposed dam, but there should be a lot of wildfowl for your children to see. Bring binoculars and a field guide, and see what species your child can identify. Male Tufted Ducks are quite easy to see, with their black plumage and white sides. Pochards often accompany them, with their reddish-brown head, black breast and tail, and pale grey body. These are diving ducks, so don't be surprised if they suddenly disappear from view. Large flocks of Wigeon are a regular feature in winter; listen carefully for their whistling calls. And if it is too cold, you can always sit in the bird hide, which is at the northern end of the dam.

www.southeastwater.co.uk/media/109033/arlingtonwalkosprey.pdf



Wigeon

© David Kjaer



Tufted Duck

Tone Blakesley

Selwyns Wood

peaceful woodland for quiet walks...



“I like the bridge high over the stream”

Selwyns Wood is a small Sussex Wildlife Trust reserve which should appeal to many families with children on the autism spectrum. This is because it is somewhat off the beaten track and tends to be fairly quiet and peaceful, even in spring when Bluebells traditionally attract visitors to East Sussex woodlands. Bluebells grow throughout the wood, particularly along the track which follows the ghyll, but the woodland floor is not carpeted throughout, which many people like to see. Also look out for the delicate white flowers of Wood Anemones which flower before the Bluebells, and in the summer, the yellow flowers of Yellow Pimpernel and Goldenrod. Explain to your children that these plants are usually found in ‘ancient’ woodland, indicating that Selwyns Wood has been here for many hundreds of years. Deep in the wood, a small but precious relict of Wealden heathland becomes a haze of pink in late summer, as the Heather bursts into flower.



From the A267 at Cross in Hand, just west of Heathfield, take the B2102 signposted to Lewes, after 0.2 miles, take the minor road (Fir Grove Road) signposted to Waldron, after 0.8 miles look out for the Sussex Wildlife Trust sign next to a house called White Lodge (TQ551206)

- Nearest bus route on A267 (1 mile away)
- Free admission, reserve open daily; small car park (if busy, you may be able to park on Fir Grove Road)
- No facilities
- Terrain: several circular routes (650 m–1.5 km); uneven and muddy in places after wet weather, with several slopes
- Ghyll with steep slopes close to one path
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Leaflet with trail map available on the Sussex Wildlife Trust website

As you stroll through the wood, look out for mammals and birds too. Squirrels may be foraging on the woodland floor, but if they see you first, watch as they clamber up the nearest tree. Listen out for high pitched shrieks and chatters of tiny voles and shrews, as they scurry through the leaf litter. If you come across them in Selwyns Wood, stand very quietly and you may be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of an animal, although they do move like bullets. Sit on one of the many benches around the wood, and listen to the calls and songs of woodland birds, or maybe tell a story. Be prepared to meet the occasional dog walker, and requests in the car park to keep dogs on leads may go unheeded. If parking is difficult, Wilderness Wood (also featured in this guide) is just 4 miles away.

www.sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/reserves/page00025.htm



Bluebells



Grey Squirrel

©David Kraer



“the bluebells are like the sea...”

Wilderness Wood

woodland for adventures...

Wilderness Wood is a family-run woodland in the Sussex High Weald. When you first arrive here, you get a strong sense that this is a wood which is meant to be explored, a wood for children to have adventures. Piles of logs and bark chippings in the car park area indicate that this is also a working woodland. Head for the timber-frame barn, which is actually a café, to collect a trail map, and more information about the wood. When you see the menu, and comfortable, rustic surroundings, you may have second thoughts about the picnic lunch in your rucksack. Outside the café are numerous picnic tables, and beyond these, the woodland playground. This is better designed than many adventure playgrounds, with a tyre swing, small zip wire, and various climbing frames. It could be some time before you get beyond this area.



On the A272 Uckfield to Heathfield road, in Hadlow Down (TQ535240)

- Buses pass the site
- Car park free; modest admission charge (free for carers of children with autism and children under three); open Tuesday to Sunday, Bank Holiday Mondays and Mondays in school holidays (check website)
- Visitor Centre (barn) with toilets and café serving local and organic food/drink; picnic tables
- Woodland adventure playground
- Terrain: network of permanent/seasonal trails, e.g. Bluebell trails (600 m and 2 km); trails may be soft and muddy in places after wet weather, some steeper slopes with steps
- Dogs may be encountered off lead, but not allowed in the play area
- Frequent information boards about woodland wildlife
- Free trail map provided

As your children begin to relax and gain in confidence, it might be time to suggest a walk around the wood, which extends over about 25 ha, crossed by a network of trails of different lengths. Close to the playground, a sign directs you along a ‘secret path’. This is just 200 m or so, through heavily shaded conifer forest. Follow the trail and look out for the giant’s chair and the carved toadstool fairy ring. Also look out for examples of children’s artwork on the woodland floor. You then enter the woodland proper, with signs to direct you along the various trails. You will also come across



information boards describing the woodland flora and fauna that you might see or hear. These are especially useful in the spring, when many woodland plants, such as Wood Anemones and Bluebells are in flower. Look out for dens, bridges and the ancient Beech tree. The track can be muddy in places after rain, and there are some steeper slopes with steps.

There are some spectacular displays of Bluebells here in the spring. Bluebells are found throughout the wood, but towards the end of the way marked trails, quite close to the Barn, you will discover a Bluebell meadow, and the strange sight of a plantation of Christmas trees amongst the Bluebells. Special events held at weekends and school holidays (additional charge) include den building, campfire cooking, searching for the Gruffalo, and 'We're going on a bear hunt' (remember to bring a bear with you). Children with autism might find it difficult to join these activities, but if they are able to cope, then these sessions might be worth considering as another way of engaging them with the woodland environment. If you visit at weekends during the spring, summer or autumn, you will probably see these events going on, and be able to judge their suitability for your child.

www.wildernesswood.co.uk/





“when I saw the heather flowers I wanted to collect the seed and grow it”



North and west of North Chailey (on the junction of the A272 and A275) (North Chailey – TQ391210)

- Buses to North Chailey
- Free admission, open daily; free car parks at Romany Ridge, Pound, Red House and Lane End Commons (other car parks very small)
- No facilities, toilets in Haywards Heath, on Hazelgrove Road (B2112), off the A272 (5 miles); toilets for ‘paying visitors’ to Sheffield Park Station on the A275 (1.8 miles)
- Terrain: mostly flat, with moderate slopes in Red House and Memorial Commons; trails can be uneven, soft and muddy under foot when wet
- Several small ponds are unfenced
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Grazing animals
- Information board in car parks show some paths
- Trail leaflets on website

Chailey Common

heathland and woodland walks...

Chailey Common is a large area of lowland heathland, designated as a Local Nature Reserve in recognition of its important plant, insect and bird communities. It comprises a series of commons, separated by a network of roads. Car parks of a reasonable size can be found at Romney Ridge, Pound, Red House and Lane End Commons. The parking area for Memorial Common is small, but this area can be reached by walking from Pound Common car park (750 m away), crossing the B2183 en route. All the commons are popular with dog walkers, but Romany Ridge can sometimes be quieter.

There are relatively few way markers around the commons, so this could be an opportunity to embark on a more adventurous walk, trying to remember the paths and landmarks as you walk around. Your child might find it interesting to use a compass. For children with autism who might be anxious about getting lost, the Chailey Commons website has leaflets with trail maps describing walks of 1.25 to 2.7 km from the car parks highlighted. As you walk around, your children may ask why there are cattle and sheep hidden amongst the bracken. For hundreds of years, local people used the common land to graze their animals, or cut wood and bracken for fuel. This maintained the open character of the heathland, until these practices died out in the last century. Animals have been reintroduced to keep the heathland open, and therefore to protect the wildlife.



Stonechat on Gorse

©David Kraer

Encourage your children to look for some of the wildlife for which the commons are so special. Heathers are characteristic of heathland; try to find the three species which occur here (Ling Heather, Bell Heather and Cross-leaved Heather). Late summer is a good time to look, when the heathers are flowering. In the spring, there may be a strong scent of coconut in the air; see if your children can work out the source, but be careful as 'Gorse' has very sharp spines. If you hear 'two stones being tapped together', this is probably the call of Stonechats, often to be found sitting on top of bushes and fence posts. Another conspicuous bird is the Yellowhammer, which many people know because of its famous song "a little bit of bread and no cheese". It was Enid Blyton who first interpreted the song this way, but maybe your children will imagine the bird is singing something different? In the wetter areas there is always a chance of spotting a Grass Snake, but you need sharp eyes, because they tend to be shy and move away as they sense your approach. And on warm summer days, heathland butterflies should add to the wildlife experience; keep an eye open for orange-coloured skippers, Gatekeeper, blues and the larger, sulphur-coloured Brimstone.

www.chaileycommons.org.uk/

www.eastsussex.gov.uk/leisureandtourism/countryside/walks/chaileycommon/default.htm





“the lake is magical...”



From Uckfield town centre, take the B2102 west signposted to the A22/A26, after 0.6 miles turn right into Batchelor Way, first left into Ellis Way, and first left into Princes Close (TQ462210)

- Local buses and trains to Uckfield
- Free admission, reserves open daily; small car park at West Park, in Princes Close; access to Lake Wood on foot from West Park
- Public toilets in Uckfield
- Terrain: mostly flat, uneven and muddy in places when wet, several minor slopes and steps (typical circular walk around West Park 1.3 km; including Lake Wood, 2.3 km)
- Sandstone outcrops are unfenced; avoid climbing or approaching the edge
- Pond (fenced) and lake (unfenced)
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Sheep graze in autumn
- Busy Rocks Road separates the two reserves; traffic noise from the adjacent A22 Uckfield Bypass
- Information boards at West Park

West Park LNR and Lake Wood

delightful woodland and lakeside walks...

A visit to West Park Local Nature Reserve (managed by Uckfield Town Council) can be easily combined with a visit to Lake Wood (owned by the Woodland Trust). An information board in West Park has a map of the reserve and information about the wildlife you might see. For example, the small patch of woodland hosts Wood Anemones and Bluebells in spring, and orchids such as Common Spotted-orchid can be found amongst the wildflower meadows in summer. Although the meadows are not species-rich, they are colourful and children may love to run around in them. Exposed sandstone rocks, with twisted tree roots clamped to them look dramatic, and have interesting textures to explore. But the rocks can be dangerous, so children should not be allowed to climb. Nearby, a small pond with a boardwalk is a good place to look for dragonflies in the summer.

To visit Lake Wood, head to the gate at the north western corner of West Park. The entrance to Lake Wood is directly opposite, but Rocks Road can be busy, so care is needed when crossing. The lake itself was once part of a landscaped garden, and still has large rafts of water lilies and specimen trees close by; children might be particularly impressed by the tall Redwood towering over them at the eastern end. Sadly the garden has long been neglected, and has a decayed grandeur about it. Children might enjoy exploring the lakeside path, which at one point appears to end abruptly, until you discover a short tunnel cut through the rock. Elsewhere, sandstone rocks overhang the water, and you may discover the steps leading down to a boathouse, again cut into the rock. If you have time, walk through the ancient woodland north of the lake, which has fine displays of springtime flowers.

www.visitwoods.org.uk (search for Lake Wood and West Park under wood name)

www.localauthoritypublishing.co.uk/councils/uckfield/enviro.html



Sheffield Forest

one of the quieter woods in East Sussex...



“I watched a huge toad cross the track”

Sheffield Forest is one of the quieter woods in East Sussex, which might appeal to families with children on the autism spectrum. A wide forest track winds its way through the forest for several kilometres, offering fairly easy walking, although there are moderate slopes in places. If you want to explore more of the area, a network of narrow trails branch off into the forest, although some of these are used by horse riders, and can be uneven and muddy as a result. Visit on a warm summer's day, and you should see butterflies such as Speckled Wood and White Admiral, basking in the sunshine or nectaring on wildflowers along the main track. You may also encounter dragonflies such as Migrant Hawkers and the spectacular Golden-ringed Dragonfly. The larger dragonflies can be quite inquisitive, so if one is hawking insects along the trail, stand quite still; if your child is not afraid, this can be a great opportunity to see one close up. When the wood is quiet, there is always a chance of encountering Roe Deer or Fallow Deer on the track at any time of the year.

If your child is interested in history, spend a few moments looking at the Forestry Commission's information board by the car park (or download a copy from the High Weald AONB website). You will discover that the forest was not always the peaceful place that it is today. The remains of sawpits, charcoal hearths and bloomery sites are evidence that the wood was once extensively worked for timber, charcoal and smelting iron. With some careful detective work, children may be able to find evidence of these activities as they explore the wood. Should you find parking difficult, Old Lodge Nature Reserve (featured in this guide) is only 4.5 miles away.

i Take the minor road (Bell Lane) west from the A22 in Nutley, signposted to Fletchling, the car park is on the right after 1.1 miles (TQ429268)

- No local public transport
- Free admission, open daily; small car park
- No facilities, toilets available at Ashdown Forest Visitor Centre (5 miles away)
- Terrain: trail can be soft and muddy after rain; several light to moderate gradients
- Horse riders use the wood
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Information board in the car park includes a trail map

www.highweald.org (search under Explore and Sites to Visit)



Fallow Deer



Toad



“I enjoyed climbing on the fallen trees”



Take the minor road east from the A22 in Wych Cross to the Visitor Centre (0.9 miles) (TQ431323); car parks for Gills Lap (TQ467315) and Pooh Sticks Bridge (TQ472331) both 3 miles from Visitor Centre

- No public transport to highlighted sites
- Free admission, car parks open daily
- Visitor Centre with toilets and exhibition
- Terrain: trails may be soft and muddy in places when wet; Broadstone Amble is a circular way marked trail (2.9 km) with several steeper slopes; trails at Gills Lap (1.3–3.2 km) also have several slopes; Pooh Sticks Bridge 800 m from car park
- Dogs may be encountered off lead, but should be under close control in grazed areas
- Grazing animals include sheep, horses and cows
- Cycling prohibited
- Information boards at the Visitor Centre and Gills Lap
- Free trail maps at the Visitor Centre

Ashdown Forest Visitor Centre

woodland, heathland and Winnie-the-Pooh...

Ashdown Forest is a former medieval hunting forest in the heart of the High Weald AONB. It has more than 40 car parks, and a series of leaflets on exploring the Forest on foot. Even on the busiest summer weekends, it should be possible to park, and find somewhere relatively quiet to walk (see Old Lodge Nature Reserve in this guide). For families with children on the autism spectrum, a good place to start is the Visitor Centre in the north of the Forest. There are toilets here, a small exhibition and shop, and you can pick up leaflets illustrating many of the circular walks in the Forest.

One of these, the Broadstone Amble, starts at the Visitor Centre itself. This circular route takes you through a mosaic of heathland and woodland, typical of the wider Forest landscape. The way marked trail follows the ridge, with spectacular views across the Forest to the distant North Downs. After 500 m, the trail heads down the slope, through the heather to a wooded stream. Visit in August, and this hillside, like much of the forest, turns pink, as the heathers burst into flower. Follow the woodland path and you will come across a ‘natural’ adventure playground, where several large Beech trees have fallen. Tree climbing skills can be practiced here, just a few metres off the ground. Two shallow streams offer further opportunities for play. The trail then heads back up the slope (an ascent of 50 m or so), before following the ridge back to the car park.



The Heffalump Trap

Many people will know Ashdown Forest as the setting for the Winnie-the-Pooh stories. AA Milne lived nearby, and explored the Forest with his son Christopher Robin. Look at the original illustrations by Ernest Shepard with your child, and you will see that the Forest looks much the same today, as it did when Pooh was having his adventures. If your child is fond of the lovable bear, head for Gills Lap car park. This is one of the busier car parks, so it might be better to visit in the morning, or on a weekday. From the car park, trails take you to some of the sites of Pooh's adventures. So remember to bring a story book with you, and let the landscape bring Pooh's adventures to life. A short walk of 1.3 km passes the places thought to have inspired Christopher Robin's Enchanted Place; the Heffalump Trap which Piglet built whilst Pooh went off to look for honey; and Roo's Sandy Pit (sadly now a gully with little sand). A longer walk (3.25 km) takes you over the bridge at the 'North Pole', past the Hundred Acre Wood, and around Eeyore's Gloomy Place.

Just over a mile from Gills Lap is the car park for Pooh Sticks Bridge. Follow the woodland trail for about 800 m to reach the bridge. Because this is popular with families, there may be a distinct lack of twigs close to the bridge. So if you want to play Pooh sticks, then it is best to come prepared or to collect twigs along the way. A few metres beyond the bridge, at the base of an old tree, your children might be excited to find Winnie-the-Pooh's front door, with a brass sign saying 'RNIG ALSO'.

www.ashdownforest.org

www.just-pooh.com/ashdown.html





“I saw some deer
but they ran away”

Old Lodge

*dragonflies and an explosion of
late summer colour...*

Old Lodge is a Sussex Wildlife Trust reserve in the heart of Ashdown Forest. The reserve tends to be quieter than many other areas in the Forest, which should suit children with autism. For much of the year, dogs are required to be kept on short leads, because Exmoor ponies and cattle graze the reserve to help protect the heathland habitat. Providing your child feels comfortable with the possibility of encountering these animals, you should enjoy a peaceful stroll around the reserve.

Old Lodge, like much of the Forest changes dramatically with the seasons. In early summer, your child's eye might be drawn to the nodding spikes of Foxgloves. If you are comfortable with bees, stop and watch the antics of bumblebees as they disappear inside the flowers in search of nectar. By August, like much of the forest, the reserve becomes a sea of pink, as Heather comes into flower. Old Lodge is particularly well known for its dragonflies. If you walk around the reserve in an anticlockwise direction, you will come across several small ponds after 700 m or so, close to the northern boundary. Look out for dragonflies here on warm summer's days, as they patrol the ponds and dart between them, often tussling with each other over territory. Children with autism might find this



On the west side of the B2026 between Maresfield and Hartfield, 0.35 miles north of junction with B2188 at Kings Standing (TQ470305)

- No local public transport
- Free admission, reserve open daily; car park
- No facilities, the nearest toilets are at Ashdown Forest Visitor Centre (3.7 miles)
- Terrain: trails may be soft and muddy in places when wet; circular way marked trail (2.9 km) with several steeper slopes
- Several small ponds and a stream (unfenced)
- Dogs on short lead from January to September
- Grazing animals include ponies and cattle
- Information board in the car park
- Trail leaflets on websites

fascinating to watch. Dragonflies often return to the same perch, so if you spot one of these by the edge of a pond, sit quietly and you might get close views (there are no safety rails though). If you have a field guide, then keep an eye out for species such as Emperor, Four-spotted Chaser, and the aptly named Golden-ringed Dragonfly with its striking bands of black and gold. Black Darters may be found basking along the rides in late summer.

The trail then passes through a small birch and pine wood, with lots of pine cones to collect, before descending down a steep slope to a stream. This area is also good for dragonflies. Cross the stream using the small wooden bridge, and continue up the slope, where Heath Spotted-orchids may be seen in mid-summer. When you reach the top of the slope, wait a while, and let your children appreciate the views across the rolling Forest landscape. As you continue your walk, you may be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of a deer, as large numbers now live in the Forest. Although the animals are generally secretive, they have been seen in daylight hours grazing in paddocks just beyond the south western corner of the reserve. But if they catch sight of you, they will retreat into the forest, so approach with great care. Another rare sight would be an Adder, which are best looked for in spring and summer, as they bask in the early morning sunlight.

www.highweald.org/downloads/publications/doc_download/1170-old-lodge-trail.html

www.sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/reserves/index.htm





“we stood under
the rocks and
watched the trains”



From the B2110 in Groombridge, follow Station Road, cross the bridge over the railway line and take the right fork (Eridge Road), the entrance track is 200 m on the right (TQ535366)

- Bus route through Groombridge (0.6 miles)
- Free admission, open daily; large car park
- Toilets in the car park
- Terrain: easy walking trail on firm surfaces usually accessible for wheelchairs (2.0 km); other trails of similar length may be soft and muddy in places when wet
- One trail follows the top of Harrison Rocks (unfenced); children should be prevented from climbing or approaching the edge
- Cyclists may be encountered
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Information boards in the car park and along the easy walking trail

Birchden Wood

rocks, steam trains and bluebells...

The Forestry Commission's Birchden Wood is one of several accessible woods in the Groombridge area. The woodland has several pleasant walks, including a way marked easy walking trail, which has a firm surface, and meanders through the woodland for about 2 km. This is advertised as a 'toddler walk', suitable for wheelchairs and pushchairs. If your child likes to explore different textures, look out for soft sandstone; the gnarled bark of old birch trees; the papery white bark of younger birches; pine cones; and the larger than life wooden sculptures. Together with the information boards, these sculptures help to bring the woodland's wildlife to life. Visit in early spring, and your children should delight in the posies of Primroses scattered amongst the violets and Wood Anemones. If your child loves the colour blue, visit in late April and May, when much of the woodland is carpeted with Bluebells.

On most weekends in spring, summer and autumn, and some weekdays in the summer, your child will surely recognise the unmistakable sound of a distant steam train whistle as you walk around. To see a steam train, follow the trail from the car park along the western edge of the wood. At several points, the railway line is just 10 m or so from the path, offering great views of the locomotives. Check the Spa Valley Railway timetable before your visit, to avoid disappointment. Another attraction along this trail



is Harrison's Rocks, a sandstone crag up to 9 m in height, which runs parallel to the path for several hundred metres. The rocks are quite spectacular in their woodland setting, and in some places you will see the twisted roots of tall trees clinging to the rock surface. The more gentle slopes below the rocks are also carpeted with Bluebells. Towards the end of this trail (1 km from the car park), it is possible to walk up through the rocks and join the easy walking trail, although the rocks are not fenced, so children should not be allowed to approach the top of the crag. Some children with autism will be desperate to climb (which is not allowed), so this walk might be too frustrating for them.

If your children would like to follow a more adventurous trail, walk south east from the car park, and follow a sometimes muddy path through mature conifer forest. The trees here are tall, and the forest is heavily shaded. The atmosphere is cool, dark and eerily quiet. But if you walk very quietly and listen hard, something will surely be rustling the leaves on the forest floor. It could be a deer, or if you are very lucky a Wild Boar, but most likely a squirrel hunting for pine seeds to store for the winter. Try to find it, before it spots you, and heads for the nearest tree.

www.highweald.org (search under Explore and Sites to Visit)





“the goldfish look like carrots”



From the A265 at Burwash, take the minor road signposted to Bateman's, car park is on the left after 0.3 miles (TQ670238)

- Bus route through Burwash (600 m walk along narrow lane with no pavement)
- Car park free; admission charge for the gardens and house (free for carers of children with autism and children under five; and free for all in November and December); check website for opening times; Kipling Country Walk free
- Toilets and tea room in gardens; toilets in car park
- Picnic area by the car park
- Terrain: easy walking paths in the gardens, with some steps; Kipling Country Walk (4 km) may be soft and muddy in places, with one steady climb of 40 m
- Ponds and river unfenced
- Guide dogs only in the gardens; dogs may be off lead in the wider estate
- Frequent information boards in gardens

Bateman's

tranquil rural gardens...

Bateman's is a delightful place for children with autism, set in the heart of the High Weald countryside. It was once the home of Rudyard Kipling, author of many children's stories, such as *The Jungle Book* and the *Just So Stories*. The 17th century house is much as it was in Kipling's time, and some children might find it interesting to walk around. Most however may be more content to explore the gardens, and for those who fear dogs, there is the reassurance that only guide dogs are allowed.

When you first enter the gardens, children with autism may enjoy the experience of the sensory herb border, with a wide range of scented plants, such as Lavender, Mint and Curry Plant. Close by is a small orchard and 'Pear Alley', where children can run through the trees, just as Rudyard Kipling's children would have done many years ago. The Mulberry Garden offers more space to run around, and flower borders which are a blaze of colour. Beyond the house is an ornamental pond (unfenced), where large shoals of Goldfish swim lazily or congregate just below the surface. Many children may find the fish fascinating to watch, and you may spend a lot of time here. The garden then becomes wilder, with carpets of daffodils, Wood Anemones and Fritillaries in the riverside meadow.



At the far end of the gardens is the old water mill, where you can watch flour being ground on most Saturday afternoons. Back at the main entrance, you can also follow the children's trail around the garden, and see if your children can find some of the characters from *The Jungle Book*, hidden amongst the foliage. There are seats throughout the gardens, offering opportunities to sit and talk or read stories, perhaps from *The Jungle Book* if you have a copy. If not, you will find excerpts on small posters around the grounds, about characters such as Akela the Wolf and Shere Khan the Tiger.

Just across the road from the house, a restored wildflower meadow allows your children to experience the countryside as it would have looked in Kipling's time. Further afield, the Kipling Country Walk follows a very pleasant 4 km trail around the National Trust estate. A map of the route can be obtained from the ticket office, or downloaded from the National Trust website. You are unlikely to meet many people along the way, so it can be quite relaxing. The route initially follows the River Dudwell, before crossing farmland and climbing up the valley side. Eventually you descend through ancient Bluebell woodland, past veteran trees and an old sunken lane, before joining the river once more. There is no charge for using the car park and taking this walk.

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/batemans/



Bodiam Castle

a castle, lovely walks and steam trains too...



“I just like to walk around the moat, watching the ducks”



From the A229 at Hawkhurst, take the B2244 south, after 2 miles take the minor road signposted to Bodiam, car park on the left after 1.3 miles (TQ783253)

- Steam railway station (to Tenterden) close by
- Large car park with disabled spaces (small charge); admission to the castle grounds is free; charge to enter the castle itself (free for carers of children with autism); check web for opening times
- Toilets, café in the car park
- Picnic areas in the grounds
- Terrain: easy walking paths from the car park to the castle entrance (450 m); a circular walk back to the car park is just under 1 km; Bodiam station is 400 m from the car park, along the roadside pavement
- Castle moat is deep and unfenced; the River Rother footpath also unfenced
- Dogs on lead in the car park and castle grounds; guide dogs only in the castle itself

The Rother Valley is arguably one of the most unspoilt parts of East Sussex. At the village of Bodiam, the valley is dominated by the ruins of an impressive 14th century castle (managed by the National Trust), with the Kent and East Sussex Steam Railway and the River Rother close by. From the car park, you can explore the castle and its grounds, take a gentle stroll along one of many public footpaths in the area or walk to Bodiam station to see the steam trains.

Some children may be happy to stroll around the moat, watch the antics of the ducks, and admire the castle from afar. A series of laminated family activity cards can be borrowed from the castle ticket office: 'Pictures in the Sky' helps children to find familiar shapes in the clouds; 'Me and my Shadow' describes activities with shadows; and 'Texture Trails' helps children to find objects with different textures, such as furry moss and lacy skeleton leaves. Many children with autism will find these activities engaging and fun. And of course, the castle itself is a very tactile place, and children may enjoy the touch and feel of the old castle walls. If you go into the castle, there is an opportunity to build a castle of your own, with the foam bricks provided on the lawns for children to play with. The medieval battlements and ramparts can also be explored, if you feel it is safe for your children to do so.



If your child is keen to walk further, there are two footpaths leading directly from the castle grounds. One footpath, almost opposite the castle entrance, leads up the side of the valley to Court Lodge Farm. Here you will be rewarded with fine views of the castle and steam trains winding their way along the valley floor. On the far side of the castle, a broad track takes you through farmland for about 1.5 km, where it crosses a ditch which marks the county boundary with Kent. Across the road from the car park, there is a wide grassy path alongside the River Rother, which runs for 1.7 km to the next road crossing. This is a very pleasant walk on a summer's afternoon, and you might see flowers such as Purple-loosestrife and Meadowsweet along the river bank, Swallows hawking insects overhead and damselflies dancing across the surface of the slow moving river. For some children with autism, the temptation of the steam trains may be too great, so your walk could be a much shorter one, to the nearby station. The road is not too busy, and there is a pavement all the way. Trains run regularly in the summer, so you should be able to get close views of at least one steam train.

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/bodiam-castle/





**“there were
colourful leaves
everywhere”**



From the A28, take the B2089 west at Broad Oak, the main car park is on the left after 1.5 miles (TQ804205); a second car park is 0.7 miles further along the road (TQ795208)

- No local public transport
- Free admission, reserve open daily; two car parks
- No facilities; toilets in Brede Lane, Sedlescombe (4 miles)
- Terrain: two way marked trails; both the shorter (red) (1.2 km) and longer (black) (2.3 km) trails are uneven in places, soft and muddy under foot during wet periods, with some moderate gradients
- Shore of Powdermill Reservoir is not fenced
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Cattle grazing in fenced heathland areas
- Information boards in the car parks
- Trail maps on Woodland Trust website

Brede High Woods

woodland for explorers...

Brede High Woods is a large area of woodland and heathland on the northern shore of Powdermill Reservoir, in the heart of the High Weald. On your first visit, consider following one of the two way marked trails which start from the main car park. These take you along wide woodland rides, through coppiced Hornbeam and Sweet Chestnut woods, and small patches of conifer forest. There are lots of woodland flowers in Brede High Woods, so take a field guide if you have one, and see what flowers your children can find. In early spring, look out for the delicate white flowers of Wood Anemones which carpet the woodland floor in places, and as these begin to fade, Bluebells come into flower. Delightful posies of Primroses can also be found, scattered along the woodland trails. In summer, it is hard to miss Foxgloves, standing tall along the woodland edge. Woodland butterflies flourish along the sunnier rides and glades, and Brede High Woods is especially well known for Silver-washed Fritillaries. These are recognisable as large, pale orange butterflies with an intricate pattern of black lines and spots. See if you can spot one sunbathing on bramble leaves, but on very warm summer days, they may just flash past in a blur of orange.



There are many other trails waiting to be explored. Brede High Lane for example, is an ancient trackway which takes you from the main car park down to the edge of Powdermill Reservoir. Unfortunately, willows and alders allow only tantalising views across the water in summer. Nevertheless, this is a very peaceful area, deep in the wood, where your child might find the sound of water gently washing up against the shore quite soothing. Occasionally the peace will be broken by a noisy tit flock, feeding as they move through the canopy. Suddenly there will be birds calling all around, but as quickly as the birds arrive, they are gone, and silence returns. If you have binoculars, see what you can spot while you have a chance. Blue Tits, Great Tits, Long-tailed Tits and Treecreepers are most likely. Towards the southern end of Brede High Lane, a path to the west allows you to follow the edge of the reservoir to Holman Wood Field. From here, paths lead you through tall conifer forest and out onto Sedlescombe Heath. Here you might encounter cattle, introduced to maintain the open character of the heath, so that plants such as heather and Dwarf Gorse can flourish. Returning to the main car park from the heath, you will probably have walked about 4 km. For a shorter walk to the heath, use the second car park (circular route of about 2 km).

www.visitwoods.org.uk (search for Brede High Woods under wood name)



Silver-washed Fritillary



Hard-fern



Long-tailed Tit



“I enjoyed playing with the ducks on the lawn”



From the A22/A257 roundabout at Pevensey, take the minor road signposted to Wartling, entrance is on the left after 3.5 miles (TQ653103)

- No local public transport
- Car park; modest admission charge for the gardens and grounds (free for carers of children with autism and children under five); open most days from April to October (check website)
- Visitor Centre with toilets, disabled toilets and tea room
- Small woodland play area
- Terrain: accessible path around the castle gardens (typical walk 1 km); two way marked woodland trails may be soft and muddy in places when wet, with one steeper slope (1.8–2.5 km)
- Lake and moat unfenced
- Dogs permitted on lead
- Frequent information boards in the grounds
- Free trail map

Herstmonceux Castle

relaxed gardens and woodland walks...

The grounds of Herstmonceux Castle are relatively quiet and peaceful, tucked away on the edge of Pevensey Levels. The atmosphere is relaxed, as you will discover when you stop your car at the ticket office. Here you will be given a map of the grounds, and directed to the car park, which is essentially the lawns directly in front of the castle. A short distance along the drive, your child will surely be excited when a fairy tale moated castle appears through the trees, directly in front of you.

From the parking area, head for the Visitor Centre, following a line of magnificent Sweet Chestnut trees. These are true veterans, up to 300 years old, so they are surely worth a ‘hug’ (though climbing on the trees is understandably forbidden). The Visitor Centre itself houses a small exhibition about the castle and its grounds. The tea room is also well worth a visit, perhaps something to look forward to after a walk around the grounds. At this point you have a choice, either to follow one of the way marked trails directly into the woods, or to first visit the Elizabethan gardens. Although formal, the gardens may surprise and delight many children with autism. The borders are a blaze of colour in the summer months, with interesting sculptures and objects to look at and touch as you wander around. There are quiet corners to sit and talk, or perhaps to read a story. Through a wooden arch you enter a ‘Magic Garden’,



a dark place under heavy shade, with strange looking objects made from deadwood to touch and feel.

Beyond the gardens, you can join the way marked trail as it enters the woodland. There are surprises here too... a pyramid built out of bricks, a 'henge' made of wood and more veteran chestnut trees. Several large trees have fallen, giving your children opportunities to explore their vast trunks, and in one case, to actually crawl into the hollow centre. Black Poplars tower overhead as you approach the Folly and its lake. In summer, the Folly garden offers another opportunity to sit quietly, whilst the lake attracts dragonflies of all sizes, which seem to be everywhere on a warm summer's day. At this point the Chestnut Walk returns across open parkland, whilst the yellow trail takes you through Bluebell woods underplanted with Rhododendrons and Azaleas. Visit in May if you want to experience the full palette of colour in the woodland. When you reach the gardens once more, you might just have time to visit the small woodland play area. Many families with children on the autism spectrum will find Herstmonceux Castle a great location to engage with the natural world, and one which they will wish to visit over again.

www.herstmonceux-castle.com





“I saw treecreepers and nuthatches”



From the A2100 at Telham, take the minor road signposted to Crowhurst (2 miles), roadside parking in Station Road, opposite the Church of St Georges (TQ758123)

- Crowhurst station is 700 m from the church, along Station Road (no pavement)
- Free admission, reserve open daily
- No facilities, nearest toilets in Battle (4 miles)
- Terrain: 800 m walk from the church to the wood, along roadside pavement and across fields with several stiles; in the wood, two way marked trails (1.5 km and 2.3 km), both uneven, soft and muddy under foot during wet periods, with several steep slopes
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Information board at the main entrance includes a trail map

Fore Wood

peaceful woodland...

Fore Wood is a delightful area of ancient woodland, managed by the RSPB. It is not directly accessible from the road, and therefore tends to attract fewer visitors than woods which have their own car parks. Some children with autism might feel a real sense of adventure, faced with a walk through the village, and across fields to reach their destination. Walk along the road, past the churchyard for about 100 m, where a small RSPB sign directs you to follow the public footpath across fields to the main entrance. Because of its location, you will need an Ordnance Survey map, or download East Sussex County Council's 'Crowhurst Walk Route 12' leaflet, which includes Fore Wood.

When you reach the wood, an Information Board illustrates two trails: one of 1.5 km (marked in red on the map, but way marked with 'green' arrows) and a slightly longer trail of 2.3 km (marked in blue on the map, but way marked with 'white' arrows). Close to the entrance, a quiet woodland pond usually hosts a few Mallards and Moorhens. On a summer's day, pause here and watch the antics of dragonflies as they buzz across the water. The shorter trail then winds its way through areas of coppiced Hornbeam and Sweet Chestnut, and high forest. In the spring, the woodland floor is carpeted with the delicate white flowers of Wood Anemones, followed by a fine display of Bluebells. Children may enjoy listening to the birdsong as they follow this trail, disturbed only by the



occasional passing train. If you have binoculars, look out for woodpeckers, Nuthatch and Treecreeper, as they move up and down the stems and branches of older trees looking for insects and grubs. The north eastern boundary of the wood follows the busy London to Hastings railway line for about 200 m, so if your child likes trains, there is a reasonable chance of seeing at least one train as you walk along this section. There are also many fallen trees here which children might wish to clamber over.

The longer trail initially follows the western boundary for about 800 m, where the woodland is generally more open. Here, you have a much better chance of seeing woodland butterflies such as Brimstone and Orange Tip in the spring, and the much scarcer Silver-washed Fritillary and White Admiral in the summer. The trail then turns sharply to the right, taking you deeper into the wood, eventually joining the shorter trail by the railway line. To return, you can either retrace your steps, or if you have a map, follow the public footpath along Powdermill Stream, and across the fields (which may have grazing animals), eventually reaching the village by the ruined 13th century manor house, almost directly opposite Station Road.

www.rspb.org.uk/reserves/guide/f/forewood/

www.eastsussex.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/68A4F042-7364-4FOA-AAC6-047661E6CC73/0/CrowhurstWalkWebversionupdate.pdf



White Admiral



Nuthatch



“here you can see the North and South Downs at the same time”



From the A259 in Hastings, take the minor road signposted to Fairlight, Visitor Centre car park signposted to the right after 1.5 miles (TQ860116)

- Bus route passes entrance (300 m from Visitor Centre)
- Free admission, open daily; pay and display car park
- Toilets; Visitor Centre open at weekends, and some weekdays
- Terrain: accessible paths to the Coast Guard Cottages view point (1.2 km return) and into Firehills (1.6 km return); other trails may be soft and muddy in places after wet weather, with steep slopes and steps in places; typical circular walks through Firehills (2.6 km), Warren Glen (2.1 km) and Fairlight Glen (4.3 km)
- Clifftop footpath is unfenced
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Animals grazing in some areas
- Information boards at entrances
- Trail leaflet on Hastings Chronicle website

Hastings Country Park

stunning coastal views, and tales of dinosaurs...

Hastings Country Park, managed by Hastings Borough Council, covers 345 ha of ancient ghyll woodland, grassland, heathland, coastal glens, and sandstone cliffs. It follows the coastline for almost 5 km, from Hastings to Fairlight. There are several car parks and access points, but families with children with autism may find the Visitor Centre is a good starting point. The Visitor Centre houses a small exhibition including fossils found along the coast, insects and a ‘touch table’ full of natural objects with a wide range of textures. From here, you can walk to The Firehills, Warren Glen and Fairlight Glen. However, there are three other car parks, at Barley Lane (for Ecclesbourne Glen and Meadow), Rock-a-Nore (for East Hill) and Fairlight Road (for the picnic site only). There are also toilets at Rock-a-Nore and the picnic site.

Pick up a map from the Visitor Centre and follow the metalled road down to the Coast Guard Cottages. Bring binoculars because the views are excellent in both directions, and your children might be impressed that they can stand in one spot, and follow the coastline all the way from Beachy Head (to the south west) to the white cliffs of Dover (to the north east), a distance as the crow flies of over 50 miles. From here, if you take the cliff top path east



through The Firehills (so called because of the fiery yellow colour of flowering Gorse) you will be rewarded with more stunning views of the coastline. Looking down on the ocean, especially on a sunny day when the water is sparkling could be a magical experience for a child with autism. There are benches where you can rest and talk, perhaps to tell your children about the dinosaurs which once roamed here and the fossilised dinosaur bones and foot prints which have been found in the rocks below. Although the cliff top path is unfenced, there is no route down to the beach because the cliffs are unstable and landslips do occur.

If your child is able to undertake longer walks, and is comfortable on paths and steps up and down steep sided glens, then you could take one of the trails west of the Visitor Centre. A trail through Warren Glen takes you to the coastal path. From here, head east to return to the Visitor Centre via the Coast Guard Cottages, or west if you want to explore the wooded Fairlight Glen. This is an important site for nature conservation in East Sussex because of the number of plants which are only found in ancient woodland. Many of these flower in spring, and you can look for them with your children. Some of the easier plants to find include Bluebells, Wood Anemone, Yellow Archangel and Wild Garlic. You may detect Wild Garlic before you see the haze of white flowers, as the air can be full of the scent of garlic. If your child likes the smell, crush some leaves, but the aroma can be particularly pungent.

www.hastingschronicle.net/countryPark.html

www.hastings.gov.uk/community_living/places_spaces_facilities/allotments_parks_beaches/countryside/hcp_nature/



Rye Harbour Nature Reserve

raucous seabirds, and pebbles too...



“I saw lots of seabirds and poppies on my walk”



From the A259 in Rye, follow Harbour Road signposted to Rye Harbour, the car park is on the right at the end of the road (after 1.6 miles) (TQ942189)

- Rail station in Rye and buses to Rye Harbour
- Free admission, open daily; large car park
- Toilets by car park; small information centre along the metalled road
- Terrain: generally easy walking around the beach reserve to the Wader Pool, Quarry and Ternery Pool hides (circular route 3–4 km); longer trails around Castle Water and Camber Castle may be soft and muddy in places when wet
- Rivers Brede and Rother and some pools are unfenced
- Dogs may be encountered off lead, but should be on lead in grazed areas
- Cyclists on the metalled road
- Information boards
- Trail leaflets on the web

Rye Harbour Nature Reserve is a unique landscape, quite unlike any other in East Sussex. Over many thousands of years, shingle has been deposited by the sea, gradually moving the shoreline further from Rye. Camber Castle, now just over a mile from the sea, was originally constructed on a shingle spit by the shore. Shingle extraction has created a series of attractive lakes and freshwater marshes, and a recent project has re-created a large area of saltmarsh.

The large car park at Rye Harbour is convenient for the beach and birdwatching hides, but longer walks will take you past Castle Water to the impressive ruin of Camber Castle. A metalled road leads from the car park directly to the beach (1.3 km), alongside saltmarsh and past a small information centre. When the tide is high, children with autism may find it soothing to sit and listen to the gentle sound of the waves washing across the pebbles. If your child loves to collect pebbles, then you may not get too much further. There are plants here too, which thrive in the salty, windswept conditions. In late spring and summer, look out for the flowers of Yellow Horned-poppies, deep blue Viper’s Bugloss and the delicate white flowers of Sea Kale, which at first glance look like enormous cabbages. After reaching the sea, continue west along the beach road, looking out for terns, as they fly low over the road, sometimes carrying a fish. Take the first path which leads



back across the shingle towards the car park. After 300 m you will come across two hides; if your child likes birds, particularly 'noisy' ones, visit the hide on your left, which overlooks the Ternery Pool. Here, small islands support large numbers of breeding gulls and terns in spring and early summer. Some children may be very happy to sit and absorb the spectacle, particularly when the adults are feeding their young.

About 150 m beyond the hides, the trail forks – the path to the right is a shorter route to the car park, past the caravan park. The path to the left passes several shallow lagoons, where you might be lucky enough to see Avocets. These elegant, black and white waders use their peculiarly upturned bills to sift through the shallow water for insects. The next right turn takes you past a narrow lake and on to Harbour Road, 250 m west of the car park. In summer, you may come across the more familiar 'red' Poppies, growing alongside Oxeye Daisies and wild roses. Sheltered from the onshore winds, it may be noticeably warmer here, with butterflies and other insects taking advantage of the shelter and abundance of flowers. If you wish to visit Camber Castle, a circular route from Rye Harbour via the beach is about 9 km, but there is a much shorter route, parking in Rye and following the River Brede (4.5 km). The Wild Rye website is an excellent source of information on the walks and wildlife of the area.

www.wildrye.info/

www.sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/reserves/page00010.htm

www.eastsussexcc.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/23COB440-9B25-4CAD-ACAE-6520BB70B964/0/CamberCastleWalkwebversion.pdf#search=%22Camber%20Castle%22



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Educational Access and Care Farms

experience farming in East Sussex...

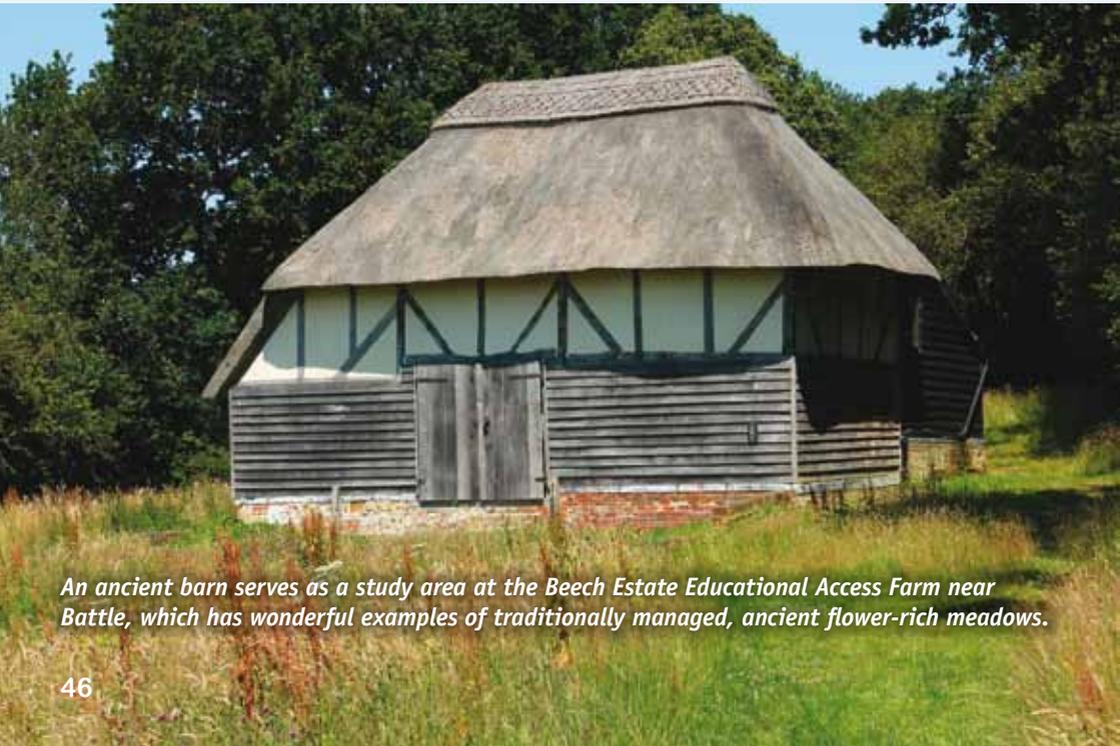
Educational Access is a scheme which provides opportunities for schools, clubs, youth groups, families and others to visit farms to learn more about the countryside, farming and where our food comes from. There may be opportunities to see livestock farming in action, wildlife or historic landscape features. Farms may have a teachers' information pack and/or Farm Fact Leaflets for other groups. Search for East Sussex on Natural England's website to find a list of Educational Access Farms and their locations. There are currently 23 Educational Access Farms in East Sussex, although this number may change over time. For each farm, more detailed information includes: what there is to see and do, farm activities, facilities, conservation on the farm and contact details for the farmer.

Care Farming is about the therapeutic use of farming practices, to provide health, social or educational care services for a wide range of vulnerable people, including children with autism and related conditions. Care farms provide supervised programmes of farming-related activities, such as helping to feed, groom and clean out animals, and woodland management. Care Farms may be visited regularly, or just once. Care farming is a relatively new initiative, and there are currently three registered care farms in East Sussex.

Educational Access Farms: <http://cwr.naturalengland.org.uk/educational-access.aspx>

Care Farms: www.carefarminguk.org/

Let nature feed your senses: www.letnaturefeedyoursenses.org/letnature/home.eb



An ancient barn serves as a study area at the Beech Estate Educational Access Farm near Battle, which has wonderful examples of traditionally managed, ancient flower-rich meadows.

Part 3 Case Stories

In Part 2, we focused on natural places in East Sussex which families with children on the autism spectrum might enjoy visiting. Here, we present a series of case stories, about visits to the countryside by small groups of school children with autism, accompanied by their teachers. Six visits were arranged by Autism and Nature in June and July 2012, with three schools in East Sussex. The Lindfield School in Eastbourne caters for secondary pupils with a variety of special needs, approximately 50% of whom have autism. Children with autism are educated together in groups of 8–14, and the main school has a special autism facility for pupils with greater needs. Torfield School in Hastings provides primary school education for children with complex needs, approximately 90% of whom have autism. Saxon Mount Community School in St Leonards caters for secondary pupils with autism and general or global learning difficulties and communication difficulties. The school has pupils with autism throughout the main part of the school. There is also a special autism facility for three classes of six children with higher levels of learning and communication need. Children from one of these, the higher level nurture class, took part in two case stories visits.

Each visit was accompanied by several teachers, staff from Autism and Nature, and led by Education Officers from one of our conservation partners: Sussex Wildlife Trust and the Woodland Trust (visits led by Sunrise Bushcraft). Three visits were hosted by Sussex Wildlife Trust staff based at the Seven Sisters Country Park (featured in this guide). The Woodland Trust visits were held during school Discovery Weeks, at either Brede High Woods (featured in this guide) or Views Wood in Uckfield. The visits varied in length from two to four hours, some including a packed lunch.

The aim of these visits was to demonstrate some of the benefits of engaging children on the autism spectrum with nature and the countryside. With the visits being led by Education Officers, teachers had more of a support role, allowing them the opportunity to watch and see what their children were doing more objectively. They were also able to learn more about the natural environment, giving them more confidence to take their pupils out into the countryside in the future. The case stories which follow describe the visits and the activities which the children took part in. The teachers completed a short questionnaire after each visit. Their valuable comments and observations on the children's experiences and the ways in which the children benefitted from engaging with the natural environment, are also included in the case stories.



Year 7 visit Brede High Woods

With heavy rain clouds gathering overhead, a small group of Year 7 children from The Lindfield School arrived at Brede High Woods for their Woodland Trust Discovery visit, hosted by Sunrise Bushcraft. This was to be the first of three visits for this class, as part of the Autism and Nature project in East Sussex. Three boys and four girls from Year 7 were accompanied by three teachers. After mid-morning snacks in their minibus, the children were taken on a short walk through the woods to the Bushcraft camp. Along the way, Lewis, one of two Sunrise leaders showed the children some interesting woodland plants, including some which can be eaten. He showed them how, if you grip a very young Nettle leaf tightly, and roll it up into a ball, you can actually eat it. He also picked a soft young Beech leaf, and explained that if you chewed it, it tasted of apple peel. Several children were keen to taste Nettle and Beech leaves. When they arrived at the Sunrise camp, Lewis's partner James, with one eye on the weather, decided that constructing a shelter might be the most appropriate activity, under threatening skies. He told the children that if the rain held off, there might be an opportunity to make a fire (sadly it did not).

After quickly demolishing the efforts of a previous school, the children set about constructing a den of their own. They really enjoyed collecting logs and branches from the surrounding woodland, which they used to form the main structure of the den. As the den began to take shape, the children were clearly focused on the task in hand, and there was lots of enthusiasm and smiles. Several children took a break to pose for photographs in the partially constructed den, whilst one boy enjoyed a deep conversation with James. Another boy, with a special interest in snails and other invertebrates, preferred to look for these animals in the woodland, with the support of a teacher. He missed out on the den building, but clearly enjoyed the opportunity to explore and engage with the woodland environment, developing his interest further.



With the main structure of the den in place, the children realised that it would not keep them dry if the rain came. So the final task was to cover the den with Bracken to make it waterproof. Bracken can be very coarse and cause cuts, so the children wore thick gloves for protection. When the den was finally completed, most of the children took a turn to sit inside, each looking extremely proud of their achievement. A light shower actually felt quite pleasant. James then began to show the children how to make a fire, but with heavy rain now falling, the children thanked James and Lewis, before hurrying back to the minibus. The adults were much more concerned about getting wet than the children, who seemed quite happy in the rain.

The teachers remarked that the children were much more relaxed out of school, and clearly enjoyed the practical den building activities. They were pleased and genuinely surprised at how well the children worked together, and how long they persevered with the task of building the den. Visits such as this give children opportunities to develop their social and communication skills, and to have new conversations and develop new relationships with other children as well as their teachers. Two children showed significant improvements in their behaviour, just during this one visit to the countryside. The children were still excited when they returned to school, and they were keen to talk about their adventure and their experiences to their peers. The teachers themselves felt that the session was a very valuable learning experience, reinforcing their views that children with autism learn better by experience and that 'outdoor classroom' environments such as woodland are very important to learning.



Year 7 visit Birling Gap and Seven Sisters Country Park

The class of three boys and five girls arrived at the Visitor Centre at Seven Sisters Country Park on a sunny June morning. The school had been invited to visit the beach at the Country Park, but the teachers felt that the walk would be too long for many of the children. Consequently, after picking up Ronnie Reed (Sussex Wildlife Trust) and David Blakesley (Autism and Nature), the school minibus departed for the short drive to the National Trust car park at Birling Gap. Here the beach is adjacent to the car park, although there is a flight of steep steps to climb down.

The visit was timed perfectly for low tide, so the first activity of the day was rock pooling... under a clear blue sky... on a deserted beach. The children made themselves comfortable on the shingle whilst Ronnie talked to them about what they might see and catch in the rock pools. Everyone then headed for the rock pools, armed with a net and a bucket. Some of the children had never been rock pooling before, and they were quite nervous and apprehensive. They took their time to move from the shingle, out across the white lip of bare rocks and onto the slippery seaweed; some needing coaxing, clinging to the adults for support. Soon though, all were feeling quite confident, and everyone began to find Winkles, Beadlet Anemones and the occasional Shore Crab. The children clearly gained in confidence as time moved on, and they were reluctant to leave the rock pools.



Once back on the shore, Ronnie showed everyone what had been found, including several crabs. The children then began to explore the beach; they touched the leathery seaweed and turned over shells, and found pebbles of different shapes and sizes. The next activity was to collect larger pebbles, which they painted with all the colours of the rainbow. There was as much paint on some hands as on the pebbles, so when the artwork was complete, the children ran down to the shoreline to wash their hands in the sea. Finally, there was time to create a giant crab from driftwood, Cuttlefish bones and debris from the strandline. The crab's empty eyes were made from soft, yellow balls of Whelk eggs, which stared up at the children. All the children enjoyed this activity, and posed proudly by their artwork for photographs. There was much laughter during the morning, and the pace of activities was gentle. It was then time for lunch, and the group returned to the garden at Seven Sisters Country Park, to enjoy their lunch in the sunshine, before departing for their school.

Afterwards, the teachers commented that most of the pupils showed a different side to their social skills whilst on the beach, getting on well together and responding well to the staff and the unfamiliar adults. The teachers were also particularly pleased with the way that all the children sat together on the grass at lunch time. Many of the pupils have issues with behaviour, motor skills and appropriate interaction, and the beach activities gave them the opportunity to shine. One child in particular exhibited much improved behaviour, showing none of his usual challenging behaviour. Another pupil who has very poor fine and gross motor skills amazed the teachers by her determination in the face of difficulties during the visit. She confounded the concerns of the teachers, by going up and down the steep steps to the beach, not just once, but twice. The teachers were also extremely pleased to see her successfully negotiate the pebble beach and the rocks to reach the rock pools. Although the teachers knew these children very well, they found they could still be surprised. One teacher remarked that "it confirms my belief that pupils like ours learn by experience and that a classroom is not always the best place to learn... it also teaches staff (myself included) that there is always something new to learn, not only about the needs of our pupils but of their capabilities". All the children were keen to talk about their experiences when they got back to school, and enjoyed looking at photographs of their adventure.



Year 7 visit Views Wood

The children arrived at Views Wood on the northern outskirts of Uckfield for their second Woodland Trust Discovery visit, again hosted by Sunrise Bushcraft. Blue skies and sunshine welcomed them, although they had driven through very heavy rain, so there were more than a few anxious upward glances amongst the teachers and hosts. After a quick late morning snack, eight very excited children and six adults were met by Lewis and David. Many remembered Lewis and David from previous visits, and they asked about Lewis's colleague James.

The visit started with a nature walk through the wood, to find James. As they followed the woodland trail, Lewis talked to the children about some of the fruits of the forest – blackberries, wild raspberries and sweet chestnuts. He was pleased that they remembered some of the plants they had come across in their previous visit to Brede High Woods, such as Oak and Beech, and several children who had not visited Brede were keen to taste young Nettle leaves.

The children were excited to meet James again and many were keen to shake his hand. James asked them to sit on logs under a giant Sweet Chestnut tree, and all were keen to explore the contents of James's huge 'touchy/feely' box. James pulled out an animal skin, which turned out to be from a Fallow Deer. This was very soft, and everyone was keen to touch the fur. A Goat skin was also very soft, and again the children loved the feel of this. The most exciting object in the box was the skin of a Python, which the children helped James to unroll. It must have been at least 4 m long! This was definitely not soft, but the children enjoyed touching it, and hearing about how Pythons hunted (although James assured them that they were safe in Views Wood). James also had several skulls, and he passed these round, asking the children if they could tell him which belonged to carnivores and which belonged to herbivores.



Whilst the children were engrossed in these activities, the skies were darkening. When a distant rumble of thunder was heard, a decision was quickly made to hurry the children back to the safety of their minibus. During the brief shower which followed, the children had a snack, and coloured wooden disks, which Lewis later threaded with string to make them each a pendant to remind them of their visit. One boy had had the opportunity to cut his own disk from a Sweet Chestnut pole, just before the call to return to the minibus.

When the skies cleared, the outdoor activities resumed. Before doing anything else, several children proudly posed to have their photos taken wearing their pendants. Using protective gloves, the children then had the opportunity to explore the woodland more closely, to find any objects which they found interesting. With the help of the adults, a fine collection was laid out on the bonnet of James's car, including lichen encrusted twigs, hazelnuts, sweet chestnuts, Bluebell seeds and various leaves and flowers. Finally, armed with paper and crayons, there was just time for the children to make bark rubbings or draw pictures of the woodland. The visit was over all too quickly, but the children had great time, and all seemed very happy.

Afterwards, the teachers said how pleased they were once again with the behaviour of the children, and how well they responded to the activities. They admitted to being amazed at the knowledge of some of the children; including facts which the children had learnt at Brede High Woods, and some things which the teachers did not know they knew. Again they commented that the development of attention, concentration, motor skills and social skills were met far better outdoors than in school. The teachers also enjoyed the opportunity to watch the pupils engaging with new activities and people, showing them in a different light to the more formal setting of school. Back at school, the children were all keen to share their experiences with other pupils and staff.



Year 2 visit Seven Sisters Country Park

A young, excited group of 12 children with autism from Year 2, escorted by five teachers, arrived at Seven Sisters Country Park Visitor Centre on an overcast summer's morning. After meeting Ronnie Reed (Sussex Wildlife Trust) and David, they briefly explored some of the exhibits in the Barn. The group then set off for Friston Forest, just a few minutes' walk from the Barn, where lots of activities had been planned. The first stop was a group of trees, onto which giant footprints had been painted. The children were asked to guess what animal might leave such a print. One belonged to a squirrel, and the children gazed high into the canopy to try to find the squirrel's drey.

Ronnie told the children she would prefer to call them by the name of an animal, rather than '2J', and so the children decided that they would be known as 'Foxes' for the rest of the visit. The 'Foxes' then had the chance to become caterpillars – each teacher became the eyes of the caterpillar, and groups of three children lined up behind, holding each other's waist, to become the legs. As legs do not have eyes, the children were blindfolded, and the caterpillars proceeded to explore the forest. As the caterpillars explored the forest, they had to identify tree stumps, leaves and moss by touch. All the children enjoyed this activity, although there was some lifting of blindfolds... The children were then each given a drawing of a caterpillar, and with the use of double-sided sticky tape, they set out to camouflage their caterpillar using leaves from the forest floor. This was a popular activity, although many of the caterpillars ended up buried under piles of leaves – perhaps too well camouflaged.

Pond dipping was next, and this proved to be the most popular activity of the morning. All the children were eager to have a go, as Ronnie showed them how to use a net safely, and how to carefully transfer pond animals from their net into bowls of water, without hurting them.



All the children had a turn, closely supervised by the adults. When everyone was ready, the children huddled over Ronnie as she showed them what everyone had caught. They saw the huge, dark predator eyes of a dragonfly larvae, watched a pond snail emerge from its shell and the antics of water boatmen as they skated through the water. Then it was time for lunch, and the children returned to the Barn area, and had lunch in the garden. This also gave them a welcome opportunity to run around and play. After lunch, they returned to the woodland, to look for bugs in the leaf litter on the woodland floor, armed with a collecting jar and a spoon. One of the highlights for many children was a baby frog, which sat quietly on David's hand – everyone crowded round for a better look. Soon it was time to leave, with just enough time to visit a Badger's sett, although all the Badgers were fast asleep somewhere underground.

The teachers were very pleased with how well the children behaved during the session. Most interacted well with Ronnie, and followed her instructions, although some needed additional support from the teachers to help them understand the various activities. The teachers said that they were genuinely pleased with some of the responses the children were able to give when questioned about minibeasts by Ronnie. The following day the teachers held a 'speaking and listening session', and the children recalled their favourite part of the day and explained their reasons. The majority of the children were able to express what they enjoyed the most and each child enjoyed different parts and gave slightly different reasons. Two of the children felt the most enjoyable part of the day was lunch time, because they liked sitting in the garden eating their lunch in the rain! All the children were happy to write a simple sentence with support and draw a picture to accompany their writing. They were pleased to learn that their work would be sent to Ronnie as a way of saying thank you.



Year 10 nurture group visit Brede High Woods

Six children with more severe autism, accompanied by one teacher and two teaching assistants, arrived at Brede High Woods just after lunch on an unsettled June day. The adults had a wary eye on the dark cloudy skies, as heavy showers had been forecast. But the clouds quickly cleared and the sun came out. The children were met by Lewis, who took them on the short walk through the woods to the Bushcraft camp. Along the way, the children discovered that while Nettles sting, their young leaves can also be eaten; and if you chew a Beech leaf, it tastes like apple peel. They also learnt that the stems of Cleavers have tiny hooks, and stick very effectively to clothing, just like Velcro.

When the children arrived at the camp, they met James, who introduced them to two basic survival skills – how to make fire, and how to make a shelter. The children sat on a log, and watched as James demonstrated how to use flints to create sparks that would light cotton wool. Once lit, James used dry twigs to make a proper fire. The children were fascinated to watch, and all were keen to have a go at making their own fires. First, they had to go into the nearby woodland to collect a bundle of dry twigs to use on their fires. Then, under the careful supervision of James and Lewis, each proudly lit their own fire. The teacher remarked that all of the pupils really impressed her with this activity – they were all really motivated to try and give it a go and all concentrated really well.

The second task of the afternoon was to make a waterproof shelter, and for this activity, the children worked together, with the support of the teachers and instructors. Lewis constructed a simple frame, and the children then spent the next 30 minutes or so collecting logs and branches. Once the structure was complete, the children were given protective gloves to collect bracken to waterproof the structure. One boy found the confidence to share a joke with Lewis and James, by repeatedly pretending to lose a finger whilst putting on a pair of gloves. Soon the den was complete; the children had worked hard, and all seemed very pleased with what they had achieved.



The teacher commented that all the students behaved very well in the outdoor environment. For this group an open space is sometimes harder to function within on specific directed tasks as there are more environmental and sensory distractions, making it harder for them to focus on and 'tune in' to information and communication from the adults supporting them. For example, one child who is usually quite insecure and 'clingy' in new environments and with new people, clearly gained in confidence as the session progressed, and it was noticeable how little he looked to the teachers for confirmation or reassurance. Another child usually hangs back from the group, moving slowly, showing signs of anxiety and distress. The teacher remarked that it was fantastic to see him so calm and happy throughout, showing none of the usual signs of anxiety. He also participated in the group task, which again the teachers said was fantastic to see. Another child impressed the teachers with his focus, as he sat still and concentrated on the fire activity, when normally he would be constantly on the move, either standing, bouncing or hand clapping.



The teacher commented that it was great to be able to work with the children in a support role following activities led by James and Lewis, and she felt that all the activities could be replicated safely. The teachers were able to really watch and see what the children were doing more objectively. The class have apparently been going out more since, and the benefits are really starting to show. Reflecting on the trip and reviewing the video and photos they took on the day was also really helpful. The teacher commented that "watching the students focus and attend to different activities has made me start to think about other experiences and activities that I could undertake outside of a classroom and out in nature, that will support and develop skills they will need in the classroom and in the wider world".



Year 10 nurture group visit Seven Sisters Country Park

The same group of six children, accompanied by one teacher and three teaching assistants arrived at Seven Sisters Country Park under a grey sky with heavy cloud. The group assembled in the Barn, where the staff used social stories to describe the plan for the day, which included walking, talking, learning and lunch on the beach. With packed lunches in their rucksacks, the children set off for the 2 km walk to the beach, led by Ronnie Reed of Sussex Wildlife Trust.

Ronnie had several sets of laminated cards with photographs of wildlife which the children might expect to see as they walked down the Cuckmere Valley, past drifts of chalk grassland flowers. The children really seemed to enjoy the opportunity to use these. The first thing they found was the caterpillar, and then the cocoon of a Burnett Moth – giving their teachers the opportunity to talk about the life cycle of butterflies and moths. Although there were no adult moths on the wing, colourful butterflies such as Marbled Whites and Meadow Browns were all around. In July, many chalk grassland plants are in flower, so there were plenty of opportunities to stop and look at these too. With the help of their cards, the children searched for the purple flowers of Viper's Bugloss and the yellow flowers of Lady's Bedstraw. Ronnie also brought along some leaves from her garden, collected from particularly fragrant plants. The children enjoyed the smell of 'Curry' Plant, Lavender and various herbs. Ronnie also used a sweep net, to catch spiders and insects for the children to look at. Several birds were included on Ronnie's cards, and the group were fortunate to have good views of a Heron, Little Egret and a Skylark perched obligingly on a nearby fence post. The children enjoyed searching through their cards to find pictures which matched these birds. As the walk progressed all the children seemed to be very calm, and clearly appreciating the landscape around them.



There was some excitement as the children finally arrived at the beach, as it was time for lunch. The children were clearly very relaxed, and seemed to have really benefitted from the long walk. The teacher commented that the time spent at the beach was really a catalyst for social interaction and play. Having eaten, all the students engaged well on the beach, with several initiating activities of their own, such as throwing stones in the sea, finding shells, or watching the waves. The teacher remarked how playful and interactive some of the children became. Laughter, great eye-contact, confidence and meaningful interactions between pupils and teachers were rewarding for all the adults to see.

The teaching assistants said that they had learnt quite a lot from Ronnie about the environment and consequently would now feel more confident escorting children on trips, and they felt that they would be able to show the children so much more when undertaking similar walks. The teacher commented that "it is really great to make the outdoors the classroom... it allows for a spontaneity and fluidity that the classroom often does not allow – you never know when you might see a rabbit, bird, fish, butterfly – it just unfolds in front of you. You also never know just what might spark the child's interest, amusement or attention – it is limitless!!"

The teacher noticed on the trip home and back at school how calm and quiet the children were. Each day is evaluated before school ends in a session called "reflections" and all the children enjoyed the trip, especially the beach, recalling something different they had done, seen, and remembered. One child in particular stood out, as he used a couple of short statements rather than single words when talking about the landscape, minibeasts and birds he had seen, and the activities he had undertaken. The teacher said that this was impressive after just one trip!



A place for notes on your favourite places





Further reading

Popular guides and web resources

Blakesley, D. and Payne, S. 2012. *Visiting the Kent countryside: a guide for parents of children with autism*. Available at: <http://www.autismandnature.org.uk>.

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Markam, L. 2006. *Kiddiwalks in East Sussex*. Countryside Books, Newbury.

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Travlou, P. 2006. *Wild adventure space for young people: Literature review: survey of findings*. OPENspace, Edinburgh, Scotland. Available at: http://www.openspace.eca.ac.uk/pdf/WASYP1_Lit_Rev_Survey220906.pdf

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This guide is the second of a series of local guides being produced by Autism and Nature. It is designed to help parents, carers and teachers in East Sussex to engage children on the autism spectrum with the natural environment. It should also prove useful to those living and working with adults with autism. It begins by introducing some of the health benefits of nature and the countryside for children with autism. This is followed by a guide to 'natural' places to visit in the East Sussex countryside, which the authors believe many children with autism might enjoy. Twenty-two natural places are described, all of which are very good for wildlife. The guide concludes with a series of case stories, which describe visits to the countryside by small groups of school children with autism and related conditions.

