

Visiting the Suffolk Countryside



A guide for parents,
carers and teachers
of autistic children

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Foreword by
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Foreword

Suffolk is a rural county rich in habitat diversity and rich in wildlife. Planning a day out in the Suffolk countryside can be a challenge, simply because one is spoilt for choice! You might decide to head to the coast, where there are vast shingle beaches, wetlands and heathlands to explore. Or you might choose to visit the Suffolk Broads, discover the forested landscape of the Brecks or perhaps experience one of Suffolk's ancient woods. What better way to engage children with the natural world than to visit a Suffolk bluebell wood in spring? With the chance of hearing the sublime song a nightingale?

Nick has spent time filming in and around the RSPB's Minsmere reserve in Suffolk. He describes Minsmere as the perfect nature reserve, recognised as the RSPB's flagship reserve. Not just from the point of view of the wildlife – it has in its four square miles pretty much every habitat found in Suffolk and therefore is home to a huge diversity of wildlife whatever the season – but also from the human perspective, it is hard to beat. There are easily accessible areas, great facilities, interpretation and helpful and friendly staff. There are also plenty of areas of seclusion, where you can escape and make your own adventures or try out what you might have learned from the more public areas. Having the opportunity to explore at your own pace, in the free dimensions of nature, is as important as having the information and the inspiration to get out there in the first place. Many of Suffolk's nature reserves, like Minsmere, provide the perfect place to inspire and be inspired, whether you're new to the world of natural history or an old hand.

David has also spent time at Minsmere with RSPB education staff, hosting visits for autistic children and children with special educational needs from local special schools. Children borrowed binoculars to look at birds, fascinated by sand martins catching insects overhead before returning to their burrows in a sandy cliff, just metres away from where they stood. They went pond dipping, excited to catch a newt or dragonfly nymph. They collected material on the beach for art projects and hunted for minibeasts in the woods. It was a privilege to share these experiences with the children, and moving to hear from teachers how children benefit from their time in the countryside.

Sadly, in our modern world many children are disconnected from nature, especially those with special educational needs. We hope that this guide will offer some support to parents, carers and teachers, providing information about Suffolk's wild and natural places that will enable them to both visit and engage their children with the natural world. The potential benefits to a child's health and well-being cannot be overstated and these places of natural beauty are also where the most important lessons and real-life skills can be found and developed away from the formal environment of the classroom or the familiar habitat of the home. There is excitement and adventure to be had where young people connect deeply and whole heartedly with their environment and in Suffolk the opportunities to do this are many and widespread, as the pages to come will surely prove.

Nick Baker (Naturalist, author and broadcaster)

David Blakesley (Naturalist and author)

February 2024

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We thank Tone Blakesley for his valuable quotes, after visiting most of the places featured in this guide. We are indebted to Peter and Barbara Creed (Pisces Publications) for designing the original guide and to Tone Blakesley for its revision. We are grateful to Laurie Strike (NatureBureau) for reading the original proofs. Photographs were taken by David Blakesley except where stated: for additional photographs, we thank David Kjaer, Tone Blakesley, Jon Evans, Steve Aylward, Jeff Higgott and Ian Barthorpe.

Preface

This guide is designed to help parents, carers and teachers in Suffolk to engage autistic children and children with special educational needs with the Suffolk countryside. It should also prove useful to carers of children with other disabilities, and those living and working with autistic adults.

Part 1 introduces the benefits of visiting the countryside, considers why such experiences are especially valuable for autistic children and offers tips on how to prepare children for an outing to the countryside.

Part 2 presents a guide to 'natural places' to visit in the Suffolk countryside, which autistic children might enjoy. Twenty-four places are described, representing the diverse range of habitats found in Suffolk, including places in the Suffolk & Essex Coast & Heaths National Landscape, the Dedham Vale National Landscape & Stour Valley and the wider Suffolk countryside.

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 featured 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, as preparation for visits to a new place can be very important. Many autistic children might appreciate being shown pictures of their destination, so we have included photographs and illustrations in the guide, that we hope children will find attractive.



©Tone Blakesley

Common spotted orchid



Part 1 - Introduction

Visiting the countryside and experiencing the natural world is widely believed to have considerable benefits for people's health and well-being, especially children. It is likely that autistic people and individuals with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) will benefit in similar ways. It is hard to imagine how anyone could fail to be moved, looking out across Suffolk's wetlands and salt marshes, with the plaintive calls of redshanks and piping of oystercatchers drifting in the air. In spring you might visit a Suffolk bluebell wood such as Bradfield Woods, where children will discover beautiful displays of colourful woodland flowers; and perhaps return later in the year to collect autumn leaves to make leaf crowns, a journey stick or natural art. Naturalist and author Stephen Moss wrote for the National Trust about how a 'natural childhood' can improve children's health, develop their learning skills and strengthen communities (Moss, 2012). Moss points out that there are longer-term environmental benefits, as our children learn about the natural world and how it needs to be protected for future generations.

Whilst much has been written about the benefits, many people are concerned that children have become disconnected from nature. Richard Louv (2005), in his seminal book *Last Child in the Woods*, described this as "nature-deficit disorder". There is widespread concern that children may grow up not appreciating the importance of the natural environment. It has been suggested that their health, well-being and development may also suffer as a result. This is a particular concern for parents, carers and teachers of autistic children who may have fewer opportunities to visit the countryside.

Benefits of engaging with the natural world

Many special schools actively engage autistic children and children with special educational needs and disabilities with the natural world. In a study with King's College, London, Autism and Nature interviewed special school leaders and teachers about their views on these activities (Blakesley *et al.*, 2013). The special schools that took part in the study were all practicing some kind of outdoor learning and were keen to do more. Teachers identified benefits to social skills and personal well-being as being particularly compelling reasons for engaging autistic children with the natural world. Another important benefit was to support learning, bringing many aspects of the school curriculum to life.

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). 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.

Gardening and horticultural therapy represent another example of how children with special educational needs can be helped to engage with the natural world. A Royal Horticultural Society Special Educational Needs schools project worked with classes with a wide range of disabilities, and included autistic children (Young, 2010). Through the learning of gardening skills, the children were able to connect with the natural world and subsequently benefited in many ways.

Suffolk has many natural places, and benefits from two National Landscapes and the Suffolk Broads. Its tranquil nature reserves are rich in wildlife with so much of interest to see. There are also new smells, tactile sensations, and sounds you may not have heard before. The sense of exhilaration that can be felt when walking through the extensive reedbeds at Walberswick on a windy day is an experience that is wonderful to share.





Cormorant

Such experiences are especially valuable for autistic people, 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 and communication skills and confidence
- Opportunities to develop fine and gross motor skills
- New sensory experiences that are soothing
- Opportunities to find plants, birds, animals, rocks and fossils that could become a focus of special interest
- Opportunities to participate in activities such as birdwatching or pond dipping
- Artistic inspiration from colours and forms seen in the landscape and clouds
- A sense of freedom and independence which children do not have indoors
- Opportunities to learn about the natural world
- Health-giving exercise.

Special school deputy headteacher Simon Payne writes that “regular access to walks in the open countryside has been a regular feature throughout my teaching career, working with children and young people with autism. 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.”

If you would like to read more about the benefits of engaging children with nature, the publications cited in this introduction are listed in the ‘Further reading’ section.



Silver-studded blue

Planning

As with any activity, we strongly recommend that parents, carers and teachers assess the risks for particular sites before visiting. For all children, there are risks associated with the outdoor environment, such as cliff edges, open water and so on. Some 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 may arouse particular anxieties for an autistic child, such as: how long the walk might be; will they get back in time for the next activity; and whether there will be dogs off lead. We have provided information for each of the natural places in this guide to help parents, carers and teachers to judge the suitability of a site and plan their visit; readers should also visit the respective websites.

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

- Do the necessary risk assessments (essential if you are a support worker)
- Ensure that you are aware of the risks posed by ticks (www.nhs.uk/conditions/lyme-disease)
- Check the distance of walks, the terrain and whether there are any steep climbs
- Use visual supports and timetables to prepare the autistic person before the outing; the photographs and illustrations in this guide or perhaps a sketch map 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 toilets
- Build in rewards
- Have some games to play or activities that you can do while going along, for example make a crown with flowers and leaves, or find objects with different colours or textures. Olivia Brown wrote about taking her severely autistic son on family walks in the Lake District (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 to find.

More ideas for outdoor activities can be found in our children’s story books, listed in the ‘Further reading’ section.



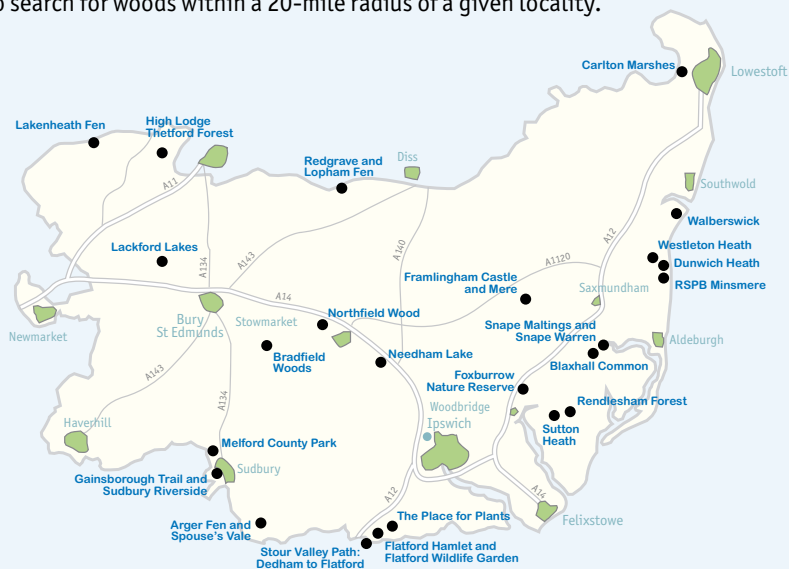
© Tonia Blakeley

Linnet

Part 2 - Natural places to visit in Suffolk

Suffolk is a rural county of generally low-lying landscapes, the highest point being less than 130 m above sea level. It is also a county of contrasts, with a rich diversity of habitats and wildlife, providing many opportunities for engaging autistic children with the natural environment. Suffolk has two National Landscapes: Suffolk & Essex Coast & Heaths National Landscape (page 22) and Dedham Vale National Landscape & Stour Valley in the south of the county (page 38), both of which attract large numbers of visitors. Elsewhere, central Suffolk is dominated by agricultural landscapes. To the north the county is relatively flat, with scattered ancient woods; valleys cut by the River Waveney and its tributaries contain remnants of once extensive wetlands, such as Redgrave and Lopham Fen. To the south, the landscape is more undulating, with ancient woodland such as Bradfield Woods. In the north west of the county the Fens reach into Suffolk, which families can experience at the RSPB's Lakenheath reserve. Further east, High Lodge (Thetford Forest) and Lackford Lakes both lie within the Brecks, a landscape known for its pine forests and heaths. The north eastern fringe of the county lies within the Broads National Park, and is represented in this guide by Carlton Marshes, where families can explore wetlands and nearby Oulton Broad. We hope that families will visit many, if not all, of the places featured in this guide.

A number of websites provide useful information for families planning to visit the Suffolk countryside (see page 49 for website addresses). For example, 'Activities Unlimited' includes all the latest news from the Short Breaks team; 'Accessible Countryside for Everyone' promotes countryside accessibility; information to help journeys by scheduled bus and train services is available from suffolkonboard.com; and for community transport from Connecting Communities and Katch (websites on page 49). Ordnance Survey (OS) maps can be useful for longer walks in places such as Walberswick National Nature Reserve. The 1:25,000 Explorer Series maps (orange cover) provide the most detail, but the 1:50,000 Landranger maps (fuchsia pink cover) are also useful. OS maps can be viewed on the Bing Maps website. Woodlands are featured on the Woodland Trust website, which allows you to search for woods within a 20-mile radius of a given locality.



- Follow the B1112 north from Lakenheath village for about 2 miles, entrance on the left 200 m north of the station (IP27 9AD)
- Public transport: railway station at Lakenheath, walk to the Visitor Centre is 800 m; on-demand Brecks Bus from Brandon and Thetford (call 01638 664304)
- Open daily; large car park 100 m from the Visitor Centre (admission charges for non-RSPB members vary – see website)
- Toilets and disabled toilets next to the Visitor Centre (open 9 am to 5 pm (4 pm in winter) except Christmas period); drinks and snacks available in the Visitor Centre and picnic area nearby
- Terrain: mostly level, stony tracks and grassy paths (can be slippery in wet weather); detailed Access Statement on website; circular walks (1.1 to 5 km)
- One hide and three viewpoints
- Boardwalk to hide off main trail; unfenced water
- Assistance dogs only on the reserve; dogs allowed on the riverside footpath
- Information boards
- Trail map: available from Visitor Centre or download from the RSPB website.

Lakenheath Fen

a great place for autistic children...

Lakenheath Fen RSPB reserve is a great place to immerse autistic children in the natural world. Helpful staff in the Visitor Centre will offer advice on which trail to follow and what to look out for. The trails take you through poplar plantations, reedbeds and past grazing marsh and open water. Lakenheath Fen is an excellent place to see dragonflies from late spring through to the autumn. Twenty-two species of dragonfly and damselfly occur at Lakenheath Fen. Some species, such as the brown hawker, can be quite inquisitive and fly up to you before continuing on their way. You might also look out for electric blue male emperor dragonflies, which patrol open areas of water. The male is territorial, and you may see it chasing other species, especially other male emperor dragonflies. The more delicate 'blue' damselflies often settle on the path side vegetation, allowing children to get close views. On sunny days, butterflies, such as small tortoiseshells, bask on the paths and in late spring 'woolly bears', the caterpillars of garden tiger moths, may be seen crossing the paths. They move remarkably quickly, so they do not need any help to get out of harm's way (they can irritate the skin if touched).

Lakenheath Fen is a haven for wetland birds, so take binoculars with you or borrow a pair from the Visitor Centre. In the late spring and summer you should see marsh harriers quartering the reedbeds while the song of reed warblers fills the air.



"I saw a cuckoo!"

Reed warblers are masters of mimicry; listen carefully and you may pick out the songs and calls of many other species. If you are really lucky, you may see a bittern, most likely flying from one part of the reedbed to another. Male bitterns have an amazing 'booming' call which echoes round the reserve. Ask your child to listen out for this! Hobbies may also been seen hunting dragonflies across the reserve.

If you follow the longer main circular trail (5 km) to the Joist Fen viewpoint, visit Mere Hide along the way (accessed via a 200 m boardwalk). The hide is a place to sit quietly, with the chance of seeing something special, such as a kingfisher (illustrated centre right). After the viewpoint, the trail follows the riverside path, a public footpath where dog walkers may be encountered. If you prefer to remain on the reserve, retrace your steps to the Visitor Centre. If this walk is too long for your child, consider the Brandon Pen family trail, which offers two short loops, each approximately 1.5 km, where you will find examples of habitats such as sandy Breckland heath, reedbed, poplar woods and grazing marsh. Self-guided pond dipping and bug-hunting kits are also available from the RSPB during the spring and summer months. As you walk around the reserve with your child, they might be inspired to collect different coloured objects, perhaps on a piece of card with double-sided sticky tape or in an old egg box. The railway line along the southern boundary of the reserve, with its frequent trains, might interest some autistic children.

www.rspb.org.uk/days-out/reserves/lakenheath-fen



- Follow the B1107 east from Brandon for just under 1 mile to the entrance drive on the right, the main car park is 1 mile along the drive (IP27 OAF)
- Public transport: contact Connecting Communities
- Open daily, large car park, parking charge (card payments only)
- Toilets with fully accessible facilities; café and picnic areas
- Terrain: mostly level, uneven in places, stony tracks and grassy paths (can get slippery in wet weather); circular walk around accessible Activity Trail and Sound Trail (1.5 to 2 km); forest trails include accessible Pine Trail (1.5 km) and Heritage Trail (4.2 km)
- Accessibility guide on website
- Longer trails cross logging roads and cycle routes
- Several unfenced ponds along longer trails
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Information boards showing trails
- Trail map: purchase from Information Point or download from Forestry England website.

High Lodge Thetford Forest

a musical forest...

Autistic children might enjoy the sound trail at High Lodge. This 'musical forest' includes a marimba and drums to play; and sound cushions to jump on. There is also an adventure play trail that might be popular with your child. The play trail has a giant swing, pyramid tower and sand play area. With these facilities, together with Go Ape and several cycle routes through the forest, High Lodge can be extremely busy, and has a very large car park to cope with the demand. However, you might consider visiting early or late in the day or perhaps out of season, when the site is quieter. Some autistic children may find it much more comfortable at these times.

Even on busy days, if you wander into the forest, perhaps following the Fir Trail, it is surprising how quickly most visitors are left behind. This part of Thetford Forest has been extensively planted with conifers, so you will see very few deciduous trees. The trails can be eerily quiet at times, with the silence being broken by the sound of a squirrel scurrying through the bracken or a bird calling in the tree tops. Occasionally, you will pass areas where the trees are closely spaced, and the forest is really quite dark, but most of the plantations have been thinned and have an open feel about them. In these areas you can see a long way through the trees. There are four species of deer in the forest, including red deer, roe deer and muntjac, but these are shy animals. If you are lucky, you may catch a glimpse of an animal in one of the many rides or more open areas of forest, but it is likely to run into the undergrowth if it sees you first.

www.forestryengland.uk/high-lodge



*"a roe deer walked
across the path"*

- From the A14 junction 51, take the B1078 towards Needham Market, the main car park is on the right after 0.8 miles (IP6 8NU), the smaller lakeside car park is on the right after 1 mile
- Public transport: Needham Market railway station close by; for local buses check www.suffolkonboard.com/buses
- Open daily, free admission and two car parks
- Changing Places toilet in the new visitor centre and café (open 09.00 to 16.00)
- Adventure play area by the picnic site, smaller play area in the lakeside car park; climbing boulder and den building area near lakeside path
- Terrain: level across most of the site, gentle slope from the riverside footpath into community woodland; surfaced path around lake (1 km), riverside path firm, other paths may be muddy after wet weather
- Unfenced river, lake and small ponds
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Information boards in the car parks show footpaths, wildlife and fossils found at the site in the past.



Needham Lake

enjoy a pleasant stroll around the lake...

This is an interesting place for families with autistic children, because of the variety of opportunities to engage with the natural world. There is a picnic area and an adventure play area by the main car park; a footbridge takes you over the River Gipping to the lake itself. As you cross the bridge look out for fish in the clear waters below. A surfaced path circles the lake crossing a local nature reserve (1 km). There are usually plenty of ducks, geese and swans on the lake expecting to be fed. In summer, pyramidal orchids flower close to the paths in the nature reserve. A large wooden sculpture of a dragonfly reminds you to keep an eye open for these insects, especially on warm summer days. Larger dragonflies may be seen hawking insects over the water, while more delicate 'demoiselles' with their metallic green bodies often sit on tall grasses close to the path. You will also come across a collection of wooden mushrooms that your child might like to explore with their hands. To extend your walk, follow one of the paths leading away from the lake towards King's Meadow, which is actually a small area of woodland by the river. Some autistic children may be very interested in the busy railway line that runs parallel to the lakeside path.

For a quieter walk, follow the Gipping Valley River Path. The path passes a recently planted community woodland which you can also explore – with young trees and meadows – before continuing to a footbridge over the river (900 m from the car park). From here you can retrace your steps, or follow the lane (Crown Street) back to the local nature reserve and on round the lake itself (1.8 km).

www.facebook.com/needhamlake/?locale=en_GB



"I sat on a wooden toadstool"

- Entrance track signposted off the eastbound carriageway of the A1101 between Lackford and Flempton (IP28 6HX)
- Public transport: buses from Bury St Edmunds stop in Lackford village; walk along Holden Road to the church, then follow the track across the field to the Visitor Centre (850 m)
- Open daily, free admission and car park
- Disabled toilet, Visitor Centre open daily, café and picnic area
- Terrain: level, wheelchairs can be pushed around the Kingfisher Trail (800 m); other footpaths can be muddy in places after wet weather (walk encompassing every hide 3.5 km)
- Ramped access to five hides along Kingfisher Trail; three hides along other footpaths
- Unfenced lakes, ponds and ditches
- Sheep graze all year, and cattle seasonally
- Assistance dogs only
- Information boards
- Trail map: available from Visitor Centre or download from website.



"Nightingales were singing"

Lackford Lakes

a tranquil wetland reserve...

Lackford Lakes is another excellent location for families with autistic children, although there is a lot of open water, which may be a concern for some parents and carers. The Visitor Centre is spacious, informative and overlooks a pond. Large glass windows allow children clear views of the pond – there are likely to be a few ducks on the water and there is a chance of seeing a kingfisher, surely a memorable experience for many autistic children. The Centre also allows close views of the bird feeding station, where children can watch the antics of familiar garden birds such as blue tits, great tits and robins. Before you set off for a walk, ask to see the wildlife explorer backpack; if this is suitable for your child, it can be borrowed, together with a pair of binoculars.

The most popular trail on the reserve is the 'Kingfisher Trail'. Just 800 m in length, this trail passes five hides, most of which have wheelchair access. The hides offer clear views across the sailing lake and several other pools. Birds may be distant on this lake, which is used for sailing most weekends. You are more likely to get closer views of wetland birds such as ducks, geese and waders on the other pools. All of the hides have a poster illustrating birds that you are most likely to see – bring binoculars if you have a pair (or hire a pair from the Centre), and see which species your child can spot. Another species which makes Lackford Lakes a special place is the nightingale. Birds return from Africa in mid-April and for the next 6 weeks or so their sublime song can be heard



Tufted duck



Grey heron

in several places on the reserve, including the area close to the Visitor Centre. Nightingales sing throughout the day, so if your child finds birdsong soothing, a visit at this time of year could provide a rich experience for them. The hides also have a poster illustrating dragonflies and damselflies that are commonly encountered in the late spring and summer months. On warm summer's days, look out for hobbies which specialise in catching these insects.

The reserve offers longer walks to hides up to 1.4 km from the Visitor Centre. These footpaths tend to be quieter, passing through ash and alder carr woodland before following the edge of Hawker Pool and Plover Lake. The more distant hides offer further opportunities to look at water birds such as grebes, ducks and herons. Ask your child to look out for snipe, with its long straight bill and mottled brown plumage. These wading birds are well camouflaged, so finding one along the water's edge can be a challenge. On a quiet day, the birds can be very close to these hides. Lackford Lakes is also well worth a visit in the winter months; you may need to wrap up warm, but you should be rewarded with much larger numbers of waterfowl and in some years, a large gull roost assembles in the late afternoon. And if it is too cold, you can return to the Visitor Centre and watch the bird feeders in comfort. Note that entry is free, but donations toward the reserve's upkeep are encouraged and appreciated.

www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/lackfordlakes



Bradfield Woods

ancient woods rich in wildlife...

- From the A134 south east of Bury St Edmunds, take the minor road from Sicklesmere, Bradfield Woods is between Bradfield St George and Felsham (IP30 0AQ)
- Public transport: contact Connecting Communities
- Open daily, free admission and car park
- Accessible toilet; Education Centre open for events
- Terrain: level; unsuitable for wheelchairs; tracks can be muddy in places after wet weather; four trails (1 to 3.8 km)
- Several unfenced ponds
- Dogs should be on lead
- Information boards
- Trail map: available on site or download from website.

Bradfield Woods National Nature Reserve is well known amongst the conservation community and is arguably one of the best sites for woodland wildlife in Britain. It is managed as a traditional coppice by Suffolk Wildlife Trust, which has an Education Centre close to the car park that is open during events. If your child understands the concept of 'age', they might be amazed to learn that some of the coppiced ash stools are thought to be over 1,000 years old. These trees are surely worth a hug! Coppiced woodland products such as bean poles, pea sticks and hedging stakes can be seen in the car park area, and piles of poles will be encountered as you walk around the woods.

Woodland flowers are at their best in spring, so this is a good time to visit. If your child enjoys different colours, then look for wildflowers along the woodland paths and in recently coppiced areas. Here you may find bluebells, yellow archangel, red campion, the delicate white flowers of greater stitchwort (illustrated above) and the green flowered wood spurge; just a few of the hundreds of plant species which grow in the wood. In April and early May, there is arguably no better place to see early-purple orchids (illustrated opposite), which are frequently encountered along the woodland paths, including the shortest trail. Bradfield Woods is especially well known for its population of oxlips, a plant related to cowslips and primroses that is restricted in its range to East Anglia. Oxlips flower in April, so there might be more visitors at this time of



"I found purple orchids"

year hoping to see this rare species. Bluebells also attract visitors to Bradfield Woods in late April/early May, although bluebells are localised within the woods.

As you walk around, stop for a minute or so and ask your child what they can hear – widget symbols and a sound board might help some children. You might hear the sound of the wind in the tree tops, the repetitive call of a ‘chiffchaff’ or the fluty song of a blackcap. In late summer and autumn, the woods may seem eerily quiet until the arrival of a noisy flock of birds moving through the trees. The flock is likely to include birds such as long-tailed tits, blue tits, great tits and perhaps a nuthatch or treecreeper. Your child might be fascinated to watch these birds flitting through the trees all around them, but as quickly as they appear, the birds move on, and the wood is quiet once again. The rides in Bradfield Woods also support a diverse range of butterflies; if you visit in the summer, ask your child to look out for the distinctive white admiral (illustrated below), and more common species such as meadow brown, gatekeeper and speckled wood.

[www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/
lackfordlakes](http://www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/lackfordlakes)



- From the A1066 take the B1113 at South Lopham, after 1 mile turn left into Low Common Road and the car park is on the right after 0.8 miles (IP22 2HX)
- Public transport: contact Connecting Communities
- Open daily, free admission and car park (donations tube available)
- Accessible toilet and small picnic area
- Terrain: mostly level, grassy paths (can be muddy after wet weather); four circular walks (500 m to 6 km)
- Open water and pond dipping platforms unfenced (pond dipping only allowed on organised events with an engagement officer)
- Dogs must be on lead at all times
- Ponies graze all year; seasonal cattle grazing
- Information boards
- Leaflet with trail guides can be downloaded from website.

Redgrave and Lopham Fen

a quiet nature reserve...

This Suffolk Wildlife Trust reserve is a good place to engage autistic children with the natural world. It is often quiet, there are trails of different lengths and there is a disabled toilet and picnic tables by the car park. To help prepare children for their visit, a trail map is available to download on the Redgrave and Lopham Fen website. This illustrates the routes of four main trails; in addition, it also shows the route of the long-distance Angles Way path, which follows the River Waveney past the reserve.

Families might choose the Spider Trail on their first visit, because of its length (2 km). The trail initially crosses open fen, passing two pond dipping platforms. These are great places to watch dragonflies and damselflies in the summer months, although you should be aware that they are not fenced. You should also note that pond dipping is only permissible on an organised event with a Suffolk Wildlife Trust engagement officer. Overhead you might see a hobby (illustrated opposite), a small falcon which specialises in catching dragonflies and other insects. Explain to your child that hobbies are summer visitors to Britain, and spend the winter in Africa. They are exciting to watch when in pursuit of dragonflies! Look out for meadowsweet, with its tufts of creamy-white flowers – some children may like their strong, sweet vanilla-like fragrance. If the sun is out, butterflies will be attracted to the flowers along this path. Look out for small tortoiseshells (illustrated opposite) with their multicoloured wings, and species such as meadow



"a butterfly landed
on my hat!"



© Tone Blakesley

Small tortoiseshell



© David Kraer

Hobby

brown, gatekeeper and skippers on warm summer days. The trail eventually reaches the River Waveney and follows the bank for about 400 m, although dense riverside vegetation limits the views of the water in high summer. If you are lucky, a kingfisher might flash past in a blur of blue and orange. Crossing the grazing marsh once more, you will find a small viewing platform and the reason for the name 'Spider Trail' becomes apparent. Fen raft spiders, one of Britain's rarest and largest spiders hunt along the margins of small ponds on the reserve. You could see how many spiders you can spot and the colour of the spider's stripes, but they are not always easy to find. Your child may have sharper eyes than you! An information board has photos and more information about this enigmatic arachnid.

If you would like your child to experience the habitats and the atmosphere of the fen without walking too far, consider the Lopham Loop. This 500 m circular trail takes you through open fen to a pond dipping platform alongside a large pond. You should see similar species to those encountered along the Spider Trail, with the exception perhaps of the fen raft spider. In contrast, the Waveney Trail allows you to fully explore the varied habitats of the reserve including the wooded areas. This trail will allow your child to get a true sense of the wildness and tranquillity of the Fen, and of course there is a better chance of encountering more of the Fen's wildlife, such as the elusive spider, deer, marsh harrier or perhaps hearing a cuckoo in the spring.

www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/redgrave

- From the A146 in Carlton Colville, Lowestoft, follow Burnt Hill Lane to the reserve car park (NR33 8HU)
- Public transport: several buses from Lowestoft to Oulton Broad and Carlton Colville; Oulton Broad South railway station is 1 km from the reserve along Angles Way long-distance footpath
- Reserve open daily, free admission and car park
- Accessible toilet and café in Visitor Centre (open daily except Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Boxing Day, 9.30 am – 4 pm)
- Terrain: mostly level, stony tracks, board walks and grassy paths (can be muddy in wet weather); easy access circular route along Sprat's Water Trail (1.2 km); Share Marsh Trail (closed from October half term until Easter) (2.8 km) and Peto's Marsh Trail (4 to 5.5 km)
- Unfenced ponds and dykes
- Dogs on lead on all the nature reserve
- Seasonal grazing with cattle
- Information boards
- Trail guide available in the car park or download from the website.

Carlton Marshes

a taste of the Suffolk Broads...

Suffolk Wildlife Trust's reserve at Carlton Marshes is just 3.5 miles from the centre of Lowestoft and yet it has a tranquil and timeless quality about it. Views across the grazing marsh towards the white sails of distant yachts on Oulton Broad are typical of the Broads National Park. From the car park, the Sprat's Water Trail might interest families with an autistic child. A trail guide is available outside the Visitor Centre, but this can also be downloaded from the Suffolk Wildlife Trust's website to help prepare children for their visit.

Some of the vegetation along the Share Marsh and Peto's trail is quite tall, so it gives a true sense of being in amongst the reeds. If you have a wildflower guide with you, the reserve provides a good opportunity to find some of the plants which characterise the Broads landscape. In spring, look out for the bright yellow flowers of marsh marigold and yellow flag (illustrated opposite), and the delicate pink flowers of ragged robin. As spring turns to summer, common spotted-orchids and southern marsh-orchids (illustrated opposite) may be found. Within a few weeks, the orchids will be past their best, but there will still be many plants in flower on the reserve, including some species that are perhaps more spectacular and easier for autistic children to see and appreciate, such as yellow loosestrife and purple loosestrife. In the dykes, look out for the delicate white flowers of frogbit – so called because it was once thought to be eaten by frogs – and the lilac-pink flowers of



*"a dragonfly hovered
in front of me"*



Marsh marigold



Southern marsh-orchid and Yellow flag

water violet. It is always worth keeping an eye open for water voles in the dykes, swimming across the water, or if you are lucky, feeding on the waterside vegetation.

With so much water, dragonflies and damselflies are everywhere. 'Hunting for dragons' can be frustrating at times as the larger dragonflies are often very active, chasing smaller insects, or resting on vegetation too far away to give good views. Damselflies are much easier for children to see at Carlton Marshes, particularly blue damselflies and emerald damselflies. As you walk around the nature reserve, stop occasionally to listen to the bird song. Through the spring and summer months, the song of reed and sedge warblers fills the air. If you look closely, you may see these small birds moving through the reeds. Water voles and otters can sometimes be seen from the decking outside the Visitor Centre. Other trails across the marshes are shown on the information board by the car park and in the Visitor Centre. For clear views of the boats and the Broad itself, it may be better to visit nearby Nicholas Everitt Park, accessible from the large pay and display car park off Bridge Road (A1117).

www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/carlton

www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/carlton-marshes-visitor-centre-lowestoft

- From the A12, 0.6 miles north of the junction with the A1152 at Woodbridge, take the minor road signposted Saddlemakers Lane and Foxburrow, the drive to the nature reserve is on the left after 0.3 miles (IP12 1NA)
- Public transport: contact Connecting Communities
- Reserve open daily, free admission and small car park
- Disabled toilet (accessible at all times) in Discovery Centre which is open Tuesday to Thursday and alternate Sundays (10.00 to 16.00)
- Terrain: mostly level, grassy paths (can be slippery in wet weather); two trails (630 m and 2 km)
- Livestock graze year round
- Assistance dogs only on the reserve
- Information boards
- Laminated trail guides available in the car park or download from website.



"I made a leaf crown"

Foxburrow Nature Reserve

rewilding a farming landscape...

Foxburrow Nature Reserve offers a good opportunity for families with autistic children to explore a farming landscape that is now being rewilded. The car park is at the end of a quiet country lane adjacent to the start of Red Trail and Yellow Trail. Laminated guides are available in the car park, but these can also be downloaded from Suffolk Wildlife Trust's website, to help to prepare an autistic child for their visit. The trails are well signposted and points of interest are explained in the trail guides.

For children who can only manage relatively short walks, the Yellow Trail might be ideal (630 m). It starts in the yard, near a small garden planted to attract insects and a pond with a dipping platform used by groups visiting the Discovery Room. In summer the pond is awash with the golden yellow flowers of greater spearwort (illustrated opposite), the tallest British buttercup. Look for tadpoles and beetles in the water in the late spring and summer, or watch dragonflies and damselflies hunting smaller insects over the water. You might even catch a glimpse of a frog or newt close to the water's surface. The trail then follows a farm track for a short distance to an area of woodland planted in 1997. After walking round the plantation you can retrace your steps back to the farmyard.

The Red Tree Trail explores the wider farm, covering a distance of 2 km across level ground. This is a great opportunity to discover how

farmland is being allowed to return to nature, for wildlife conservation. Soon after leaving the car park, you will walk past the oldest tree on the farm, a veteran oak thought to be over 400 years old. Perhaps your child will want to give it a big hug! The trail then follows an old cart track, planted with hedgerow trees and shrubs on either side to help animals and birds move safely through the landscape. If you have a field guide, see how many different trees and shrubs you can spot as you walk along. Between markers 3 and 7 you should find at least ten species, including elder, hazel, field maple, elm, oak and hawthorn. Later in the year, many of these shrubs will be laden with fruit, important for some birds and mammals. Visit in the early part of winter and you may see blackbirds and song thrushes feeding alongside fieldfares and redwings – ‘winter thrushes’ that visit Britain from Scandinavia and Iceland.

At any time of the year you might see part of the reserve’s flock of Hebridean sheep, although these animals are moved to other Suffolk Wildlife Trust reserves from time to time. Through a gate, there is a bench where you might rest a while and talk about what you have seen. The trail continues through oak woodland – look out for bat boxes attached to some of the oaks – before crossing fields that until 2021, were being used to grow arable crops such as barley. The Red Trail then joins the Yellow Trail, returning to the farmyard and car park, where you can sit by the pond or rest for a while in the wildlife garden.

www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/foxburrow



Greater spearwort



Six-spot burnet

© Tonia Blakesley

- From the B1115 just west of Stowmarket take the minor road to the village of Onehouse and park in Northfield Road (IP14 3EY); walk 50 m along Ash Road, and follow the path to the right past a row of houses to access the wood; alternatively, walk along the main road for 340 m, turn right into Woodland Close, the main entrance is 200 m along this track (IP14 3HL)
- Public transport: check www.suffolkonboard.com/buses
- Open daily; parking in local side streets
- No facilities
- Play area behind the community centre
- Terrain: level, tracks can be muddy in places after wet weather; small bridges cross some ditches; one stretch of boardwalk through a particularly damp area
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- An OS map would be useful.



"I learned how to use a compass"

Northfield Wood

quiet woodland walks...

One attraction of Northfield Wood for families with children with autism is that it is off the beaten track. Visitors are likely to meet local dog walkers, but otherwise the wood is often quiet. There are no signposted trails or trail map, so tell your child that this is a wood for young explorers! Your child might enjoy using a map and compass at this location. From the main entrance (if you enter the wood from Ash Road, turn left to reach the main entrance), follow the main ride in a north easterly direction for about 200 m until you come to a fork. This may be an opportunity to give your child a chance to decide which way to walk next, perhaps with a bit of help. As you walk along these relatively wide rides you will see trails leading into the woodland. These paths are much narrower, and there are small ditches to be crossed; you may find a small bridge or logs bridging the gap, which some children might find adventurous.

Explain to your children that Northfield Wood is an ancient wood, which means that woodland has occupied this site for at least 400 years. For this reason, it has a rich diversity of woodland plants - best seen in spring, when many woodland plants are in flower. Take a guide to wildflowers if you have one, and ask your child to look out for early-purple orchids, primroses and oxlips, particularly along the margins of the main rides. You will find fewer plants in areas where old woodland trees have been cut and replaced by conifers. As you walk around look out for deer, particularly muntjac, and if there is time at the end of the day visit the children's play area just behind the community centre.

www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/visiting-woods/woods/northfield-wood

- Castle car park is on Church Street in Framlingham (IP13 9BP), Elms car park is off New Road (IP13 9EH)
- Public transport: buses from Ipswich to Framlingham (walk of approximately 500 m to castle); check www.suffolkonboard.com/buses, and Katch
- Open daily in summer, weekends in winter and 5 days per week early spring (check website for details); charge to enter the castle (English Heritage members, carers and children under 5 free); parking charge (English Heritage members free)
- Accessible toilets in castle car park, toilets in castle
- Terrain: level, firm path into the castle (100 m) but steep and undulating paths around moat; trail around the Mere can be very muddy after wet weather (circular walk 1.4 km)
- Dogs on lead in castle grounds; dogs may be encountered off lead in the Mere nature reserve
- Cattle in Framlingham Mere at certain times of the year
- Check website to avoid events (castle may be busy and may close early)
- Trail map for Mere: available from castle shop or download from Suffolk Wildlife Trust website.



Framlingham Castle and Mere

a castle and lovely walks too...

If your child is interested in history, Framlingham Castle is well worth a visit. The 12th century castle can be admired from afar by walking around the parkland just to the east of the castle (note this is sometimes used as an overflow car park) or from Suffolk Wildlife Trust's Framlingham Mere nature reserve. If the castle is not too busy, children may enjoy walking around the interior of the castle. Some autistic children may enjoy touching the old castle walls. Steep spiral stairs lead to the upper floors and wall walk. If your child can manage this and you feel confident that it is safe to do so, there are great views across the surrounding countryside. The castle may open early for families with an autistic child (contact the castle for details).

For a more strenuous walk, explore the earthworks and moat surrounding the castle. This area can be accessed from the bridge over the moat, but the paths are rough, undulating and steep in places. There is also a path from the lower court down to Framlingham Mere. This joins the Mere trail around the perimeter of the nature reserve, well away from the water's edge. The trail crosses grazing marsh that can be wet and boggy, even in the summer months. Pick up a trail leaflet from the Castle shop, which shows an alternative route via the 'town trail', avoiding the wettest part of the reserve. The leaflet illustrates some of the Mere's wildlife, including 300-year-old oaks – surely worth a hug – and wildflowers such as meadowsweet, which possesses an aromatic fragrance which some autistic children might find attractive. Alternatively, park in the town to access Framlingham Mere directly, and admire the castle from afar.

www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/framlingham-castle



"I ran round the castle moat"

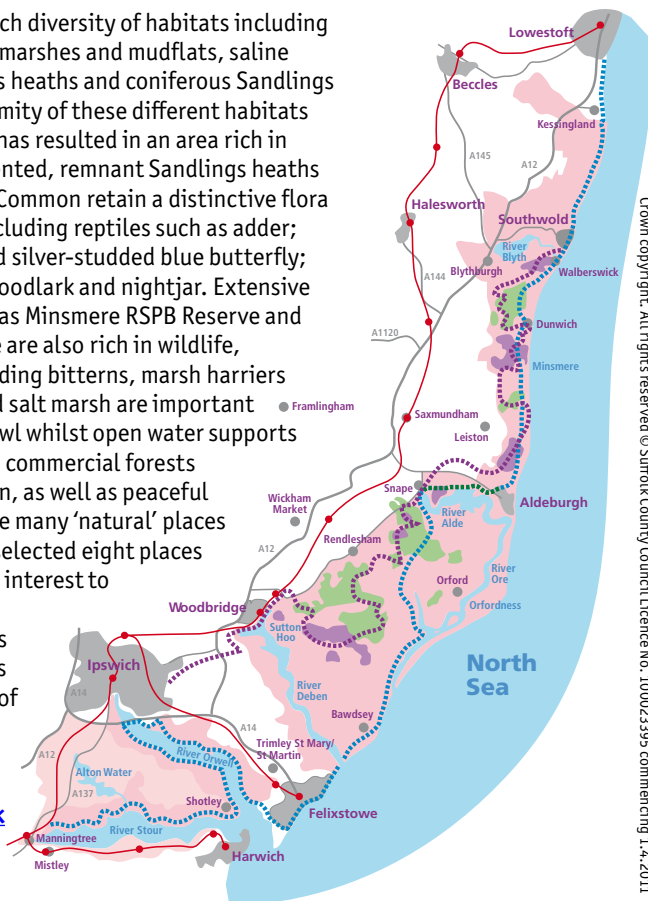
Suffolk & Essex Coast & Heaths National Landscape

The Suffolk & Essex Coast & Heaths National Landscape (formerly designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) is a low-lying coastal landscape, extending from Kessingland in the north to the Stour Estuary in the South. The gently rolling Sandlings separate five river estuaries – the Blyth, Alde and Ore, Deben, Orwell and Stour. The coastline of shingle beaches and low crumbling cliffs is largely undeveloped, partly because of the absence of a road along much of the coast. The peace and tranquillity of the area has provided a source of inspiration to countless artists, writers and musicians. Displays of wildflowers along country lanes and cottages washed with ‘Suffolk Pink’ are further testament to the largely unspoilt nature of the National Landscape. There are no large towns, but historic coastal towns such as Aldeburgh and Southwold attract many visitors, offering a more traditional seaside experience.

The National Landscape supports a rich diversity of habitats including shingle beaches, grazing marsh, salt marshes and mudflats, saline lagoons, reedbeds, ancient Sandlings heaths and coniferous Sandlings forests. The diversity and close proximity of these different habitats and the protection afforded to them has resulted in an area rich in wildlife. Although now highly fragmented, remnant Sandlings heaths such as Westleton Heath and Sutton Common retain a distinctive flora and fauna with many rare species, including reptiles such as adder; insects such as green tiger beetle and silver-studded blue butterfly; and birds such as Dartford warbler, woodlark and nightjar. Extensive reedbeds and lagoons in places such as Minsmere RSPB Reserve and Walberswick National Nature Reserve are also rich in wildlife, supporting rare breeding birds, including bitterns, marsh harriers and avocets. Inter-tidal mudflats and salt marsh are important feeding areas for waders and waterfowl whilst open water supports commercial and pleasure craft. Three commercial forests also offer opportunities for recreation, as well as peaceful walks deep into the forest. Among the many ‘natural’ places in the National Landscape, we have selected eight places which we believe will be of particular interest to families with an autistic child.

There are, however, many more places to explore and we would urge families to use the resources cited at the end of this guide to seek out further places to visit.

<https://coastandheaths-nl.org.uk>





- On the B1069, half way between Tunstall and Snape (IP12 2EJ)
- Public transport: contact Connecting Communities
- Open daily, free admission and two small car parks either side of the road
- No facilities, disabled toilets and café at nearby Snape Maltings (1 mile)
- Terrain: gentle slopes in places, soft sand and grassy paths; typical walk 1.5 km
- Dogs should be on a lead
- An information board illustrates the trails, but an OS map would be useful.

Blaxhall Common Nature Reserve

quiet heathland walks...

This quiet Suffolk Wildlife Trust reserve will interest many families with an autistic child. To the north of the road, a sunken track heads out across the heath through a small area of woodland. One tree in particular may prove irresistible to young climbers! If your child is comfortable with arachnids, look out for labyrinth spiders, which spin funnel-shaped webs low down in the vegetation. In summer, small clumps of purple bell heather add a splash of colour to the landscape, but by mid-August, the heathland is a sea of pink as ling heather bursts into flower. Look out for butterflies on warm summer's days, particularly the silver-studded blue – an information board in the car park explains how its caterpillars are protected from predation by ants, which carry them underground into their nest. Heathland birds such as Dartford warbler and stonechat also make their home here. For a short walk, turn right after about 500 m onto a path that takes you towards the Sandlings Walk and follow this back to the car park (an OS map may prove useful). Look out for old birch trees along the Sandlings Walk, as your child may like to touch their deeply fissured bark. Pine cones are abundant under the Scots pines and your child might enjoy collecting these.

The Sandlings Walk also continues across the southern part of the reserve, following the edge of a conifer plantation and passing through areas of bracken – which by mid-summer will probably be taller than your child! Several fallen pines lie across the path creating a natural obstacle course, which children may enjoy negotiating. When you reach a junction, retrace your steps or continue to explore the area using an OS map as a guide.

www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/blaxhallcommon



"I collected lots of pine cones"

- From the A12 just south of Blythburgh take the B1387 to Walberswick (IP18 6TZ)
- Public transport: contact Connecting Communities; foot ferry across the River Blyth from Southwold (April to Oct – check Explore Walberswick website)
- Open daily, free admission and two large car parks (charge from April 1st to September 30th)
- Toilets (including RADAR facilities) and several cafés in the village
- Swings and slide on village green
- Terrain: level, walks along sand and shingle beach; tracks across marshes can be muddy in places after wet weather, boardwalk in places
- Unfenced rivers (deep water and strong currents) and pools
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Information boards
- Trail leaflet: download from Natural England website.

Walberswick

extensive reedbeds and crabbing...

Many people visit Walberswick for the beach and the opportunity to go crabbing. With large car parks, Walberswick can be a popular destination on a fine summer's day, so for autistic children, choose the time of day or the season carefully. On a weekend in autumn or winter for example, the car parks may be relatively quiet. For children who are not able to walk too far, explore the areas around the car parks, including the beach and the boats along the River Blythe. If your child is comfortable in a small boat with unfamiliar people, you could take the foot ferry across the river. This is basically one ferryperson and a rowing boat, and it takes just a few minutes to cross, depending on the wind and tide. Walberswick is famous for 'crabbing' and there are often families dangling lines into the river. All you need is a line, mesh bag, bait, net and a bucket (available in Walberswick shops). Remember to put no more than four or five crabs in a bucket, separate small and big crabs and not to keep crabs out of water for long before putting them carefully back in the river. This is a very good opportunity for a child to see a crab up close.

Far fewer people head south from the car parks to explore Walberswick National Nature Reserve, which covers some 810 ha and includes Westwood Marshes, one of the largest reedbeds in Britain. Walk along the beach for about 750 m, following the route of the Suffolk Coast Path before taking a narrow footpath across the marsh to a footbridge over the Dunwich River. About



"we caught a crab!"



Common lizard



Bearded tit

80 m further along the beach is a National Nature Reserve sign – if you reach this you have gone too far. The Suffolk Coast Path continues along a long section of boardwalk to the ruins of an old wind mill, visible from all around the reserve. In warm weather, common lizards (illustrated above) bask on the boardwalk, but they are very sensitive to vibrations, so you will have to ask your child to look ahead to see them.

As you walk through the reedbeds you may occasionally hear ‘pinging’ calls as small, russet orange birds dart low over the reeds. Explain to your child that these are bearded tits, which spend their lives in the reedbeds. Adult males are stunning birds (illustrated above) and if you are lucky, you may be able to show your child a bird feeding close to the path, surely an unforgettable experience. The path by the old mill gives excellent views across the reedbeds and you have a reasonable chance of seeing a marsh harrier quartering the reeds, or, if you are lucky, a bittern in flight. In spring, the mill is also a good place to listen for the bittern’s deep booming call. At this point, you will have walked 1.8 km from the car park. There are now three choices: you can continue along the path to the beach and walk north along the beach to the car park (a walk of 4.8 km); continue along the bank for 100 m before turning right to explore the path through Westwood Marshes; or retrace your steps to the car park.

<https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/35020>

- Follow the brown signs to Westleton from the A12 at Yoxford (south) or Blythburgh (north), in Westleton follow brown RSPB signs (IP17 3BY)
- Public transport: contact Connecting Communities
- Open daily (except 25–26 December), large car park; admission charges apply (free for RSPB members, first child of each party, carers, and 16 – 24-year-olds (with proof of age until 2025))
- Disabled toilets, shop and café in the Visitor Centre
- Terrain: mostly level and undulating, tracks can be muddy in places after wet weather; gentle slopes along parts of the Woodland and Island Mere trails; detailed Access Statement on website; Coast and Island Mere Trails 2.8 and 2.4 km respectively
- Four hides (with ramped or level entry); further three hides and viewing platform have stepped entry (32 to 46 steps)
- Unfenced water in places
- Assistance dogs only on the reserve, but dogs allowed on the beach and in the shop and café
- Trail map: available from the Visitor Centre or download from website; dog walking map available from the Visitor Centre.

RSPB Minsmere

great opportunities to engage with nature...

RSPB Minsmere is a fantastic place for wildlife. It is also ideal for families with autistic children to visit because of the opportunities to experience wildlife that can be difficult to see elsewhere. RSPB staff in the Visitor Centre offer advice on where to go and what to look for. RSPB volunteers are often stationed in some of the hides and along the main trails, particularly during the breeding season, to offer further help and point out birds and other wildlife of interest. Bring binoculars if you can or hire a pair for your child from the Visitor Centre.

There are two clearly signposted circular walks which start and finish at the Visitor Centre; the Island Mere Trail and the Coast Trail. Following the Coast trail, it is 650 m to the beach, and a further 250 m to the East hide along an Access for ALL boardwalk path. East Hide is one of five hides/viewpoints on this trail which overlook 'the Scrape'. The Scrape is a series of artificial lagoons managed to support breeding waders, gulls and terns, including avocets (illustrated opposite), one of Minsmere's best known breeding birds. Back on the beach, look carefully and you may find pieces of crag, with tiny fossil shells, scattered amongst the flint pebbles. Continuing on to the Sluice, the trail then returns with the Scrape to the right and extensive reedbeds to the left. In late spring, you have a good chance of seeing another of Minsmere's better known species, the normally shy and elusive bittern. At this time, when bitterns are feeding their young, the adults make



"I photographed a bittern in the reeds"



Avocet



Marsh harrier

frequent flights to their favoured hunting areas in the reedbeds. It is also possible to get good views of the birds feeding, particularly from the aptly named Bittern Hide (32 steps to access). This is the first hide on the Island Mere Trail. There is also a very good chance of seeing marsh harriers quartering the reedbeds from this hide and red deer are sometimes seen in amongst the reeds. Island Mere Hide is a little further along the trail, and accessed along a short boardwalk. The hide provides good views across reedbeds and open water, and has a variety of seating available. This is also a good place to look for bitterns and marsh harriers in the spring months. The trail continues to the road, where there is an option to follow the Woodland Trail, which adds about 1.5 km to the walk. Alternatively, follow the signs to the Canopy Hide (46 steps to access), which is a short walk into the wood. Here you can sit quietly and watch birds moving through the tree canopy, especially in the mornings when birds are more active.

Before you leave, visit the Wild Zone play area behind the Discovery Centre. This should appeal to many autistic children, particularly the child-sized sand martin tunnel and bittern nest. There is a special 'den-building area' in the woodland within a few metres of the play area. Note that two mobility scooters and one wheelchair are available to hire for free (book in advance by calling 01728 658281). In addition to accessibility information on the website, accessible maps are also available from the Visitor Centre.

www.rspb.org.uk/days-out/reserves/minsmere



- Follow the signs to Westleton from the A12 at Voxford (from south) or Blythburgh (from north), in Westleton follow the minor road (Dunwich Road) signposted to Dunwich Heath, there is a small car park after 0.7 miles and the main car park after 1 mile (near IP17 3DD)
- Public transport: contact Connecting Communities
- Open daily, free admission and two car parks
- No facilities, toilets at nearby Dunwich Heath (2 miles) and Minsmere RSPB Visitor Centre (3 miles)
- Terrain: gentle slopes, sandy and stony tracks, some can be muddy in places after wet weather
- Dogs should be on lead from March to the end of August
- Information boards.

Westleton Heath

glorious colours in autumn sunshine...

Westleton Heath National Nature Reserve is a good example of the once extensive Sandlings Heath. The habitat is similar to nearby Dunwich Heath, but Westleton is a much quieter place, lacking the facilities of Dunwich. Consequently, some families with autistic children may prefer to walk here. There are no signed trails, so it is useful to bring an OS map or print an aerial photograph which should clearly show the network of sandy paths. A walk around the boundary of the reserve to the north of Dunwich Road is 2.2 km, but there are options for much shorter walks, following other trails across the heath. If your child is happy to walk further, approximately half way between the two car parks, cross the road to access the southern part of the reserve.

The reserve is primarily open heathland, with large areas of ling heather, although both bell heather and cross-leaved heath can also be found. Occasional birch trees and Scots pines are scattered across the heath. For children who like lots of colour, visit in late summer to see vast swathes of pink flowering ling heather, with occasional patches of deeper purple bell heather. As October approaches, the heath takes on a distinctly autumnal appearance. The orange seed heads of the heather dominate the landscape, complemented by patches of bracken that take on a rustic hue at this time of year. If you can, visit with your child in the late afternoon on a sunny autumn day. In the hour or so before sunset, golden light accentuates the colours, and the heath almost glows.



"I heard a red deer bellowing"



Stonechat



Heather

At this time of year, the red deer rut takes place on fields to the south of the reserve. Late in the afternoon you will hear the deep-throated roar of the stags, as they defend their harem of hinds. If you have binoculars, you should see the animals from the southern boundary of the reserve in late September and October, although they may be distant. The RSPB Minsmere website has more details about the rut, including special events held at Westleton Heath to help visitors to obtain better views of the animals.

The heath is also home to some interesting and rare birds. As you walk around, ask your child to listen for a sound like two stones being tapped together, which is actually the call of a stonechat (illustrated above). These are quite confiding birds and often sit in prominent places, allowing children to get good views. In spring, Dartford warblers and woodlarks will be holding territory and you may also see these birds on top of the heather, although they are generally shy. The heath also supports a healthy population of nightjars, but to experience these birds requires a special trip at dusk, which may upset the routines of some autistic children. From the main car park, you can also follow paths into Dunwich Forest, which might be particularly pleasant on a hot summer's day – the trails are not signposted, so an OS map would be useful if you intend to walk any distance.

www.gov.uk/government/publications/suffolks-national-nature-reserves/suffolks-national-nature-reserves#westleton-heath

- Follow the signs to Westleton from the A12 at Yoxford (from south) or Blythburgh (from north), in Westleton follow the brown Dunwich Heath signs to the reserve (IP17 3DJ)
- Public transport: contact Connecting Communities
- Open daily; large car park (pay and display for non-National Trust members)
- Toilets close to car park; radar toilet near tea-room entrance; Visitor Information hut; tea-room (takeaway) but see website for opening times; and picnic area nearby
- Heath Barn with children's information (comfy seating and handwash facilities)
- Terrain: paths uneven, soft sand in places, undulating with slopes; circular walks from 1.2 to 3.8 km
- Powered mobility vehicle available (pre-booking advised)
- Unfenced cliff top and water filled ditch (fenced pond)
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Information boards showing trail map
- Access statement and trail maps on website.

Dunwich Heath and Beach

heathland by the sea...

The National Trust's Dunwich Heath is an interesting place to visit with autistic children. It has good facilities, parking and self-guided trails through heathland and woodland. The Heath Barn has a range of wildlife posters and books, and there are posters about recent military history in the Seawatch building. Some families with an autistic child will prefer the Smuggler's Trail, a short circular walk across the heathland (1.2 km). Twelve trail boards along the way provide clues to solve a puzzle – leaflets are available in the Heath Barn or Visitor Information. The Smugglers Trail starts behind the Coastguard Cottages, and runs parallel to the coast for about 350 m. It then takes you out onto the main heathland area before returning to the car park. Signs warn children not to venture towards the unfenced cliff top, which is about 15 m away from the trail at the closest point. If you want to see the heath at its most colourful, visit in late July and August. At this time of year the heath becomes a sea of pink, with splashes of purple and yellow, as first bell heather and then ling heather come into flower. Surely a delight for children who love the colour pink! Your child may notice the coconut-like fragrance of gorse flowers in the air, but take care not to get too close to the spiny stems of the plant itself.

Four self-guided trails (1 mile to 3 miles) present further opportunities to explore the heathland. Families with an autistic child might also consider the Orange (3 mile) and Pink (2 mile)



"heather is very pink"

walks, which cross the central heathland area, avoiding the deep ditch along parts of the Grey Trail and Discovery Trail. Look out for Dartford warblers (illustrated below), which are perhaps easier to see here than on some Suffolk heaths. Dartford warblers have a distinctive long, slim tail; they are dark slaty-brown above and brown-pink below. They can be quite secretive birds, so it will be a challenge for your child to spot one – bring binoculars if you have a pair. Nightjars also breed at Dunwich Heath, but they are nocturnal, flying and uttering their strange ‘churring’ song at dusk. ‘Routines’ may prevent many families from visiting Dunwich or other heaths at dusk on a summer’s evening, but if you live nearby, ask the National Trust staff on site for guidance about the best place to see the birds.

Along the southern perimeter, the Discovery Trail passes Docwras Ditch and the Centenary Pond. At certain times, the Discovery Trail adopts a theme of coastguard ‘signal flags’. During weekends and school holidays the ranger team organises pond dipping and bug hunting sessions (telephone to check dates/times). Also along this path you will come across a south-facing sandy bank with an information board which describes the various solitary bees and wasps which excavate their nests in the sandy soil. Shortly after the sandy bank, there is an opportunity to return to the car park. Alternatively, continue along the Discovery Trail which has 10 posts posing questions which can be answered on the trail leaflet (a distance of 1.2 km). If you have time, the beach is about 200 m from the car park, down a sloping path. Dunwich Beach is mainly shingle, but some areas of sand are exposed at low tide. If you look carefully amongst the shingle, you might find pieces of crag with tiny fossil shells, which will interest some children with autism.

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/suffolk/dunwich-heath-and-beach



© David Kjaer

Dartford warbler



- **Snape Maltings** is on the B1069 just south of Snape village (IP17 1SP)
- **Public transport:** contact Connecting Communities and Katch
- **Open daily, free admission;** large car park at the Maltings and a very small car park near Snape Warren, in Priory Road, Snape (IP17 1SA)
- **Disabled toilets, café** and other eateries at the Maltings
- **Terrain:** mostly level, stony tracks, grassy paths (can be slippery in wet weather) and boardwalk
- **Unfenced water** in places
- **Dogs** may be encountered off lead
- **Information boards**
- **Explorer guides:** download from the Suffolk & Essex Coast & Heaths National Landscape website.

Snape Maltings and Snape Warren

walks along the Alde estuary...

Snape Maltings, with its craft shops, restaurants and galleries might not seem an obvious choice for this guide, but the Maltings are beside the River Alde, they have good facilities and provide a base for lovely walks along the river. If your child can only walk relatively short distances, consider a stroll around the Maltings themselves; start by the river, go past the reedbeds and out across the meadow. There are a number of sculptures to look at here, including Barbara Hepworth's 'The Family of Man', and 'Reclining Figure: Bunched' by Henry Moore. This short walk is about 1 km. From the far corner of the meadow, families can continue south of the river by following the boardwalk through the reedbeds. After the first section of boardwalk, the path follows the edge of an arable field, before a longer section of boardwalk takes you through a more extensive reedbed and on to Iken Cliff car park (3 km return). Some autistic children may enjoy walking on the boardwalk and find this walk particularly soothing. It is a peaceful place, and on a spring or summer's day the air might be filled with the rhythmical song of reed warblers.

Families can also cross the river to join the start of the 'Sailors' Path' which follows a route between Snape Maltings and Aldeburgh. Explain to your children that this is the path sailors would walk between Aldeburgh and Snape. The path follows the River Alde east along the edge of Snape Marshes to Snape Warren. This is also a peaceful walk, offering children far reaching



"I like walking along the boardwalk"



views across grazing marshes and the Alde estuary. There are lots of wildflowers along the path; children might try to find the rare marsh sow-thistle, which is illustrated on an information board. In spring and summer you will hear the song of reed warblers – see if your child can spot one in the dense reeds. This will be a challenge, even if the bird is just a few metres away! When the tide is out, you might also hear the plaintive calls of curlews and other waders out on the mudflats. The path is quite exposed and the sky is big, so on rainy days you can watch showers as they approach – getting closer and closer but hopefully passing you by!

When you reach Snape Warren, you will have walked a distance of 1 km, and may decide to retrace your steps at this point. Alternatively, explore the Warren before returning along the same riverside path (thus avoiding the busy road junction in Snape village). In high summer, as you cross the heathland, look out for some of the reserve's resident birds, such as Dartford warbler and yellowhammer, with its unmistakable bright yellow plumage. Most adults will be familiar with the yellowhammer's song, which is said to mimic the phrase 'a little bit of bread and no cheese'. Ask your child if they agree with this interpretation. Or maybe they think that the bird is singing something else...

<https://brittenpearsarts.org/walks-at-snape-maltings>

- From Woodbridge, take the A1152 to Bromswell, and then the B1084 (towards Orford), the Rendlesham Forest Centre is signposted on the right after 3.3 miles (IP12 3NF)

- Public transport: contact Connecting Communities

- Open daily, free admission; the large 'main' and the 'Plane Spotters' car parks are currently pay and display (card only) or RingGo

- Information kiosk open during peak periods

- Toilets in the car park; mobile catering usually available at weekends

- Terrain: mostly level or gentle gradients, stony tracks and grassy paths (can be slippery in wet weather), trails 1 to 5.3 km

- Several unfenced ponds along the longer Phoenix Trail

- Dogs may be encountered off lead

- Information boards

- Trail map: available in the car park or download from the Forestry Commission website.

Rendlesham Forest

forest walks and opportunities to play...

Children visiting Rendlesham Forest might be immediately attracted to the adventure play area close to the car park. The play area, with its 'UFO' theme, includes a climbing frame, bug maze, swings and a zip wire. Unlike many play areas, the equipment here is well spaced out amongst the trees, which should help some autistic children. A circular walk around the play area is about 300 m. Not surprisingly, this site is growing in popularity and the car park can be busy. For autistic children, choose your times carefully and you may find the site can be quiet.

Close to the car park, the 'Easy-access Trail' offers a short walk into the forest of just under 1 km. At the point where the Easy-access and 'longer Phoenix Trail' separate (300 m from the car park), you enter the Tangham Wood sculpture area. Although this was constructed in 2008, some of the wooden wildlife sculptures still remain, although past their best. The sculptures represent some of the animals and birds which live in the Sandlings heaths and forests. Your child may enjoy searching for the sculptures, which include a grey squirrel, rabbit, common frog, grass snake, fox and barn owl, all hidden away in the forest. After exploring Tangham Wood, continue along the Easy-access Trail back to the car park. The longer Phoenix Trail (approximately 5.3 km) follows a series of rides and forestry roads, mainly through conifer forest of different ages. Some of the rides are wide, with ling heather and wildflowers along their margins. On a warm summer's day you



"I zoomed down the zip wire"



might encounter speckled wood butterflies, which prefer shady rides, but in the more open areas look out for other species, such as meadow brown, gatekeeper and small heath. In places the floor is littered with pine cones, far too many to choose from if your child wants to collect a few to take home. As you get further from the car park there is always the chance of coming across deer in the rides. As the forest is predominantly conifer, you will not hear or see as many bird species as you would expect in deciduous woodland. Nevertheless, some species favour conifer plantations, and you might catch a glimpse of coal tits, chaffinches and goldcrests flitting through the tree tops.

In contrast, if your child is interested in science fiction and UFOs, the Rendlesham UFO Trail should appeal to their imagination. This trail, which is similar in length to the longer Phoenix Trail, allows you to explore the places where sightings of a UFO were reported over Christmas in 1980. Although the forest has changed a lot in recent years with new planting, the trail passes the key locations where the incidents took place. The accompanying leaflet tells the story of the events and invites the reader to make up their own mind about what actually happened...

www.forestryengland.uk/rendlesham-forest

- From the A1152 just east of Woodbridge, take the B1083 south towards Sutton village; for the Northern car park, turn left after 0.7 miles onto a minor road, the car park is on the right after 1.3 miles (IP12 3TF); for the Southern car park, continue along the B1083 for a further 1.1 miles, the car park is on the left
- Public transport: contact Connecting Communities
- Open daily, free admission and two car parks
- No facilities, public toilets in Woodbridge (approximately 4 miles)
- Terrain: mostly level, stony tracks and grassy paths (can be slippery in wet weather); circular walks of 3 and 6.2 km
- Dogs should be on lead
- Livestock grazing at certain times of the year
- Information boards
- Explorer guide: download from the Essex & Suffolk Coast & Heaths National Landscape website.

Sutton Heath

heathland adventures...

Sutton Heath and nearby Hollesley Heath represent one of the largest areas of Sandlings Heath in Suffolk, and are a special place for wildlife. In spring, woodlarks will be in song, but more secretive later in the year. In late spring and summer, redstarts can be found around isolated clumps of trees. The males are very smart-looking birds (illustrated opposite) that your child may enjoy watching, especially if you have binoculars with you. Hobbies may also be seen hawking insects overhead, particularly favouring dragonflies. At any time of the year, more familiar kestrels may be seen hovering over the heath whilst buzzards drift overhead and Dartford warblers call from the tops of the heather. On warm summer's days lizards often scurry across the track – your child may spot them before you. Adders are also possible, particularly earlier in the day, but if you do come across one, warn your child not to approach. You also have a good chance of seeing green tiger beetles (illustrated opposite), which like to hunt for insects on the open sandy paths. Children may be fascinated by their iridescent green colouring and the yellowish spots on their backs. The beetles are active from April to September but difficult to get close to.

If your child has a sense of adventure, set off across the Heath from the Southern car park and let them make up the route as you go along. Alternatively, you can follow one of two trails described in the Suffolk Coast & Heaths AONB 'Sutton Heath Explorer Guide'.



"I saw a green tiger beetle"

Both trails take you through woodland and across the heathland, although they differ considerably in length. The Explorer Guide is useful as there are no signposts on the ground. The Sutton Heath Stroll (3.25 km) crosses open ground with bracken, small patches of ling heather and scattered Scots pine trees before entering a more densely wooded area after about 350 m. The next 2 km or so are wooded with deciduous woodland and pine forest near the Northern car park. In places, pine cones litter the woodland floor and your child may wish to collect some as a souvenir of their visit. The trail finally crosses open heathland, which in the late summer and early autumn provides a sudden splash of colour. You can also follow this trail from the Northern car park, which in contrast to the Southern car park, offers welcome shade on a warm summer's day.

The 'Heath and Forest Hike' is a strenuous walk (6.4 km) more suitable for families used to longer walks. The trail initially follows the same route as the Stroll, eventually reaching the main area of heathland after about 1 km. Avoiding the loop past the cottage at the far end of the heath reduces the length by 1.25 km. There are vast swathes of ling heather here, a veritable carpet of pink in late summer. Ponies and sheep often graze the heathland, so you may come across these animals on your walk. On another occasion you might consider exploring Hollesley Heath, which has similar habitats (car park 1.7 miles along the minor road from Sutton Heath Northern car park).

www.thesuffolkcoast.co.uk/shares/Sutton_Heath_Explorer_Guide-AONB.pdf

<https://coastandheaths-nl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Sutton-walk.pdf>



Green tiger beetle



Redstart

Dedham Vale National Landscape & Stour Valley

The Dedham Vale National Landscape & Stour Valley (formerly designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) represents a peaceful, rural landscape on the Suffolk-Essex border that is quite distinct from the rest of Suffolk and Essex. The area is widely known through the paintings of landscape artists such as John Constable and Thomas Gainsborough, which adds to its popularity with tourists. The landscapes around Flatford and Dedham that inspired John Constable are still recognisable today, in what is sometimes called 'Constable Country'. This part of Suffolk and Essex is characterised by rolling farmland, ancient lanes, traditional villages, meadows, rivers, ancient woodland carpeted with bluebells and more recent plantations of cricket bat willows and poplars. The River Stour itself is a key feature as it meanders through the lowland landscape; distinctive crack willow pollards can be found along the riverside. The river rises in Cambridgeshire and flows in a generally south eastern direction through Sudbury, Dedham and Flatford before becoming tidal at Manningtree. The National Landscape and Stour Valley support a number of rare and protected species, including black poplar, dormouse, otter, water vole, stag beetle, great crested newt, skylark and barn owl. Whilst some of these animals may be difficult to see, their presence is indicative of an area still rich in wildlife. The ancient woodland at Arger Fen and Spouse's Vale for example is a great place to experience Suffolk's diverse woodland flora and birdlife.

One way to enjoy this area is to explore the Stour Valley Path – a 97 km footpath from Cattawade near Manningtree in the east to Newmarket in the west. The Stour Valley Path Guide splits the path into 10 sections of 7.2 to 13.7 km in length, most of which can be walked in one direction with a return to the starting point on public transport. If these sections are too long for your child, consider the shorter Dedham to Flatford walk described opposite. Other places recommended for families with an autistic child and featured in this guide are as follows: Flatford hamlet and the wider National Trust Estate; the RSPB Wildlife Garden at Flatford; Arger Fen and Spouse's Vale; The Place for Plants; the Gainsborough Trail and Sudbury Riverside; and Melford Country Park.



<https://dedhamvale-nl.org.uk>

- From the A12, take the B1029 to Dedham, two car parks just after Dedham Bridge (C07 6DH)
- Public transport: contact Connecting Communities
- Riverside walk open daily, free admission; two pay and display car parks in Dedham
- Toilets and Boathouse Restaurant by Dedham Bridge; toilets, changing places facility and tearoom in Flatford
- Rowing boats for hire at the Boathouse Restaurant (Dedham) and Flatford
- Terrain: level, grassy paths (can be muddy after wet weather); return walk 4 km
- Unfenced river, deep water lock at Flatford
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Livestock grazing in riverside meadows
- Route map: download from the Dedham Vale National Landscape & Stour Valley website.

Stour Valley Path

from Dedham to Flatford through Constable country...

The riverside path from Dedham to Flatford is the most accessible section of the Stour Valley Path for families with autistic children. Here we describe the facilities and route from Dedham, but you could also undertake this walk in reverse from Flatford (see overleaf). The official route of the Stour Valley Path covers a distance of 2 km from Dedham to Flatford, but if you follow the more direct, well-worn paths across the meadows, the distance is closer to 1.6 km. If the return walk to Flatford is too far, consider walking to Fen Bridge which is about half way. At this point the Path crosses the county boundary (the River Stour) from Suffolk into Essex.

From Dedham, cross the road bridge to join the path. This winds its way through tranquil riverside meadows, some grazed by cattle or other animals. In meadows which have not been grazed, countless buttercups create a sea of yellow in the late spring and summer. Pollarded willows line the meandering river in places; explain to your child that the trees are over 100 years old and have been worked over time to provide poles and stakes. On the water itself there are usually a few mallards and sometimes a family of mute swans. You are also very likely to see families rowing along the river in boats hired from the Boathouse Restaurant at Dedham bridge or from Flatford. If your child is comfortable with the idea of going in a rowing boat, sitting close to the water, this could be a great way to explore the river.

www.dedhamvalestourvalley.org/visiting/visitor-guides/stour-valley-path

www.dedhamvalestourvalley.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Walking-in-Constable-Country-Guide.pdf



"we rowed on the river"

- From East Bergholt, follow the brown tourist signs (C07 6UL)
- Public transport: for buses to East Bergholt (1 km walk along narrow road) check www.suffolkonboard.com/buses
- Tearoom open daily April to October, for other months check website; car park open dawn to dusk all year, 150 m from Flatford Hamlet and RSPB Wildlife Garden (parking charge for non-National Trust members); wildlife garden open daily April to October (check website for open days in winter)
- Toilets, adapted toilet and changing places facility near the blue badge car park, opening times the same as Tea Room
- Terrain: gentle slope from main car park (including steps) to the wildlife garden and hamlet; paths level and surfaced in hamlet, steps in wildlife garden; elsewhere grassy paths can be slippery in wet weather; 'purple' circular walk has one steep slope
- Two bird hides ('Orange' walk)
- Unfenced river, ponds and deep water lock
- Dogs on lead in the RSPB Wildlife Garden and hamlet
- Map of walks displayed in car park and near Willy Lott's House.



Flatford Hamlet and Flatford Wildlife Garden

a walk back in time...

The hamlet of Flatford is well known for being the inspiration for some of John Constable's best known paintings. As you walk down to Flatford, look out for the RSPB's Wildlife Garden. Despite its modest size (0.3 ha) the garden is designed to inspire visitors, especially families, to help nature in their own gardens. Colourful flower borders, a wildflower meadow, apple trees, woodland garden and a lovely wildlife pond should appeal to the senses of many autistic children. The staff and volunteers here are passionate about connecting children with nature. Family trails (small charge) and bug bingo spotting sheets offer interesting activities for families. There is also a small picnic area, boardwalk and an information barn where your child can learn more about local wildlife. For some autistic children, the garden alone may be enough for one visit.

Flatford has a sense of timelessness... crossing the river, you may see cows standing in the water as you look back towards Flatford Mill. If your child has a grasp of time, explain that Bridge Cottage is a 16th century farmer's cottage; Willy Lott's House is also a 16th century cottage; and Flatford Mill itself was originally an 18th century fulling mill for cleansing cloth, before being converted to a flour mill. If you have any concerns about water, do not cross the bridge, for there is a deep lock opposite the mill. Rowing boats can be hired by the bridge, allowing your child to see the countryside of Dedham Vale from a very different perspective. Note that whilst



"I was very happy to see a newt"



the Tearoom, Bridge Cottage and the Constable Exhibition open regularly from April to October (check website), the countryside can be accessed at all times.

The National Trust estate extends well beyond Flatford hamlet, and an information board invites you to walk in an artist's footprints... to explore the countryside as John Constable would have done, 200 years ago. The shorter 'orange route' (1.25 km) follows the boundary of Gibbonsgate Field. From the bird hide overlooking a tranquil lake you might see mallards, moorhens and great crested and little grebes. The walk then continues through a small copse with a carved paintbrush, owl and woodpecker to find; your child can hold the woodpecker and tap its bill against a piece of wood or a tree to make a sound like a real woodpecker. There may also be enough wood to build a small den. The walk then passes several old oaks – perhaps as old as the mill itself – as it returns to Flatford. The longer 'purple route' (2 km) takes you across grazed pasture to an ancient field maple tree – you might pause to let your child feel the tree's gnarled and ancient trunk – before climbing the hill along the edge of a small wood. As you walk across the top of Miller's Field your child might enjoy the view across Dedham Vale, before walking back to Flatford. Finally, the tearoom might be a very pleasant way to end your visit.

www.rspb.org.uk/days-out/reserves/flatford-wildlife-garden
www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/suffolk/flatford

- From the A12, follow the B1070 (through East Bergholt) for 2 miles, the entrance is signposted on the left (CO7 6UP)
- Public transport: buses from Ipswich to East Bergholt stop at East End Corner (400 m walk on narrow pavement along Mill Road), check www.suffolkonboard.com/buses
- Garden open daily 1st March to 30th September (except Easter Sunday), admission charge for adults (carers and children free); car park
- Toilets, garden centre shop and café serving drinks and cakes
- Terrain: the garden is on a gentle slope, grassy paths can be slippery in wet weather; typical circular walk around the garden 1 km
- Several unfenced ponds
- Assistance dogs only.

The Place for Plants

a peaceful and delightful garden...

The Place for Plants is a garden centre with a delightful garden and arboretum that families with autistic children might find particularly attractive. The gardens are privately owned and were originally laid out early in the 20th century by the great grandfather of the present owner. Only assistance dogs are allowed in the gardens, so if your child is wary or frightened of dogs, the Place for Plants offers a rare opportunity for a more relaxing walk with the reassurance that you will not be approached by dogs off lead.

In the spring and early summer, as you walk into the garden, you will notice that the grass has not been mown. The owners have created a wildflower meadow, a reminder of how flower-rich hay meadows used to look before the vast majority disappeared from the British countryside over the course of the 20th century. In early spring, look out for snake's-head fritillaries, which are now very rare in their native habitat. Ask your child why they think the fritillaries have been given this name. Other wildflowers such as primroses also flower early in spring, followed by oxeye daisies (illustrated above) and yellow rattle as the summer approaches. Meandering paths of short grass guide you through the meadow, past trees and shrubs which form part of the arboretum. If your child likes colours, then they will appreciate the palette of the rhododendron and camellia flowers, of pastel yellows and pinks to deep reds and oranges. Later in the spring, fallen petals look



"I met a friendly chicken in the garden"



like confetti scattered on the paths. Children might like to make some natural artwork with the fallen petals, by collecting different colours and making patterns on the ground. Be sure to take a photograph of their work! Along the way there are benches in secluded spots, where you might sit and read stories or listen to the song of garden birds such as robins and blackbirds. As you continue your walk past clumps of bamboo, ask your child if they know what animal is well-known for eating bamboo in the forests of China.

If you first visit in spring or summer, consider returning in the autumn when leaves are changing colour and shrubs are laden with fruit. Autistic children might enjoy the opportunity to make a crown of autumn leaves. Take a strip of card 3 cm wide, stick the ends together so that it will fit on your child's head, and put a strip of double-sided sticky tape around the crown. As you walk around the gardens, ask your child to pick up leaves of different colours to stick on their crown, which hopefully they will wear at the end of the visit. The trail through the garden ends in the Victorian walled garden which houses the plant centre. Nearby, the café sells drinks and cakes which might be very tempting after a good walk around the garden.

www.placeforplants.co.uk



- Take the Nayland road out of Bures, at the cross roads (after 1.6 miles) turn left (signposted to Assington), the parking area is on the right after 1 mile (CO8 5BN – see also TL930352)
- Public transport: contact Connecting Communities
- Open daily, free admission but limited parking in small car park
- Terrain: undulating paths, steeper slopes in places, tracks can be muddy in places after wet weather; three trails (approximately 0.8 to 3.7 km)
- Dogs should be on a lead
- Information board showing trails
- Trail map: download from Suffolk Wildlife Trust website.

Arger Fen and Spouse's Vale

carpets of bluebells in the spring...

Arger Fen and Spouse's Vale is a Suffolk Wildlife Trust reserve perhaps best known for its spring display of bluebells. As a consequence, in late April and early May when the bluebells are at their best, the car park is likely to be busy, particularly at weekends. At this time of year, it might be better to visit early in the morning or later in the afternoon if your child is likely to be upset by difficulties in parking. At other times of the year, the reserve is much quieter.

Entering the woodland by the car park, you will find an information board with a map showing trails of three different lengths. Many visitors follow the green trail (1.5 km) which is signposted in an anticlockwise direction. This follows the wooded slopes of the valley, through areas which have been replanted with conifers, although there are a lot of shrubs and wildflowers along the paths. If you have a field guide, look out for species such as wood spurge, yellow archangel and greater stitchwort in the spring. You will also come across small patches of bluebells, but it is further along the trail that more substantial areas are encountered. As you return along the valley, you will find a mosaic of colour on the woodland floor, with bluebells on the slopes contrasting with white carpets of wild garlic in the damper areas. Wild garlic (illustrated opposite) creates a pungent aroma which your child may detect in the air. Look out for dense patches of horsetail which also thrive in the wetter areas – tell your child that



"There were a lot of bluebells"



Wild garlic

horsetails were around at the time of the dinosaurs, when they could grow up to 10 m tall! Along the way your child will also find occasional fallen trees and stumps to clamber over. If you are lucky, you may glimpse a deer before it runs away to hide in the woodland vegetation. At any time of day, but especially early in the morning, Arger Fen echoes to the sound of woodland birdsong – stop for a moment and ask your child to close their eyes and tell you what they can hear.

A longer trail (3.7 km) takes you out of Arger Fen and across former arable fields to Spouse's Grove. After they were last ploughed, these fields were left for trees to colonise and grow naturally. Crops have been replaced by dense stands of young trees. If your child can manage the longer walk, it is well worth the effort, because Spouse's Grove is a delightful ancient wood, full of colourful woodland flowers and carpeted throughout with dense patches of bluebells. One particular glade is like a sea of deep blue in late spring. Spouse's Grove is also located on the slopes of the valley; the path descends to a short boardwalk across a wetter area before climbing the valley side once again. Look out for badger setts along the trail here; if you come across piles of freshly excavated soil, ask your child what animal might be living in the tunnels beneath their feet.

www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/arger-fen

- From the junction of the B1508 and A131, follow the brown leisure centre symbol to the leisure centre car park (C010 2SU)
- Public transport: short walk from bus routes and railway station in Sudbury; check www.suffolkonboard.com/buses
- Open daily, free admission and large car park (at the time of publication, first 3 hours free)
- Toilets in nearby leisure centre; eateries in Sudbury
- Terrain: mostly level, railway track bed is firm under foot, grassy paths elsewhere; all paths can be muddy in places during wet weather; Meadow Walk with waymarks (6 km)
- Bridges with railings over rivers and road; dangerous if children climb on them
- Unfenced river, ditches and pools
- Cattle graze in the water meadows in summer
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Numerous interpretation boards
- Trail maps and video: download from Sudbury Town Council and Gainsborough Trail websites.

Gainsborough Tail and Sudbury Riverside

ancient water meadows and railway history...

Starting from the Kingfisher Leisure Centre car park, there are many options for walks along the old track bed of the Great Eastern Railway and across Sudbury Riverside meadows. For a short walk, set off along the old track bed and as you walk along, ask your child to imagine steam trains thundering down the railway line en route from Colchester to Bury St Edmunds. When you reach the bridge after 400 m or so, turn left and cross Friar's Meadow to the River Stour. From here you can walk back along a peaceful stretch of the reed-fringed river, before cutting across the meadow to the car park. This is a walk of just over 1 km, but it gives a real flavour of the longer walks described below.

Sudbury water meadows, managed by the Sudbury Common Lands Charity, lie to the west of Sudbury and can be reached along the old railway, following the 'Gainsborough Trail Meadow Walk'. Follow the old track bed for about 1 km, before taking the ramp down to the red brick pumping station just after the Ballingdon Street railway bridge. From here, the water meadows open up in front of you; the Stour Valley Path follows the river whilst other footpaths criss-cross the meadows. This is an ancient landscape with ditches, ponds and meadows which may never have been ploughed. The meadows are grazed, as they have been for more than 800 years, so be prepared to meet cattle on your journey. The river also has a very natural feel, with reeds along the banks, overhanging willow trees and floating water lilies. If you are lucky,



"a mole poked it's head through the soil"



you may spot a kingfisher as it flashes past, but you will certainly see plenty of ducks, particularly near the designated feeding area at the Croft. Look out for mute swans and their cygnets along the river in high summer; swans also tend to congregate upstream at Brundon Mill.

A few hundred metres beyond the Croft is Salmon Leap Weir, designed to enable salmon to move upstream. Sadly, an attempt to introduce salmon into the River Stour in the 1960s was unsuccessful, but autistic children may enjoy listening to the sound of water spilling over the weir. The riverside footpath continues as far as the pink-washed Brundon Mill, which is 2.8 km from the Leisure Centre car park. From here, families may decide to retrace their steps across the meadows to the railway line and on to the car park. Alternatively, continue along the 'Meadow Walk' past Brundon Mill on the Stour Valley Path for a further 400 m to the old railway line and return along the track bed. However, it is a long walk back and the views from the railway line are often obscured by trees and scrub, or the banks of a cutting. Autistic children may prefer to walk back along the river through the more open landscape of the water meadows.

www.gainsboroughtrail.org.uk
www.sudbury-tc.gov.uk/walking



- From the junction of the A134 and A131 north of Sudbury, take the B1064 towards Long Melford, turn left after 0.4 miles, the car park is signposted on the left (CO10 9HH)
- Public transport: buses to nearby Rodbridge Corner from Sudbury and Clare, but 200 m walk along a busy lane with no pavement; check www.suffolkonboard.com/buses
- Open daily, free admission and car park
- Toilets in the car park; picnic area nearby
- Terrain: mostly level, grassy paths (can be slippery in wet weather); circular walk about 700 m
- Unfenced riverside footpath (optional)
- Ponds are unfenced and may be covered with duckweed that can make them look remarkably like a lawn
- Dogs may be encountered off lead
- Information boards include a map of the site.

Melford Country Park

a small riverside nature reserve and park...

Melford Country Park, also referred to as Rodbridge Picnic Site, is a former sand and gravel pit by the River Stour. In the past, the river was deepened and straightened to form a 'millstream' to power Borley Mill, further downstream. The Country Park is a small site (8 ha) and therefore ideal for children who are not able to walk too far. A typical walk around the whole site is about 700 m and routes are illustrated on an information board in the car park (although not signposted on the ground). For children interested in nature there are four information boards in the Country Park with photos and descriptions of bird species that can be seen. There is also an information board about some interesting archaeological finds.

From the car park, follow the route of the nature trail across the picnic area or walk down to the river, and follow the riverside path for just under 200 m. This is a relaxing walk, even in the rain – the slow-moving river is fringed by reeds, water lilies float on the surface and branches overhang the water. Rejoin the trail and cross the meadow into young woodland. Here, many children will enjoy climbing on the tree stumps, balancing on the fallen trees or hiding in one of the 'dens'. If there are no dens, there should be sufficient branches to build one for yourselves. The trail soon emerges from the woodland, crossing a low wooden bridge which provides the first clear view of the ponds. Your child is likely to spot mallards and mute swans on the water, making trails through the weed as they swim towards you, suspecting that you have food for them. The trail continues, out of the wood and back to the car park... time for a picnic?

www.facebook.com/LongMelfordCountryPark



"I enjoyed feeding grain to the ducks"

Further reading

Web resources

- Activities Unlimited: www.suffolklocaloffer.org.uk/short-breaks-and-leisure-activities/activities-unlimited
- Brecks Bus: <http://icklingham.onesuffolk.net/assets/Uploads/Suffolk-Links-BR-Aug-14.pdf>
- Connecting Communities: <https://communities.suffolkonboard.com>
- Katch: www.katchalift.com
- Suffolk on Board: www.suffolkonboard.com
- National Rail Enquiries: www.nationalrail.co.uk
- Accessible Countryside for Everyone: www.accessiblecountryside.org.uk/suffolk
- Changing Places accessible toilets: www.changing-places.org
- Access Able: www.accessable.co.uk
- Visit Suffolk: www.visitsuffolk.com
- Discover Suffolk: www.discoversuffolk.org.uk
- Autism Anglia: www.autism-anglia.org.uk
- Dedham Vale National Landscape & Stour Valley: <https://dedhamvale-nl.org.uk>
- Suffolk & Essex Coast & Heaths National Landscape: <https://coastandheaths-nl.org.uk>
- Suffolk Wildlife Trust: www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org
- Woodland Trust: www.woodlandtrust.org.uk
- Bing maps (use desktop version for OS maps): www.bing.com/maps

Autism and Nature children's books (available on Activities Unlimited website and www.widgit.com)

- Blakesley, D and Blakesley, T. 2015. Alex and Rosie's Adventures in Suffolk.
- Blakesley, D and Blakesley, T. 2017. Alex and Rosie's Suffolk Colouring Book.
- Blakesley, D and Blakesley, T. 2021. Alex and Rosie Explore Suffolk's Heritage.
- Blakesley, D and Blakesley, T. 2022. Alex and Rosie's Suffolk Heritage Colouring Book.
- Blakesley, D and Blakesley, T. 2022. Jay and Ellie Visit the Red House and Snape.
- Blakesley, D and Blakesley, T. 2023. Alex and Rosie Learn About Woods and Trees.
- Blakesley, D and Blakesley, T. 2023. Alex and Rosie Learn About Water Conservation in Suffolk.
- Blakesley, D and Blakesley, T. 2024. Alex and Rosie Make a Wildlife Garden.

Other publications

- Blakesley, D, Rickinson, M and Dillon, J. 2013. Engaging children on the autistic spectrum with the natural environment: Teacher insight study and evidence review. Natural England Commissioned Reports, NECR116. Available at: <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/11085017>
- Brown, O. 2005. Autistic at altitude. Communication, Summer, 40–41.
- Faber Taylor, A and Kuo, FE. 2009. Children with attention deficits concentrate better after walk in the park. Journal of Attention Disorders 12, 402–409.
- Gunton, T. 2008. Explore Wild Essex: a guide to the nature reserves and country parks of Essex and East London. Lopinga Books and Essex Wildlife Trust, Essex.
- Louv, R. 2005. Last child in the Woods: Saving our children from Nature-Deficit Disorder. Atlantic Books, London.
- Moss, S. 2012. Natural childhood. National Trust.
- Page, L. 2010. Kiddiwalks in Suffolk. Countryside Books, Newbury.
- Young, H. 2010. Growing together: gardening with children and young people with Special Educational Needs: RHS SEN schools project 2009–2010.

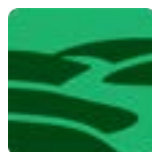


This guide is designed to help parents, carers and teachers to engage autistic children and children with special educational needs with the natural environment. It should also prove useful to those living and working with autistic adults. It begins by introducing the benefits of visiting the countryside, considering why such experiences are valuable for autistic children. This is followed by a guide to 'natural' places to visit in the Suffolk countryside, which the authors believe many autistic children might enjoy. Twenty-four natural places are featured, including places in the Suffolk & Essex Coast & Heaths National Landscape, the Dedham Vale National Landscape & Stour Valley and the wider Suffolk countryside.

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