



# A sense of freedom

The experiences of disabled people  
in the natural environment



## Introduction

The natural environment has a positive role to play in many peoples' lives. There is growing evidence that it can improve our health and wellbeing, and can bring individuals and communities a wide range of social benefits.

It is important that everyone should be able to experience and enjoy recreation within a natural setting. However, disabled people do not always have the same opportunities to experience and enjoy the natural environment that many of us may take for granted.

It is important that all organisations who manage access to nature, from small city parks to large national nature reserves, consider the needs of their disabled customers.

This document is a collection of personal accounts from people with a range of impairments. It offers a unique insight into the difficulties some disabled

people face in accessing the natural environment, and the many benefits that arise when they are able to enjoy the outdoors.

Despite the barriers they face, the people telling these stories are passionate about the natural environment and many are actively working for change, volunteering their time to help organisations improve access to the outdoors for disabled people.

We are grateful to our contributors for sharing their stories with us. They give us a greater understanding of how we can improve disabled peoples' access to the natural environment and their enjoyment of it.

We hope these stories will inspire individuals and organisations, give them the confidence to engage with disabled people, and help them to improve their experience of nature.

**Dr Helen Phillips**  
**Chief Executive, Natural England**

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## Hazel Jarrold

Hazel Jarrold, of Horndon on the Hill, Essex, has been a keen member of the Thurrock Ramblers' Association for 23 years. Despite limited mobility due to arthritis in her spine and other health problems, Hazel is still regularly walking between two and four miles – ten to twelve on a good day. The exercise is good for her arthritis - "I have to keep moving, or I seize up!" - and also for her asthma, as it removes the need to use her inhaler.

Hazel also suffers from periods of severe depression, "When black is the lightest colour you can see", and she finds that being among the sights, sounds and smells of the natural environment helps a great deal. "The taste of wild blackberries – there's nothing like it!"

With the Ramblers, Hazel travels to various venues

within an hour's drive: to Kent, where the hills are steep; the undulating landscape of Essex; the rolling hills of Sussex; and on to the flat countryside of Cambridgeshire. They travel in private cars, and occasionally by bus to places like Hastings, Norfolk and Kent. There are also longer trips: this year to Tregaron in Mid Wales.

A more local favourite walk for Hazel is along the sea wall at Tilbury. "Walking by water has a special charm of its own and is very calming," she says. "You can watch the traffic on the river. There are lots of water birds, such as herons, coots, ducks and seagulls. On the landward side there are also many birds and you often get close to species such as sparrow hawks. The flowers attract butterflies and other insects." The area has another, unique attraction: it is the site of Victorian rubbish dumps and many people

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dig there for bottles from that era. Hazel says this makes it even more interesting, with people to chat to. "Then of course there is a fort at each end to look round, and just past Tilbury Fort there is a pub, 'The World's End'. Coalhouse Fort also has a canteen."

In the past a visit to Tilbury involved walkers scaling the jetty by means of two vertical ladders. Hazel is grateful that there is now a track under the jetty, complete with ramp and steps, which make it easier to negotiate.

An occupational therapist by profession, Hazel feels that everyone should have the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of walking in the countryside, although she understands that not everywhere can be made accessible. She is a member of the Local Access Forum, and is very strongly in favour of the removal of stiles. These are a particular problem for her, as she loses balance easily. Her fellow rambles help her, but if she is walking alone, stiles can be dangerous.

Hazel also finds overgrown paths a problem, as her sticks get caught in the vegetation. She is pleased that under Defra's stewardship scheme, landowners are required to keep pathways clear, as she is concerned that some pathways might disappear if they become completely overgrown. "People walking the paths help keep them in good condition," she says. When farmers reinstate paths after ploughing, it is helpful when they remake the path properly. There are some occasions when a tractor is used to create a pathway, and this can result in deep ruts that are awkward and painful for Hazel, and people with similar problems, to negotiate.

Hazel has noticed that access to the countryside has become much better since the passing of the

Disability Discrimination Act (1995). She is delighted that Thurrock Council has decided not to replace stiles as they wear out, either putting in a 'kissing gate' or just leaving a gap where the stile once was. It is important that gates can be opened easily with one hand, as someone who needs a stick to lean on cannot use both. This is also necessary for people with upper limb disabilities, whom Hazel says are often forgotten, but who also need help with access.

Some other improvements she suggests are adding handrails to stairs, and ensuring that plank bridges over ditches are wide enough for someone walking with sticks, otherwise there is a risk of falling in. In the case of the latter, there are some plank bridges that are approached by steps with a bar at the top, which prevent Hazel climbing onto the bridge. Hazel finds barbed wire and electric fences are also barriers, where there is no means of getting across.

However, she reiterates that access has improved and is still improving. This is excellent, she says, because there is no substitute for walking as an aid to health. "People join our group and find it makes a real difference to them. One lady was worried about walking because she had a pain in her knee. I reassured her, saying I had arthritis but still walked, so she joined. That was several years ago, and she's still a member. And when I was very ill with repeated infections, my doctor told me I only survived because I was so fit due to my regular walking!" ■



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## Brian Archer and Ace

Brian Archer and his Guide Dog, Ace, live in Romford, Essex. Brian was blinded in the Second World War at the age of two, but regained partial sight after an operation when he was six. He is a keen yachtsman, sailing at Southampton and Falmouth, Cornwall, where he uses adapted electronic equipment such as adapted autopilot, echo sounding, talking Global Positioning Systems and satellite navigation to sail alone. He loves the feeling of freedom that sailing gives him, the close contact with the elements and the exhilaration and speed.

Brian is also a keen walker. A past chairman of the London Blind Ramblers' Association (LBRA), he has enjoyed going into the countryside for recreation for the past 45 years. Together with the other LBRA members, Brian travels to different railway stations in the Home Counties at weekends and undertakes

circular walks accompanied by sighted members of a local rambling group, as well as taking part in weekends away in places such as Devon. He loves to get away from the traffic noise and smells of his busy home town to cleaner air. "It might sound odd," says Brian, "but I can 'see' the scenery in my mind, as well as having it described to me by sighted companions."

Spending his leisure time in the natural environment has been an important part of Brian's life since he was a child, and he is very confident in his approach. He has had Guide Dogs since he was 18 years old, and he does not feel that there is anything a sighted person can do that he cannot, given the right equipment.

As Ace is too young at present to take part in long cross-country walks while in harness, Brian

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sometimes undertakes longer walks alone – but he does not feel particularly vulnerable. However, he does appreciate trails laid for partially sighted visitors, such as the one at Cockfosters in Hertfordshire, where logs are used to provide a raised trail which can be easily followed using a long cane.

Although he has a very positive attitude to countryside access, Brian still encounters some barriers to his enjoyment of the natural environment; mainly stiles. Stiles are difficult for Ace to get over, as are chained gates, if the bars are too close together for Ace to get through. The best stiles, says Brian, are those that are 'v' shaped and have a trap door in the 'v' which can be raised to let a Guide Dog through.

In Brian's view, crossing country roads can be just as hazardous as crossing those in urban areas, as there are not usually audible Pelican crossings on country roads outside of towns and villages. Other obstacles are plank bridges over ditches, which are often too narrow for someone who is partially sighted to negotiate, as it would be very easy to step in the wrong direction and fall.

Getting to the railway station where he meets other London Blind Ramblers can involve a journey on the Underground network, where escalators pose a problem: dogs are meant to be picked up, and often there are no staff around to help, meaning Brian has to ask a fellow traveller to find a staff member.

Although Brian can manage occasionally without Ace, he does rely on his Guide Dog and finds it difficult if Ace is not tolerated in the different places they need to visit day to day. Contrary to popular perception, says Brian, Guide Dogs are not always accepted in shops and other establishments. "Even in big supermarkets like Tesco, I have been asked to leave with Ace. I stand my ground and tell them they're committing an offence under the Disability Discrimination Act – some accept it, some don't. I think a lot more could be done in terms of training – some people regard Guide Dogs as pet dogs in a harness, and treat them and their owners accordingly." ■



Walkers enjoying a rest stop at Brandon Marsh © McCoy Wynne



Water sports activities in Kent © Tina Stallard







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### Becky Hanson, Jenny Smythe & Tracy Biggs

Becky, Jenny and Tracy live in rural locations in Herefordshire and Worcestershire. Becky and Jenny are in their twenties, and Tracy is in her late thirties. They all have learning difficulties.

Becky lives in a shared flat at Pound Farm, a residential community near Ross-on-Wye set up to provide an environment in which young people with learning difficulties can gain confidence and independence. Here the residents grow flowers and vegetables, and look after livestock: chickens, ducks, Ryeland sheep, Kune Kune pigs and a herd of short-legged Dexter cattle. Courses in animal care and a wide range of other subjects are provided, as are leisure facilities and organised trips, including accompanied walks.

Jenny and Tracy live in supported accommodation at another site run by the same organisation, a short distance from Pound Farm. As non-drivers based in the countryside, all three agree that the main problem they have is using public transport to get around, both for work and leisure. "It's difficult," says Becky, "you can only go where there's a bus route, and they don't run that often." Becky goes regularly to Ross on Wye for carriage driving lessons. She really enjoys these, but has to rely on lifts from a volunteer to get there. She also likes going on accompanied walks from Pound Farm a couple of times a week.

Tracy enjoys the exercise and fresh air she experiences walking to work at a café in Newent if the weather is good, but isn't so keen when it rains. In her spare time, she likes to go shopping, watch TV, listen to music or read.

Jenny works as a kitchen assistant at a primary school in Minsterworth, some ten miles away, and has to get a bus to Highnam, where a colleague picks her up and takes her to school. The head teacher gives her a lift home in the evening, as there is no suitable bus. "The buses are often not on time – and when it snowed, the bus didn't come and I was stranded! Luckily a lady took me into her house until my boyfriend could pick me up in his car." Jenny and her boyfriend sometimes drive to the Forest of Dean to go walking – but she also likes to go shopping and to the cinema. "I'd really like to live where there are more shops!" she says.

For these young women, the main barrier to wider enjoyment of the countryside is the lack of reliable public transport. This also affects their ability to access services in nearby towns, which is equally important to them. ■



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## Caroline Walsh

Caroline Walsh, a volunteer at the Kent Wildlife Trust at Maidstone, is an environmental scientist who is working for a PhD in Inclusive Volunteer Tourism in Marine Conservation in the UK. Born with Spina Bifida, she is a wheelchair user who has in the past few years rediscovered her own enjoyment of the countryside.

“My parents used to take me for walks – my father even bought a moon buggy for me so I could accompany them over difficult terrain. But when I was fourteen, we went to the Lake District, and there were lots of stiles. I just thought it was all too much effort, and I couldn’t see what the countryside had to offer me. For the next ten years, I just disengaged. I didn’t want to go into the countryside at all.

“But then in 2003 I represented my own charity,

Access to Marine Conservation for All (AMCAI), at an Accessibility to the Countryside event in Holland, and I was very surprised by the amount of interpretation and the range of guides available.

“It’s the same in this country – landowners are trying hard to follow the Disability Discrimination Act, and the Countryside Agency’s (now Natural England) Diversity Review has definitely resulted in greater accessibility.

“Once I realised that things were open to me, my perceptions changed.” Even so, visiting the coast in a wheelchair was quite challenging, but Caroline discovered the freedom of scuba diving and it changed her views and direction in life.

In her voluntary capacity, Caroline is engaged in

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outreach work to increase the number of people with disabilities who visit the Kent Wildlife Trust centre. This year will be the second in which she has been involved in organising an event at the centre for Marine Awareness Week (MAW).

Three years ago, she attended a similar event there to promote AMCAI, and found she was the only disabled person. She decided to become a volunteer at the centre, and at the two annual MAW events held since, 20 per cent of visitors were people with disabilities, following Caroline's input - a very encouraging development.

One of the ways in which Caroline achieved this outcome was to build the confidence of people who felt that the countryside was not for them, despite a desire to go there and find out more. She joined the Accessible Walking Group which was funded by the Countryside Agency, through the Diversity Review, to give disabled people the opportunity to explore nature in a safe environment. Through this she made personal contact with people who wanted to do more in the countryside, but were unsure how to go about it, and encouraged them to visit the centre.

"People were not aware of what they had already achieved," says Caroline. "As they gained confidence, they became motivated to do more - and realised that it doesn't have to be expensive."

Caroline's advice to organisations who want to improve disabled access is to work with people who know the issues, and to develop partnerships so disabled people can feel confident and have someone with whom to identify. She also believes that it is important to have a diverse range of volunteers working in the countryside: "What we need is an 'Access to Volunteering' fund," she says. ■



Hand biking with the cycling club in Hythe © Tina Stallard



Youngsters on the Tarka Trail, Calvert Trust © Tina Stallard



Organised walk in city park for the Islington Chinese community © Tina Stallard



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## Ian Joyce and Hettie

Ian Joyce never really understood the attraction of the countryside. It wasn't until he became profoundly deaf and later acquired an Assistance Dog that Ian was prompted to venture into a local nature reserve.

Ian had hearing difficulties from birth, but could cope with a hearing aid in each ear. However when, due to a series of increasingly severe infections, he could no longer wear his hearing aids, his life was turned upside down.

"I became isolated from that moment," says Ian. "There was no support – I was just expected to live with it." From being an outgoing young man with a good job and social life, Ian became depressed and withdrawn, unable to work and finding it a real struggle to venture out of the house.

For three years, Ian battled with depression and self harm – during which time he got professional help. It was his social worker who suggested he might find an Assistance Dog helpful. Eventually, he was offered Hettie, a fourteen-month-old Norwegian Buhund.

"Having Hettie has changed my life," says Ian. "I even give talks to schoolchildren about being deaf and how Hettie helps me. Before Hettie, if anyone had told me I would be able to talk to a hundred children, I would have thought they were mad. Now I do things like that regularly – the children love Hettie."

Since having Hettie, Ian has become aware of what the natural environment has to offer. He is a complete convert: "It may sound strange, but the countryside was too green for me! Then, one day, I decided to take Hettie to the Smestow Valley nature reserve – it's near my house – and I loved it! Now we walk there often.

"The attraction was purely visual at first, the different colours of the grass, fields, woodlands, track, canal, flowers. Also, it was a weekday and it was quiet, which appealed to me. After that I was hooked!" The second time Ian visited, he met the site Ranger, who took him on a guided tour. "Since then he has always looked after me and Hettie, which is one of the reasons why I like it - we feel respected and valued."

Ian finds that being in the open air allows him to use all his senses, enjoying colours and smells, and that the natural environment has a calming effect. Together he and Hettie visit a range of beauty spots and National Trust properties. He is planning a week's holiday in the Highlands of Scotland, travelling by plane with Hettie on the seat beside him, and can hardly wait.

Ian has also participated in the National Trust's 'A Countryside for All' initiative, visiting the Clent Hills to comment on the Trust's facilities from the point of view of his own disability.

"I liked the idea of walking with Hettie somewhere

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new, also that the National Trust would like to receive feedback from me. I was very, very nervous, as this was a big step for me. I gave my feedback and that was it, I thought.”

However, The National Trust asked Ian to attend more similar events and talk about Hettie, as well as his experience of deafness and mental health issues. Ian spent time talking with staff on the walk. Afterwards, he spoke about having a Hearing Dog, the barriers he encounters and how they can help him enjoy the natural environment more easily, rather than putting him off by refusing entrance to Hettie.

Ian thinks the effort was worthwhile. “I have had feedback from the staff when visiting other sites, as they have heard of me and Hettie so I think we have helped raised consciousness in a small way,” he says.

However, Ian still experiences some problems in the natural environment, most of which are overcome with Hettie’s help. Mountain bikes are dangerous, as Ian can’t hear them approaching, and they are often travelling at speed. Hettie will signal ‘danger’, and if necessary pull Ian out of the way. She will also let him know if people are approaching on foot, which can cause embarrassment if he cannot hear them asking him to move, making them think that he is deliberately ignoring them.

“People have no means of knowing that I can’t hear,” says Ian, “and they think I’m being ignorant. Sometimes they grab my arm or shoulder from behind to get my attention, and when it comes out of the blue like that, it’s a shock for me and it really makes me jump! I’m tall, and people can perceive me as threatening when I react suddenly. Nowadays, when they see Hettie in her ‘Hearing Dogs’ working coat, they usually understand that I have a disability.”

However, not everybody does understand. Taxi drivers in particular can object to carrying Hettie, and restaurant staff sometimes do not know that the Disability Discrimination Act requires that all Assistance Dogs should be accommodated. Ian feels it is important to help people to understand: “I take it personally if they won’t allow Assistance Dogs, but I’m careful not to seem aggressive. I just explain what the dogs do, and remind them of their responsibilities under the Act. Sometimes people can be very abrupt, which is a shame.”

Ian thinks that wider public understanding of the role of Assistance Dogs would make access to the natural environment, and other areas, easier for disabled people. He is unequivocal in his appreciation of the support he has received from the charity Hearing Dogs for Deaf People: “Hettie helps me do lots of things on a practical level, but most of all, she’s a companion who gives me the confidence to get out there and live my life!” ■



Kite flying on Parliament Hill © Tina Stallard



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## Mrs Anne and Dr Peter Young

Anne Young has been a wheelchair user since 1984, four years after she was diagnosed as having multiple sclerosis. A former State Registered Nurse, she now relies on her husband Peter, a retired anaesthetist, to push her chair when she goes out of the house.

Anne and Peter have been keen walkers all their lives and they see no reason to allow Anne's disability to get in the way of them enjoying the countryside they both love. They regularly walk the perimeter path of Cheltenham racecourse near where they live, and often travel further afield at weekends and for holidays, visiting Westonbirt Arboretum, Slimbridge Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, the Lake District and the North Moors National Park among other destinations, as well as taking their annual holiday in Pembrokeshire.

This year, they intend to visit the Scottish Highlands too, and Peter is busy researching what activities they might enjoy. Forward planning and preparation make all the difference, he says. Peter finds it helpful when access guides are provided by landowners, such as the one published by the National Trust. "They're very useful - you can get a good idea of the sort of path you'll find when you get there." He feels that wheelchair access has improved greatly over the past 23 years, and that it is continuing to get better. The increased availability of accommodation adapted for wheelchairs has also facilitated their visits to different parts of the country.

Anne suffered from depression in the first years of her illness, feeling that her ability to enjoy life had been taken away. With treatment and counselling

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however, she began to realise that she could still do many of the things that make her happy – just in a different way. One of the main activities she was determined to continue was getting out into the countryside. “I’ve always been an outdoor person,” she says, “I love the fresh air, and I didn’t want the MS to stop me.” Anne also loves the feeling of space that being out in the open air gives her. “People in wheelchairs can feel enclosed within themselves. I felt very trapped when I first used a chair, but you needn’t be, if you really want to do walks. You can get in touch with people who can make it easier.”

Using a wheelchair successfully out of doors depends on suitable terrain. Loose gravel, uneven surfaces such as cobbles and paths that become very muddy when wet are all difficult to negotiate. Anne can tolerate a certain amount of bumpiness, but finds the sudden jolt caused by the chair’s wheels going over a manhole cover uncomfortable. Steep gradients can be quite a problem for Peter, both uphill, when extra effort is required from the pusher, and downhill, when it can be a struggle not to lose control of the wheelchair. “Anne is a lot smaller than me – if she was heavier, I would find it quite difficult.”

Two other main barriers are stiles and gates that do not open wide enough to admit a wheelchair – particularly the ‘kissing gate’ type, where a gate panel swings in a semi-circle within a curved frame. Anne and Peter appreciate gates such as the one installed on the racecourse perimeter path near their house, which is a ‘kissing gate’ designed to allow wheelchairs through, but kept secure by a lock opened by a Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation (RADAR) key.

It is important, Peter says, to keep raising disabled access issues. “If you don’t ask, you don’t get! There is a willingness to provide access, but so often organisations just don’t know what is needed – and no-one tells them!” When a new housing estate was built near the racecourse path, one of the planning gains was a bridge over a stream. Peter contacted the local council and asked for the bridge to be built to accommodate wheelchairs: it was, and now Peter and Anne use it regularly.

The Youngs feel that there are a lot of wheelchair users who are not aware of the increased countryside access opportunities. “We don’t see many other people like us in the places we go to”, says Peter, “I think people just don’t know what is available. But you do have to get out there and do things for yourself, not just wait to be told where you can go and what you can do.” ■



© Hearing Dogs UK

## Jean Lawrence and Scampi

Jean Lawrence is from rural Cambridgeshire, and loves to be out in the open air, spending a lot of time walking with her hearing dog, Scampi. As well as her hearing difficulties, Jean has balance problems caused by Ménière's disease, and uses a stick to help with this when she is out. "I do find it relaxing to be in the countryside," says Jean. "You don't need language there!"

Jean and her husband chose their bungalow because it is near to several good walks, including Ely Common and the bank of the River Ouse. "I just love being out of doors," she says. "I can walk along the riverbank two or three times a day, and always see something different. There is a lot of wildlife to look at, including herons and geese, and the cattle grazing on the far bank."

One of the footpaths along the river has recently been resurfaced with Tarmac by Sustrans, making it easier for Jean to negotiate. This has also given better access for cyclists, wheelchair users and people with pushchairs, which Jean recognises as a good thing. However, cyclists can cause problems, as she is often taken by surprise when they speed past her, not realising she is unaware of their approach from behind. "I think the onus should be on cyclists to look out for pedestrians, instead of assuming they have the right of way," says Jean.

New wooden seats have also been installed at intervals along the path, which are much appreciated by Jean. She is impressed with the design of the path, too: "I cringe at the thought of Tarmac, but now it has grown over at the sides, and looks more natural. The seats fit in well with the



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surroundings, too. The path is very well thought out – whereas before you had to go across the railway track, now it goes round under the railway – much less dangerous.”

Further afield, Jean and her husband like to go caravanning. One site, at Watlington in Oxfordshire, is a particular favourite because it backs onto good walking country. Cirencester Park caravan site is also a place they particularly enjoy, again because it is easy to get out into the surrounding countryside. Whittle Dene, a Woodland Trust wood in Northumbria, is another site Jean loves. “It’s so peaceful, and there’s so much to see – I can sit there for hours!”

Jean finds this ease of access to the countryside is mirrored by her experience of taking Scampi into cafes and shops. It is rarely a problem: when he is working in public places he wears his burgundy jacket displaying the ‘Assistance Dogs (UK)’ and ‘Hearing Dogs for Deaf People’ logos as well as being on the lead, and this is recognised by staff. “The National Trust in particular is very good about giving access to houses and parkland,” says Jean. “We often go to Ickworth House, near Bury St Edmunds – there are lovely walks there, and the dog is welcomed. At National Trust properties the staff often ask if the provision they make is ok!”

Jean has given a talk at a seminar for National Trust staff, explaining the importance of access for Assistance Dogs, and she believes that the National Trust’s commitment to disability awareness training is very important in helping to make its properties accessible.

Jean’s experience of getting out into the natural world is mostly very positive. However, there is

one important area in which there could be a great deal of improvement. Jean lives within travelling distance of some lovely beaches, including Hunstanton beach in Norfolk, but she is prevented from enjoying them during the summer because most beaches have seasonal restrictions on dogs – including Assistance Dogs. Leaving Scampi in the car is clearly not an option, as it would be unsafe for him as well as unsatisfactory for Jean, who relies on him for support.

Assistance Dog owners are advised never to leave their dogs at home alone for periods of longer than two hours, as this could damage the bond between them. This means that unless they live close to the coast, many disabled people are unable to visit beaches when restrictions apply, even if they leave their dogs at home – which most would be reluctant to do. Local authorities who put up ‘No dogs’ signs on their beaches without the qualification ‘except for Assistance Dogs’ are in contravention of the Disability Discrimination Act – however this is still common practice.

“Presumably it’s to do with hygiene,” says Jean. “But no-one with an Assistance Dog would fail to clear up after their animal – it’s part of our code of conduct. It doesn’t seem right that I can’t take Scampi to the beach, when he is welcome everywhere else!” ■



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## Mark Austen

Mark Austen, who is visually impaired, was keen to talk about his experiences in the countryside in one of his favourite places to visit: Westonbirt Arboretum, the Forestry Commission woodland visitor centre at Tetbury, Gloucestershire.

“People ask me all the time how I can enjoy going to somewhere like this,” he says, “but sight is only one of the senses you can use to experience the countryside. I’m very aware of the sense of space around me, and I can feel the different textures and shapes of the trees and shrubs.”

The car accident in which Mark lost his sight at the age of 29 (he is now in his forties) also robbed him of his sense of smell – but he is still able to have a very immediate relationship with his surroundings. Sounds, such as the squelching of mud or crackling of dry leaves underfoot, wind in tree branches and birdsong help him to visualise the scene. Coming from a rural background, Mark spends as much time as he can in active outdoor pursuits. When he returns to his native Hampshire, he goes fishing with his father, holding the line in his hands so he can feel when a fish nibbles the bait. He also uses ‘bite indicators’ - alarms attached to the floats - but prefers the former method. Both are successful - recently he caught a 22 lb common carp.

Another of Mark’s favourite venues for fishing is

a fishing lake specifically designed for disabled people at Tockington reservoir near Bath. Entry is by RADAR key, and is free for disabled people and a companion. There are no trees by the edge of the ‘swims’ where fish can be caught, and the gravel paths are level so that anglers do not stumble. This also gives good access for people with all types of disability. Colourful pegging helps anglers to identify where they need to go.

Mark also rides horses on a leading rein – but the sighted rider leading him needs to be alert and warn him of approaching hazards. He also enjoys flying his kite on the Hampshire Downs and on the common near where he lives in Chipping Sodbury.

One of the most exhilarating moments Mark has experienced in the countryside was during a walk on the coastal path near Lizard Point in Cornwall: “There’s a sheer drop of hundreds of feet on one side, and it’s very difficult to know how close you are to the edge! Walks like that are exciting, but very dangerous. I wouldn’t attempt it without a sighted guide.”

Despite being able to get to and enjoy these places, Mark still feels that there is a lot that can be done to make access to the natural environment easier for visually impaired people. He finds it very helpful to have a sighted guide, often his wife or a friend, and he appreciates the fact that some organisations,

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such as the National Trust, provide trained volunteer guides. "What I really want is someone who is as passionate about the environment as I am, and who has the knowledge to describe it accurately and in detail - friends can't always do that!"

As a Braille teacher, Mark has five students, and he is passionate about the desirability of Braille signage and information boards. However, they should be installed at the appropriate height so that they are not a potential hazard for someone who can't see.

Audio guides are another aid about which Mark feels strongly. "They're not suitable everywhere, but they're an excellent way to get a lot of information. However, care should be taken over how the trail is laid out – the numbered stations must be in a logical sequence, and all the same size, shape, font and colour or you can end up getting confused." Mark's feedback at one particular site has resulted in their layout being changed.

A sensory trail specifically designed for visually impaired people, with Braille signs and an audio guide to describe the scenery, would heighten the experience; and would enable visitors to walk around and enjoy the trail independently.

Accessible toilets are also very important, says Mark. They are not always available, even since the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act. Other problems include inaccessible gateways and stiles. "Stiles are the worst thing! The ones I've come across have mostly been made of wood, with two steps on one side and one on the other – very awkward, and can be slippery when they're wet. The good ones are those with a flat metal base that are easy to get over."

Mark's advice to anyone with a disability who wants

to get out into the country is to do some detailed planning first, although he acknowledges that this is often easier said than done. "Through the RNIB, I advise various organisations on their provision for people with sight impairment. It's a good idea to ring up the place you want to go to and ask lots of questions: how do you get there? How accessible is it? Can they provide a guide? From the landowner's side, it is good to publicise the things they are doing to help disabled people to gain access to their land."

In Mark's view it is vital for providers to market their provision effectively. It is helpful if landowners are proactive in encouraging disabled people to visit the countryside, giving them the confidence to go into an unfamiliar environment. "A lot of people simply aren't aware of how accessible the countryside is nowadays. They need a bit of encouragement!"

Whatever arrangements need to be made, Mark is certain that access to the countryside is vital to his quality of life: "What I enjoy is the sense of freedom being in the country gives me," he says. "There's no anxiety. At home, you're always on your guard because of traffic and people." ■



A stroll along Ramsgate Promenade © Tina Stallard



## Parveen Rahman

Living in London, Parveen Rahman appreciates the walking opportunities offered by her membership of the London Blind Ramblers' Association. "I love the exercise," she says, "meeting people and being in the country – somewhere different, and in the open air." Although she has only ten per cent sight in one eye and none in the other, the result of the glaucoma she has suffered since the age of five, Parveen loves to see the intense green of the countryside. She also enjoys the exercise, the interesting smells, and the peace and quiet: "It takes your mind off your problems and makes you feel more relaxed. I can't believe how peaceful it is sometimes!"

Parveen uses a long cane to identify any obstacles in her path. A member of London Blind Ramblers for around eight years, she finds it very helpful that on their outings she is paired with a sighted person. "Even with the cane, I can't always tell if there's a sudden dip in the ground – you need to have someone who has sight with you. I wouldn't go on my own." An added benefit is that Parveen has made some good friends in this way, with

whom she meets up on successive trips. As well as one-day outings to places such as Guildford, Great Missenden and Flitwick in Bedfordshire, several weekends away are organised each year: the next will be to Worthing. The ramblers meet at a railway station and travel together to their destination, where they are met by local ramblers who have arranged their walk. Sometimes this is a circular walk from the railway station into the countryside and back again, and sometimes the local walkers arrange transport to the starting point.

There are some barriers to Parveen's enjoyment of the countryside, even with a sighted companion. Stiles are difficult, particularly when they are not well maintained. Overhanging hedges and trees can also be a hazard, as are potholes and very uneven ground. Barbed wire on fences, in hedges and on stiles can be very treacherous and result in serious injury. Parveen appreciates the efforts of landowners who keep pathways clear and make sure their stiles are in good repair, and she would be happy if barbed wire was not used near rights of way. ■



School children on a woodland assault course, Keswick  
© McCoy Wynne  
Previous page © Tina Stallard



Stream dipping near Settle © McCoy Wynne



## John Mallindine and Poppy

John Mallindine and his Hearing Dog, Poppy, enjoy fresh air and exercise. Together they walk twice a day: around the village of Leasingham, near Sleaford in Lincolnshire, where they live, and for an hour every afternoon along local bridleways. Here they encounter no problems: Poppy does not mind horses, local dogs are well trained or kept on their leads, and farmers who occasionally drive their 4 x 4 vehicles along the paths have usually met John before and know that he has hearing difficulties, so make sure they sound their horns loudly to warn him of their approach.

John also plays golf regularly at South Kyme golf club near Boston, where Poppy accompanies him on her lead and causes a stir in the clubhouse, because everyone wants to make a fuss of her. He finds that Poppy is very well received in his

local area, almost without exception. The two supermarkets in Sleaford, Tesco and Sainsbury's, are particularly helpful.

A volunteer speaker for Hearing Dogs, John gives talks to a range of organisations with audiences from four to 450 people, including schools, the WI, University of the Third Age, Brownies and Scouts. This year he and Poppy also represented Hearing Dogs at the Lincolnshire Show. From his own experience (Poppy is his third Hearing Dog), he is able to demonstrate the enormous difference they make to the lives of people with impaired hearing, and the reasons why they should be accepted everywhere. "You become very isolated when you can't hear," he says, "and these dogs bring people back into the community, as well as helping with the practical aspects of life such as waking you up and letting you know when

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someone is at the door. Everyone wants to talk to you when you're with your dog!"

John has recently moved from Surrey. He was used to walking on common land such as Horsell Common and Chobham Common, as well as in big parks such as Richmond Royal Park, and is now having problems finding places where Poppy can have a good run off the lead. "It's all farmland around here," he says, "all privately owned. Although there are rights of way – paths we can walk along and back the same way – there don't seem to be any big open spaces where Poppy can have a run."

Although he is physically fit and, having his own car, has no problems with transport, John's hearing disability prevents him getting the information he needs to identify suitable places to exercise Poppy. "Although I have hearing aids, it is difficult to understand people on the phone. Quite often, telephone information lines just have a recorded message giving times of opening, and it's too quick for me to take in." People have suggested to him that he looks for information on the internet, but that is more easily said than done: "You're supposed to be able to find things out by going on websites – but I haven't got the hang of computers, despite going to an evening class!"

John checks his local newspaper for advertisements and articles about places to go, as well as picking up leaflets from the library and tourist information centre. These are fine as a start, but he often needs to find out more before deciding to visit a particular venue – and that is when he gets into difficulties. "People get irritated when you ask them to repeat themselves, and they often won't speak slowly. I would love to be able to write a letter and get my questions answered that

way – but no-one seems to put their address on leaflets or advertisements any more." This can be very frustrating: John cites a recent advertisement for a 'Dog and Horse Day' which he would have found very interesting – but the venue was not given, so he had no idea where it was!

John would like more organisations to take into account the fact that there are still people who find it difficult to use computers, and not assume that everyone can access their website. Also, he thinks that many staff answering the telephone would benefit from disability awareness training – specifically regarding hearing impairment - which would help them be more patient with people like him. "I'm quite persistent," he says, "but a lot of people would be embarrassed and put off if the person they were speaking to on the phone was obviously irritated by being asked to repeat information." ■



© David Lucas

## Matt Lucas and Cap

Matt Lucas has had his Hearing Dog, a cross-bred terrier called Cap, for nearly eight years. Matt's hearing disability (he has no hearing in his left ear and only fifty per cent in his right) means he needs Cap's help to live independently. Cap accompanies him wherever he goes, including to work in the IT department at Chilwell School, a Foundation School in Nottingham, and walking in the local countryside as well as on holidays and days out around the country.

Matt, his parents and brother David have always enjoyed the countryside and spend much of their leisure time walking in the Peak District and visiting lots of National Trust and English Heritage properties. Matt and David are both keen photographers, and like to combine both hobbies by taking pictures when they are out. Matt finds the natural environment both relaxing and invigorating, a welcome change from his job.

A favourite place of Matt and David's is the Vale of Belvoir. Here, apart from insufficient 'poop scoop' bins in the car park for the volume of use, there are few barriers to their enjoyment of this popular beauty spot – or indeed any of the rural places they visit. "I haven't encountered any major problems," says Matt, "it's mainly that people don't understand what an Assistance Dog does, so sometimes they're not prepared to make allowances for Cap." On a recent

holiday in Northumberland, Matt and Cap were asked to leave a shop – however Matt argued their case, and the shopkeeper reluctantly allowed them to stay.

Matt does voluntary work for Hearing Dogs for Deaf People in his spare time. He has designed a poster which shows the five different types of Assistance Dogs in the individual coats or harnesses that they wear when working, to help raise awareness. These are used by the National Trust and many other organisations to teach their staff how to recognise working dogs who should be allowed to accompany their owners.

Matt says the poster has had a beneficial effect. "Guide Dogs for the Blind are widely known, but Hearing Dogs for Deaf People, Canine Partners, Dogs for the Disabled and Support Dogs haven't been around for quite as long and aren't always recognised immediately. The National Trust were the first to put up the posters at the entrance to each property, so staff and visitors can see them. When people understand why the dogs are there, they are usually very accepting."

However, Matt has come across one or two people who are still prejudiced against Assistance Dogs. "I think it's a matter of training. I have been told by a member of staff at a stately home that he didn't



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care what the policy of his organisation was - he didn't agree with it! But he didn't stop Cap from coming in with me."

A problem Matt and Cap sometimes encounter is that of other dogs being exercised off their leads under inadequate control by their owners. Last year, Cap was attacked by another dog, and following that incident, he is still nervous of other dogs. It is very difficult for landowners to prevent this happening, but notices requesting that dogs are kept under control placed in car parks and on notice boards, as well as on information literature, would draw attention to the problem and perhaps change behaviour.

Cap is trained to remain with Matt constantly while he is working, and this can cause problems when Matt encounters stiles, particularly if they are poorly maintained or blocked off with barbed wire. Matt needs to negotiate them with Cap by his side, so when he came across a revolving gate where there was insufficient room for Cap to go through with him, this caused confusion for Cap.

However, none of these difficulties seriously interferes with Matt's ability to get into and make the most of the natural environment. The main thing from his point of view is to promote understanding of the role of Assistance Dogs. "I'd like to see the poster put up everywhere: shops, restaurants, entrances to parks and stately homes. I'd also like organisations to make sure their employees and volunteers are made aware of what the dogs do, so no misunderstandings arise. Ideally every 'No Dogs' and 'No Dogs Except for Guide Dogs' sign should be taken down - after all, they are illegal under the Disability Discrimination Act! They should be replaced with the appropriate sticker: 'Assistance Dogs Only!'" ■



Feeding swans at Stratford Canal © McCoy Wynne



Enjoying a countryside walk on Dartmoor © Tina Stallard



A riverside ramble on Dartmoor © Tina Stallard



© Carolyn Smith

## Wayne Chapman

Wayne Chapman is originally from East Anglia. He has been blind from birth, and attended a residential school near Sevenoaks in Kent, where he learned to read Braille. He is passionate about the natural world, and spends much of his free time in the natural environment, walking and bird watching. Although he is unable to see the birds, Wayne identifies them by listening to their individual songs.

“I was lucky as a child,” says Wayne, “my parents didn’t over-protect me. I used to run around the woods and get the full experience – the trees, the smells, the different surfaces underfoot. My brother would bring things for me to touch. I still feel that sense of freedom when I’m in the country, and I’ve always loved nature.” Although he now lives in London, Wayne regards frequent

visits to the countryside as vital to his health and sense of wellbeing, and makes every effort to visit frequently. “I can’t imagine not being able to get back to the country every so often – life would certainly be less rich and more stressful!”

At least once a year, Wayne attends an educational leisure course at the Natural History Centre, in Kingcombe, West Dorset. Closer to home, he goes with friends to Kew Gardens, and when he visits his mother in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, he likes to accompany her and her partner on fishing trips: they fish while he listens to the birds.

Wayne also enjoys visiting Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust reserves, where he has been on an organised holiday for visually impaired people. “It was fantastic – we fed Ne Ne geese from our own hands

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– a great experience! We also had the chance to go to the hatchery, where we heard the tapping of mallard hatchlings as they emerged from their eggs. We were able to hold very young mallards in our hands, and got pecked! We also witnessed the ringing of chaffinches, robins and bluetits.”

The Braille signage and audio guides provided by the National Trust and some RSPB reserves are very good, according to Wayne, as well as trails set up specifically for blind and partially sighted people, such as the one at Sandringham Park. Ideally, he likes to have a sighted guide to describe the scene, as well as to warn him of possible hazards coming up, such as uneven surfaces, boggy ground and steps. “If you know what’s ahead, you’re ok.”

At Slimbridge Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, Wayne appreciated being able to touch things such as models of birds and willow trees. However, the use of audio or Braille guides would have added to his experience. In addition, a portable handset would have ensured that Wayne’s experience of the telephone exhibit ‘Follow the Swallow’ was improved, as he could listen to more commentary at his own pace.

Other improvements to provision for blind and partially sighted visitors could include more tactile guides, such as directional arrows that are raised in relief on wooden boards, according to Wayne. He also believes there are examples of good practice from Europe that could be shared to good effect. One such is the Romellaere nature reserve in France. “On the walls around the reserve, they have lots of Braille signs telling you about the different plants, and when you come to a break in the wall, there is a tactile arrow indicating which way to go. You can get around the reserve on your own.”

Another good example of enabling blind and partially sighted people to explore independently is at a hotel run by the Swiss Federation for the Blind in Saanen, Switzerland. Here a ‘rope walk’ leads patrons from the hotel entrance into the surrounding forest.

Wayne has taken part in a National Trust Access day at Box Hill in Dorking, where he was asked by the organisers to give a ten-minute speech on why and how the natural environment needs to be accessible to disabled people. He explained how important it is to him, both physically and spiritually, and that he believes everyone should have equality of opportunity to experience the natural world. While he found the information centre at Box Hill excellent, the staff willing and helpful and the Braille guides useful, Wayne was able to make some suggestions for improvement, including defining steps better by painting the edges white, introducing tactile paving and Braille signage.

Wayne works for the RNIB Helpline, and one subject that does not often come up is access to the countryside. He believes that many blind and partially sighted people think the countryside is not for them – a perception he is keen to challenge. From his own experience, Wayne is convinced that there are huge benefits to be derived from a closer association with the natural world - for everyone, whether or not they have a disability. Unfortunately, in Wayne’s view, some disabled people are in danger of excluding themselves from those benefits simply by assuming it will be too difficult to gain access, and not finding out for themselves. ■



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Enquiries, Natural England, Northminster House,  
Peterborough PE1 1UA

Tel: 0845 600 3078 (local rate)

E-mail: [enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk)

Fax: 01733 455103



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