

OUR PLACE *News*

The monthly magazine dedicated to help everyone over 50 get the best out of life!

JANUARY 2025

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Somerset to Scotland

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PLUS...

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Letter from the Editor

Welcome to Our Place - The monthly magazine dedicated to help everyone over 50 get the best out of life!

Every month, we bring you news and features on; Health & Beauty, Money & Work, Leisure & Travel, Food & Drink, Arts, Crafts & Hobbies, Home & Garden, plus... our Charity of the Month!

Our Place was founded with a mission to connect the mature online community to a world of news, features, offers and life changing products they may have missed out on. Bring them all into one place, Our Place.

What makes us special is that we are a vibrant team of all ages, from 21 to 65 who are all passionate about living life to the fullest irrespective of age. We have built strong relationships with some of the best UK age related businesses with the aim of brokering discounted rates for our Over-50s community.

Become a Friend of Our Place and receive our exclusive newsletters. They are a great way of keeping updated with the latest news and promotions. We aim to bring a smile to your face every time you open your inbox by selecting exclusive vouchers and discounts just for you.

We welcome you and hope you enjoy Our Place.

The Editor - Our Place

PS. Do you have an interesting story or article? If so send us an email by visiting: www.ourplace.co

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RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch 24th - 26th January 2025 Nationwide

The RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch is the world's biggest bird survey and regularly attracts nearly half a million participants.

The records from people counting birds in their gardens provides a vital snapshot of the UK's birds each winter.

The RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch 2025 will take place over the weekend of the 24th and 26th January 2025.



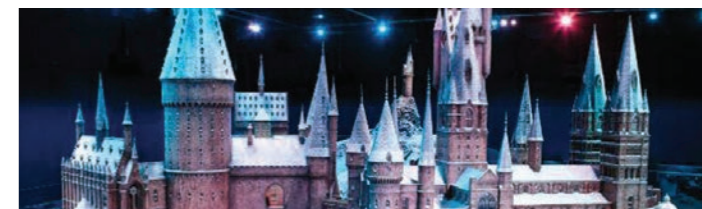
To take part in the Big Garden Birdwatch simply spend an hour watching the birds in your garden or local park over the weekend.

Count the highest number of bird species you see at the same time. You can use pen and paper or the RSPB's online counting tool.

Don't count the total over the hour as you may get the same birds visiting more than once.

Submit the results to The RSPB via their website.

*Do you have an event near you?
If so, let us know by sending us an email to:
www.ourplace.co*



Hogwarts in the Snow - The Making of Harry Potter

Until 19th January 2025

Warner Bros Studio Tour, London.

Celebrate a very magical festive season with **Hogwarts in the Snow** at Warner Bros. Studio Tour London - The Making of Harry Potter.

Winter has arrived at Hogwarts. Glittering Christmas trees line the Great Hall and a replica festive feast including flaming Christmas puddings is laid out on the long tables; while the top section of the hall is transformed for the Yule Ball with snow, icicles and an orchestra of magical instruments. Around the rest of the studio, special-effect fires roar in the fireplaces, the Gryffindor common room is filled with Christmas treats and the detailed Hogwarts castle model is covered in a special blanket of snow. Get up close to props, costumes and models used in the Harry Potter films. Take a look around the studio's famous movie sets decorated as they were for the festive scenes. And find out how different types of artificial snow and ice were created and used in the films. You can also tuck into a 2-course meal in magical surroundings with the return of Dinner in the Great Hall this Christmas.

WINTER CAT WARNING

At this time of year please check under your car and wheel arches for cats trying to keep warm, before you set off on your journey!



During the cold winter months cats will often seek out any warm space they can find. One particularly irresistible lure seems to be the cosy confines of a warm car engine. Unfortunately, cats that seek shelter under the bonnets of cars can then be injured or killed when that car is started. Help keep your own and your neighbourhood cats safe this winter by tapping the bonnet of your car before you start the engine.



Happy New Year! 8 New Year's resolutions to make a positive impact

Instead of a New Year's resolution that rights a wrong in your life, why not resolve to make some positive changes? Here are a few suggestions...

New Year's resolutions are supposed to mark a new start as we say goodbye to the old year. Instead of the standard resolutions that seek to resolve personal issues like being overweight, smoking, drinking too much and exercising too little, why not make a few positive resolutions that are uplifting instead of self-denying? Let's face it, we all need a bit of positivity at the moment. Here are a few ideas...

Smile more

People haven't been smiling much recently and mask-wearing doesn't really help. Make it your New Year's mission to smile at people you pass (at a safe distance) in the street or on a walk, and say hello. It's such a small gesture but can really brighten people's day.



Find a home hobby

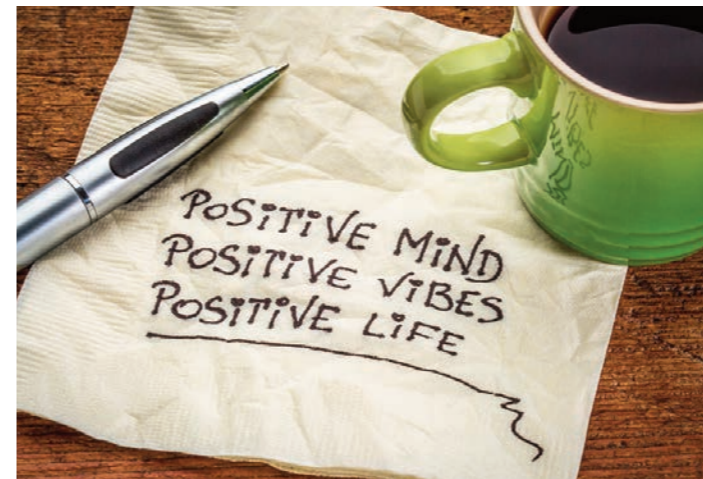
We're not talking stamp collecting (unless, of course, that appeals), but you could try something creative, like making your own cards or gifts, or even learning a language online. There really are loads of new things you can try at home.

Stop putting things off

Many people have tasks they'd been putting off for years, like cleaning out cupboards and drawers, or reading that book that'd been gathering dust on the bedside table. If you haven't finished any tasks or have been putting off starting them, resolve to finally do them in the New Year.

Think positive

Positive thinking, or an optimistic attitude, is the practice of focusing on the good in any given situation. It can have a big impact on your physical and mental health.



That doesn't mean you ignore reality or make light of problems. It simply means you approach the good and the bad in life with the expectation that things will go well.

Support local businesses

It may not even have crossed your mind when you're ordering a takeaway, for instance, but have you been buying from national chains or local businesses? Small local businesses have really been struggling because of pandemic restrictions, so resolve to be mindful about who you give your trade to in the New Year, and buy local if you can - it'll help local tradespeople, and might make you feel good too.

Actually speak to friends

It's easy to forget you can actually speak to people on phones as well as texting, e-mailing or WhatsApping. Instead of typing something to your mates in the New Year, resolve to actually pick up the phone and speak to them sometimes. You may be surprised how nice it is to hear their voice and just have a good ol' chinwag. It'll lift your spirits way more than a WhatsApp message could.



Get outside more

Set yourself a goal to explore different areas near you on a walk every day/week depending on how much time you've got. And if you already go outside with your dog every day, don't just go on the same walks each time - resolve to find out what your area has to offer, you might be surprised.



Be grateful

As we shift into 2025, remember what matters to you most.



(Article source: Silver Surfers)

The best ways to boost your immune system as cold temperatures hit

You can strengthen your immune system by eating nutritious foods, exercising and getting enough sleep.



Silver Surfers reports that as large parts of the UK brace for heavy snow and freezing rain this weekend, with temperatures dipping as low as minus 5°C overnight, experts are urging people to take extra precautions to stay healthy.

The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) has issued cold weather health alerts for all of England, warning of a week of wintry conditions ahead.

In light of the harsh weather, we have spoken to a GP who has explained how the cold can affect our health, and has also shared some effective ways to boost your immune system during the cold snap.

How does cold weather affect your immune system?

“Cold weather itself doesn’t weaken your immune system, but the conditions associated with it can make you more susceptible to infections,” explains Dr Chun Tang, GP at Pall Mall Medical. “In winter, we spend more time indoors with others, which makes it easier for germs to spread. “Additionally, cold air can dry out the mucous membranes in your nose and throat, reducing their ability to trap and fight off bacteria and viruses. Lower sunlight exposure can also reduce vitamin D levels, which are crucial for immune health.”

Who is more likely to be affected?

“People with weakened immune systems are more vulnerable during the colder months,” says Tang. “This includes older adults, young children, pregnant individuals, and those with chronic conditions like diabetes, asthma, or heart disease.

“It’s important for these groups to take extra precautions, such as staying warm, eating nutritious food, and avoiding crowded places when possible.”

Here are 8 ways to boost your immune system during the cold snap...

Aim for 7-9 hours of sleep per night

“Aim for consistent, quality sleep of 7-9 hours each night, and try to maintain a regular sleep schedule, even on weekends,” advises Tang. “Sleep is when your body repairs itself and produces infection-fighting cells and antibodies, so chronic sleep deprivation can reduce the production of these vital cells, making it harder for your body to ward off illness.”

Minimise stress

Consider practising mindfulness, deep breathing or meditation to alleviate stress, as it can compromise your immune system. “When you’re stressed, your body releases cortisol, a hormone that can suppress immune function if levels remain high for too long,” explains Tang. “Chronic stress also promotes inflammation, which can further weaken your body’s defences. “Managing stress through activities like exercise, meditation, or even a relaxing hobby can significantly support your immune health.”

Wrap up warm

“As the temperature drops, keeping warm over the winter months can help to prevent colds and flu,” says Claire Nevinson, superintendent pharmacist at Boots. “Try swapping your normal duvet for a heated blanket or choosing a self-heating mattress topper, but be sure to follow the instructions on how to use safely. “Layering up and hand warmers can also be great ways to fight the cold, especially if you’re going outdoors.”

Eat foods rich in vitamins and antioxidants

“Citrus fruits like oranges and lemons provide vitamin C, which supports immune function, and leafy greens like spinach and kale are loaded with vitamins A and E,” says Tang. “Probiotic-rich foods like yoghurt and fermented foods like kimchi can improve gut health, which is closely tied to immunity. “Nuts, seeds, and fish offer zinc and omega-3 fatty acids, both of which are important for fighting inflammation.”

Stay hydrated

“Even in winter, drinking water helps keep your immune system functioning well,” says Tang.

Exercise

“Moderate exercise like walking or yoga helps keep your immune system in good shape,” says Tang.

Consider taking extra vitamins

“Take key vitamins, including C and D, and zinc, which are especially beneficial for immune health,” suggests Tang.

Keep up to date with your vaccinations

“The most important winter vaccination is the flu shot, which protects against the seasonal flu virus,” says Tang. “Additionally, some individuals - especially older adults, young children, pregnant people, and those with certain health conditions - should consider the pneumococcal vaccine and updated COVID-19 boosters. “Not everyone is eligible for all vaccines, so it’s best to discuss your specific needs with your doctor.”

(Article source: Silver Surfers)

6 mind sports to exercise your brain and keep you sharp

These brain-boosting activities are great for the whole family.



Silver Surfers reports that many of us will be getting family favourites such as Scrabble and Chess out of the cupboard over the Christmas period to enjoy with our loved ones. Lots of these beloved games are referred to as ‘mind sports’ as they help exercise our brain. We have spoken to some experts who have explained how these activities enhance brain function and why regularly engaging in them can help maintain mental sharpness in later life.

What are the benefits?

“Engaging in mind sports offers substantial cognitive benefits, particularly for maintaining mental sharpness as we age,” says Dr Steve Allder, consultant neurologist at Re:Cognition Health. “They provide a diverse range of mental challenges that can improve control of attention (focus), working memory, planning, imagination and other aspects of executive cognitive function, making them invaluable tools for lifelong brain health. “They are even more powerful if they involve social interaction.”

How often should we be doing them?

“The more often you can do brain-boosting exercises, the better,” recommends Suzanne Mumford, head of dementia and lifestyles at Care UK. “Daily is ideal, but if that isn’t achievable then three to five times a week is advisable.”

What could the consequences be later in life if you don’t stimulate your brain?

“Common signs that we’re not looking after our brains the best we could is forgetting important things, finding it hard to pay attention or think clearly,” explains Natalie Mackenzie, brain expert and cognitive rehab therapist. “When it comes to cognitive decline as we age, research suggests that learning a new skill can help with cognitive decline that we all worry about.”

Here are six of the best mind sports to try...

Backgammon

“Backgammon combines strategic planning, probability and risk assessment, stimulating the prefrontal cortex and numerical reasoning areas of the brain,” explains Allder. “The game encourages adaptability and cognitive flexibility while improving mathematical reasoning and spatial awareness. “Additionally, the social aspect of playing backgammon can create connections and reduce stress.”

Cards

“Card games challenge cognitive flexibility, logical reasoning and math skills, stimulating the brain’s frontal lobe and numerical reasoning areas,” says Allder. “These games also encourage social interaction, which enhances mood and mental health. “Playing games like Bridge, Poker, Rummy or Solitaire improves memory, decision-making and adaptability, keeping the brain engaged and sharp.”

Crosswords

“Crosswords engage a number of cognitive domains (areas and processes) which help mental agility and sharpness,” explains Mackenzie. “They utilise memory processes for recalling words and knowledge, and therefore stimulate these neural pathways. “Critical and strategic thinking to enable problem solving is at work here, whilst expanding vocabulary. This then stimulates the memory processes of encoding and storage of these new learnings, more neural firing occurring.” Several studies have associated crosswords with delayed onset of memory decline in those later diagnosed with dementia, adds Mumford. “Dementia is linked with loss of neural connection within the brain, while activities like crosswords can help create new ones - thus enabling older people living with the condition to mitigate the symptoms,” explains Mumford.

Chess

“Chess requires strategic thinking, memory and pattern recognition, engaging the prefrontal cortex and other critical areas of the brain,” says Allder. “It helps develop foresight, patience and problem-solving skills while promoting neuroplasticity, which enhances cognitive flexibility. “This makes chess particularly effective for maintaining sharpness later in life.”

Jigsaw Puzzles

“Jigsaws are all about problem-solving, which certain types of dementia can affect, such as vascular dementia,” says Mumford. “Doing jigsaw puzzles is a great way to maintain those skills, and there’s an added physical benefit to this one - dexterity. “Good motor skills are essential as we age, as they can help older people remain independent for longer.”

Scrabble

“Scrabble is a powerful tool for stimulating vocabulary, language skills and strategic thinking,” says Allder. “It activates the brain’s left hemisphere for language processing and the prefrontal cortex for planning and decision-making. “Players benefit by improving their vocabulary, memory and focus while enjoying social interaction, which can reduce loneliness and stress.”

(Article source: Silver Surfers)



A winter's trail: Seasonal UK walks from Somerset to Scotland

The stark landscapes of mid-winter are the best time for enjoying the elements on these routes. Our writers tell us the personal stories behind their favourite hikes.

Derwent Edge, Peak District (pictured above)

You can concertina this walk into a couple of hours, or else pack a lunch, take all day and let it breathe. Its centrepiece is Derwent Edge, a line in the sky running south to north, the preferred direction of travel, past a series of rocks and outcrops with down-to-earth names, like the Wheel Stones, the Salt Cellar and the Cakes of Bread, that don't do justice to their sculptural mystery.

To the east there are grouse moors. But west and north are what we've come for, a wide panorama of wildness and space. Below, the upper Derwent valley is filled with a reservoir, and on its far side rolling moors and hidden valleys stretch into the desolate distance. This is a landscape that was for centuries cropped and burned and emptied of nature but is now taking steps towards recovery, with deciduous trees emerging to offset some boring spruce plantations that in places smother the hillside.

Things may be getting better, nature-wise. For now, though, the main attraction is elemental: wind and light that cleanse the soul, cloudscapes and showers of stinging rain.

I love Derwent Edge for all those things, and across four decades have walked it every so often, on hot summer days and in the depths of winter when the northern sky was turquoise and pink, and hard snow squeaked with cold. But it's most special for one Christmas Day many years ago.

A dusting of snow had lightened the moors, the sky was blue above our heads but the valley at our feet was buried in cloud. Trotting north, we saw another small group hurrying south towards us, the only people we would see all day. As they grew closer, we realised we knew them. It was our good friend Sue with her husband and one of their daughters. Amazed at the coincidence, we stopped to talk. Sue was fizzing, as she almost always was, and greeted us with her usual warm smile, excited to be exactly where she was. You couldn't help but smile back.

It was typical also that she pulled from her rucksack a flask of mulled wine and mince pies to share. The day was made. When she died a few years ago, much, much too soon, the sudden absence of her energy robbed us all. Due to this, Derwent Edge has the memory of a beautiful person and the space she filled, now and always.

Ed Douglas is the author of *Himalaya: a Human History* (Vintage, £25).

River Avon walk, Central Lowlands

I meet the River Avon where I know it best, underneath the arches of the aqueduct in Muiravonside. The grey structure and swooping curves cradle the Union Canal on to Edinburgh. I aim to walk upstream, following the River Avon, walking part of the 10-mile heritage trail that runs from Avonbridge to Linlithgow.

I have only ever walked sections of the full trail and today I plan to walk part of the route to another feat of engineering, the Westfield railway viaduct, built in 1854 to carry coal.

The sycamore trees have all but shaken off their leaves and the earth is thick with a bed of yellow matter. The winter sun lights up the highest points of the aqueduct but down here on the well-worn path, there is only shade. I follow the track along the river, the sound of the water drowning out the birds. I think of the place I grew up, a tied house on a private country estate in Cumbria. As kids, we had the run of the gardens and woods.

Now Muiravonside is my local estate and I love to wander it too. It plots changes in history: lime kilns for building the New Town in Edinburgh, a mill for timber, a ruined Big House. Farther upstream there is even a cave where they say 13th-century Scottish knight William Wallace hid from the English. Out of the heart of the estate, farmers' fields flank the banks of the river. There is a kerfuffle of hoof marks at the low points, a sure sign of cattle crossings.

As the path skirts away from the river and up into a field, I struggle up the gradient. Then at the top, I enter a wood. A series of steps meanders back down to the riverbed, covered in a thick layer of beech leaves. I worry about slipping, then I worry about climbing back up, as I know I will soon need to retrace my steps. My wanderings of the estate 30 years ago always had a deadline - a split shift or sunset - and now it is no different. At the foot of the hill, a burn runs into the Avon and I cross an old wooden bridge, its timber as light as a wasp's nest. I stop to watch the river then turn back. Next time, I'll start from the viaduct and walk to the end of the trail where a decent pub meal is promised in Linlithgow. But for now, it's the staircase of leaves and school pick up for me.

Rebecca Smith is the author of *Rural: The Lives of the Working Class Countryside* (HarperCollins £18.99).

The Culbone walk, Exmoor

Tiny Culbone church sits in a clearing in the woods, a couple of miles' walk from the nearest road. Although the vicar and a few parishioners can bounce and slither down a muddy track in the ecclesiastical Land Rover, visitors must walk there along the South West Coast Path. The church, dedicated to Welsh saint Beuno, is so utterly enchanting and the walk so varied that it is no hardship to make this a there-and-back walk; it's little more than 3½ miles from its nearest car park at Porlock Weir. Enthusiastic walkers can lengthen it to make a circular trip of around six miles or even complete the entire 29-mile Porlock Pilgrim's Trail which links nine of Exmoor's chapels and churches.

Culbone was one of the first places that my friend and co-author Janice and I sought out when commissioned to write the first Slow Guide to Devon and Exmoor. We both loved little churches and here was the smallest working one in England, and in a region spilling over with interest.

Not far from the church Samuel Taylor Coleridge was interrupted mid-opium dream, mid-poem by a Person from Porlock; and the Countess of Lovelace, better known as early 19th-century "computer" pioneer Ada Lovelace, lived in a mansion near Porlock Weir. Below her now-ruined house, Ashley Combe, the path passes rather surprisingly through two tunnels. These routed tradesmen to the back entrance of the manor to spare her the unpleasantness of meeting any of the lower orders as she made her way to her bathing hut.

The up-and-down trail passes through oak and beech woods with good views of the sea in winter and occasional benches where you can catch your breath and maybe enjoy a flask of mulled wine. Although you have been looking out for the church for a while - it seems a long mile and a half - you round a corner and suddenly there it is below you, its little spire, set slightly askew, reaching hopefully towards the treetops.

It looked so vulnerable that a lump rose to my throat and my eyes filled with tears, and it's had the same effect each time I have walked there; I can't easily explain why. I'm not religious, but there's something about its isolation and its walls "saturated with centuries of worship", as the church booklet so elegantly puts it, that tugs at the heartstrings.

Inside the simple interior, the harmonium is spattered with candle wax, there is a box pew for the Lovelace family, and the rough stone font, showing the chisel marks of its creator, has baptised babies since Norman times.

Janice died last year, and of all the walks we have done together, this is the most special, the most poignant. And the most repeated.

Hilary Bradt, founder of Bradt Travel Guides

Continued on pages 10-11...



The Black Hill, Herefordshire (pictured above)

At some point in 1977, between punk gigs and O-level exams, I went to the public library and pulled out a new book called *In Patagonia*. I was already obsessed with plans for worldwide adventure, and Bruce Chatwin's first book supercharged my dreams. By the time his novel *On The Black Hill* came out in 1982, I was living in Sudan. No matter, a copy eventually reached me in Darfur. To my horror, however, the Black Hill in question was not set deep in the Andes, nor even a month's ride by camel from Timbuktu. It was in the Bannau Brycheiniog (formerly the Brecon Beacons). Had Chatwin lost the plot? How could the scene of my childhood camping holidays ever be interesting? I soon learned, of course, that it could.

The location had been carefully chosen: close to the wrinkled lip of Offa's Dyke, lying in the borderlands of England and Wales where echoes of religion and strife still resonated. Change has come to the area since Chatwin was here: Hay-on-Wye is now a vibrant book town, the Bull's Head at the foot of the hill is a fine upmarket gastropub, and the narrow winding lanes are even less passable now that cars have grown so fat. And yet the medieval churches and neolithic monuments remain, and the walk up the Black Hill is as inspiring as ever.

Start at the car park near Black Darren crags, north-west of Longtown. Walk up the road then take the path up on to Little Black Hill then up the increasingly bleak ridge to the Black Hill itself. Panoramas can be magnificent, but it can also be mistily mysterious, with wind-battered ancient rowan trees clinging to the rocks and hardy sheep giving baffled stares. From the summit of the Black Hill you may cut short back down the Olchon valley or continue to Hay Bluff, which is in Wales.

From here there's a choice which could depend on weather conditions: either loop westwards or east. The former takes you on to Offa's Dyke Path and a great high level route south along another ridge. Just before the Black Darren crags, drop down and return to your car. Alternatively, if things are getting a bit spicy (and they can), drop east from the Bluff and find the low level path that follows the contours south. It is a lovely summer walk, but winter is best, when the gnarled trees are dripping with rain and the last few berries glow like embers. Then you can drop into the Bull's Head for refreshments and read a few pages of Chatwin's classic tale of the two brothers who extracted quietly heroic lives from these spartan hills.

The Offa's Dyke version is 15 miles and takes six to seven hours. The lower level path to the east of the Black Hill is about the same. The short version via Olchon Valley is 9½ miles.

Kevin Rushby

A loop in the Norfolk Broads

Norfolk is so dull! So flat! Just water, sky and churches! Or so bemoaned my younger self. I grew up on the edge of the Broads, wishing I was in the middle of somewhere else. How times change. My parents still live in Acle, the village I thought so bland. Now, when I return, it's with different eyes and different feet.

Maybe it's because I go home at Christmas, but winter is when this landscape seems most right. Stark fields of mud and stubble; waterways, empty of holiday cruisers, left to the ducks; a crisper rattle through the reed beds. Plus, somehow, in these darker days, the space between past and present feels especially thin.

Stockbury, near Maidstone, Kent

In the past, I didn't know I liked walking. Or that I had this fine loop on my doorstep. Handily, Acle has a railway station, so you can start it from there. After traversing the village, you're soon crossing the fields past lonely St Mary's Church in Fishley, which sits far from any congregation. The path continues to Upton, where there's a community-run pub, the White Horse (you'll have to fight my parents for the chairs by the fire). Next, skirt Upton Broad nature reserve where, in winter, hen harrier and even common crane hang out.

Ahead lies South Walsham Broad, where you can pick up the Fleet Dyke. Tracing this channel, then the River Bure is - to my mind - about as Norfolk as it gets: an exposed sloshy land pressed flat by enormous skies. Before long St Benet's Abbey appears on the bank opposite, frustratingly near but far. I was once taken over by tin boat on a youth trip. Without one, such is the bridge-less sogginess of this place, that getting there from here requires another 12-mile walk.

It's fascinating though: founded in 1019, St Benet's was the only English monastery Henry VIII didn't dissolve; the Bishop of Norwich still holds a service at the ruins once a year.

The abbey isn't the only stranded relic. As you follow the river, you can see to the windmill at Thurne (which still works), and you'll pass close to sail-less Oby and Clippesby mills. Just three of the 300-odd drainage pumps once stationed across the county to keep the marshes dry.



The river path leads back to Upton, cuts across fields, rejoins the Bure and reaches Acle Bridge. I did a project on it once: long ago, two murders were committed here; it's said a pool of fresh blood appears on the anniversary every year.

There's a pub at the bridge, if you're thirsty. Then it's a mile or so along the river back to Acle village. Teen me would hang out at the bus stop. Middle-aged me would recommend St Edmund's Church instead. Round-towered and part-thatched, its 15th-century font is remarkable. As my young self never said.

Sarah Baxter

The first time I stumble across Stockbury, I feel as though I have discovered a secret. The village centre emerges from a warren of wooded lanes, kids are playing on the streets and horses are tethered on the village green while their owners lunch at the Harrow, a community-owned pub.

From the pub I follow the path to St Mary Magdalene church, which overlooks the Stockbury valley. The flint tower sits behind a yew tree with a 10-metre girth. Its branches have grown and twisted into forms resembling coral groves.

There is a whisper of something ancient, an older, indigenous religion whose rules we have forgotten. The remains of the old motte-and-bailey castle next door is guarded now only by drowsy sheep, grazing under the cherry trees.

From the church I head across newly ploughed wheat fields. Fieldfares call overhead and then tumble into the hedgerow to seek shelter from the cold wind blowing in across the North Sea. The Medway estuary sweeps across the horizon.

One of the country's great migration routes for thousands of waders, ducks and geese that are pouring in to feed on the mud flats and roost on the islands. I imagine the icy water of the river sizzling as it merges on the skyline with the fiery tongues of beech trees descending from the chalk downs. Each tree is burnished, the deep reds and golds of copper kettles polished to perfection.

I head through a kissing gate into Queendown Warren, a Kent Wildlife Trust reserve. Flocks of herdwick sheep, like fluffy teddy bears in dusty pink and chocolate coats, raise their heads to watch me.

The Warren is where I found sanctuary during the first Covid lockdown of 2020 while my elderly father was in hospital. Its mixture of rolling hills, woods and pasture gave me strength and clarity to make seemingly impossible decisions on his behalf. I am grateful to this landscape, those words not doing justice to my feelings for this place.

I head to the skeletal beech tree beneath which I made those decisions and sit under its boughs with my coffee flask. I touch its roots and feel the echo of the person I was, forever changed by the events of that year.

Life moves on and so do I across the downs and then back up through the lanes to Stockbury, the bright colours of the hazels casting sunshine into the gathering dusk. I've now moved to the Stockbury valley and this circular walk - about four miles in total - remains one of my favourites.

(Article source: The Guardian)



Good mood food: Food to help boost your spirits in January

These six ingredients could help bolster your health and spirits in the new year.

January can seem like a tough and endless cold stretch, as we're thrown back into work and 'normal' routines after a fun few weeks of festive celebrations. However, the foods we eat can play an important role in boosting our mood and navigating the wretched January blues.

Here's a selection of foods to add to your shopping list this January, which are packed with vitamins and nutrients to give you a much-needed energy boost...

Eggs

"Eggs are rich in vitamin D, which is essential for mood regulation especially during winter months, and choline, which supports brain function," explains Lucy Diamond, registered dietitian and clinical director for innovation at NHS weight management provider, Oviva.



Eggs are also incredibly versatile, making them perfect for breakfast, dinner, or even a snack. "Whip up a veggie-packed omelette for breakfast or bake eggs in a tomato and pepper shakshuka for a warming dinner," suggests Diamond. "For a really easy snack, have a hard boiled egg - they're full of flavour and keep you feeling full."

Peppers

Peppers can bring a pop of colour to your meals, while also providing essential nutrients.

"The main nutrients in colourful peppers are vitamin C, antioxidants and fibre," says Rosie Carr, dietitian at healthy eating plan, Second Nature. "Vitamin C is crucial for producing noradrenaline, a neurotransmitter that affects mood and energy. The fibre content also supports gut health."

You could roast or stuff them, or add them to soups for a nutritious warming meal. "Cook a roasted pepper and tomato soup with collagen-rich bone broth," recommends Carr.



Dark chocolate

"Dark chocolate contains flavonoids and magnesium," says Diamond. "There is some evidence that this can help improve blood flow to the brain and promote relaxation."

It's a great alternative to milk or white chocolate, due to its lower sugar content. "Have a couple of squares of dark chocolate after dinner, or sprinkle grated chocolate over Greek yogurt with berries as a snack or meal for breakfast," suggests Diamond.

Kale

Stocking up on leafy greens could help cure your post-Christmas blues. "Kale contains folate, magnesium and fibre. Folate is essential for producing mood-regulating neurotransmitters, while magnesium helps reduce stress and anxiety," explains Carr. "Try sautéed kale with garlic and two soft-boiled eggs for added B12."

Walnuts

Start anew this January by swapping the leftover Christmas chocolates for some nutrient-rich nuts.

"Nuts and seeds are high in magnesium and omega-3, which help regulate neurotransmitters and reduce inflammation in the brain," explains Diamond. "Add a handful of walnuts to your morning porridge, or snack on a small handful of walnuts if you get hungry between meals."



Grass-fed red meat

"The key nutrients in grass-fed meat are iron, B12, zinc, and high-quality protein," says Carr. "These nutrients are essential for producing neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine, while B12 supports cognitive function and nervous system health." Iron is particularly important, as iron-deficiency can contribute to fatigue and low mood – and beef is packed with it. "Try a warming beef and lentil stew with root vegetables, combining the benefits of red meat with fibre-rich legumes that support gut health," suggests Carr.



(Article source: Silver Surfers)



Seven deadly sins: The home insurance traps that could cost you dearly

Price comparison sites offer the promise of low insurance premiums, but could leave you with cover that turns out to be much more expensive in the long run.

Everyone wants a good deal on their home insurance. At a time when Britons are counting the pennies more closely than ever, it's natural to be searching for the cheapest policy, particularly since insurers have been raising their premiums. That's why so many people use online comparison sites, which supposedly scan the market to find you the lowest prices.

Here's the thing though. The cheapest policies upfront often end up costing you more - sometimes much more. Price comparison sites don't give you much help with understanding what different policies cover, or which optional elements of insurance are worth paying for. What seems like a bargain may turn out to be anything but.

The accidental damage ambush

Accidental damage claims account for more than a third of all claims on home insurance. But search for a policy online and you will routinely be asked to accept limitations to your cover in return for a lower premium.

There may be a cap on the pay-out or small print that restricts when you can claim. Insurers may look to deny your claim under "wear-and-tear" exclusions, even though your loss was caused by a genuine accident.

The result is that you end up out-of-pocket. Look out for policies that offer both standard and optional or extended cover; the former may be cheaper, but will limit your protection.

The home emergency hook

If something goes seriously wrong in your home - a plumbing disaster, say, or an electrical mishap - you need help quickly. Home emergency cover gives you access to a phone line you can ring at any time of day or night to request that a contractor gets to you fast, typically with no call-out fees to pay.

But on most insurance policies, this is an optional extra and will cost you a few pounds more. It's an obvious saving if you're looking online to cut costs, but often proves to be an expensive - and anxiety-inducing - omission.

The trouble with travel

The best home insurance policies cover you when you're away from home too; if your possessions are stolen from your car, say, you need to be able to claim.

Again, however, anyone buying insurance online will be offered the option of reducing their premiums by limiting this feature of the policy - through a lower total maximum claim, say, or caps on single items. You'll lose out simply because you were in the wrong place when your insurance was needed.

The climate change conundrum

The changing climate is driving more extreme weather events and making problems such as flooding more common. If you live in an area considered susceptible to such problems, insurers may endorse your policies - restrict what they'll pay out on certain types of claims or demand higher excesses. That won't always be obvious, or easy to understand, but can cost you dearly.

There may also be limits on what the policy covers - will you be able to claim in full for alternative accommodation costs, for example, or costs incurred because you're having to travel much further?

The holiday let howler

The number of Britons renting out their houses for short periods on platforms such as AirBnB has increased by more than 30% over the past five years. But the second you let your house out to paying guests - or even a single room in it - you risk invalidating your home insurance.

That could be disastrous; if your insurer hasn't been made aware that you are letting all or part of your property, you run the risk of any claim you need to make being declined or not paid in full, whether or not it's connected to the letting. This isn't usually mentioned when you're buying home insurance online, but you'll often need specialist cover.

The fraud failure

The UK is suffering from a fraud epidemic, with identity theft alone up by 45% last year. What many people don't realise is their home insurance can be a huge help: if you've signed up for legal cover as part of your policy, it will pay many of your costs as you attempt to recover from an identity fraud, as well as providing support with everything from an employment dispute to a personal injury claim.

However, legal cover is typically an optional extra - again, if you're buying home insurance online, the value of this cover may not be obvious; many people therefore decline it to save money but come to regret the decision later.

The buildings insurance booby trap

Insurers need detailed information about your property to make informed decisions about what to charge you for cover; if you provide incorrect information, even by mistake, the insurer may reject any claim you end up making, or only pay part of it.

The problem is that the information insurers ask for can be technical - they may need to know about the structure of your property, for example, or the specifications of your locks. If you're completing an application online, with no help, it's easy to get something wrong inadvertently. But mistakes may come back to haunt you.

How to avoid getting caught out

The best way to avoid falling into these traps - or other common home insurance pitfalls - is to get some professional advice when you're looking for cover.

Price comparison sites do what they say on the tin - they enable you to compare prices - but that's only half the story. The best policy for you is one that is competitively priced but, crucially, gives you the cover that you need.

Nest GI is an independent company offering free impartial advice regarding all types of property insurance. We'll assess your needs and then recommend the best value policy for you from our panel of over 90 insurers.

Don't wait until you're caught out. We believe no-one should be financially penalised for switching their insurance to a better value provider, so our unique "free switch" guarantee refunds any administration or early cancellation charges imposed by your existing insurer.

(Article source: Silver Surfers)

Please help us rescue and care for vulnerable hedgehogs - **Britain's favourite mammal**

A shocking study has revealed that hedgehogs are rapidly vanishing from our countryside, with numbers **HALVED** in the last 20 years.

I am delighted to tell you that Britain's hedgehog has won favourite mammal in a UK poll.

The UK's only spiny mammal won with 35.9% of the 5,000 votes, more than double that of the Red Fox, who came in second place with 15.4%. The Red Squirrel came third with 11.4%, out of a shortlist of 10 charismatic UK mammals.

Unfortunately, hedgehogs are rapidly vanishing from our countryside as numbers have **HALVED** in the last 20 years, a shocking study has revealed.

Henry Johnson, hedgehog officer, People's Trust for Endangered Species (PTES) said:

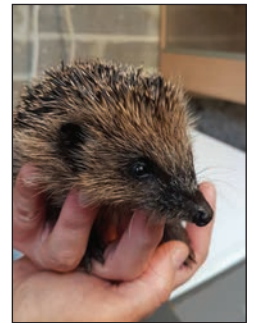
"We Brits seem to love hedgehogs for a whole range of reasons, including their cute appearance, their role as slug controllers and the way they have colonised our gardens with such aplomb. This is why it is so sad to see them decline, with one in three lost since the millennium."

Threats to hedgehogs come mostly from us. In rural areas, our farmland increasingly lacks the diversity of habitats hedgehogs need and the invertebrates they feed on. In towns and cities green spaces are lost to development, paved over or increasingly fragmented. Hedgehogs are also very prone to road traffic accidents.

This is why we have launched this special Annual Appeal to protect Britain's favourite mammal.

At Hedgehog Rescue Rehabilitation and Care Centre we respond immediately to rescue injured hedgehogs. A vet is called in straight away and the hedgehogs are monitored and cared for. Once fit and well they are released back into the wild.

Hedgehog Rescue is now conducting its Annual Appeal. Only by continuing our huge effort and long-life commitment can we give these wonderful animals a safe, happy and contented life.



We care for many hedgehogs here at our rehabilitation centre. Hedgehogs just like these:

'Julie'



'Julie' (pictured left) came in last Autumn, quite small, out in daylight and had ticks. She stayed a few weeks, put on enough weight, and made a full recovery. She was released back to her own territory by the finder.

Baby Hedgehogs

These 2 hedgehogs came in as very small babies and had stayed with us a few weeks, gaining weight and giving us a chance to sort out their health issues. They had several ticks and needed worming. When they were 100% ready, we released them close to where they were found.



These hedgehogs are some of the lucky ones. Others are less fortunate.

As a friend who knows what a wonder animals can be, I hope you will support our Annual Appeal. Your kind gift will help us rescue and care for many more vulnerable hedgehogs - Britain's favourite mammal.

To donate to Hedgehog Rescue, go to:
<https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/hedgehogrescue>
or write to: Raisemore, Unit 1, Alton Road Industrial Estate, Ross-on-Wye HR9 5NB



HEDGEHOG RESCUE
 REHABILITATION AND CARE CENTRE

Registered Charity No: 1126812 (England & Wales)
 Registered Charity No: SCO47720 (Scotland)