



Wild about Swimming

Only a few generations ago, wild-dipping was the only way to learn to swim for most people. Andrea Mynard shares her favourite spots for a completely free lesson

Redolent of simple, carefree summers, pond dipping and wild swimming can give our children (and us) the sort of adventures our grandparents enjoyed when they gathered by water to paddle, picnic and play. Maybe I spent too much time reading *Swallows and Amazons* as a child, but just thinking about messing about by water always transports me to a nostalgic childhood world of dam-building, pooh sticks and exploring. Words like freedom and adventure are inexorably linked in my mind with wild swimming. Back down to earth as a parent planning a swimming trip to an English river, the word bracing also features. But armed with plenty of warm clothing, and with a little preparation, trips to places where our children might see their first kingfisher or build their first dam can be great fun and are an exciting way for them to engage with the natural world.

While recently thinking about whether to restart swimming lessons for my daughter at our local municipal pool, I read Deborah Devonshire's account of learning to swim as a child in her memoirs: "the smell of newly cut grass, cow parsley, thrushes... takes me back to our stretch

of the Windrush. No health, no safety, no handrail on the single planks that were our bridges as we crossed and recrossed over the river. It was paradise and I knew it."

Thinking how much more romantic this sounds than learning to swim in a chlorinated pool, I realised that just a few generations ago, wild-dipping was the only way to learn to swim for most people. In the early 1900s, there were river swimming clubs and lidos all over the country. It was only when indoor pools came in and rivers bore the brunt of pollution from industrial development in the post-war years that outdoor swimming became less popular.

magic of rivers

Pools and springs have of course been appreciated, even revered, since ancient times, with the Romans building shrines to the water goddesses and 'Mermaid Pools' dotting our Pennine mountain tops. The health benefits of dipping in bracing natural waters - it can soothe muscles, boost the immune system and relieve depression - were also part of our collective knowledge. During the nineteenth century, natural swimming pools inspired artists and writers. Water inspired some of the greats of children's

literature, from Charles Kingsley dreaming of water babies on the Devon Dart, to Henry Williams swimming with Tarka the otter. And not only did the cascading waterfalls and mountain pools of the Lake District have Romantic poets waxing lyrical, Peel Island in the South Lakes became Wildcat Island in Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons*, where Titty, Roger, Susan and John camped, drank ginger beer, swam, bothered Captain Flint in his houseboat, and generally got up to mischief.

Now that our rivers are mostly in good order again (in fact many are hidden havens for wildlife once more), it's perhaps time for more families to take the plunge and have fun messing about by our wild waters, whether pond-dipping or swimming. There does seem to have been a resurgence of interest in wild-dipping over the last decade or so. According to the Outdoor Swimming Society, where many people share swimming chat and news online, more people are embracing the joys of swimming under an open sky and rediscovering: "a yearning to recover a sense of how the natural world smells, tastes and sounds".

For children this can be magical, even if just pottering about with a net chasing minnows in the shallows. On a bright but



blustery September day last year, we set up camp with our family on the sandy cove at Porthcothan in Cornwall. Happy to play in the sand, it was a while before my daughter and her cousins discovered that tucked around the corner from us was a magical world of rock pools. Not just the great fun but regular old rock-pools that we'd become accustomed to during the holiday, these offered a hidden world to be explored. By climbing up on to the first layer of rock pools, the kids found gorgeous turquoise mini lagoons in the rocks above, big enough for adults and older children to swim in. An intricate web of deep blue pools and streams teeming with life seduced us all. George, aged one, was pottering about lower down, enthusiastically dipping his toes in. Gracie, aged four and a half, plunged in like a water baby. Lucky Ruby was given a scenic trip around the pools on a body board by her Dad, acting like an intrepid explorer discovering a secret kingdom; aged four, limpets and tiny mussels clinging to the rocks were still amazing finds to her, although she was adamant that pirate treasure was sure to be found in the next lagoon. Luckily we'd hired wetsuits for the day for the girls, which turned out to be money well spent as they were in and out of the water all day, even though it was chilly.

confident and safe

Daniel Start, whose wonderful book, *Wild Swimming* is full of babbling moorland brooks, soothing gladed pools and invigorating waterfalls to paddle, swim, camp and have fun by, says: "Wild swimming is a wonderful and fun way to build children's confidence around water, and in nature. They can start with paddling, pebble hunting and minnow



"An intricate web of deep blue pools and streams teeming with life seduced adults and children alike"

fishing in the little shallow streams that are in the countryside all around. You can then progress to sandy river beaches when they are ready to learn to actually swim. Wild Swimming teaches them how to manage in the outdoors and means they will be more confident and safer swimmers and explorers as they grow up."

Growing up in a rambling old house that was shared with two other families - and came with lakes, woods, streams and an overgrown boat house - Daniel's own childhood sounds full of Swallows and Amazons style adventures. He learnt to make dams, build rafts and explore the Wye River. One Black Mountain's stream, complete with mossy dingles and foxglove-filled dells, is firmly etched in his memory: "Plunging into deep pools and sliding down chutes, my brother and I spent much of our summer squealing and slithering along its helter skelter of cascades."

With the help of friends, Daniel made a five year journey that would take him back to these beloved childhood places as well as help him discover many more special places where people still swim. *Wild Swimming* is his handbook of these places, full of beautifully enticing photos and with excellent >

TIPS FOR MESSING ABOUT BY WATER:

CHECK IT'S CLEAN If the water looks appealing, it probably is, if it looks scummy, your instincts to keep your children away are probably right. If in doubt, check environment-agency.gov.uk before leaving home

PROTECT WOUNDS Cover cuts with waterproof dressings

FIND POPULAR SPOTS See Outdoor Swimming Society website (outdoorswimmingsociety.com) for places to swim recommended by other swimmers

CHECK CURRENTS These are not always predictable and are likely to be stronger after high rainfall. Check tide timetables at coastal areas

LOOK BEFORE LEAPING

Jumping in is great fun but step in first, to test the depth of the area and check it's clear of objects

WRAP UP WARM Acclimatise to cold water gradually and always take warm clothes to put on afterwards

BE PREPARED Taking children's fishing nets, buckets and a picnic rug will ensure you can set up camp for a full day in the summer

MAKE A PICNIC Take plenty of snacks/a picnic as swimming makes everybody ravenous!



> practical details – lots of grid references and footpath details enabling readers to find his discoveries. It's also great for families with young children as there are plenty of places listed for paddling and swimming where the water is no deeper than 1m and some good suggestions for games, water activities and even waterside foods.

Just an initial glimpse of Wild Swimming had me dreaming of summer days heading off with a picnic to the idyllic spot by the River Windrush where it's possible to bathe in the romantic grounds of a ruined manor house before catching crayfish for supper. There may even be some dancing mayflies and buttercups to tickle my toes if I'm lucky. Or you can follow Daniel's directions to the spot where Henry Williamson was inspired by the River Torridge to write about Tarka, a young otter cub who enjoys life exploring his river surroundings. Talking about how Tarka tried to keep out of trouble (although unfortunately this never quite goes to plan), and as a cub learns how to clean himself, swim and catch fish may be great fun in any waterside setting. Reading passages from *Water Babies* (subtitled: *A Fairy Story for a Land Boy*) with its enthusiasm for the wonders of nature, including great descriptions of the hatching of a dragonfly beside a babbling brook, seems apt too. Maybe your children won't meet the merry creatures encountered by Tom the chimney sweep in his watery adventures,

but the foolish trout, the wise old salmon and the crafty otter may be replaced by other creatures, all equally fascinating.

pond-dipping

Pond dipping with a net can make children of all ages realise how water can be teeming with life - from frogs and tadpoles, fish and surface swimming insects to snails. Crouching down in shallow water, children may encourage their parents to take what Roger Deakin (whose book, *Waterlog* details his journey through Britain by river, lakes and sea) called "a frogs eye view". Taking children to places where they can skim stones, learn to play pooh sticks and build dams before falling asleep in the grass can take us back to our own childhoods, as well as opening up a fabulous world of adventure for youngsters. They may even find their first otter track. And just sitting by water can be good for the souls of frazzled parents too - as the day unfolds, you'll notice birdsong, see different kinds of birds on the water or flying over it, insects will appear and you could see fish basking under the water. This type of old-fashioned messing about by the water is very much part of the National Trust's 50 Things To Do Before You're 11 ¾ campaign for this summer. The National Trust cares for more than 720 miles of UK coastline and countless streams, rivers and lakes, many of which are great for wild swimming. Pond dipping events

are organised at many National Trust properties throughout the year, including at Wicken Fen in Cambridgeshire, Carding Mill Valley in Shropshire and Parke in Devon. According to Lisa Gledhill of the National Trust: "Children who have the opportunity to play outdoors, to test their own strengths and learn to make judgements about their own limits, develop self-confidence which can benefit them for the rest of their lives. Wild swimming – when properly supervised – can be a great way for children to literally immerse themselves in the outdoors experience and take pride in their own achievements."

Lisa stresses though that parents need to check the local conditions for swimming and make sure children don't swim alone. While a day out by the water is free and needs little equipment, some planning and thought for safety is important. Checking the cleanliness of the water you're heading to is a good idea – many rivers in the UK are cleaner than they've been for 150 years but if in doubt you can get a rating for your local stretches on the Environment Agency website by entering the relevant postcode. Towels and warm clothing for afterwards are important as, whilst exhilarating, our lakes and rivers can be very cold! It's a good idea to have everybody thoroughly warm before getting to the water – maybe by running races and games of tag. Afterwards you can always race up a nearby hill. Although cuddling up to read *Swallows and Amazons* by a campfire sounds good to me.

want to know more?

wildswimming.com
outdoorswimmingsociety.com
nationaltrust.org.uk/events

what to read

Wild Swimming Daniel Start
tinyurl.com/danstart
 Waterlog Roger Deakin
tinyurl.com/rdeakin
 Swallows and Amazons tinyurl.com/swallownamazons

Andrea lives in rural Gloucestershire with her partner and four year old daughter, Ruby, combining freelance writing with life as a full-time mum. She enjoys growing organic vegetables or heading off for adventures