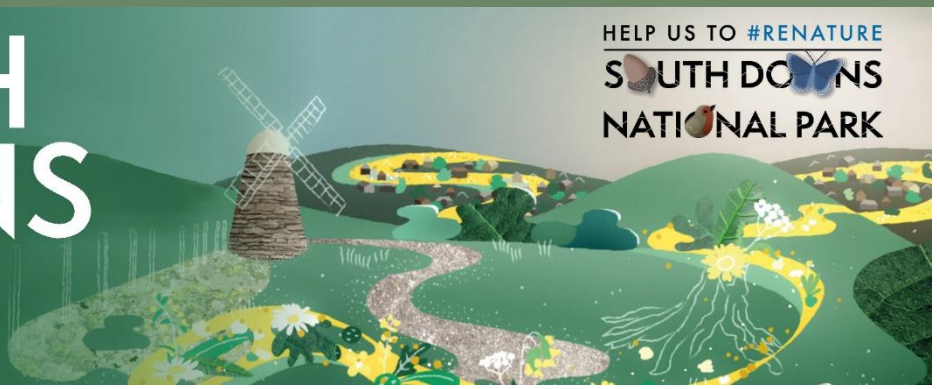
June 2026

SOUTH DOWNS NEWS



WORK AND PLAY IN YOUR NATIONAL PARK

This month:

- **Amazing nature** Find out about the incredible wildlife in the National Park in our ReNature Festival and discover what's been achieved to help biodiversity bounce back.
- **Take The Lead** Our dog campaign returns with an emphasis on water.
- **Makeover at historic pond** Find out about new artwork at a pond that dates back to the 1100s.
- **A walk on the wild side!** Win a free family day pass to Marwell Zoo as part of ReNature Festival.

As always, please send your comments and ideas to us at newsletter@southdowns.gov.uk

Success for nature as festival returns for 2026

More than 12,400 football pitches of land are being transformed into habitat for wildlife as the National Park marks the fifth anniversary of our ReNature campaign.

The work, delivered in partnership over the past five years, has included planting more than 100,000 trees, adding over 4,000 tennis courts of wildflowers, planting 35km of hedges and creating much-needed new wildlife havens on the edges of farms and urban development.

Over 30 ponds have been created or restored for wildlife and many more are in the offing.

Since the campaign's launch in 2021, over **£20m** has been raised from various donations and grants to help nature bounce back.

The success comes as our popular **ReNature Festival** kicks off on 19 June and runs until 28 June, with an action-packed line-up of events and activities across the South Downs.

The events are a chance for people of all ages to learn more, get involved and experience the incredible wildlife and landscapes of the National Park.

Among the highlights will be sunset nature safaris led by rangers, an open day at Seven Sisters Country Park, mindfulness in nature sessions, a wildlife photography exhibition and a chance to learn more about amazing reptile-rich heathlands at Hogmoor Inclosure, in Bordon.

The ReNature campaign was launched in response to the national biodiversity crisis with the goal of transforming 13,000 hectares – or over 20,000 football pitches – into habitat for wildlife by 2030.

Allison Potts, Director of Landscape and Operations for the National Park, said: "Nature is beautiful, inspiring and uplifting. It also underpins our everyday lives in terms of our communities, our economy and our health and wellbeing, including providing clean air to breathe, food to eat and water to drink. want nature everywhere for everyone, with a South Downs landscape that's teeming with wildlife.

"So we're really pleased the significant progress on our ReNature initiative, now almost at two thirds of the way to reaching our target.

"This has only been possible thanks to the fantastic organisations and individuals that work in partnership with us: the incredible farmers, landowners, businesses, schools, volunteers and local communities – so we want to say a big thank you. Let's work together to get us over the finish line and give nature the boost it deserves!

"We're determined to turn the tide on biodiversity loss and there are exciting times ahead as we have some big strategic nature recovery work in the pipeline."

Early ecological studies show that habitat restoration and creation are beginning to have an impact, with a variety of species bouncing back, including Adonis blue butterflies, natterjack toads, bats and water voles.

Ten farms and large estates across Sussex and Hampshire, covering an area of more than 800 hectares, are currently working with the National Park to secure long-term wildlife restoration through habitat creation and businesses investing in nature credits.

As a Local Planning Authority, the National Park has also played a big part through securing Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) – where developments create or improve habitats for wildlife to leave nature better in a better state than before. The National Park Authority secured 120 biodiversity units from 115 planning permissions between 2023 and 2026, with average gains exceeding the statutory minimum.

Meanwhile, well over 50 different projects have been delivered through the Farming In Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme, including hedgerow planting, meadow creation and soil enhancements.

The ReNature initiative will continue at pace, with big goals to plant at least a million more trees, including restoring 1,000 hectares of woodland through private finance. In the pipeline, and subject to funding approval, is "South Downs Big Chalk" – a planned £10m programme to restore precious chalk grassland, which is often called Europe's rainforest in miniature due to its incredible biodiversity.

Josh Esan, Engagement and Events Officer for the National Park, explained this year's ReNature Festival is all about highlighting the importance of maintaining a balanced relationship between people and nature.

Josh said: "Everyone can play their part in helping wildlife, no matter how big or small. It could simply be planting some wildflowers in your garden or doing some wildlife surveying."

To see the full programme for the festival visit **www.southdowns.gov.uk/renature-festival/**

To donate to the ReNature campaign visit the **South Downs National Park Trust**.

Project leaves big changes

It's known as Europe's rainforest in miniature as just a single square metre can be a haven for over 40 different species of wildflowers and more than 20 varieties of butterflies.

Now a partnership that was created to protect precious chalk grassland has come to the end of a four-year run – and left lasting change for the better.

"Changing Chalk" began in 2022 and since then more than 650 hectares of chalk grassland has been restored or improved to help wildlife.

More than 30,000 hours of volunteer work has gone into helping nature havens across the eastern South Downs.

Among the highlights has been creating 50 hectares of wildflower habitat at Gayles Farm near Seaford, transforming previously cultivated land.

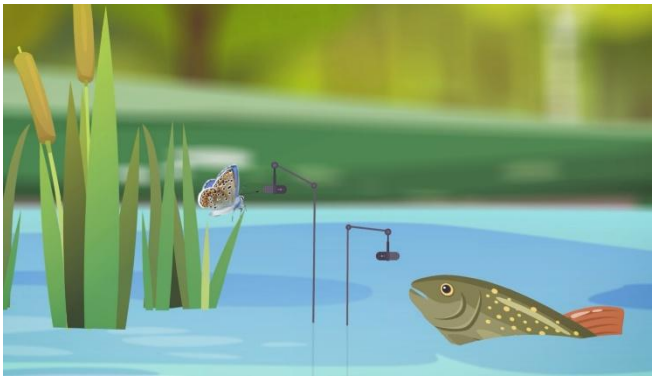
The programme also restored seven dew ponds and helped to protect the endangered Wart-biter bush-cricket. A total of 32 of the crickets were moved to a new site to help establish a new population in Sussex.

The programme was led by the National Trust and funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, with the National Park Authority as one of the key partners.

"Changing Chalk shows what's possible when organisations, communities and funders work together at a landscape scale," said Richard Henderson, Chair of the Project Board at the National Trust. "The programme has delivered real benefits for nature and for people. We hope its legacy will continue for years to come, with communities continuing to enjoy, care for and feel connected to the South Downs."

As well as nature, the project has helped to connect communities with the amazing heritage on their doorsteps. Initiatives such as The Big Dig and Monument Mentors enabled local people to uncover and protect the stories beneath their feet, while projects including Writing Our Legacy invited people from diverse backgrounds to explore their own connections to the landscape through creative expression. A celebration film about Changing Chalk can be watched **here**.

Helping waterways thrive



An Adonis blue butterfly hosting a podcast with a talking trout is part of a new thought-provoking campaign to raise awareness about the impact of dogs on ponds and rivers.

The Take the Lead campaign has now been running for well over a decade in the South Downs National Park, encouraging responsible dog walking in the countryside by doing simple things such as keeping dogs on leads around livestock and picking up dog poo.

A new strand of the initiative is around helping nature thrive in ponds and rivers.

Funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, a series of fun and tongue-in-cheek wildlife animations have been produced, sharing the viewpoints of various creatures about the impact of dogs on their water habitats.

The campaign is part of the "Downs to The Sea" project, which is aiming to help biodiversity bounce back by creating a network of restored ponds and wetlands across the region.

It comes as there are now around 13 million pet dogs in the UK, increasing the number of dogs out and about exploring the countryside.

Evidence has shown that dogs can cause severe disruption and damage to wildlife in ponds and rivers. The impact can be in several ways:

- **Flea and Tick Treatment** – Research has shown that spot-on flea treatments which contain insecticides are posing significant risks to wildlife who live and feed in our rivers or ponds. Fipronil and imidacloprid are powerful pesticides that are banned from agricultural use due to their harmful environmental effects but are still commonly used in pet products.
- **Sediment disturbance** – When dogs enter a pond or river, they stir up sediment which causes the water to turn murky. Sediment can then settle on plants, stopping light penetrating through to aquatic vegetation and stunting their growth.
- **Bank erosion –** Dogs can cause erosion on river and pond banks when they push their way through vegetation to enter the water. To help wildlife thrive we are updating our Take the Lead campaign to include a key message around these water habitats.

People can help care for the National Park by following these simple steps to be a responsible dog owner while out and about in the countryside:

- Rivers and ponds are wildlife havens – help protect them by keeping your dog away from the water and on the path.
- Keep dogs on a lead near grazing animals and wildlife.
- Bag and bin your poo, any public bin will do.
- Protect ground nesting birds – stick to the paths, especially between 1 March and 15 September.
- Do not enter military training areas when the red flags are flying

Jan Knowlson, Biodiversity Officer for the National Park, said: "The South Downs National Park is a great place for dog-walking and we want people and their pets to continue to enjoy it.

"The National Park is a haven for wildlife and we're working hard to give a helping hand to nature, which is really struggling across the UK, mainly due to loss of habitat over many decades.

"So this initiative is all about raising awareness about the impacts of dogs on watercourses and how dog walkers can play their part in nature recovery. Clean, healthy waterways are absolutely vital for both people and nature and we can all work together to help restore these precious wetlands."

Aimee Felus, CEO of the Western Sussex Rivers Trust, one of the partners in the Downs to the Sea project, said: "All of us dog owners can help by speaking to our vet about alternative treatments and keeping our dogs on a lead near ponds and rivers."

To watch the animations and for more information on Take the Lead, as well as frequently asked questions about dogs and water, visit https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/take-the-lead/

The Western Sussex Rivers Trust has also produced a **useful leaflet for dog owners**.

The Downs to the Sea project launched last year with a bumper action plan to restore and create a network of "blue spaces" in the landscape. It's funded through a £1.7m grant from The National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Get involved in major plan

Time is running out to have your say on a vital placemaking plan that will guide the future of the National Park.

The National Park Authority is preparing a new Local Plan to guide how and where development takes place in the National Park over the next two decades, replacing the current Local Plan adopted in 2019.

The goal of the Local Plan is to address vital issues such as the need for affordable housing, quality development, restoring nature, climate action, a flourishing rural economy and helping local communities thrive.

The consultation runs until 23 June.

Vanessa Rowlands, Chair of the National Park Authority, encouraged people to get involved and tell us what they think.

She said: "This is an opportunity to protect and enhance the things we all love most – our landscapes, communities, cultural heritage, dark skies, wildlife, water courses and much more."

Among some of the key proposed policies in the new Local Plan are:

- Landscape-led – so conserving and enhancing the South Downs landscape is considered strongly with any planning application that comes forward.
- A total of 77 site allocations spread across the National Park, delivering 3,559 new homes, including affordable homes, as well as employment and gypsy and traveller pitches. Sites chosen include brownfield sites and those in and around existing settlements.
- Shoreham Cement Works is earmarked as a potential mixed-use development of residential, commercial and community spaces with the capacity to support up to 400 homes and significant employment opportunities.

After completing all the required stages, it's hoped that the new Local Plan will be adopted in 2027. From then on, all planning applications will be considered against policies in the new Local Plan.

To see the proposed Local Plan and make a comment visit **www.southdowns.gov.uk/planning-policy/new-south-downs-local-plan/**.

Artwork unveiled at pond

A beautiful town pond has been given a new lease of life thanks to new education boards.

Colourful interpretation panels have been installed at South Pond in Midhurst

The panels, designed by Emily Summers-Milesman, a talented artist and Interpretation and Place Officer for the National Park, feature visual illustrations that represent the various wildlife, plants and trees that live in and around the pond.

The project, led by South Pond volunteer group, was the culmination of several year' work and searches for funding.

Chichester District Council funded the project, while the National Park Authority financed and produced the artwork.

Anne Reehill, Secretary of South Pond Group, said: "We hope these beautiful interpretation boards help people better understand how special South Pond is and how we can all care for it."

South Pond has an interesting history. It's fed by two streams which were once the boundaries of Saxon settlements. The streams join together and form the division between the oldest part of Midhurst and West Lavington.

The South Pond was formed when one of the medieval lords of Midhurst dammed the streams to make a breeding pool for fish. It is thought that the dam was erected in the mid-1100s.

Just to the west of the Pond, South Mill was in existence by 1284, used to grind corn powered by the pent-up waters of the Pond. In 1634 it was converted to a fulling mill: a cloth formed by shrinking woven cloth to produce a denser more hard-wearing fabric. The mill is now a private house but its pool can be seen from the road.

Helping our house martins

Kim Greaves, Ranger for the Eastern Downs, writes about efforts by the National Park to help house martins and swifts.

House martins and swifts were once common and widespread species in the UK, with the sounds of their distinctive calls and their bustling and arcing flight overhead being the epitome of the British summer.

Traditionally nesting under eaves and within roof spaces in our villages, towns and even city centres, these human-made structures acted as suitable proxies for their natural nesting places amongst the boughs and fissures of ancient trees, which were felled and lost over generations on a monumental scale to build our buildings and ships, and to introduced diseases such as Dutch Elm disease.

Due to a lack of suitable wet mud in the modern landscape as a result of climate change and hard surfacing of trackways, House Martins now struggle to replace lost nests, and are forced to expend a lot of energy to do so.

This has led to House Martins declining by 50% in the last 50 years, and Swifts declining by 60% in the last 30 years, contributing to the ever more silent springs and summers we now endure.

Recently, National Park rangers funded 10 house martin nest cups and four swift boxes to be fitted to the Long Barn at Stanmer, near Brighton.

Historically, this barn dating to the 1700s supported a large colony of house martins, but these nests were removed when the barn was restored a number of years ago. Artificial nest cups have been installed and quickly occupied. The house martin colony had a bumper season last year with nearly all the cups occupied and many pairs having double broods. In late summer a flock of between 50 and 100 birds were seen dust bathing outside Stanmer House. So it seemed a good time to expand the housing opportunities and additional cups have since been added.

The National Park's eastern ranger team are hoping to develop this into a wider house martin, swift and swallow project. So watch this space! 😊

Win day-out at wildlife park!

Do you fancy a trip to Marwell Zoo to see some incredible wildlife?

As part of our ReNature Festival, we've got two family tickets to give away for a day out at the amazing wildlife park.

All you need to do is share an image of you doing your bit for nature – whether it be some wildflowers in your garden, creating a "bee hotel", creating a mini-pond in your garden or even just out and about spotting wildlife. It's totally wide open!

Simply share your images with us via email **newsletter@southdowns.gov.uk** or on Instagram with the hashtag **#ReNature2026**

The deadline for entries is 31 July. Good luck!

Marwell Zoo covers 140 acres and is located in the National Park, near Colden Common.

There was some exciting news recently as their female snow leopard, Zaya, gave birth on 20 May.

It's still early days, so the cub or cubs remain in the cubbing box out of sight, so Marwell staff can't yet confirm how many cubs she has had.

A Marwell spokesperson said: "In order to replicate as closely as possible the birthing experience Zaya would have in the wild, we take a hands-off approach, leaving her to use her natural instincts.

"The cub or cubs will still be very tiny and totally dependent on Zaya. They are not mobile yet and still might not have even opened their eyes. It will be several weeks before they are big enough to leave the cubbing box."

Meanwhile, the park's rhino calf has officially been named Amali, meaning 'hope' in Swahili. Amali has recently taken her first steps outside, exploring her habitat alongside mum, Zahra. As she grows, Amali will play an important role in white rhino conservation as part of the European breeding programme.

Things to do in the South Downs this June

Please follow the links as booking may be necessary. Find these and more events across the National Park and submit your own events at **southdowns.gov.uk/events/**

- Would you be interested in creating **a lasting legacy** for nature in the South Downs? A special guided walk has been arranged at Seven Sisters Country Park for people to find out the amazing impact a gift in a will can have on this incredible landscape. Marvel at the breathtaking views of the iconic Seven Sisters cliffs and breathe in the fresh coastal air. Enjoy a guided walk with a National Park ranger followed by a glass of locally produced wine. The relaxed free event is hosted by the South Downs Trust and takes place on Wednesday, June 24. Trampers and mobility scooters are available. **Book a place here.**
- A new music series is starting at one of Hampshire's most beautiful churches, St Hubert's, this month. Check out the **concert programme here**.
- An open day is being held for people to find out more about a potential beaver release on the Western Rother, a river which passes through Petersfield, Midhurst and Petworth. The drop-in event, organised by the Western Rother Beaver Group, takes place on 17 June from 10am to 4pm at the South Downs Centre, in Midhurst. Find out about **WRBG here**.
- Families can celebrate Father's Day in a unique and memorable way at **Amberley Museum**, where dads can enjoy free admission for one day only on Sunday 21 June 2026. As a special thank you to fathers, the Museum is offering complimentary entry for all dads when tickets are pre-booked online.
- Coming up on 4 July, Lewes will burst into colour, music and celebration as the town marks the 250th anniversary year of the Declaration of Independence with a joyful Festival of Democracy inspired by its most famous radical, **Thomas Paine**. The centrepiece will be a vibrant Procession of Democracy through the centre of Lewes, gathering from 1pm at Westgate Car Park. The procession will culminate at Lewes Castle Gun Garden at 3pm, where music, speeches and performances will continue until 6pm.

Pic credits: P1 water vole Dick Hawkes; P1 butterfly Danial Greenwood; P5 house martin chicks Paul Stevens: P5 Marwell Zoo