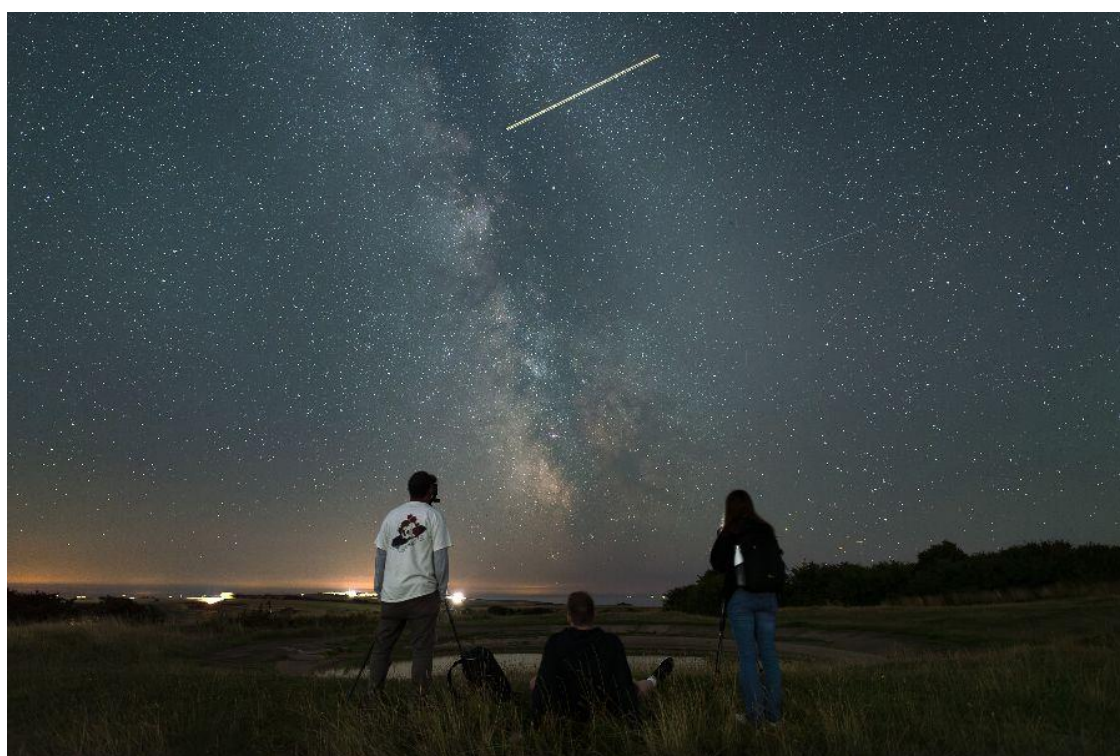


[View this email in your browser](#)



Gentle January and the return of the Dark Skies Festival!

Happy 2026 and welcome to the first South Downs National Park newsletter of the year! We've been busy preparing over the past few months for the **10th anniversary of the National Park becoming an International Dark Sky Reserve**. With lots of

areas with very little light pollution, the South Downs really is every stargazer's dream! We've got an action-packed schedule of events, many of them free! Check out more details below.

This month we're also celebrating the winners of our annual photo competition - thank you to everyone who has taken part. You should be very proud of your photographic talents! Our People's Choice vote is now open, with the winner taking home £100.

Also this month we're embracing the notion of "gentle January" - being kind to yourself in what, for many people, can be a tough month! Read on and find out more 😊

[Click here to read a PDF version of South Downs News](#)



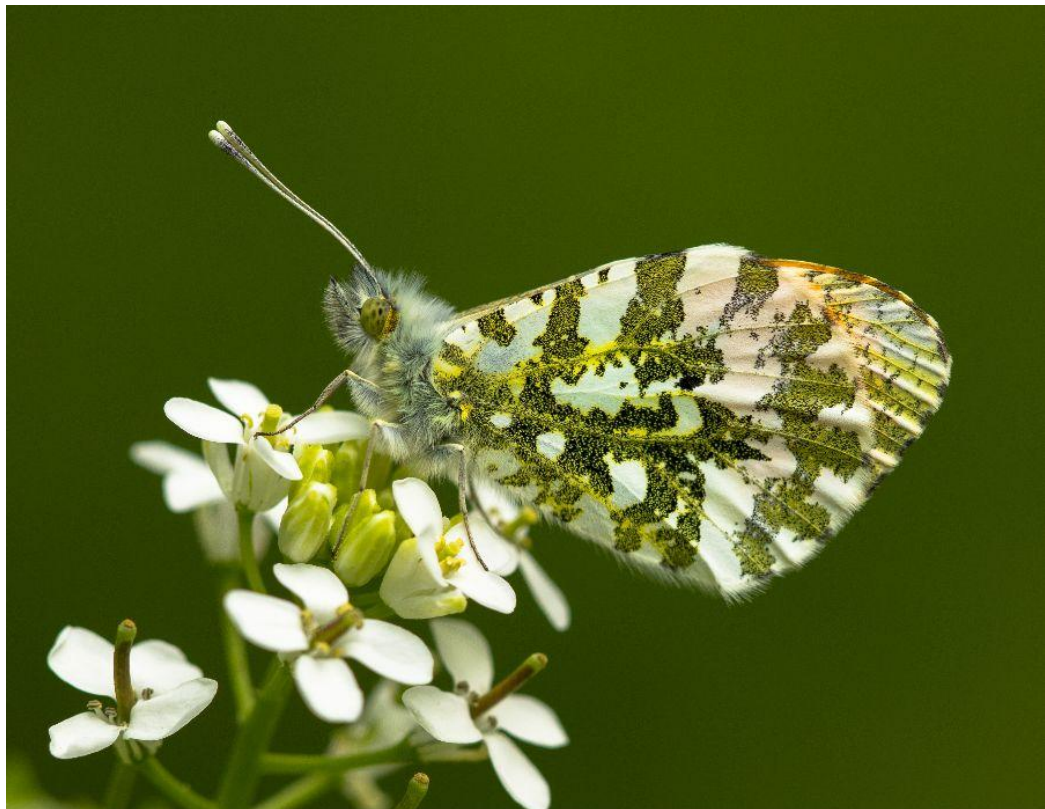
Stunning images win photo competition

A hauntingly beautiful photograph of gnarly giant trees and a quintessentially South Downs image of a colourful butterfly are the winners of this year's photography competition.

Almost 500 images were submitted by members of the public for this year's contest, which marked the 15th anniversary of the National Park and celebrated people's favourite things about the South Downs.

Find out all the [winners and highly-commended images here!](#)

Vote for your favourite in The People's Choice





Celebrating 10 years of stargazing fun

Awe-inspiring, otherworldly, special.

Just some of the words you might use to describe a dark sky glistening with twinkly stars in every direction.

Dark skies are one of the most amazing things about the South Downs National Park – located next to some of the busiest cities and towns in the UK and yet with an amazing core of dark sky that make it every stargazer's dream.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the South Downs National Park becoming an [International Dark Sky Reserve](#).

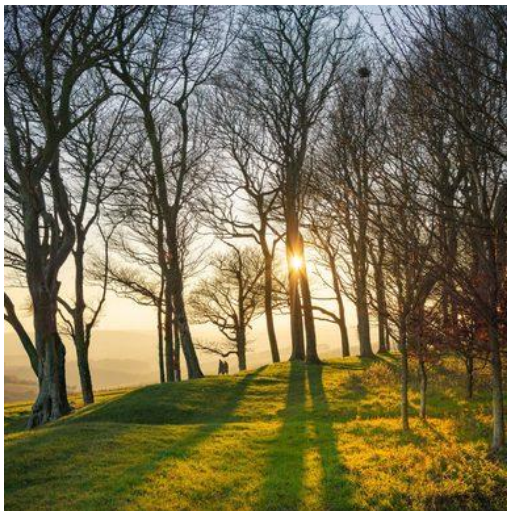
To celebrate, the National Park's Dark Skies Festival returns bigger and better than ever, with a bumper line-up of events across Sussex and Hampshire between 12 and 22 February. [Find out more here!](#)

[See the full programme here](#)

Wetland work is completed

Much-needed improvements at RSPB Pulborough Brooks and RSPB Pagham Harbour have been completed as thousands of migrating birds settle down for their winter stay.

The £300,000 works, part of the Downs to the Sea project, have improved vital new wetland havens for birds, mammals, and invertebrates. [Learn more.](#)



Be gentle to yourself this January

January can come with a lot of pressures, so with that in mind we're embracing the notion of "gentle January" at the National Park.

It's the idea of being gentle to yourself during these colder months, taking time to recuperate and doing simple,

inexpensive things to help your wellbeing. [Find out more.](#)

Meet the National Park Ranger

To kick off 2026, we meet Lawrence Leather, a Ranger at Seven Sisters Country Park and find out about his life, work and passions. [Learn more here!](#)



Other news from your National Park



New South Downs exhibition opens

A captivating set of chalk pastel drawings reflecting the fragile beauty of the South Downs goes on display at Petersfield Museum and Art Gallery. The drawings are by acclaimed artist Sara Lee (*pictured above*).

[Read More →](#)

South Downs National Park is an “economic powerhouse”

The South Downs is the “economic powerhouse” of England’s protected landscapes, a major new independent study has shown.

With protected landscapes covering a quarter of England, the report shows the South Downs is the economic leader, and hosting around a third of all businesses.

[Read More →](#)

Win a day-out at Butser Ancient Farm!



Nestled in a serene valley just a stone's throw from the busy south coast is a fascinating venue that brings the past to life.

[Butser Ancient Farm](#), near Waterlooville, Hampshire, allows visitors to travel back through 10,000 years of human history and discover what life was like for people in our ancient past.

The farm's buildings are all based on evidence from archaeological excavations. Butser staff and volunteers are continually testing theories about the technologies, building techniques and ways of life of ancient people by reconstructing elements of their homes and lives.

The story of Butser Ancient Farm began with a decision in 1970 by the Council for British Archaeology to establish a working 'ancient farm' where archaeologists could experiment to test their theories on how people lived in Iron Age times.

The site now welcomes over 35,000 schoolchildren a year, as well as scores of other visitors, who come for a fun and unique day out to learn about traditional skills, archaeology and Britain's prehistory.

It's a regular filming location for many documentaries, TV dramas and movies. Butser has a bumper line-up of events for 2026, including special activities for half-terms, storytelling, bronze casting, stone-age sewing and its ever-popular Beltain Festival.

We've teamed up with Butser Ancient Farm to offer a free family ticket (covering two adults and two children).

People signing up to the newsletter during January will be automatically entered into the draw to win the tickets. Those who are already signed up can email "roundhouses" to newsletter@southdowns.gov.uk before midnight on 31 January.

Sign up to the newsletter [here](#) and see competition T&Cs [here](#).



Coming up this January



- A new [photography exhibition](#) starts at Gilbert White's House in Gardens from 20 January, running until 12 April. "South Downs Portraits – Lives in a Landscape" presents a selection of portraits of people whose lives and work relate to the landscape of the South Downs. The exhibition is part of a long-term project that the photographer Anne-Katrin Purkiss began in 2002, when the creation of a South Downs National Park was first announced.
- [Arundel Museum](#) will be holding a special talk on 22 January about Sussex farming life in the 1950s. Ian Everest's interest in the history of Sussex farming dates to his childhood, which was spent living on a 1,000-acre downland farm on which his father worked. In his teenage years, Ian worked on farms in the River Ouse Valley before attending Plumpton Agricultural College. His talk looks at life on Manor Farm, Bishopstone, during the 1950's and is based on a cine film made by farmer John Willett.
- How do volunteers help conserve a beautiful river to help wildlife? Find out as the River Meon Conservation Volunteers hold a [special event](#) on 22 January to find out more about what they do and why. They'll also share their role in citizen science and how the group was formed, with a special focus on its importance to Bishops Waltham and the River Hamble.
- The [Big Garden Birdwatch](#) returns this month! Sit back, relax and watch your garden birds for an hour over the weekend of 23 to 25 January. Whether you're a newcomer or a regular, it all counts. The RSPB would love to know what you see so please remember to report your sightings online!

