

# ONE WALK FOUR SEASONS

EXPLORE YOUR LOCAL PATHS ALL YEAR ROUND AND YOU'LL  
COME TO LOVE THEM MORE THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE...

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Peter's all-season walk takes him  
and faithful friend Capone round  
Chichester Harbour.



When I first saw it, my heart went into my mouth and then dropped into my stomach as I realised I was looking at a pterodactyl. Loping away from a low branch, its massive wings somehow rolling up and then unrolling in an unbelievably slow movement, it rose gracefully, magnificently away from me.

Regaining my composure, with my trusty Kodak digital at my side, I still managed to miss the chance of a great picture and Capone, my faithful, four-legged companion, just looked at me in disgust before doing his own loping away towards the sea.

Ever since then I've been hunting the heron and its mate, for there are two of them cruising the farmland, woods and foreshore between Emsworth, Warblington and Langstone. I've seen it perhaps half-a-dozen times in as many months, once just three feet above my head as I walked down one of Havant's more exclusive residential avenues. Every time I fumble for my camera, it uncurls those great wings, folds its neck up in dinosaur style and leaves me in disarray.

Every day produces something remarkable in this little haven on the south coast. Across Chichester and Langstone harbours the Portsmouth Spinnaker tower glints bright white in the sun. Crowds of brent geese grow bigger and individually fatter by the day and the oystercatchers screech low along the water's edge, swinging in formation to display the dazzling zig-zags along their backs.

When the brent geese first came in from their



Peter Reynolds: just 'a lachrymose old Welshman'?

summer home in the Arctic, they would gather in one huge flock of perhaps 500 in a field just above the sea. Capone would put them up in a force five south-westerly and they would head seaward in a cacophony of honking, flapping wings getting them nowhere, directly into the gale. I would walk on with them above and all around me, hanging motionless, creating a world of noise and feathers and wind and dog and insignificant me.

In stark contrast is the peace of Warblington cemetery, where a piteous children's section contains gravestones decorated with teddies, windmills, rubber ducks, Rupert and Peter Rabbit. Every day that two-minute walk touches me but never more so than on Christmas morning. Then, the really remarkable thing was the intense, beaming smiles that both the bereaved mothers gave me as they tended their child's grave. Walking into the south-westerly that morning made my eyes water as never before.

Apart from herons, the main focus of our daily rambles is sticks.

Of course, sticks come in all shapes and sizes but Capone prefers something, shall we say, robust. I suppose the ideal is about four feet long and perhaps three inches thick, but the crucial factor in stick style is the way it is carried. It must be held at one end, not in the middle. I think Capone believes this is more flamboyant in the same way that a quiff or fringe sweeps back or a fighter pilot's scarf flies to one side. Of course, even the most perfectly fashioned stick is

**"EVERY DAY PRODUCES SOMETHING REMARKABLE  
IN THIS LITTLE HAVEN ON THE SOUTH COAST."**

Heading for glorious Warblington.







Warblington cemetery.



Capone eyes up his next stick.



Capone: 'his sheer joy at being perfectly expresses the purpose of a dog.'

merely debris on the ground until I have thrown it. Then it becomes the most exciting, the most important thing in life and if it is thrown into the sea he would swim until he sank before giving up the chase.

One of our favourite walks is Thorney Island, all the way around – an eight-mile walk, preferably in a force eight gale. Out along a one-mile dyke, straight as an arrow, then pass through the MoD security gate, keeping to the public footpath beyond. The oystercatchers are still here on Thorney although in much smaller numbers, but another mile or so on and we put up a roe deer. It ran and Capone ran too but made my heart burst with pride when he responded immediately to the signal, dropped and looked back at me. We watched it run 300 yards inland and continued on our way.

As you approach the most southerly point on Thorney you see to your right the end of Hayling Island and to your left, East Head at the tip of West Wittering. Between is open ocean and a direct line to the Falklands. When we first made this journey, I spotted an Army Land Rover ahead and we found two men laying the foundations for a bench in memory of a "fallen comrade". Now, the bench is there. It's not the usual railway sleeper design. It's much more elegant and the inscription reads "In memory of Steve Jones, 264 (SAS) Signals Squadron & the crew of 'Hilton 22'."

These were our boys, shot down just north of Baghdad three years ago. If I had a son who died a

#### YOUR GUIDE TO THE SEASONS

Get under the skin of your local walks by identifying the change of the seasons. Nature's Calendar, on the Woodland Trust website, details key dates in the natural world, including the first sightings of snowdrops, frogspawn and swallows, to the first tint of autumn leaves. Log on to the site to register your own observations from your walks, and keep a record so you too can become a local guru on nature's calendar in your patch. For more information, visit [www.naturescalendar.org.uk](http://www.naturescalendar.org.uk)

hero in the service of his country, I could think of no more poignant and intense place to remember him amidst the wind, the sea, the sky and the solitude.

Capone and I duly honoured their memory and I sat for a cigarette. He accorded me the privilege of sitting beside me on the bench for such a special occasion. We remembered them, lachrymose old Welshman that I am.

At home in the back garden lies a pile of sticks, proudly retrieved, collected and preserved. Out there in the wind and the rain a pile of sticks fashioned into a bench remembers much more than just another walk with the dog.

As the seasons change, new scenery brings out a burst of fresh exuberance from Capone. He gallops across the fields, his energy enough to lift any mood. His sheer joy at being perfectly expresses the purpose of a dog. He and the intimate experience of a walk with my best friend is the most powerful of therapies requiring no theory or structure, just the doing of it. Perhaps more like a meditation or prayer.

As spring accelerates towards summer, the grasses and nettles in the hedgerows are lush. The trees turn a deeper green and fill out their magnificent silhouettes, but the earliest crop in Emsworth is the forest of masts that sprouts everywhere you look.

Real weather returns to crown a long hot bank holiday weekend and end the tedious republic of sunshine. Capone has to be dragged from the house because although he will plunge into an icy sea in the



depths of winter, a little gentle drizzle is enough to deter him from leaving his lap of luxury inside.

The rain doesn't just come down in sheets. It is like unravelling great bales of sailmaker's cloth. The wind takes it and flaunts it and slaps you in the face. Already my trousers are soaking to the knees but now Capone's tail is up. There's a job to be done. The inflatable kayaks and lilos are back in the garage and high water beckons for the boards with their storm sails and the bold knights of the sea who will skim the waves and charge the surf. This is the glory of battle with the elements. Courage and determination and persistence and rain and wind, even if, alas, no sleet and snow.

Spring has some advantages for only in full leaf can the trees deposit an extra six or seven gallons with each gust. The gulls soar. The rooks rise and fall and the odd saturated pigeon flutters from the branches.

Across the fields the maize shoots that have been reaching for the sun droop and sag under the weight of water but you can almost hear their roots sucking the moisture, preparing themselves with the energy to burst upwards once again when the skies clear.



The beast understands nothing of this but he knows it all. At last, puddles are no longer avoided but splashed through. The spring returns to his step and the tail is held high and proud and wags uncontrollably as the sticks are found and thrown and retrieved.

The most extraordinary things happen every day to those of us that indulge in this most universal hobby of walking the dog. With age the individual senses diminish in power, but I find that there is a greater discernment between them. I hear birdsong now like I never used to. The pleasure of the birds, the sea, the sky, the light and the breeze is all so much more intense and the unreserved, joyous companionship of my dog makes it all the more so.

In high summer we had high drama here as a bottlenose whale became stranded near Langstone bridge. The world, his wife, TV crews and dozens of photographers invaded our space. Actually there were probably about 100 turning the sea wall in front of Langstone millpond into a grandstand. To be honest, I don't understand the fuss. I see more interesting, exciting and tragic things nearly every day in

**"THE PLEASURE OF THE BIRDS, THE SEA, THE SKY, THE LIGHT AND THE BREEZE IS SO MUCH MORE INTENSE."**



Now where did our  
pterodactyl get to?



Chichester Harbour. I don't think anyone turned round and noticed the 30-odd little egrets roosting in the trees just a few yards behind them. The television crews certainly didn't.

That same morning that the sorry whale paddled up the channel between Thorney and Hayling, Capone and I were on the other side of Thorney, in our latest favourite spot, waist deep in the saltmarsh grasses. Our friend the heron came into sight and I was delighted to see that his mate was there, too.

The birds took off and escaped me but then I saw them both on the other side of the river bank. Then I saw double, for perhaps 60 or 70 yards in front of me were four herons casually watching the water and thinking about breakfast.

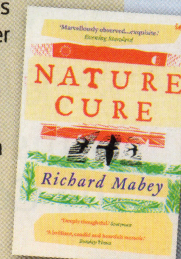
This was a truly remarkable sight. Much more interesting to me than a enormous, sad mammal lying in the mud and I managed to record it at the limit of my zoom lens. This was my scoop, captured in glorious Kodak colour while the grandstand roared and cheered and applauded. All Capone did was look at me and say, "Now get on and throw that stick!"

## LOCAL HEROES

Meet five writers whose work showcases their passion for walking their home turf...

### RICHARD MABEY

With a powerful claim to being the best nature writer in Britain today, **Richard Mabey** has a string of critically acclaimed books under his belt, including 'Birds Britannica' and 'Flora Britannica'. But it's 'Nature Cure', his moving, insightful account of overcoming depression by re-engaging with nature on a small, local scale in Norfolk that truly reveals the power of opening your eyes to the countryside's astonishing daily performance through the year. 'Nature Cure' by Richard Mabey, £7.99, Pimlico.



### PENNINE PENURY

Pennine farmer **Hannah Hauxwell** hit the national consciousness in the early 1970s when the TV series 'Too Long A Winter' revealed the poverty and hardship of her life as a hill farmer, living without running water or electricity. Her passion for her remote patch of North Yorkshire shone through, engaging millions of viewers.

### A VET'S LIFE



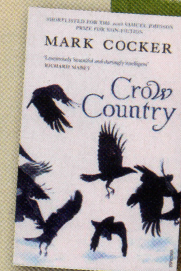
It's a very blurred line between fact and fiction for Britain's most famous vet, **James Herriot** (aka Alf White). Names may have changed, and poetic licence exaggerated events and experiences, but there's no doubting the truth below of a vet's year-round working experience in the Yorkshire Dales.

### A YEAR ON EXMOOR

In a world of identikit presenters, **Johnny Kingdom** stands out like a sore thumb. Here's someone born and bred on his patch who was living, breathing and walking Exmoor long before the cameras discovered him. The result is a profound, innate understanding of Exmoor on foot, a lifetime's accumulated knowledge that dazzles like a lighthouse. And he still shares it on his Exmoor Safaris. For more information, see [www.johnnykingdom.co.uk](http://www.johnnykingdom.co.uk)

### CROW COUNTRY

Of all the birds, in all the towns, in all the world, to paraphrase 'Casablanca', **Mark Crocker** chose the crow family to study. He developed an obsession with where, how and why the birds worked, rested and played in a roost near his Norwich home. 'Crow Country', by Mark Crocker, £8.99, Vintage.



## TELL US ABOUT YOUR PATCH

Are you in love with an all-seasons walk on your doorstep? Email us about it at [country.walking@bauermedia.co.uk](mailto:country.walking@bauermedia.co.uk)