

Growing Up Wild



Stories of wild childhoods
growing up in Suffolk

DID YOU GROW UP
Wild?

Growing Up Wild

From attempts to navigate rivers in barrels, to tales of beachcombing and apple scrumping, nearly 100 stories of childhoods spent outside have been collected as part of Suffolk Wildlife Trust's Growing Up Wild campaign.

Launched in May 2016, the project had clear aims: to create a unique historical archive to share with future generations for many years to come; a memory bank that could remind us of the importance of the natural world and inspire children, families and adults to explore, learn and play. To reconnect.

It couldn't have come at a better time. The results of a 2015 YouGov poll, commissioned by The Wildlife Trusts, highlighted a gradual loss of contact with nature during childhood.

Despite recognition of the importance of nature in childhood and of the health and social benefits to be derived from time spent outdoors, the signs are that a generation of children is growing up physically and emotionally removed from the natural world. A total of 57% of parents thought their children spend less time outdoors than they did, while 37% of

children had reportedly not played outside by themselves in the past six months. One in three children were said to have never climbed a tree.

We hope the following selection of stories of winters and summers-gone, which also captures the voices and characters that lived them, will help to bridge this disconnect, while also evoking a sense of the Suffolk landscapes that the Trust is working so hard to protect and restore. Growing Up Wild is both our past and our future. ■

All of the stories collected in the project can be viewed or listened to at www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org



This project was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, with additional support from Essex & Suffolk Water's Branch Out fund.



ANDY HAY RSPB IMAGES
DANIEL INGOLD ALAMY



The Photographer John Ferguson



John Ferguson is a documentary, lifestyle and portrait photographer who has worked with national newspapers, magazines, NGOs and design agencies. He has travelled to more than 60 countries to cover everything from disasters and conflicts to major sporting events.

Now based in Suffolk with his family, John continues to work on both large and small-scale projects, tackling both with the same objective: to produce relatable images that tell stories, that are approachable, intimate and unaffected.



Aubrey Warren

Aubrey Warren was born in Stanton, where he still lives. A volunteer for Suffolk Wildlife Trust at Knettishall Heath, he remembers landscapes dripping with flowers and full of wildlife.

I grew up in Stanton. Born there, never moved anywhere since. I grew up in an old cottage. The heath was completely different then, more open. There are lots of trees now.

We used to come to Knettishall Heath, a big gang of us on our bikes. We spent a lot of time on the river and walking all along the river and, like kids did in those days, we'd catch fish and have 'em in a jar and sort of look at them. Well, that's how you learnt about things, you know.

My father was only a farm worker so money was very tight, but we were quite happy and made our own fun. They were simple games. We made bows and arrows out of sticks and feathers and played Cowboys and Indians.

It was a very basic sort of life but we enjoyed it. It's just a shame that the kiddies these days don't get the type of fun that we had. It was just different then.

Farming was very labour intensive. Everything was done by hand. We helped with thrashing the stacks in harvest or cutting the sheaths. We saw harvest mice

nests in the corn. And shrews, or rannies as we call them in Suffolk, would be scurrying about. The old boys on the farm used to say "you want to put some string round the bottom of your trousers boy or you'll have those rannies running up your leg"!

We rode on the Suffolk Punch horses and they even allowed us to take them out when I was about fourteen, fifteen. I sat on it side-saddle and picked up sugar beet tops or mangel-wurzels for the cattle.

A lot of species were common then. Water voles we saw everywhere, in a ditch down the side of the field and in ponds, which were in every field then. Great crested newts, with their lovely orange bellies. We used to fish them out and put them in a jar. Stag beetles. We had hedgehogs snuffling round the garden. Skylarks would be hovering over practically every field. We had lovely open meadows, all covered with buttercups, saxifrage, daisies... lovely. But when you see it now you have to stop and take it all in because you don't see it very often, but then it was the normal thing.

Aubrey at Knettishall Heath where he used to play with his friends as a child and now volunteers.



We rode on the Suffolk Punch horses at the farm when I was about 14... picked up sugar beet tops or mangel-wurzels for the cattle.





Charlotte Mercer

Whether she was roaming free in the countryside or exploring the marshes by her Newbourne home, water was at the heart of Charlotte's childhood.

I grew up as one of six children in the heart of the village of Newbourne in the 1950s/60s. We had what I believe was an idyllic childhood free to roam for miles in the countryside all around us, mostly in the marshes between home and Hemley.

Whinny Hill (now SWT Newbourne Springs) was also a favourite, where we played Poohsticks and picked wildflowers for later pressing and sticking into scrapbooks. In the marshes we picked enormous bunches of primroses and blue and white violets, which grew in such huge swathes that you couldn't see where we had gathered them.

We went bird nesting and were allowed to take just one egg from each nest which we took home excitedly and watched our father 'blow' them for keeping in a special box, which we treasured.

We always looked everything up in our little Observer books so we grew up knowing the names of all the flowers, trees, plants, birds and their eggs and song, insects, butterflies, animals and pond life.

Our 'playground' had a stream running through and we fished for tiny sticklebacks by dangling jam jars tied with string in the fresh clear water. We took frogspawn home in jars and watched them turn into baby frogs which we put back in their habitat.

Catching grasshoppers was another challenge we got very good at but we let them go immediately, only to catch another within seconds.

We always treated every creature with great care and respect.

Charlotte and her family enjoying a summer walk at Newbourne Springs.



We played Poohsticks and picked wildflowers for later pressing and sticking into scrapbooks.



DID YOU GROW UP
Wild?



Claire Ward

Claire grew up playing on her aunt and uncle's smallholding in Earl Soham. She now encourages her young son, Jack, to enjoy the outdoors as she used to and to make nature an important part of her family's everyday life.

I used to love watching the seasons go past. Springtime, the bulbs coming out, leaves coming into bud. Brilliant! And waiting for the blossom to come on the trees. Waiting for the first swallow, wondering if they were ever going to come, then when it did you knew spring had arrived. Listening for the cuckoo. We would stand in a hut on the farm and listen for it and when we heard it we were, like, "Yes!"

In autumn there were so many leaves. I remember we used to rake 'em, rake 'em, rake 'em. The others would say, "Claire, are you helping?" and I'm like, "Yeah, yeah, I'm helping, I'm helping!". But I would sweep them into a massive pile and then kick them around. Not helping, just making a mess and having fun.

In wintertime, getting so filthy in puddles was the best thing ever. I can remember running towards my uncle once and slipping in a puddle, getting drenched.

With having Jack now, I'm really aware of the wildlife around us. When we walk down to the town I say "Can you hear that pigeon, coo, coo, coo?", or I will point out a blackbird or make a wish with a dandelion. I just talk about it all the time with him. I hope that as he gets older he will think it's really cool. I think it's so important, and if you don't point things out to them when they're young, they're not going to find it important, are they? They'll just think it doesn't matter, but it does matter. Well, it does to us, in our family anyway.

Me and Jack are always outside so I'm hoping he's going to learn like I did. That's my plan anyway! We pick up stones in the garden and we make piles of twigs. We found a chrysalis the other day and I was trying to explain to him what it was. He didn't really know what I was saying, but I was telling him anyway because one of these days he will understand.

Claire and her son Jack exploring the family smallholding in Earl Soham, where Claire spent time as a child.



I used to love watching the seasons go past. Springtime, waiting for the first swallow, listening for the cuckoo.



DID YOU GROW UP
Wild?



Paul Watkin

A childhood outdoors, whether exploring the woods near Bungay or fishing for water boatman, has stayed with Paul his entire life.

I suppose living in the country I've always had an interest in nature but I'm not a great birdwatcher. I know a house sparrow and I know a blackbird and I know a thrush but I'm not an ornithologist – I'm not a great person who can identify plants – but I suppose as children we were taught various things by the teachers at school about nature and they're there for the rest of your life.

I used to roam like kids do with a stick and sometimes the dog over fields and fields and fields and play with the neighbouring kids at Manor Farm St. Johns. I remember the old lady there, Mrs Debenham. She used to bake buns and Patrick, her son, and me used to go off into the wood with a bun each and sit under a tree and eat these buns and go-kart down the hill and just be in the countryside.

Wherever you are in the country, nature's all around you so you see things and you

watch things change as the seasons go round.

I used to have mates up from school and I remember they built a raft to go on our pond and I stood on the bank and watched four of them sail out across the pond. The whole thing collapsed and they ended up covered in mud and my mother had to wash them before they went home – that was funny – we'd have been about 11 or 12.

In the spring term, our teacher, Mrs Powell, used to take us down to the river so we'd all walk, which isn't far from that school (Bungay School) through the staithe, and across the bridge at the weir, and then across the Falcon Meadow to a tributary of the Waveney. There we would go dipping and find snails and caddis flies and see the whirligig beetles and the diving beetles and the water boatman and she'd teach us about them.

Paul, with his sister Rosemary, at Falcon Meadow in Bungay, where he remembers fishing with a homemade fishing net.



Wherever you are in the country, nature's all around you, so you see things and watch things change as the seasons go round.





Robert Dunnett

Growing up on a farm in Great Bealings, Robert recalls his early swims in the 'Deep Hole' and how he forged freindships that have lasted a lifetime.

I was born on 4th June 1935 at Grotto Farm in Great Bealings and when my father and his brother-in-law bought the coal business in about 1938, we moved to Little Bealings. The war came along but I was lucky, all of us were lucky, we had a fairly normal life.

We had the farm at our disposal. We would climb all through where the stables were, where the cows were kept. I can remember great piles of cow cake (cattle feed!) they called it, I think, and we used to eat this. And also down in the river where the cows were on the field we would swim. There was a place called the Deep Hole which was under a great tree root and there were cows upriver doing what cows do and we were downriver swimming in all of this! It was a silly place, really, you could get yourself caught in the tree roots if you weren't careful but that was where we basically learned to swim.

They were super days. We would go out in the morning with a bottle of orange juice and a halfpenny packet of broken crisps

and some sandwiches and we would be down there all day long. They really were halcyon days.

The village was like a big family. I was an only child but I had a friend, Keith Steward. Keith and I met at the age of three and at the age of just over eighty we are still best of friends. That's a lovely relationship. 'We' was really the whole village, maybe not all at once. If we did get together all at once it was sort of a little village army – beware! The farm really was the hub of us. If you wanted to meet somebody and you didn't know where they were, go down the farm.

But even then while we were down there you could hear aircraft at Martlesham Heath, which had Royal Airforce up there till 1942 and then the Americans came in in 1943 and stayed until 1945 and you could hear the difference in the aircraft but there we were playing in the river and swimming and enjoying ourselves and the war was probably about a mile and a half away.

Robert (in the red coat) and his childhood friend, Keith, in Great Bealings where they grew up.



Our favourite place was the Deep Hole which was a hideaway under a great tree root.

DID YOU GROW UP
Wild?





Shirley Daley

Much of the heath where Shirley used to play near Ipswich has now gone but she remains bewitched by the skylarks that hung in the air of a never-ending summer.

We used to go Holywells Park in the summer holidays with a bottle of lemonade and when you ran out of drink there was a big tap in the park that you could fill it up with. And we had jam sandwiches, which was all anybody ever had, everyone was the same.

We just used to play in the park all day, or we'd go up the heath. There's not much left of the heath anymore – Rushmere Heath – and I used to lay on the hill and look up at the blue sky and the skylarks... and just laying there and looking at them, and just wondering what it was like to fly, really, and I hope I find out next year, because before I'm 71, I'm going to jump out of a plane!

In the summer we used to wear a cardigan on the first of May, for May Day at school, and after that you didn't wear a cardigan until you went back to school in September.

Because the weather was always nice. If we got wet, we dried out on the way home anyway.

My older brother used to come to the park with us, so he was always around. So, we were never in fear of anything, even when I cut my foot. The parkie was there to help and it was just a lovely place to be, and we never used to bother mum all day. We'd only go home when we were hungry, when the jam sandwiches ran out! It was just the long, long days of summer, it was beautiful. Good memories.

My highlight in nature... in my life... it was the skylark. I just love the skylarks, and it was just the way they used to take off, and just hang in the air and sing – it was the sound of summer. And you knew that once they came, you'd got a long hot summer, and it was just lovely.

Shirley at Holywells Park in Ipswich, where she remembers listening to skylarks.



We used to play in the park all day. We took lemonade and we had jam sandwiches, which was all anybody ever had.



DID YOU GROW UP
Wild?



Tony West

From dawn to dusk, Tony spent his childhood days on Carlton & Oulton Marshes. He remembers long days jumping dykes and swimming in the river's green flows.

Well, I've been on these marshes (Carlton & Oulton Marshes) all my life, and the things we used to do – well, I can't tell you everything we used to do down here. We used to come first thing in the morning and it'd be late at night before we used to go home. No one used to worry. It never gets dark now, not like it used to. I mean, years ago it used to be completely black but now it don't get dark, it don't get dark at all.

We used to go across the old willow trees that overhang the dyke. We used to walk across them and go out on the island out there near the river at the bottom of the hill and you could walk across the river there on shingle. That's where we used to go swimming years ago.

We used to follow the leader on the dykes here, jumping dykes. Whatever the leader

jumped, the other boys used to follow and we used to have fires and strip off and dry our things off before we used to dare go home.

Up there in the Landspring Dyke it used to be full of watercress. Armfuls of that we used to get and take it into the shops, two or three shops, in Oulton Broad – they used to take it off us and we used to get a few pence for it. Then later on we used to come down here, taking mother's linen basket on a little old buggy, and pick mushrooms, get that full of mushrooms and take that down Oulton Broad and sell it at these two or three shops and some more we used to take into Lowestoft on the bike... I was only about eight or nine years old. It was all during the war. This all happened during the war.

Tony revisiting his favourite boyhood fishing spot at Carlton Marshes.



We used to follow the leader on the dykes at Carlton, jumping dykes. We got wet and lit fires to dry our things off before we used to dare go home.

DID YOU GROW UP
Wild?





Mandy Inniss

Slugs, newts, lizards and frogs were all taken home in Mandy's pockets after a day roaming outside near Drinkstone.

I grew up in a small village called Drinkstone.

We'd just cart whatever we could find – big logs, trees, anything that we could find. Corrugated iron was quite a good one once we – put that in the hedge in a ditch and we'd made a really good makeshift like Nissen shelter thing and it was all going really well until the farmer came along and decided to cut the hedge and we thought we'd better make a run for it.

We just used to hang out really and we'd have a small radio – we were quite well equipped! We could just be in there for as long as we wanted and it was our place to be. My mum was always really good and would let everyone round the house but it's not quite the same as having your own secret place to go.

Down the bottom of Cross Street there was a house that used to have a walnut tree so I used to go and pick those and end up with really brown stained hands because you open up the cases and they just stain your hands so bad. We'd walk miles for hazelnuts

then climb up and pick the hazelnuts from the trees. Walnuts and hazelnuts were always, always the favourites. I loved that time of year.

We used to collect loads of stuff – every year we'd have frogspawn. We'd just fish it out and keep it at home. I would find newts and lizards and keep those at home in old washing up tubs. Once I'd come home from playing out and (my mum always remembers this) I was watching television and all of a sudden I fished in my top pocket and brought out a frog. And big slugs like the big leopard slugs – I used to keep those; loads of different stuff, I always had. Birds I'd bring home that were injured and things like that.

Sometimes we used to just take some sandwiches for lunch. I mean I'd just sit out in a cornfield somewhere, nice and quiet with a little radio and I'd just sit there for ages, listening to music on my own, just being – and it was just nice.

Mandy in Drinkstone reminiscing about her childhood adventures and with the chickens; at The Field of Dreams farm in Thurston, where she sometimes volunteers.



We had our own secret place to go – we could just be in there for as long as we wanted and it was our place to be, you know.





Peter Underdown

Now a volunteer at Carlton Marshes, Peter remembers exploring the Broads as a child, catching eels, watching wading birds and getting milk fresh from the cow.

All my life really I've been doing something up here at Carlton, whether it was fishing or walking or bird-watching, or just watching the animals, all sorts of things really. My mother used to bring us up here for picnics, because back in them days, there wasn't much to do. It was just after the war, so just to get out used to be a big thing. My mother used to like nature and birds, so that's where I got it from.

When I was old enough to come down here on my own, when my mum used to let me out, I used to walk for miles. That's all you did in those days was walk and, well, do what kids do. I used to go sticklebacking and catch eels under the bridge, fish, and all sorts.

When I came home from school I used to come here because Carlton Centre used to be a farm and I got friendly with the cowman. I used to help him. He used to let me get the cows off the field and bring them into the farm, and we all used to milk 'em, and after that, he'd give me some milk out of the filter. That was fresh. It was so creamy that I can remember it to this day. And then I used to wander off and find something else to do.

There used to be more wading birds down here than there is now. I can remember there were hundreds on the marshes, in a flock, the plovers and godwits and all sorts.

Peter at Carlton Marshes, where he played as a child and now volunteers.



All my life I've been doing something up here at Carlton. I used to go sticklebacking and catch eels under the bridge.





Nicki Dixon

Walking from her home to swim with cows and fish for tiddlers, the River Stour still casts a spell on Nicki.

I just love these meadows (Sudbury Water Meadows). As a child we'd leave home early in the morning, pack up our sandwiches and we'd be here all day. We swam in the river while the cows were in there and dried off on the banks. We loved it. We spent a lot of our summer holidays here watching the cows walk past. We grew up here as well as growing up at home.

We fished for tiddlers over near the weir with our fishing nets and our buckets and we spent a lot of time outdoors here and to me there's nowhere else quite like it because it's very natural. I love manicured gardens but to me this is proper outdoors.

It's quite a walk for little legs. It's probably just under a mile from where we lived but we tended to cut across Friars' Meadow, which is off Cornard Road, and just follow the old railway track (which is the most beautiful walk, especially on a hot day because it's very sheltered) and pop out just

behind the fire station and make our way across to the water where we'd lie in the sun and we'd bring books, picnics, cheese and pickle sandwiches and a bottle of water – very easily pleased. We just loved being outdoors and we still do.

I'm the only one of the four of us who lives locally still but when they come and visit the first thing they say is, "Can we go down to the river?" So, it casts that spell over people. The River Stour is a very special river.

If we were out all day – the chip shop sadly isn't there any more – we would wander back with a bag of chips. We'd get sunburnt a little bit and we'd be covered in stuff from the river but it was idyllic. My parents came down to Suffolk from South Yorkshire. Much as I love South Yorkshire, I will be eternally grateful forever to them for moving here and for bringing us up in such a brilliant place.

Nicki looking out over Sudbury Water Meadows, which formed a big part of her childhood.

DID YOU GROW UP
Wild?



In the warmth of summer we would swim in the Stour and dry off on the banks as the cows grazed nearby.





Margaret Jay

Growing up in Lowestoft, Margaret remembers the magic of exploring the beach and foraging in hedgerows.

I have so many lovely memories from my childhood – walking along North Beach with my father, before breakfast, searching for coloured stones and shells to collect. My father told me that Fairyland was across the sea and that fairies would slide over the sea on rainbows and ride on dolphins, which made the beach seem like a magical place. I remember playing on the beach at the bottom of Pakefield cliffs and pulling bones out of the cliffs from the old graveyard which had disappeared over the cliffs!

I would go out on bike rides with friends and deliberately get lost. Or we would take a small dinghy out on the Broads – but I didn't dare tell my parents! I remember being dared to walk across a fallen tree lying over a pond – and actually doing it! I thought I was so brave. Then I remember

watching my brother collect caterpillars and putting them on the wall of a house belonging to an elderly neighbour for fun. And we collected frogs and tried to teach them to jump over my father's walking stick!

I would walk through the bluebell woods on Yarmouth Road and gather armfuls of bluebells. You could do that in those days.

So many memories... climbing trees in Normanston Park... gathering blackberries on the slopes of the North Denes. And the hedgerows were full of primroses in the spring. You don't see that now.

I remember walking through cornfields and watching skylarks climbing higher and higher and listening to their song. Summer's here!

Margaret in Gunton Woods, Lowestoft, enjoying the bluebells and sunshine.



**I remember being
dared to walk
across a fallen tree
lying over a pond,
walking through
bluebell woods and
hedgerows full of
primroses.**



DID YOU GROW UP
Wild?

