



wild swimming



what is it?

'Wild' swimming is the only term that covers what we're talking about. It's not just 'swimming' - that includes indoor swimming pools; it's not 'outdoor swimming' - that includes lidos and outdoor pools; it's not 'swimming in rivers and lakes', because it also includes seas, oceans, lochs, pools, reservoirs, gravel & sand pits, old quarries, estuaries, firths, ponds, streams and anywhere else you can swim in nature - and then the name would be a bit too long. Wild swimming nails it.

In the early 20th century there were outdoor swimming clubs all over the UK, but they slowly died out as indoor pools were introduced, and our waterways became more polluted. Back then it didn't seem eccentric to swim in nature, as it still doesn't on the continent.

It was a different story in the UK as the 20th century progressed. Local authorities discouraged it, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents wanted it stopped (but not mountaineering or hang-gliding), the Environment Agency issued an annual warning not to do it, and the Health & Safety Executive insisted on a life-guard on inland swimming spots.

The River and Lake Swimming Association was set up in 2003, and campaigning resulted in RoSPA changing their focus to alcohol and swimming, the EA stopping their annual press releases, and the HSE changing their life-guard policy to waters where swimming is actively encouraged. So the previous levels of discouragement aren't there any more.

Also, British water bodies are less polluted than they were 50 years ago, as manufacturing has moved to the Far East. Whatever that means for the global environment or our economy, it means cleaner rivers, lakes and coastal seas, which is one of the reasons that wild swimming is beginning to take off again - that and a desire to live more naturally moving slowly from the margins to the mainstream.



what are the benefits?

- don't need a bricks & mortar pool, with all the embodied energy, electricity, heating, chlorine and habitat loss that that entails
- get closer to nature - you can easily swim with ducks and fish, and if you're lucky, with seals, or really lucky, otters; for some reason, wildlife seems less scared and more curious of us when we're in the water
- the more people who do it, the more people will want to protect our rivers, lakes and coastline
- health & happiness - the exercise will keep you fit, the fresh air healthy, and the exhilaration is a natural antidepressant
- pleasure - there's nothing like swimming in a loch, with the mountains and forests all around reflected in the water, with no noise except bird song and little splashes as you move through the water; read Roger Deakin's *Waterlog* for an account of the wonderful experiences you can have swimming wild
- it's free - you don't even need to buy any kit (unless you want to get a wetsuit for cold weather swimming)

what can I do?

Safety

- make sure you can swim well first; and if you are going to swim anywhere there might be boat traffic, it's a good idea to wear a brightly-coloured swimming hat, so that you can be seen
- don't swim in algal blooms, as they can cause allergic reactions, skin rashes etc.
- this may seem obvious, but don't jump or dive in if you can't see the bottom; walk gently into the water before swimming off

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- swim with someone else, in case you get into trouble
- there won't be life guards, and you may not be aware of hazards. Wild swimming is not completely risk-free, just like mountain climbing, canoeing or mountain biking. All you can do is try to understand the risks and not be reckless
- you may want to get a wet suit, as it keeps you warmer, which means you can stay in the water longer in cold weather, and it's safer as it makes you more buoyant.
- Weil's disease is carried by animals, and can be water-borne. In the UK there are around 50-60 cases a year, and 2 or 3 deaths (almost exactly the same as for lightning strikes in the UK). So there's a risk, but it's miniscule
- the sea can have rip currents that could carry you away - see wildswimming.co.uk/sea-safety for what to do

Legalities

In Scotland it's clear - you can swim anywhere. In England and Wales, it's much less clear, but it's certainly not illegal to swim in most open water.

Landowners next to watercourses own some of the bed, and angling clubs own fishing rights - but no-one owns the water, and that's all you're touching, apart from getting in and out. So check that there's public access to your entry and exit points, and you should be OK.

The Canal & River Trust don't allow swimming in canals or rivers used for navigation. See the River & Lake Swimming Association for more info on legalities.

Practicalities

- see lowimpact.org/wild-swimming for interactive maps, guides and books for swimming places - or just ask locals
- just do it - it's not cold once you're in, and when you get out you feel tingly and warm all over
- most of us have had a dip in the sea in summer, but if you've never swum in a lake or river before, it may feel weird at first - the squelch of mud between your toes, water weeds brushing your legs, a duck floating past; but you'll get used to it
- wetsuits often have a little zip pocket for your car key / valuables, so that you don't have to worry about your belongings. Don't try it with an electronic car key though! If you want to keep things dry, there are companies that sell waterproof belts and pouches etc.

Other things you can do

Join the Outdoor Swimming Society or the River & Lake Swimming Association and help campaign for more access for wild swimmers. You can help wild swimmers even if you don't do it yourself, by:

- reducing water use. Extraction for agriculture, industry and domestic use is increasing as the economy and population grows. That means not only lower water levels, but also increased concentrations of pollutants.
- using eco-friendly washing-up and laundry liquids, cleaning products, soaps and especially dishwasher detergents. Non-eco detergents often contain phosphates, which end up in rivers via your drain, and cause algal blooms
- not using garden chemicals either, as they will be washed into groundwater and eventually into watercourses

resources

- see lowimpact.org/wild-swimming for more info, maps, links and books, including:
- Roger Deakin, *Waterlog*
- Daniel Start, *Wild Swimming; Wild Swimming Coast & Wild Swimming France*
- Kate Rew, *Wild Swimming*
- wildswimming.co.uk - online wild swimming community
- river-swimming.co.uk - River & Lake Swimming Association
- outdoorswimmingsociety.com - the Outdoor Swimming Society
- wildswim.com - interactive map of swimming spots all over the UK



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