**More info on outdoor swimming (after intro)**

What you might want to know if you have just started to swim outdoors. This note follows on from the introductory outdoor swimming sessions which gave a chance to have a go at outdoor swimming and gave some information about safety and other issues. Here are some answers to questions that we didn’t have time to answer on the day and those that people asked afterwards. It might also be of use to others. It can [be downloaded (Word.docx, 16 pages)](https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/More-info-on-outdoor-swimming-at-260823.docx)(updated 26 August 2023)

There is also a shorter and simpler key info [Q&A with key info on swimming safely on this website](https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/issues/swim-play-in-water-safely-q-a/), and as a note, [Swimming and playing in water safely Q & A (Word.doc, 5 pages)](https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/issues/swim-play-in-water-safely-q-a/), and as an illustrated PDF, (Download 4 page PDF, <https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/swim-play-safe-QA-illus-PDF-50.pdf>

Children might enjoy these activity sheets, [Learning To Be Safe In Water Children’s Activity Qs (Download PDF 2 pages)](https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Learning-To-Be-Safe-In-Water-childrens-activity-Qs.pdf) and [Learning To Be Safe In Water Children’s Activity As (Download PDF 1 page)](https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Learning-To-Be-Safe-In-Water-childrens-activity-As.pdf)

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*Note compiled by Imogen Radford, updated August 2023. I have included information and advice that I believe to be accurate and helpful, but I take no responsibility for swimmers. All outdoor swimmers must be solely responsible for making their own assessment as to the risks of any sort of any particular swimming or related activity, and are responsible for the safety of their children or dependants. Landowners or land managers need to do their own risk assessments.*

*Note provided as part of the Healing Waters project, part of BFER,* [*http://www.brecks.org/BFER/*](http://www.brecks.org/BFER/)*; the scheme also takes no responsibility for information included in this note.*

**1. Places to swim in the Brecks**

There are many places that people swim in the area: some traditional long-standing swimming holes and access points; some more recently discovered. The project will survey the rivers to look at these places, discover more, and discuss access issues with riparian landowners.

There is information about swim places in the Facebook group, **Outdoor Swimming in Breckland** (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/453608638711081/>). Other groups will have info in their area: see [the section on groups below](https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/issues/z-more-info-on-outdoor-swimming-september-2020/#local-swim-groups.). Some swimmers will know places but don’t share information about them publicly or widely, usually because they are too small to take the impact of a lot of visitors. There are also guide books and online or media articles.

**‘Safe’ places**

I prefer not to talk about safe places, as a place might be safe on one day and in some circumstances and not in others, for example a slow flowing river in summer could become a raging torrent of floodwater in winter. And it depends very much on the person who is going to swim, their capabilities, experience, strength etc. So it’s best to risk assess every place on every visit, and in relation to every swimmer.

Some places do have features that are more likely to make a swim safe for more people than others, however, such as shallow beach entry and exit points, slow or no current.

**Accessible swim spots**

Swim spots that have easier entry and exit points, and that are close to parking, will be more accessible to disabled people with mobility issues. There is a list in the Featured posts/Files in the Outdoor Swimming in Breckland group (see swim groups below), and it will be on this website soon.

**Where is it allowed?**

This is a complex issue, as outlined in the Outdoor Swimming Society web post, Is It Legal, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/is-it-legal/>:

“*In Scotland swimmers have a right to swim as part of their statutory right of responsible access to most land and inland water, in effect a Right to Roam. In England and Wales the law on inland swimming is less clear and more restrictive. However, there are many places with a legal right of access to swim, many more where there are very strong arguments that the right exists, and numerous places where swimming is accepted.*

*With the rising popularity of outdoor swimming and the importance of outdoor swimming being open to all, campaigns for clear rights on where people can swim and to enable swimmers to access more swim spots responsibly are more important than ever, and need the support of swimmers.”* <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/is-it-legal/>

It goes on to outline the key points about access and legality, and how to get involved and to campaign for better access, including backing moves to establish a Right to Roam similar to in Scotland which would include the right to access water. See also this post about access to rivers, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/the-3-percent-access-myth/>

Read more about access and liability here, <https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/issues/access-guide/>.

There are some places in the Brecks where you might find No Swimming signs, but where in practice swimming is tolerated by the landowner. Others where the landowner has stated their position, such as the [FAQ covering swimming and other activities at Lynford Water](https://www.forestryengland.uk/article/lynford-water-frequently-asked-questions). And others where it might not be acceptable.

The Facebook group, Outdoor Swimming in Breckland – or the other local groups listed below – is a good place to find out about places where swimming is 'allowed' and possible, or not appropriate.

**How can I find a suitable new swim spot?**

Start with places others have already found, as they can share information, tips and warnings – though you need to check it on the day as these could be out of date or conditions could change. You can also try to find places yourselves, by looking at detailed ordnance survey or satellite maps, and doing some research. See where footpaths and roads cross rivers, as these are often access points. The places you find will mostly be rivers, as there are very few lakes where you would be able to swim; most are kept private and usually used for fishing, sometimes for organised swimming or other events.

**Swimming in the sea and tidal waters**

This note doesn’t cover this, because the Brecks doesn’t have either of these, and it’s best to get information from those that know these better. You can find some information here, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/category/features/survive/seas/>.

Immerse Hebrides are a much respected organisation that have done a lot to support outdoor swimming, and they run sea safety training online, <https://www.immersehebrides.com/training>; next course October 2023, £40, booking link: <https://bookwhen.com/h2otraining?tags=swimming#focus=ev-susx-20231009200000>. You can join one of the Facebook groups with members that often swim at the sea.

2. **Swim safety assessment**

To keep yourself safe swimming outdoors, you can make these assessments:

**ASSESS YOURSELF**

* Ask yourself about your capability including how far you can swim and how strongly, how confident you are, what fears you have and what could make you panic – and whether you know what to do if you do panic.
* Consider how you are feeling on the day, including whether you are tired, your level of nutrition and hydration, whether affected by medication or alcohol – all the factors that could affect your swimming and how cold you could get and therefore how long you might stay in. Do you need particular clothing or equipment?
* Assess others if you are responsible for them, such as children or dependents – how are you going to be sure that they are safe? Ask young people if they understand about the risks and how to stay safe.
* See also a [Q&A with key info on swimming safely on this website](https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/issues/swim-play-in-water-safely-q-a/) for shorter and simpler key info. (Or download it, [Swimming and playing in water safely Q & A (Word.doc, 5 pages).](https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/issues/swim-play-in-water-safely-q-a/)

**ASSESS THE WEATHER**

* air temperature, water temperature, wind, sun, rain, mist or fog…
* Consider how it will affect your swimming, your safety and recovery if you get cold, and where to put your clothes.

**ASSESS THE PLACE**

* Where will you get out after your swim? This is much more important than where you get in. Will you be able to do so even if you are cold and your muscles and your hands are affected by the cold?
* Is there a current and if so how far will it wash you downriver and do you have an alternative exit point? Can you throw a stick in to see what the current is doing? Can you swim upstream first, or walk along the bank to assess before getting in?
* Is there fast/white water, a weir, or eddies (which are patches of water that flow in the opposite direction to the main current)? What would happen if you got into this water?
* Are there likely to be boats? If so how can you be sure that you are visible to them and can keep out of their way?
* Could there be litter or obstructions in the water or on the bottom?
* Is the water clear or silty and does it seem clean?
* Is it deep or shallow, is there mud or is the bottom firm where you get in and out?
* Are there weeds or wildlife, will they cause you a problem, or are you likely to disturb them or their habitat?
* Does the water seem clean?
* Are there issues about permission or access to the water?

Rachel Andrews has done a video on assessing a possible swim spot, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52DsoA4DzHk>

**3. Safety and outdoor swimming**

Article on swimming safety and why it matters, with a checklist and links, <https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/issues/swim-safety/>, and key tips on swimming safety from the Outdoor Swimming Society, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/summer-safety/>

**Equipment and clothing**

FOR SWIMMING

* The minimum you might need is a swimming costume. I would recommend swim shoes for most locations, especially rivers when you are not always sure where you’re going to get out and there might be litter or sharp stones. Beyond those, there is no need to buy a lot of expensive clothes and equipment. (I have also discussed this in [this article about getting started in inland outdoor swimming](https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/issues/getting-started-in-inland-outdoor-swimming/)).
* If you are swimming somewhere with boats a brightly coloured swim hat is a good idea, and a tow float makes you even more visible. Tow floats are also useful for putting things in. They are not a safety device and it is really important to realise that you shouldn’t rely on them for resting on if you’re not capable of swimming a particular distance, as discussed on the Outdoor Swimming Society website, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/tow-float-or-not-tow-float/>. Some use a buoyancy aid, especially if swimming alone.
* Many use goggles, and some snorkelling masks, to see under the water.
* Many choose to wear wetsuits. They give buoyancy and keep off some of the cold, but fitting can be an issue, as is taking them on and off. They don’t keep out all of the cold, or prevent cold water shock. You can wear a rash vest or leggings, neoprene tops, leggings or costumes, gloves, boots, socks or hats to help with the cold.
* Some like to have thermometers to gauge the temperature each time they go. They vary in cost and accuracy, but their main point is to help you learn what temperatures you can cope with and for how long each time you swim. Some have sports watches to measure distance, or ordinary watches to check how long they are in the water. Phones in waterproof covers do all this, take photos, and are there for emergencies as well. There are a range of waterproof cameras and video cameras.
* Some prefer to just immerse themselves in nature without a lot of stuff!

FOR CHANGING AND AFTERWARDS

* Changing outdoors is made easier by having some kind of changing mat and handy bag to put your clothes in, especially in cold and wet weather.
* There are a wide variety of changing robes. Some of these are very expensive, some not, or you can make your own.
* The key is to have warm clothes to put on afterwards – at least one extra layer, and more as the weather cools. Easy to put on garments are best. It is also good to be warm before you swim, as you take longer to cool when you get in the water.

**Risks of swimming – is it ‘dangerous’?**

Some talk about the dangers of swimming, or say that swimming is dangerous. It isn’t dangerous compared to many other activities, as discussed in this article, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/drowning-statistics/>. And it is more constructive to talk about the risks or hazards and how you can avoid them causing you a problem. You can download a Note outlining the main risks and how to avoid harm: [Risks to health and safety of outdoor swimming, and how to mitigate them (Word.doc, 5 pages)](https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Risks-to-health-and-safety-of-outdoor-swimming-and-mitigation-general-refOSBApr2020.doc)

**COLD**

The key risks are:

* cold water shock. Entering cold water quickly can cause an uncontrollable sharp intake of breath, an increase in breathing rate and an increase in blood pressure. It typically lasts up to a couple of minutes. To avoid problems, enter the water gradually and wait until your breathing calms down before swimming off. Read more here, <https://openwaterwheway.wordpress.com/2022/11/11/cold-water-shock/>.
* cold incapacitation or swim failure. Staying in cold water for too long if not used to it can make muscles weaker, making it harder to get out or to swim back if you are a long way from the shore. To avoid this, swim close to the shore, or do short trips out and back. Read more, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/cold-incapacitation/>, and <https://openwaterwheway.wordpress.com/2022/11/11/swim-failure-what-can-happen-when-you-get-too-cold/>. If you are not sure how long you can stay in then keep it shorter, gradually build up times in the water checking how you feel each time.
* hypothermia. Can occur if staying in cold water too long, and potentially afterwards – see after drop. Read more, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/understanding-hypothermia/>
* after drop. This happens when you get out of the water because your body continues to cool for up to 20 to 30 minutes. This is why you can find you are shivering a few minutes after you finish swimming, which is the body’s way of generating heat. The important thing is to get dry, dressed and warm quickly after swimming, ideally before the shivering starts. Warm drinks, snacks and moving around gently can help warm you up, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/warming-up-after-drop/>.

See also these articles on Cold, <https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/issues/zcold-and-other-risks-of-swimming-more-info/> and <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/tips-on-winter-swimming/>. Remember that everyone responds differently to cold water, and what you can do, and what someone else can do, will be different.

These techniques are very useful in responding to panic, including because of being cold – breathing out or floating on your back – RNLI advice, Float to Live: <https://rnli.org/pages/ppc/beach-safety/beach-safe-float>; and <https://sacdt.com/blog/2012/01/swimmers-basic-guide-to-understanding-and-avoiding-hyperventilation-and-panic/>

CRAMP

This is not caused by swimming after eating – there is no reason to wait 30 minutes before getting in the water – or by cold water, though it might be more likely when the water is cold.

Cramp can be caused by dehydration, excessive strain placed on leg muscles, such as when exercising, or a sudden restriction in the blood supply to the affected muscles.

To prevent it, make sure you’re well hydrated, warm up your muscles before going in to swim, and try to swim in a relaxed way, build up your swimming techniques and the time you can stay in the water before going far from shore.

If it happens when you are in deep water, try to relax and float on your back, massage the area if possible, or wait until it has passed.

**FEARS AND PANIC**

* Many people find they prefer to avoid weeds or take time to get used to them. Many fear fish, eels, harmless snakes such as grass snakes (which you can see swimming across the water sometimes). None of these creatures will harm you; they will all want to avoid you, and weeds are unlikely to be a problem (more on this below, [wildlife and weeds](https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/issues/z-more-info-on-outdoor-swimming-september-2020/#wildlife-weeds)).
* It is not at all unusual to fear what you can’t see under the water.
* Familiarity helps to deal with these fears. Some like to swim with goggles or masks and snorkels and see all the interesting wildlife and plants underwater. Some like to embrace the touch of the variety of water plants. And some just learn to accept that being in a natural environment includes these.
* If you fear being out of your depth and swimming across deep water, then stay in shallow water and build up your confidence and your capability to swim in deeper water. It is good advice if swimming in a lake or wide river to stay close to the shore unless you are confident that you can swim a distance and for a time in cool water. Cold incapacitation is a real risk, and panic can also be a problem. Build up gradually to meet these challenges.
* Trying not to panic, and knowing what to do if you panic, is important. Panic can be caused by sudden entry into cold water, weeds or fish or fear of them, cramp, or realising that you are out of your depth or far from shore but feeling tired or cold or both.
* Learn how to respond to panic, by breathing out or by floating on your back, <https://sacdt.com/blog/2012/01/swimmers-basic-guide-to-understanding-and-avoiding-hyperventilation-and-panic/>.
* Be familiar with RNLI advice, Float to Live, <https://rnli.org/pages/ppc/beach-safety/beach-safe-float>, and practice doing the starfish float so you know how to do it when you need it.

**OBSTRUCTIONS, SHARP OBJECTS, MUD**

* Look out for logs, branches, rocks, especially if you’re thinking of jumping into water or if you are travelling fast downstream.
* Be aware that you need to look every time you go.
* Watch out for litter, especially abandoned fishhooks or sharp edges of cans or broken bottles. Shoes can help.
* Look out for fishing hooks and lines tangled in branches.
* You can get stuck in mud, so try to find exit and entry points with a firm bottom. If you do get badly stuck, try not panic or move about too much, lie down and spread your arms and legs out wide, call for help.

**JUMPING AND DIVING**

Many people, especially young people, really enjoy jumping and diving into water. Most know how to do this safely, even though it can look a bit scary if you’re not used to seeing it. If you are thinking of doing it, be sure to check:

* if it is deep enough
* whether there are any rocks, branches, other obstructions or other people in the way
* if there is a current or fast water, where it will take you
* that you know where you’re going to get out
* that you know how to jump or dive suitably for the water.

And

* only jump once you are used to the temperature of the water (to avoid [cold](https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/issues/z-more-info-on-outdoor-swimming-september-2020/#cold-risks) shock).

**CURRENTS, WEIRS**

* Be aware of the current, make sure you know how fast it is and where you can get out if swept down further than you expect, and don’t panic.
* You can throw a stick in to see what the current is doing. We sometimes hear about ‘hidden currents’, but you can usually see movement on the water – look carefully and learn what it means. (There is a detailed book on this: How To Read Water: Clues & Patterns from Puddles to the Sea, by Tristan Gooley.)
* Swim upstream first, or walk along the bank to assess before getting in.
* Have an alternative exit point.
* Be aware of getting stuck in branches or other obstructions in a fast current, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/currents-and-eddies/>, and don’t use a tow float in these conditions.
* Generally avoid weirs. Some can be relatively safe in summer but be very cautious, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/understanding-weirs/>
* Be wary of fast/white water in a weir, waterfall or mill race. This can reduce buoyancy, send you underwater, and cause panic if unexpected.
* Eddies (patches of water that flow in the opposite direction to the main current) can take you in an unexpected direction, and this could take you into the fast water.

BOATS

* Know whether there might be boats, and be ready to keep out of their way.
* Make sure that you are visible to them, with a brightly coloured swim hat and tow float.

**WILDLIFE AND WEEDS**

* Weeds (or water plants) are much overstated as a risk – they won’t drag you down – but it is possible to get stuck in some types. Don’t dive or jump into an area thick with weeds. If you are swimming and becoming entangled in weeds then stop moving your arms especially in a circular motion, but instead gently float downstream or out of them, or use your feet to propel you. Or move your arms back the other way in a circle to free them from weeds. Try not to panic; read and practice what to do if you do panic.
* Reeds are often mentioned – these grow upright at the edge of the water (as do rushes), and there is nothing to fear from them. It is not easy to enter the water where there are reeds; best to find a beach or clear bank.
* It is very unusual for fish or other wildlife to be a problem. There are very rare reports of pike mistaking toes dangling in the water for food. Most fish will steer well clear of humans, and won’t nibble your feet!
* You might be lucky enough to see a grass snake swimming across the water. There is nothing to fear from these snakes. Adders rarely swim, and even if they do will keep away from you.
* Swans are much feared; but stories of them breaking arms are a myth. They have been known to behave aggressively toward swimmers, especially when they have cygnets (young) and if you get between a parent and its cygnets. Generally if you swim quietly past them you will not have a problem, and if they hiss at you either swim away, or if necessary stand up (literally) to them and they will generally back off.

**BATHING WATER QUALITY**

The Outdoor Swimming Society website article, Is It Clean?, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/is-it-clean/>, outlines the key issues about water quality, and suggests that you can generally tell whether water is clean enough you to swim. It includes a link to the Rivers Trust map of discharges from water treatment centres. See also <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/10-ways-to-stay-well-swimming/>. Generally the waters in the Brecks and East Anglia are clean for swimming in most places most of the time. (There are issues with pollution affecting wildlife, which swimmers all care about, but those are different issues to those that might make swimming unsafe.)

**Blue green algae** is generally only found in lakes and slow-moving rivers, though there are a few reports in the Brecks area. If you see it, it’s generally best to keep out of the water, though that’s not always necessary, <https://www.swimthelakes.co.uk/12915/blue-green-algae-and-swimming/>

It is very rare to develop **Weil’s disease**, but is worth being aware of and taking simple precautions. Cover any cuts with waterproof plaster, wash hands before eating, have a shower as soon as possible, and if you develop any flu-like symptoms within 4 weeks after swimming, see a doctor, tell them about swimming outdoors, and make sure they test for the infection. Read more, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/understanding-weils-disease/>. Note that although the leptospirosis bacteria is likely to occur anywhere – so there is no point in testing or saying that a particular place has it – swimmers are not at great risk of developing it. And it can come from any animal, rats or others, and in urban or rural areas.

**Pollution and bacteria.** Bacteria can be present, especially after heavy rain, downstream from cattle grazing and water recycling (sewage) outfalls if not properly treated. It’s generally safest to stay out of these parts of rivers after heavy rain, and sometimes after a long dry spell. See <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/is-it-clean/> and <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/understanding-rain-windy-weather/>.

There has been much coverage of this issue in the media over the last couple of years, and much of it is exaggerated and overstated about the potential risks to swimmers, especially when it comes to the relatively clean waters of East Anglia. There is no need to let it put you off swimming most of the time in most waters, and this article can help you assess and decide whether to swim and how to stay well when you do, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/10-ways-to-stay-well-swimming/>.

**Swimmer’s itch** is a rash usually caused by an allergic reaction to parasites that burrow into your skin, usually in shallow warm water. It is unpleasant but not dangerous. If you can, rinse with clean water after swimming and/or immediately briskly towel dry, <https://outdoorswimmer.com/blogs/swimmers-itch>. Unfortunately once you develop this allergic reaction you will be more susceptible to the problem, and the only way to avoid it is to avoid places when and where it occurs or to cover up with leggings or wetsuit. Swimmers also report that taking antihistamine can help.

**EMERGENCIES**

What to do if someone is in trouble in the water – DON’T jump in unless you are fully trained! Do: **Call for help, Call 999, Reach but don’t get in**

Instead immediately call for help, call 999, throw something or reach out with something they can grab onto, tell them to float on their back and try to calm and reassure them if they are panicking. Make sure you know where you are so that you can tell the emergency services. What3Words is now considered the best way to do this – get the app on your phone. No data or phone signal is needed to check the location.

The two key messages if anyone falls in or gets into trouble – Float to Live, <https://rnli.org/pages/ppc/beach-safety/beach-safe-float>; and Call, Tell, Throw from UK National Water Safety Forum <https://respectthewater.com/>, and see also info on what to do if someone could be drowning from RLSS, <https://www.rlss.org.uk/how-to-rescue-someone-from-drowning>.

LIFESAVING

We ran an intro to lifesaving session in the project. This focused on ways you can help yourself, by knowing about Float to Live. And ways you can help people if you see them in trouble in the water, particularly throwing in a rope or something that floats to give them something to help them stay afloat and to pull them to shore and keep them there. At the same time important to talk to them to keep them calm, and to call 999 if needed. The training emphasised that your priority is yourself – stay safe, help people in trouble in the water, but don’t put yourself at risk by getting in. There are lifesaving clubs in Bury, Ipswich, Southwold/Lowestoft and Cromer, if you want to find out more. Or you could consider training as an open water lifeguard or pool lifeguard (if you do the pool training you can do one more day to convert that into the open water qualification).

**4. Benefits of swimming**

Benefits are reported for physical and mental health, as outlined in this article, <https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/issues/zcold-and-other-risks-of-swimming-more-info/>, and in this post on the benefits of swimming and the outdoors generally, <https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/nature-outdoors-swimming-and-health/>.

Swimming can help physical fitness, and because it is not weight bearing it can be done by people unable to do other activities. Many report eased pains and aches, reduced blood pressure, increased immunity to colds and other infections, and increased energy and general fitness.

There is growing evidence and there are many reports of improvements and benefits for mental health, including reducing anxiety and stress, improving confidence and self-esteem.

Studies are being conducted on all of this, and will take place throughout all of the BFER projects including this one, with participants being asked to fill in questionnaires to help us understand these benefits.

Swimming is fun and enjoyable for all ages. It is affordable. It can provide a sense of community and bring people together who might not otherwise meet, or strengthen existing communities. Involving children and young people in swimming is a good way to get them active, and also to help them develop their understanding of how to deal with risk (more here <https://playsafetyforum.wordpress.com/resources/> ). And there can be economic benefits, as well, bringing people to areas and using local cafes, car parks and other facilities. Swimming locally is more environmentally friendly than driving to the coast.

**5. Care for the environment**

Outdoor swimmers generally have a very low impact on the environment, and most show sensitivity. The Outdoor Swimmers Code, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/outdoor-swimmers-code/>, outlines ways of respecting and protecting the environment, being considerate of other water users and local communities, and being responsible and safe swimmers, and this post looks at how we can avoid impacting adversely on nature in more detail, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/swimming-responsibly/>.

Biosecurity is about swimmers and other water users being careful not to spread invasive plants and animals between waterways, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/understanding-biosecurity/> and <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/spread-word-not-weed/>.

Swimmers and local communities often get involved in litter picking and other ways of caring for the local environment or the place where they regularly swim. This can be done formally or informally, but it’s important to follow safety guidance.

Anti-social behaviour by a minority of visitors to our swimming places, especially in summer when there are larger numbers, sometimes including people who haven’t had an opportunity to develop an understanding of how to respect natural rural spaces, can have an impact on the local environment and community. Educating people is a key aim of this project, which is bringing together swimmers and landowners to find ways to maintain access while minimising the impact. These problems are partly caused by there being far too few places that people know they can go to and that are suitable for the numbers. Another part of the project is to look at access. We would like to discover and make available more suitable swimming spots for the growing numbers of people living in the area who want to enjoy the countryside and the rivers.

**6. Who to swim with?**

**SWIMMING ALONE**

It is usually said that it is better not to swim alone, and that is probably true if you are just starting swimming outdoors. However, it is important to realise that each person takes responsibility for their own safety. Consider how likely it is that a problem might occur, and think about what difference having another person with you would make. Many swim alone and enjoy the peace and higher likelihood of seeing wildlife; some have no alternative. They will be especially careful about assessing and not taking risks. This is a useful article on swimming alone, <https://openwaterwheway.wordpress.com/2022/11/16/never-swim-alone-really/>

If you do swim alone, it is suggested that you let somebody know where you are, how long you’ll be and to check in when you return, though consider what would happen if you choose on impulse to do a longer swim. Consider taking a phone in a waterproof pouch.

**SWIMMING WITH OTHERS**

It is generally recommended that you swim with others. However, when you do it’s important to take responsibility for your own safety, not be swayed by peer pressure to do anything you wouldn’t do if you were alone such as staying in longer and go further than you are capable of. Nor to pressure other people to do something they are not comfortable with. And do consider having a discussion with the people you are swimming with and make a plan about what would happen in an emergency. Are they trained to rescue, and if not do they know the dangers of trying to do so? Who will call for help, who knows the location details? This is a useful read, [**https://openwaterwheway.wordpress.com/2022/11/16/group-swimming-the-joys-and-the-challenges/**](https://openwaterwheway.wordpress.com/2022/11/16/group-swimming-the-joys-and-the-challenges/)**, and this video,** ‘What makes swimming with a buddy safer?’ **is also useful,** [**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkaYoEzZacQ**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkaYoEzZacQ)**.**

**SWIMMING WITH CHILDREN**

Swimming and playing in water can be very enjoyable and is a healthy and affordable activity for children and families. The risks and benefits of swimming are similar for children as for adults, except that children might not yet have as much knowledge or ability to judge risk, so will need a few key points simply explained.

Some say that children should be warned of the dangers of swimming. However talking about risks that you can do something about can be a much better way of keeping them safe. They can learn safe behaviour, just as they can learn to cross the road safely.

Adults are responsible for their own safety and for the safety of any children or dependents, especially if they have limited swimming ability or confidence. Keep an eye on them, keep them close to you, and consider whether you have enough adults for the number of children.

Children are more susceptible to cold because they are smaller, but if they are having fun they might not realise how cold they are.

Some useful tips in these articles:

* Wild Swimming with Children: Is it Safe? <https://outdoorswimmer.com/blogs/wild-swimming-with-children-is-it-safe>
* Swimming with Toddlers, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/swimming-with-toddlers/>
* Wild Swimming Water Safety for Parents and Children, <https://www.hungouttodry.co.uk/wild-swimming-child-safety>
* There is also a shorter and simpler key info [Swimming and playing in water safely Q&A on this website](https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/issues/swim-play-in-water-safely-q-a/), and as a downloadable note, [Swimming and playing in water safely Q & A (Word.doc, 5 pages).](https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/issues/swim-play-in-water-safely-q-a/)
* Children might enjoy these activity sheets, [Learning To Be Safe In Water Children’s Activity Qs (Download PDF 2 pages)](https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Learning-To-Be-Safe-In-Water-childrens-activity-Qs.pdf) and [Learning To Be Safe In Water Children’s Activity As (Download PDF 1 page)](https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Learning-To-Be-Safe-In-Water-childrens-activity-As.pdf)

**7. Finding others and groups to swim with; what swimming to do next**

**Local informal (usually Facebook) swim groups**

The Facebook group, Outdoor Swimming in Breckland, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/453608638711081/>, is an ideal place to meet other swimmers and learn about swimming in the area. Many participants and would-be participants in the event have already joined and become active in the group. It allows people to arrange to meet up with more experienced swimmers who can show them places, pass on tips, and provide company and encouragement (especially valuable in the winter months). Swimming is always at your own risk, with no safety cover, and people expected to read up and ask advice in advance of swimming, in line with the Outdoor Swimming Society [Swim Responsibility Statement](https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/oss-swim-responsibility-statement/). When people meet they are sensitive about numbers at a location. There is lots of information about safety and locations within the group’s Files, Announcements and discussions.

This group works in a similar way, Wild Suffolk Swimmers, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/3294254064144996>. It has a lot of information about places to swim, with a map of locations, swim groups in the region, and has WhatsApp groups for swim meet ups and formal chat – join through the group.

There are a number of other groups in East Anglia, including these most local to the Brecks, and these all work in a similar way:

* The Crazy Ladies (women only) <https://m.facebook.com/profile.php?id=1498238353526181&ref=content_filter>
* Norfolk and Norwich Wild Swimmers <https://m.facebook.com/profile.php?id=420297512027829&ref=content_filter>
* Cambridge-ish Open Water Swimmers <https://www.facebook.com/groups/458637021178577/>
* Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Bluetits [https://www.facebook.com/groups/353046959286207/?ref=share](https://www.facebook.com/groups/353046959286207/?__cft__%5b0%5d=AZXZ7E3UTDJb083a8JZGkmMXrcgx1j435i_emkIg2xkxenBdjVOLjSP8N2rIVuESW547f_p1blIfNBRA9RN0DgbqoCJf42ftQovHDVtKdEjb2AyPePGUiZZA_AowCioEmEtLL2auPo_usX_I2ZXWzKN3&__tn__=-UK-R)
* Ely Outdoor Swimming <https://www.facebook.com/groups/449037527440843/about/>
* FENFINS Fenland Ely Nene Fabulous Inland Swimmers – covers March-Whittlesey-Peterborough (hidden group – you can make contact through their Facebook page, Fen Swims, <https://www.facebook.com/FenSwims/>)
* North West Norfolk Wild Swimmers <https://www.facebook.com/groups/950367182035769>
* Norfolk/Suffolk Water Tigers - Wild & Free Swimming <https://www.facebook.com/groups/620135429098606/>
* West & Mid Suffolk Bluetits, [https://www.facebook.com/groups/546794759826626](https://www.facebook.com/groups/546794759826626/?__cft__%5b0%5d=AZXZ7E3UTDJb083a8JZGkmMXrcgx1j435i_emkIg2xkxenBdjVOLjSP8N2rIVuESW547f_p1blIfNBRA9RN0DgbqoCJf42ftQovHDVtKdEjb2AyPePGUiZZA_AowCioEmEtLL2auPo_usX_I2ZXWzKN3&__tn__=-UK-R)
* Suffolk Open Water Swimming, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/104942032882884/permalink/5431187530258281>.
* Open Water West Suffolk (page), [https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100069367165902](https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100069367165902&__cft__%5b0%5d=AZXZ7E3UTDJb083a8JZGkmMXrcgx1j435i_emkIg2xkxenBdjVOLjSP8N2rIVuESW547f_p1blIfNBRA9RN0DgbqoCJf42ftQovHDVtKdEjb2AyPePGUiZZA_AowCioEmEtLL2auPo_usX_I2ZXWzKN3&__tn__=-UK-R)

There is a longer list for East Anglia in the Wild Suffolk Swimmers group, here, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/3294254064144996/posts/3301875973382805/>.

There are groups across the country, with many but not all listed here, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/uk-wild-swimming-groups/>, or you can find them using the Outdoor Swimming Society Facebook group or other general swim groups. The expansion of groups and the numbers in them has been marked in the last few years, and they form a wide variety of supportive swimming communities.

**Mental health swims**

Hosts arrange meets for people to swim, paddle or just come along. There are some in Norfolk and Suffolk, <http://www.mentalhealthswims.co.uk/#home>, and one in the Brecks, meeting at Brandon generally Sundays 11-12, [check their web page](https://events.more-human.co.uk/event/1684852331517x768350616157683700) for up-to-date info. <https://events.more-human.co.uk/event/1684852331517x768350616157683700>

**Events and organised venues**

Many people like the safety cover, reassurance and precision about distances provided by organised venues. There are no events or organised venues in the Brecks area at the moment, and very few in the wider area either.

A good way to find out more about these is in Outdoor Swimmer, which also has an informative website and magazine, <https://outdoorswimmer.com/find/venues>.

The Outdoor Swimming Society also has information and runs events, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/open-water-swimming-lake-directory/>, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/category/features/events/>.

You might need to book, and it would be best to check before travelling to a venue.

**Further events within the project**

The project has no further events planned at the moment, but there is a possibility of one final event in 2024. If this happens, there will be info on the page [Outdoor swimming practical project dates](https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/os-brecks-2/dates-set-healing-waters-swimming-project-beginning-2020/).

We also hope to develop [***Swim Walks***](https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/os-brecks-2/swim-walks/). Swim walks or runs can be an interesting thing to do once you have started outdoor swimming, and can build skills of risk assessing water entry points.

**Swimming into autumn/winter**

Starting in summer is ideal, then you can carry on as long as you feel comfortable. Acclimatising to the cooling water is easier if you go regularly, perhaps twice a month, as temperatures go down. If you are not sure how long you can stay in then keep it short, gradually build up times in the water checking how you feel each time. However, if temperatures drop, you would shorten times in the water, perhaps put on more clothes such as gloves, and be well organised with warm clothes and ways to warm up afterwards. See the section on [cold](https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/issues/z-more-info-on-outdoor-swimming-september-2020/#cold-risks) above. Be aware of weather conditions; this page might be useful, <https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/issues/swimming-after-rain-and-in-bad-weather/>

This video on Autumn swimming for beginners gives advice, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nI2GY1UpU78>, and this one talks about the benefits and how your body reacts and adapts to cold water <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pXLF0sucDU>

**Swimming techniques, longer swims and challenges**

Signing up to swimming events can provide the sort of challenge some people find provides motivation to develop their swimming. There are winter challenges including the polar bear challenges <https://polarbearchallenges.com/>.

Do take notice of advice on cold water swimming, and remember not to let the challenge take priority over keeping yourself safe and respecting your own capabilities.

Improving your swimming is probably easiest in swimming pools, many of which organise group or individual swimming tuition and have swimming clubs, and there are swimming coaches, including for open water.

Some join triathlon clubs, though they are all outside the Brecks, for example Tri-Anglia, <https://tri-anglia.club/>, Kings Lynn triathlon that has an arrangement to swim in Pentney lakes,  <https://kltri.co.uk/training-overview/swim>, or the West Suffolk Swimming Club, <https://uk.teamunify.com/Home.jsp?_tabid_=0&team=reczzwssc>.

Some join up with other swimmers, sometimes pairing up with people at a similar level, and find that they motivate each other or learn from more experienced swimmers. The Facebook swim groups are a good place to do this.

**8. Other projects**

You can read more about the wide range of **BFER** projects on the **website projects page** <http://www.brecks.org/BFER/projects/>, and can get in touch if you’d like to be involved in any of them. Everyone who attended the event or wanted to hear about future events has been added (unless they said they didn’t want to be), and others can sign up for BFER updates and newsletter, <https://tinyurl.com/BFERsignup>

One, (2.2) [Tales from the River](https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/os-brecks-2/tales-from-the-river-project-outline/), is gathering stories about swimming and other outdoor recreation in the Brecks in the past and present, while another, (2.3) [Industrious Rivers](https://brecks.org/bfer/projects/under-the-surface-discovering-heritage/2-3-industrious-rivers/), will look at trading history.

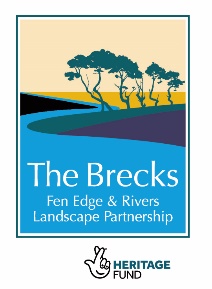
There is a series of guided river history walks, starting 14 September, 25 October and 12 November, see [Swim history project plans](https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/os-brecks-2/dates-set-tales-from-the-river-project-to-start-spring-2020/) for details and booking.

There are projects about river heritage and history, conservation, access to river paths, and much more, with opportunities to be trained and to volunteer, including to carry out citizen science, river restoration, oral history interviewing and research.

**The Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers Landscape Partnership Scheme** (BFER) is a group of government and non-government agencies and interest groups working together to deliver a National Lottery Heritage Funded Landscape Partnership scheme. The Scheme is a collection of 24 innovative projects focusing on water related heritage & landscape, to be delivered by a wide range of partners. Read more at <http://www.brecks.org/BFER/>

**9. More reading**

* This article gives some pointers to getting started, <https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/issues/getting-started-in-inland-outdoor-swimming/>.
* Local swim groups often have resources in their Files or Featured Posts
* Swimming publications and websites also are a good source of information, including the Outdoor Swimming Society, Outdoor Swimmer, the River and Lake Swimming Association, Wild Swimming, Loneswimmer. And **Rachel Andrews has done a wide range of useful videos on all sorts of topics** [**https://www.youtube.com/@EverydayAthleteRach/videos**](https://www.youtube.com/@EverydayAthleteRach/videos)
* The Outdoor Swimming Society has information on a wide range of safety issues for swimming, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/category/survive/>
* The Outdoor Swimmers Code, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/outdoor-swimmers-code/> outlines ways of respecting and protecting the environment, being considerate of other water users and local communities, and being responsible and safe swimmers.

*Note compiled by Imogen Radford, updated August 2023. I have included information and advice that I believe to be accurate and helpful, but I take no responsibility for swimmers. All outdoor swimmers must be solely responsible for making their own assessment as to the risks of any sort of any particular swimming or related activity, and are responsible for the safety of their children or dependants. Landowners or land managers need to do their own risk assessments.*

*Note provided as part of the Healing Waters project, part of BFER,* [*http://www.brecks.org/BFER/*](http://www.brecks.org/BFER/)*; the scheme also takes no responsibility for information included in this note.* http://www.brecks.org/BFER/; National Lottery Heritage Fund https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/

[On website: <https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/issues/z-more-info-on-outdoor-swimming-september-2020/>]