

“THE THERAPEUTIC BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR ADVENTURES FOR THE 14.1 MILLION PEOPLE LIVING WITH DISABILITY IN THE UK ARE HUGE”

The Hauxwell family out exploring Shetland with their cat Neko [see page 58].



ACCESS FOR ALL!

Access to nature is essential for all of us but only easy for some. How does having a disability affect your ability to get outside, and can access be improved? We find out...

WORDS SARAH RYAN

At 10.10pm on 4 June 2019, Jesse Dufton pressed his hands into rough sandstone and pulled himself onto the top of a 137m (449ft) sea stack teetering off the west coast of Orkney. As the sun set across the North Sea, his sight guide and partner Molly scrambled over the rim behind him. Jesse had just completed the first blind lead climb of the Old Man of Hoy.

If you've seen the documentary of the ascent, *Climbing Blind*, you'll be familiar with the story, and if you haven't you really should. It's an inspiring account of a climb which is adventurous even with full sight, requiring a hairy scramble down a sketchy cliff path just to reach the start. For many able-bodied outdoor lovers it may well have been a first glimpse into what it's like to get into wild places when you don't have full use of your body.

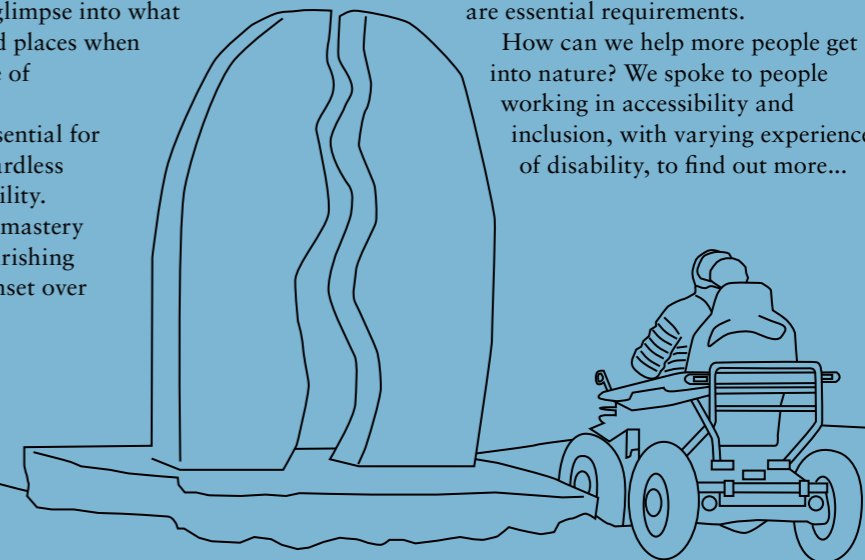
Time in nature is essential for all human beings, regardless of mental or bodily ability. Challenge, autonomy, mastery and the good soul-nourishing stuff of watching a sunset over

the sea or feeling the cold wind on your face are important for everyone. We all appreciate nature and time in it, but it's more straightforward for some of us to get it.

Jesse's is an example of extraordinary skill, ability and commitment, but there are others. Scottish mountaineer and quadruple amputee Jamie Andrew made an ascent of Kilimajaro (5895m) in 2004 with an all-disabled team. In 2013, Arunima Sinha became the first female amputee to reach the summit of Everest.

These are incredible achievements but some other people need more help. Disabilities can vary greatly in severity, hindering movement, communication, mental processing or sometimes all three. Some of us need a little help, others need a lot. Empathy and understanding are essential requirements.

How can we help more people get into nature? We spoke to people working in accessibility and inclusion, with varying experiences of disability, to find out more... ▶





A NORTH

Debbie North *Inclusion and Diversity Expert, The Outdoor Guide*



OS champion and access expert for The Outdoor Guide, Debbie North uses a variety of wheelchairs to explore the British countryside, tackling summits from Cairn Gorm to Blencathra. Her walks, including OS mapping, directions, places to stay and eat, can be found at theoutdoorguide.co.uk/tog-friends/mobility-access-tog

TRAMPING OFF TRAIL

Tramper all-terrain mobility scooters can be hired, often for free, at a number of sites across the UK, including Malham Tarn, Devon's Tarka Trail and Derwent Reservoir in the Peak District. For a full list of locations see tinyurl.com/tramper-place

“As a wheelchair user, it can be difficult to know where there are accessible walks. It is frustrating when your walk comes to an abrupt end because of a stile or a stepped path, or to find a kissing gate is too narrow to pass through.

“Back in 2008, after diagnosis of spinal degeneration, I began exploring all-terrain wheelchairs. I’d never heard of them before and was amazed to learn about the different types. By sheer luck, I saw a news report about the TerrainHopper, an award-winning 4x4 all-terrain wheelchair, and booked a test drive.

“It was amazing. It climbed up the side of a hill with ease and went through deep mud and dry sand. I fell in love with it. In fact I was so impressed that Andy, my husband, and I set off on our own version of Alfred Wainwright’s epic coast to coast, travelling 190 miles between

St Bees and Robin Hood’s Bay.

“During this time, I sent a cheeky email to Julia Bradbury asking for her support with my crazy adventure. I was shocked to receive a phone call from her sister, Gina, asking if Andy and I would like to meet up for a coffee to discuss all things countryside.

“Gina offered me my own section on the website to develop AccessTOG – where Julia walked, I was to wheel! Now, I travel all over the UK with TOG, filming stile-free walks. I have a new career as presenter, writer and keynote speaker and I love it. I am passionate about creating a countryside for all, and through TOG I am able to reach out to the people who can make the decisions and changes. I’m an active campaigner in the field of accessibility, particularly in the countryside. Slowly but surely we

are making a difference.

“There are 14.1 million people living with a disability in the UK. The therapeutic benefits of outdoor adventure activities for people with disabilities are huge. And there’s the same enjoyment, love of nature and sense of accomplishment that able-bodied people get.

“Whilst able-bodied people often get outside and do things without even thinking about it, for people with disabilities there is so much more planning and research involved. Where will I go? Where can I stay? Does the campsite have accessible facilities? Are there any wheelchairs for hire? The list, at times, seems endless. This is why on AccessTOG I share the walks and the places I’ve stayed. I write up an honest review and because of this TOG is becoming the trusted resource for info about accessible stile-free walks.”



Kim Hauxwell OS Champion, Breaking Down Barriers with Brynn



In 2020, Kim's 15-year-old son Brynn pushed himself 1679 miles in his wheelchair, just short of going from Lands End to John O' Groats twice. The whole family (mum Kim, 11-year-old Faith and cat Neko), who live in Shetland, are now OS GetOutside champions. linktr.ee/BDBwithBrynn

"Accessing the great outdoors is something that so many people take for granted. For wheelchair users and their families it is not so easy, and with so many obstacles many people are missing out as they don't realise that they can access some great places.

"For us the realisation that we could get outside and enjoy all the amazing views that Shetland has to offer started when Ability Shetland introduced us to all-terrain wheelchairs. Just having that piece of equipment, which allows us to tackle so many different terrains, opened up so many possibilities. As Brynn shouted out "Freedom!" while propelling himself along the beach track, we knew our lives were about to change forever. How did we not know about these sooner? It was a game changer!

"Ever since that day we love to get outside, and have uncovered so many new places. From short, flat walks, where we greet the Shetland ponies, lambs and local wildlife, to more challenging treks like Fethaland, where we spend the day following the track up and down hills, through mud and over

stone beaches. Or having lunch looking out for killer whales on the horizon and listening to the birds above. Some walks are still inaccessible due to stiles, kissing gates, locked gates and more challenging terrain, not only to wheelchair users but also families with pushchairs and others with limited mobility. We have found the best way to avoid these is to follow single-track roads marked on a map, or by using the OS Maps app.

"Being able to experience all of this has had such a positive impact on the whole family's physical and mental health. We feel it's so important to share our journey, so people can see that these places are accessible with the right wheelchair, no matter your ability.

"On our more adventurous days – like trekking around St Ninians Isle, where there is no track – we make sure we are prepared. We have a team with us, take ramps and ropes, and have enough people to lift the wheelchair and help Brynn over obstacles. But some of our favourite treks are the local ones, where we can go at our own pace, stop, enjoy every moment and just be free."

Martha Wood



Fundraising and Marketing Officer, The Bendrigg Trust

"When you have a disability, you're told what you can't do a lot. We want to change people's attitudes so they see there are lots of things you can do.

"My brother has a progressive physical disability. He'd been on a residential trip when he was 12 or 13 and gone climbing and cycling and he came to Bendrigg when he was in his mid-20s. He was in a wheelchair at that point but still had some muscle movement, and he managed to climb up the climbing wall – which for him was amazing. Sitting in a wheelchair, you're at a lower height, always looking up at people, so being on top of the climbing wall looking down can be quite profound. Similarly, on a zipwire your limbs don't restrict you, and you can fly down it with complete freedom.

"People say there's Bendrigg magic here. They often arrive a little bit nervous and skeptical, and by the end they're brimming with confidence and ready to go home

Set up in 1978, The Bendrigg Trust broke new ground in providing high quality activity courses for disabled and disadvantaged people. From a specialist base between the Lakes and the Dales, it offers a variety of activities including canoeing, caving, climbing and fell walking. bendrigg.org.uk

and take on even more. Being around other people in a similar situation to you, all achieving these amazing things in front of each other, is so inspiring. You form bonds very quickly when you're doing challenging things together and supporting each other through it.

"When it was first built, Bendrigg was one of a kind, and the people that started it have pioneered the way forward. As the charity's become more successful and the technologies and equipment have advanced, we've been able to develop too. Outdoor equipment can be expensive anyway, and for specialist disability equipment the price tag goes up even higher. We've got adaptable minibuses, wheelchairs with big, almost mountain bike-like tyres, and other specialist equipment so we can take people out and off-site.

"There was some uproar a while ago about a tarmac path going along one of the old railways in the Lake District, but there are so few places which are accessible for people. We're not talking about tarmacking a path up Helvellyn, it's just giving people a place they can go because there's not that much out there.

"I think probably the biggest change needed is in general attitudes around disability. If people were more educated and aware of the different kinds of disabilities there are, we would know what to put in place to help create a more inclusive world."

GROUPS MAKING A DIFFERENCE

The Rough Guide to Accessible Britain

A free PDF detailing 200 accessible attractions. motability.co.uk/cs/accessible_guide

Euan's Guide

Disabled access reviews of attractions, events, eateries and more written by disabled people. euansguide.com

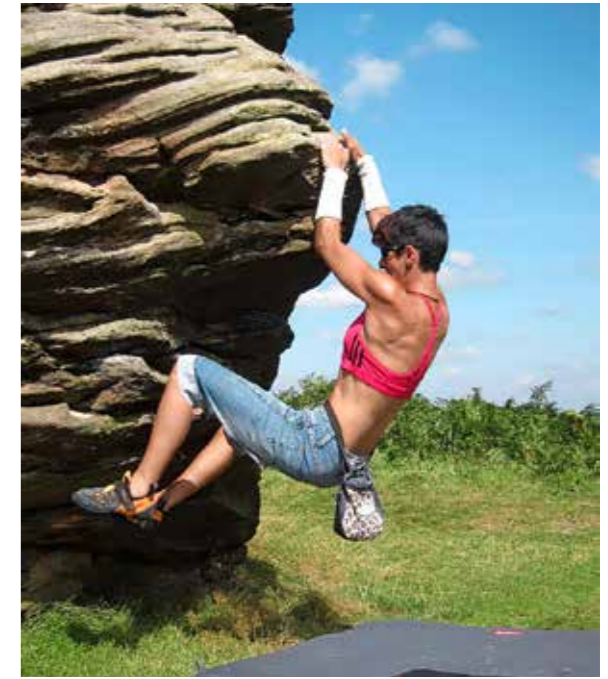
Paraclimbing London

An accessible paraclimbing group. instagram.com/paraclimbinglondon

Accessible Countryside

Accessible places to stay, sport venues and scooter hire. accessiblecountryside.org.uk

Tourism for All Tourism resource using National Accessible Scheme Ratings. tourismforall.co.uk



Anita Aggarwal Team GB Paraclimbing World No. 2



After being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2009, Anita used climbing to help learn to move her

limbs again. She has since stood on the podium for multiple paraclimbing competitions and coaches people of varying abilities. photographyanita.wordpress.com

"My kind of coaching isn't just about climbing, it's life skills. I end up teaching my clients how to communicate, how to look at people and how to have systems in place.

"One client couldn't go down steps or climb a hill, but now she can climb mountains, go up steps and down hills. You've got kids who can get over stiles and follow footpaths on their own because they've practised their strength on the wall. It helps them to better balance on a bike, to trail run or go canoeing.

"I've climbed for physio to strengthen my weak side muscles, while people who've had eating disorders develop muscles and people with scoliosis learn how to balance. It automatically comes into your normal life – I can't reach the top shelf in the kitchen but I can put my leg on the worktop and stand up. We're finding that the balance developed in climbing gives people with vertigo or gait issues the ability to put their hands down when they fall and stop themselves rather than smacking their head. Climbing is a way of helping you move through life."

