

Free guided walks help us benefit from natural world

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WE all know how beneficial spending time in nature can be, but finding the time isn't always easy.

That's where the Northam Burrows Rangers' free guided walks come in! With two different walk styles and plenty to discover along the way, they reckon there's something for everyone to enjoy.

On Mondays, you can join the 'Good Start to the Week' walk for a two-hour guided hike and the chance to learn more about our unique local landscapes. If you prefer a gentler pace, the 'Wellbeing Walk' on Thursdays offers a shorter, relaxed amble with friendly company and plenty of fresh air.

Forthcoming walks include:

Monday 16th February (2pm - 4pm) — Meet at the Northam Burrows Visitor Centre for a walk around the coastal habitats and look for signs of the wildlife that lives here.

Thursday 5th March (3pm - 4pm) — Find out more about the habitat management work carried out by the Rangers, starting from the Northam Burrows Visitor Centre.

Monday 23rd March (2pm - 4pm) — Meet at Westward Ho! Slipway for a tour of our coastal habitats.

Thursday 2nd April (3pm - 4pm) — Join a gentle stroll along the historic promenade, starting from Westward Ho! Slipway.

Monday 20th April (2pm - 4pm) — Meet at the Appledore Gate of Northam Burrows for a loop through the lanes and hills of Appledore.

Councillor Lyndon Piper, lead member for leisure at Torridge Dis-



All Northam Burrows walks are free to attend and no booking is required. Appropriate clothing and footwear are advised. For more information, email northam.burrows@torridge.gov.uk or call 01237 479708

trict Council, said: "Spending time in nature is a simple yet powerful way to support our wellbeing. These guided walks offer an opportunity to get outside, appreciate the beauty of our local area, and connect with others in the community.

"Whether you're hoping to learn something new, enjoy some fresh air, or simply take a well-earned breather from everyday life, we hope these walks inspire you to explore the natural landscapes right on your doorstep."

According to the Woodland Trust, research has shown how woods can increase our physical health, mental wellbeing and quality of life.

The trust says: "Walking is one of the easiest ways to get more active and keep fit. But it doesn't end there. The increase in heart rate improves blood flow and helps your heart pump more efficiently. Walking can help maintain bone health, keep blood sugar levels balanced and energy levels even.

"Just 30 minutes a day is beneficial,

including reducing risk of conditions like heart disease and diabetes. If a half-hour hike seems out of reach, start small and gradually increase your step count.

"The setting makes all the difference. Walking in nature has been overwhelmingly proven to help keep your blood pressure down versus an indoor treadmill or busy city streets. Being outside in the sunshine helps increase vitamin D too, which gives your immune system an extra boost."

Appeal for resilience on rail link

NORTH Devon rail campaigners have been calling for better rail replacement services following several days of disruption on the North Devon Line, which left passengers without alternative transport options.

Services between Barnstaple and Exeter were suspended for a third consecutive day on Thursday last week, with no rail replacement buses currently operating. The North Devon Line Rail Promotion Group said this created significant challenges for commuters, students and vulnerable passengers across North Devon.

Chair of the group, David Northey, said: "We recognise that severe weather and infrastructure issues can create complex operational challenges. However, it is important that passengers on branch lines receive the same level of contingency planning and support as those travelling on mainline routes."

The group has noted that other road transport services continue to operate along the corridor and believes this demonstrates that limited replacement provision may be possible, even if full timetables cannot be restored immediately.

They said: "We understand that safety must always come first, but there may be scope for a reduced or phased replacement service that at least maintains basic connectivity between North Devon and Exeter."

The disruption has had a particular impact on students travelling to Exeter.

President of the North Devon Line Rail Promotion Group, Andrea Davis, said: "For many people in North Devon, the railway is not a convenience — it is a lifeline. When services stop and no alternatives are provided, whole communities feel the impact immediately. We want to work positively with GWR to make sure passengers are supported properly and that future disruption is handled more effectively."

The Rail Promotion Group has represented rail passengers on the North Devon Line for more than four decades and works closely with the rail industry, local authorities and regional partners to strengthen, protect and grow the line. This partnership approach has helped deliver significant improvements in services, passenger growth and station investment over many years.

Mr Northey added: "We recognise that extreme weather events such as flooding are, to some extent, outside the direct control of the railway. However, resilience planning, infrastructure maintenance, capacity management and contingency arrangements are within the industry's influence. That is where we believe further progress can and should be made."

Group buys new section of old line

THE Barnstaple & Yeo Valley Railway Trust has bought a 718-metre section of railway route through the Collard Bridge Scout camp site thanks to an agreement with the North Devon Scouts.

B&YVRT — a registered charity combining the assets of the Exmoor Associates and the Yeo Valley Trust — said this purchase will link with sections of trackbed already owned by Exmoor Associates, creating a continuous stretch of route (subject to bridge reconstruction) between Snapper Halt and the restored Chelfham station of over two miles.

The charity said this represents a major milestone in the long-term ambition to acquire the historic Lynton & Barnstaple Railway route south of Wistlandpound Reservoir to Barnstaple (Pilton), and ultimately the entire route between Barnsta-

ple and Lynton. This agreement concludes over two and a half years of detailed discussions, route design work, engineering assessment and negotiation.

Throughout this process, both organisations have maintained a consistently constructive and solutions-focused relationship, enabling an arrangement that protects the Scouts' operational needs while safeguarding the historic route corridor.

The agreed route is 718m (0.45 miles) of safeguarded railway route which will be partly on the original formation and partly on a new alignment.

"Securing this section is crucial for any future railway construction," said Phil Heathcote, chair of the B&YVRT.

He added: "The agreement also cements the cooperative partnership



A section of the Lynton & Barnstaple Railway route through the Collard Bridge Scout camp site. Above: the line before 1935 and right, as it is today



between B&YVRT and the North Devon Scouts, which will remain essential during future engineering, planning, and construction phases."

With the purchase complete, B&YVRT will begin the detailed engineering surveys needed to create the new rail route to the required standards.



be Beach, North Devon © Arnhel de Serra



shayes, near Tiverton in Mid Devon © Trevor Ray Hart



A relaxing winter dog walk in the park at Killerton, near Broadclyst in Devon © James Dobson

New future for branch line trains

GREAT Western Railway introduced the UK's first battery-only train into passenger service this week, marking a milestone in low-emission rail travel and highlighting technology that could benefit Devon's branch lines in the future.

The Class 230 engine has spent 22 months undergoing trials on the Greenford branch line in London, testing fast-charge technology designed to allow trains to operate without diesel.

On Saturday, January 31, it replaced its diesel counterpart on the 05:30 service from West Ealing to Greenford, giving passengers the first experience of the battery-only service.

Last year, the train set a world record for the furthest distance travelled by a battery-electric train on a single charge, covering 200.5 miles. This surpassed the previous record of 139 miles, set in 2021 by Stadler Deutschland, demonstrating the potential for battery-powered trains to operate longer regional routes without refuelling.

GWR told the *Gazette* that there are no specific plans for the train to operate in Devon at present.

However, the *Gazette* understands they could be developed for use on UK branch lines, including in Devon.

GWR said that while there are no immediate plans to bring this particular train to Devon, the fast-charge technology itself could be developed for use on branch lines in the county.

The operator said this provides confidence that "fast-charge battery trains could help to deliver services across branch lines in Devon and Cornwall".

As part of the trial, GWR developed planning tools to calculate where charging points would need to be located.

According to GWR, these tools provide confidence that fast-charge battery trains could help deliver services on branch lines in Devon and Cornwall, as well as the Thames Valley. Crucially, GWR said the results could also be applied to similar regional routes across Britain.

"With our regional fleet getting rather old and in need of updating, we think battery trains, and fast-charge technology, could be part of the solution," GWR told the *Gazette*.

The company added that it is working with the Department for Transport and Network Rail to develop a cross-industry plan.

While passengers in Devon will not see the train in service immediately, the trial offers a glimpse of what could be possible for local branch lines. Rural routes such as the Tarka Line, Riviera Line and Exe Valley Line could eventually benefit from quieter, cleaner, and more environmentally friendly services if battery and fast-charge technology is deployed more widely.