

Outdoor access



The John Muir Award encourages the exploration of wild places, from city park to mountain top, and understanding your rights and responsibilities regarding access to certain areas is essential for fully enjoying the outdoors.

What is outdoor access?

Most land in Britain, even in protected areas such as National Parks, is privately owned. Land that appears to be ‘unused’ may have an important purpose such as grazing sheep or a habitat for wildlife. Thanks to a network of footpaths, rights of way and public access, there are many opportunities to explore the countryside away from roads. Access rights apply to urban parks and path networks, to hills and forests, and from farmland and field margins to beaches, lakes and rivers.

The law is different in Scotland, England and Wales and Northern Ireland. You should be aware of your access rights so you can make good decisions and judgements to enjoy your countryside responsibly. Access rights cover many activities, including:

- Informal activities, such as picnicking, photography and sightseeing
- Active pursuits, including walking, cycling, riding, canoeing and wild camping
- Taking part in recreational and educational events
- Simply travelling from one place to another

Footpaths

England and Wales have an extensive network of off-road routes classed as **Public Rights of Way**, most of which are shown on Ordnance Survey maps, and should be signed at junctions with public roads. Many are also signed or “waymarked” with coloured arrows along the route. There are several different categories of rights of way, including **Public Footpaths** (open to walkers only), **Bridleways** (open to horse riders and cyclists), and **Byways** (some only open to non-motorised users, and others that can be legally used by motorists).

There are also other paths open to the public such as ‘Permissive’ paths where the landowner has given permission, and towpaths along canals. Again, these are shown on Ordnance survey maps.

In **Scotland**, rights of way are less extensive than in England and Wales because there is a tradition of access to most land. Rights of way do exist, but there is no legal obligation on local authorities to record them, so they don’t appear on Ordnance Survey maps; though paths and tracks are shown on these maps as geographical features and you have a right to walk on most of these.

New rules enable local authorities to develop **Core Path Networks** by adopting and improving existing paths and creating new ones. Plans for these networks will largely supersede existing arrangements for rights of way. Core paths will appear on OS Explorer maps.

Access to the wider countryside

In many areas you can enjoy wider access, where you don’t have to keep to a particular route but can walk at will through an open space. You can use any path or wander off path if the terrain is suitable.



In **England and Wales**, the public has a right to walk over designated access land, under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. The exact areas of land covered are shown on maps prepared by the Countryside Agency and the Countryside Council for Wales, and also on 1:25,000 OS Explorer maps. Access land may be signed on the ground with the access symbol shown on the left.

The rights apply to specific areas of land classed as **mountain** (over 600m), **moor, heath, down** and **registered common land** (areas of land which were historically used communally by local residents). In addition, landowners are now able voluntarily to dedicate other categories of land for public access.

Landowners can restrict or prevent access for up to 28 days a year without special permission and can apply for additional restrictions for purposes such as land management, conservation and fire prevention. These closures apply only to the wider right of access: for example, if land is closed under the 28-day rule but is crossed by a footpath that is a public right of way, you still have a right to use the footpath. In addition, there are various areas of land open to the public under arrangements that predate the 2000 Act. They include public parks, much of the land owned by the Forestry Commission, National Trust and other bodies, and various areas open either due to specific acts of parliament or other agreements.

Most access land (except for very small parcels of land, some parks and open spaces and areas of 'de facto' access) is shown on Ordnance Survey Explorer maps and these are the best choice for planning to walk. Details of restrictions are given at information points on the ground or are available from local authorities and information centres.

In **Scotland** there has long been a general presumption of access to all land unless there is a very good reason for the public to be excluded. The Land Reform Act 2003 confirmed this presumption,

and walkers in Scotland now have a statutory right of access to all land, except for areas such as railway lands, quarries, harbours, airfields and defence land where the public are excluded by law.

Walkers should act responsibly when exercising their right of access and follow the Scottish Outdoor Access Code published by NatureScot. For example, you should avoid walking across growing crops when there is a route around the field or across sports pitches when they are in use and obey advisory signs asking you to avoid certain areas at certain times for land management, safety or conservation reasons.

Care should be taken during the deer stalking and grouse shooting seasons. Further information on stalking is available from the [Heading for the Scottish Hills](#) webpage sponsored by NatureScot. Information about access is available from local authorities and information centres.

Northern Ireland - [Outscape](#)^[AB1] is a not-for-profit organisation responsible for developing, managing and promoting outdoor recreation in Northern Ireland: [Outscape](#)

Wild camping

In **England and Wales**, you have no general right to camp and if you do so you may be trespassing, unless you use an official site or first obtain the landowner's permission. In practice responsible "wild" camping may be tolerated in upland areas, particularly when you are a long way from alternative accommodation, though you are trespassing and could be moved on. Enquire locally or contact National Park authorities in advance.

In **Scotland** responsible wild camping is permitted on most land if you follow the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. The Code itself gives detailed guidance and useful advice on how to camp responsibly.

The Countryside Codes

[England](#)^[AB2] & [Wales](#)

- Be safe - plan ahead and follow any signs
- Leave gates and property as you find them
- Protect plants and animals, and take your litter home
- Keep dogs under close control
- Consider other people

[Scotland - Outdoor Access Code](#):

- Respect the interests of other people
- Take care of the environment
- Take responsibility for your own actions

[Scottish Outdoor Access Code education resource](#) pack – web-based resource with downloadable guidance and activities

Useful websites

[Natural England](#) – access rights and information for England

[Natural Resources Wales](#) – recreation and access guidance for Wales

[NatureScot](#) – Scottish Outdoor Access Code

[The Ramblers Association](#) – Britain's walking charity

[British Mountaineering Council](#) – access and conservation information

[Campaign for National Parks](#) – charity dedicated to securing the future of National Parks in England and Wales

[Scottish Campaign for National Parks](#) – charity campaigning for National Parks in Scotland

[National Landscapes Association](#) – supporting the National Landscapes in England, Wales & Northern Ireland

[Open Spaces Society](#) – defending open spaces in England and Wales

[Ordnance Survey](#) -Information on maps and great resource for map reading for beginners.

[Leave No Trace](#) - Research and initiatives so every person who ventures outside can protect and enjoy nature responsibly.

Access for all

Everyone should have opportunities to access and enjoy the social, economic, cultural, health, environmental and aesthetic benefits that wild places can offer. Ensuring that circumstances aren't a barrier to experiencing wild places has been at the heart of the John Muir Award since its launch in 1997.

[Phototrails](#) -Online, searchable resource providing detailed accessibility information for trails throughout the UK, including photos of potential hazards, surfaces, gradients and facilities.

[Day of Access](#) - Campaign promoting access to wild places and the benefits of the outdoors to people with disabilities, with a pilot 'Day of Access' held at Schiehallion in June 2019.

[Pony Axe S](#) - Takes people who use wheelchairs to all the places where wheelchairs can't take them, providing all terrain access to wild places and nature experiences.

