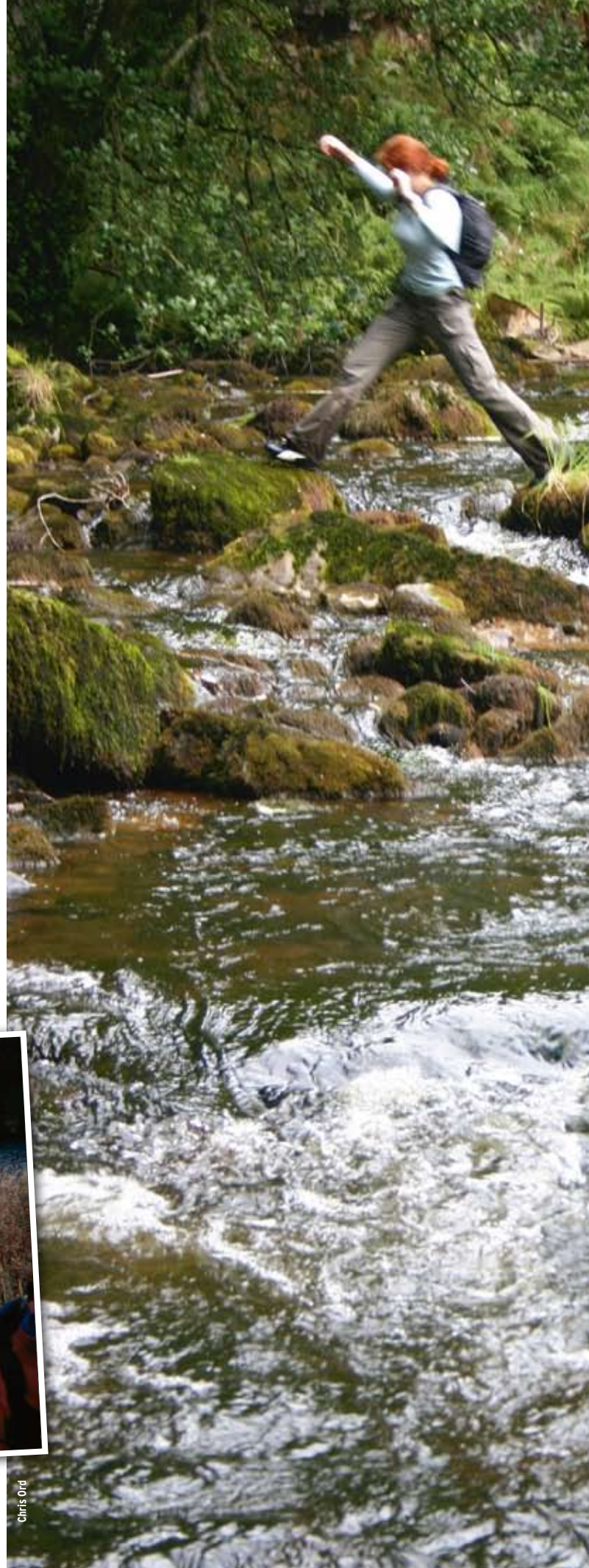


TREADING WATER

A gentle gurgling, the play of light, a splash of just-glimpsed wildlife. There's something special about walking by water and you don't have to be an experienced hiker to enjoy it. Andrew McCloy rounds up the best waterway trails in Britain and finds, whether it be riverbank or canal towpath, there's nothing like going with the flow.

Whether it's a tinkling stream or meandering river, an unruffled canal or gentle navigation, walking beside water is enjoyable on so many counts. It's relaxing and soothing, the dappled light on the water is pleasing to the eye, and the greenery and wildlife has a calming influence. In a practical sense too, waterside paths usually guide you on an easy and reliable route so you rarely have to worry about getting lost. It's also a great place to see something unusual, even if it simply floats past.

For city dwellers, waterways often provide an oasis of green and quiet. According to a study by British Waterways, the temperature by rivers and canals in urban areas can be as much as five degrees cooler than the town or city centre. A definite bonus during summer! But whether that's scientifically correct or not, there's no disputing the joy of a shady, tree-lined walk alongside a canal or river, perhaps stopping for a waterside picnic or visiting a quiet pub. And since over half the UK population lives within just 8km/5 miles of a river or canal, the simple pleasures of walking beside water are available to everyone.



© Countryside Agency/Anne-Katrin Purkiss, Leslie Garland

Chris Ord

Main picture: Using stepping stones to cross the River Hepste in the upper Neath Valley, South Wales.
Below left: Walking the Thames Path in Oxfordshire.

5 BEST MAJOR RIVER WALKS

1 Thames Path, Thames Head (near Kemble)

to Thames Barrier, 294km/184 miles. Pioneered by the Ramblers, this highly accessible and regal river trail links the Cotswolds to the capital, with excellent public transport links and plenty of day walk options. Historic, scenic and full of interest, a winner with all ages and abilities. www.nationaltrail.co.uk/thamespath

2 Speyside Way, Buckie to Aviemore or Tomintoul, 145km/90 miles.

One of Scotland's official Long Distance Routes, the trail begins on the Moray coast and follows the banks of the fast-flowing River Spey, via whisky distilleries and forest, into the Cairngorms National Park. www.speysideway.org.uk

3 Ribble Way, Longton to river source near Ribblehead,

114km/71 miles. Originally proposed by the Ramblers as far back as the 1970s, this lovely route traces Lancashire's premier river (according to many) from its mouth near Preston to its source high up on the Pennine moors. www.lancashire.gov.uk

4 Severn Way, Plynlimon to Bristol, 360km/225 miles.

The UK's longest river walk, from remote Welsh mountainside to the sweeping Severn Estuary via Welshpool, Shrewsbury and Worcester. A route full of contrasts - try to time your walk to coincide with the Severn Bore for a truly memorable experience. www.severnway.com

5 Wye Valley Walk, Chepstow to Plynlimon,

218km/135 miles. Criss-crossing the English/Welsh border, this is another fine trail established with the help of the Ramblers that since 2002 has been extended to the river's source in the Hafren Forest, near Plynlimon. www.wyevalleywalk.org

RIVERSIDE WALKING

To walk the length of a river from source to mouth is a unique journey; one that can take you from a babbling mountain stream or gurgling pastoral brook to the broad sweep of a city centre waterway. In many ways it's a tailor-made long-distance walk, with a defined start and finish and a real sense of progression the further downstream (or upstream) you travel.

FROM SOURCE TO SEA

There are few more evocative long-distance walking routes in Britain than those that chart the route of a river from source to mouth. Some of the major trails, such as the Thames Path, flow languidly across the lowlands; while others such as the Teesdale, Ribble and Weardale Ways begin their journeys to the sea in the high Pennines.

The longest river walk in Britain is the Severn Way, stretching 360km/225 miles from its source on the slopes of Plynlimon in mid-Wales to its conclusion on the banks of the 6km/4-mile wide Severn Estuary. At the other end of the spectrum there are short but no less charming local routes, such as the Test Way in Hampshire, the River Parrett Trail in Somerset and the Exe Valley Way in south Devon. The River Ayr Way in southern Scotland is one of the latest to be developed, covering the river's 66km/40-mile progress from Glenbuck to Ayr.

Sometimes, though, it's not so easy to identify the precise source of a river. The River Nene, which flows from central/southern England into The Wash, has three different sources in Northamptonshire - a fact that makes the beginning of the 176km/110-mile Nene Way a little arbitrary, to say the least. Geographers generally make their selection by assessing the length and volume of water contributed by various tributaries and the altitude at which they rise, but this still leads to disagreements.

Take the case of the 114km/71-mile Ribble Way, originally championed by local Ramblers, which flows from the Yorkshire Three Peaks area through Lancashire into the Irish Sea near Preston. It's commonly believed to rise near Ribblehead (hence the name). But over the years the source has variously been identified as a pair of springs on Wold Fell (by William Dobson), Cam Fell in terms of altitude (by Jessica Lofthouse), springs at the head of Jam Sike on Gayle Moor (by Gladys Sellers), and the junction of Long Gill and Ouster Fell (Alfred Wainwright). So take your pick!

“To walk the length of a river from source to mouth is a unique journey that can take you from a babbling mountain stream or gurgling pastoral brook to the broad sweep of a city centre waterway.”

5 BEST MINOR RIVER WALKS

1 Test Way, Inkpen Beacon to Totton (Southampton),

70km/43 miles.

Exploring one of the finest and purest chalk streams in southern England, this short-but-delightful north-south route through rural Hampshire ends on the banks of Southampton Water.

www.3.hants.gov.uk/walking

2 River Parrett Trail, Chedington (Dorset) to Steart (Somerset),

80km/50 miles.

From the gentle hills of the Dorset/Somerset border, this three- to four-day lowland ramble crosses the Somerset Levels and Moors via unspoilt villages and enigmatic, open landscapes.

www.somerset.gov.uk/somerset/ete/rpt

3 Usk Valley Walk, Caerleon (Newport) to Brecon, 77km/48 miles.

Heading north through Gwent past the Black Mountains, this valley trail finishes in the Brecon Beacons National Park and for a while follows the towpath of the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal towpath.

www.uskvalleywalk.org.uk

4 Fen Rivers Way, Cambridge to Ongar Hill (near King's Lynn),

98km/61 miles.

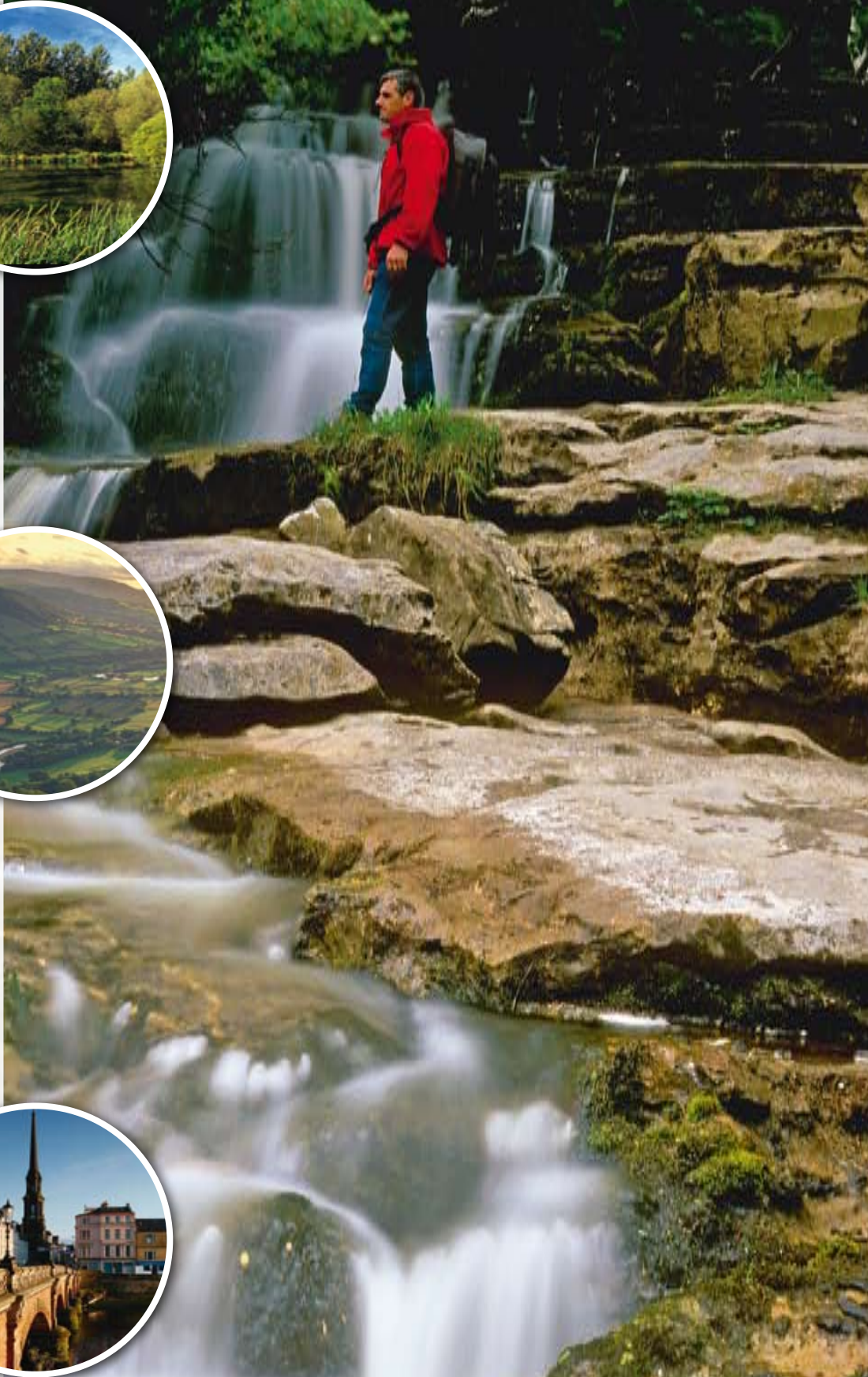
Linking two of East Anglia's historic centres, the trail explores the course of several small rivers that drain from the Fens into The Wash, most notably the Great Ouse. There are wide-open skies and plenty of water-based wildlife.

www.countrysideaccess.norfolk.gov.uk

5 River Ayr Way, Glenbuck to Ayr, 66km/40 miles.

Claiming to be Scotland's first complete source-to-sea walking route, the waymarked trail begins inland near Muirkirk and, via nature reserves and ancient monuments, finishes on the Firth of Clyde at Ayr.

www.theriverayrway.org



“Flooding is an occupational hazard with riverside walking, but walkers on the Severn Way might also witness a more unusual natural phenomenon: the Severn Bore, a fast-running tidal wave that travels at 16km per hour.”

ACCESSING THE RIVERSIDE

If pinpointing the source of a river can sometimes be problematic, another issue is the actual route of some riverside trails. Basically, when does a riverside walk become a general valley walk?

Problems over access on foot have hampered the development of a number of waterway trails, just as canoeists have battled for years for greater access to the water itself. It's no coincidence that some ostensibly river-based walks have ended up as valley-based trails instead. The Wye Valley Walk, Stour Valley Path and Derwent Valley Heritage Way in Derbyshire are all attractive routes and well worth exploring, but they incorporate plenty of country lanes or field paths well away from the river bank. Others, like the Dyfi Valley Way via Machynlleth and Llanmawddwy, don't pretend to be riverside routes at all, and instead follow the higher and rougher edges of the valley. Then there's the Speyside Way, one of Scotland's official Long Distance Routes, which starts/ends at Aviemore, even though the River Spey rises many miles away in the Corrieयरack Forest north east of Spean Bridge.

Elsewhere, the development of the Severn Way involved protracted and, at times, fruitless negotiations with landowners who refused to allow a riverside passage, so in places the trail has to make time-consuming and frustrating detours. Between Llanidloes and Newtown most of the route is away from the river; and around Welshpool it in fact follows the towpath of the nearby Montgomery Canal.

THAMES PATH SUCCESS

In the case of the Thames Path, a major problem in its initial development was the disappearance over the years of numerous small ferries, leaving whole sections of the towpath stranded. Another obstacle was the Crown Estate, who refused to allow public access to the 2km/1.5-mile riverbank trail around Windsor Home Park, and instead made walkers switch to the main road through Datchet on



Surfing the Severn Bore near Gloucester.

Alamy/Phil Rees

the opposite bank. Despite these problems, the Thames Path has proved one of the most popular national trails in England, not least because of the accessibility and ease of use that make it particularly suitable for daytrips.

Pioneered by the Ramblers and eventually opened in 1996, the 294km/184-mile route traces the river from its source in the Cotswolds to the Thames Barrier in central London. Ramblers vice president, David Sharp, was instrumental in its development, writing the best-selling guidebook to the route in which he describes the river's transition from “the lonely, open water meadows of the headwaters to the vistas of a great city”. Today, the route of the Thames Path through the capital is one of Transport for London's six strategic walking routes and a 16km/10-mile eastwards extension has seen the trail join up with the London Loop and Crayford Marshes. (Which begs another question: where should a river trail end when it reaches a yawning estuary?)

SPECTACULAR SURGES

Of course, flooding is an occupational hazard with riverside walking, but walkers on the Severn Way might also witness a more unusual natural phenomenon. The Severn Estuary has the second highest tide in the world, with a range of over 12m/40ft, and this gives rise to the so-called Severn Bore, when the incoming tide funnels the water between the narrowing banks so that it produces a single, fast-running tidal wave that travels at an average speed of 16km/10 miles per hour. The bore can travel a long way upstream and is a spectacular sight, with canoeists and surfers vying to keep up with the surge.

The River Trent has a similar tidal wave around springtime, known as the ‘Trent Aegir’, that can reach heights of up to 1.5m/5ft; while the River Spey is said to be the fastest-flowing of any British river, and snow melt can sometimes raise levels by as much as 3.5m/12ft. >>

WATERWAYS WILDLIFE

Water is so intrinsic to just about every living thing that a walk beside a river or canal is nearly always rich in nature. Birdlife is perhaps the most visible - from dippers bobbing on fast-running upland streams (such as the Ribble, Ayr and Usk) to herons poised by a languid meander (see along the Thames or Fen Rivers Way). Mallards, coots and moorhens may be a common sight, but a skein of geese overhead or a swan coming into land is a head-turner. The blue flash of a kingfisher on the wing never fails to thrill - look for slow-moving rivers with plenty of waterside trees, such as the Wye or Test.

Grass snakes often sun themselves on river banks, but in fact are good swimmers and can spend up to an hour underwater. More secretive still is the water vole, Britain's largest native vole, which makes its home in bankside burrows and has

suffered persecution at the paws of the invasive American mink.

More ubiquitous is the dragonfly, its buzzing and whirring such a common accompaniment to a summer stroll beside gently-flowing water (like that of the Kennet & Avon and Grand Union canals). Pools and ponds often support a variety of amphibians - frogs, newts and toads - while in the more remote and often upland locations (such as the Speyside Way) the otter is making a comeback, but you will have to be both lucky and patient to see one.



Images: northeastwildlife.com

britainonview/Alan Novelli



The Falkirk Wheel on the Forth & Clyde Canal.



Picturesque Worsley on the Bridgewater Canal, Greater Manchester.

VisitScotland/Scottish Viewpoint

britainonview.com

CANALSIDE WALKING

At first glance, canal-walking might seem rather tame and regimented when compared to riverside routes, but in fact the two present very different and complementary walking experiences. Britain's 3,540km/2,200 miles of inland canalways are one of the unsung jewels in our domestic rambling crown, penetrating deep into both rural and urban areas and providing easy and peaceful recreation for people of all abilities.

URBAN GREEN CORRIDORS

Where the canal network really comes into its own is in the urban context, providing green rambling corridors amid the bustle and buildings of our towns and cities. Towpaths might have been originally fashioned for commerce and industry, but today they are all about leisure and recreation - a point that the Ramblers are keen to promote.

"The beauty of the canal network in places like Birmingham is that you can quickly disappear from the noisy roads for the peace and quiet of the waterside," says Mohini Howard, outreach officer for the Ramblers' Get Walking Keep Walking project which helps people in big

cities do more regular local walking to improve their health and well-being. "Since the 1980s, Birmingham's inner-city canals have been transformed and now nearly every walk we put on involves a stretch of canal. People love the tranquility and we find the abundance of wildlife a great teaching resource."

ROMAN-BUILT TO STATE-OF-THE-ART

Canal-building in Britain began as far back as the Romans, whose 18km/11-mile Fosdyke Navigation between the River Trent and Lincoln can claim to be the oldest canal in Britain. However, the modern network took shape with the Industrial Revolution and its splendid legacy is still plain for all to see, providing highlights for both water-borne and towpath users. Notable highlights include the newly reopened Standedge Tunnel (Britain's highest, longest and deepest) on the Huddersfield

WIN!
 A self-drive canal boat holiday for four (worth over £500) with Anglo Welsh Waterway Holidays - a member of the Drifters consortium (☎ 0845 762 6252, www.drifters.co.uk). The holiday offered is a mid-week break in the first two weeks of October 2008. Enter online at www.walkmag.co.uk/competitions or email entries with 'Canal boat holiday' in the subject line with your name, address and contact number to walkmag@ramblers.org.uk. Alternatively, send entries to Canal boat holiday competition, Ramblers, 2nd Floor Camelford House, 89 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7TW. The first entry drawn after 4 August 2008 wins.

FLOATING HOLIDAYS

Why not turn your waterside stroll into a floating holiday? Travel expert John Carter - the face of the BBC's *Holiday programme* and ITV's *Wish You Were Here...?*, and now appearing on www.travelguru.tv - looks at the options.

When your route takes you along a riverbank or a canal towpath, how often do you observe folk on their leisure craft and think a slow-paced, relaxed, waterway holiday might make a nice change? By the same token, how often do those folk look at you and say to themselves: "I really must do something more energetic?"

It is possible to get the best of both worlds with a wide range of holidays available to walkers who fancy adding boating to their holiday mixture.

"We welcome many visitors who spend all day exploring the country through which we are boating, or simply walk the banks or towpaths, stopping to visit hamlets, stately homes or churches, and then return to the boat in time for tea," says Lindy Foster Weinreb, who works with Drifters, a consortium of award-winning

holiday boat operators. She adds that an increasing number of older boaters are no longer content to sit on deck and watch the scenery glide by.

There are, indeed, plenty such opportunities throughout Britain's waterway system. For example, why not hire a boat as your mobile base on the River Wye and tackle sections of the 219km/136-mile long Wye Valley Walk? The Leeds & Liverpool Canal is another option. Close to its towpath, the Pendle Heritage Centre has a great range of walking maps for enthusiasts who are unfamiliar with the area. Or what about the Macclesfield Canal? It takes several hours to sail around Mow Cop hill, so walkers can take the high route and rendezvous with their companions on the boat at the other side.

Whether you cruise on river or canal, the walking options are virtually limitless. But for the real enthusiast, I would suggest taking passage on a crewed or 'hotel' boat, which will continue its journey when you are taking the long way round on foot to a pre-arranged rendezvous point. A self-drive craft is probably best for those who want to spend just a morning or an afternoon ashore.

For information on boat hire and waterways walks, visit www.waterscape.com.

5 BEST CANAL WALKS

1 Grand Union Canal Walk, London to Birmingham, 234km/145 miles.

The longest single canal in Britain combines urban towpath with peaceful rural stretches. Good public transport connections allow for plenty of day walks. Numerous highlights along the way, including Foxton Locks staircase (Leics) and Stoke Bruerne (Northants) with its canal museum, tunnel and waterside pubs.



2 Cheshire Ring Canal Walk, circular around Cheshire/Greater Manchester, 156km/97 miles.

The six individual canals that make up the 'Ring' are the Trent & Mersey, Bridgewater, Rochdale, Ashton, Peak Forest and Macclesfield, taking you from the industrial heritage of inner city Manchester to the peaceful fringes of the Peak District and Cheshire Plain.

3 Llangollen Canal, Hurlston Junction (near Nantwich) to Llantysilio, 74km/46 miles.

Strictly speaking a branch of the much longer Shropshire Union Canal, the Llangollen section winds its way through the picturesque hill country of the Welsh Borders and includes the spectacular Chirk and Pontcysyllte aqueducts.



4 Forth & Clyde/Union Canals, Glasgow to Edinburgh via Falkirk, 106km/66 miles.

A great coast-to-coast walking route across the Central Lowlands of Scotland, these two inter-connecting canals are green and rural, boasting history aplenty that includes castles, Roman remains and the Falkirk Wheel - a state-of-the-art revolving boat lift.

5 Kennet & Avon Canal Walk, Pill (near Bristol) to Reading, 135km/84 miles.

Linking the Thames and the Bristol Channel, this route across southern England was reopened after restoration as recently as 1990 and is renowned for its engineering and architecture, with many bridges and aqueducts designed in a classical style by John Rennie. Visit www.waterscape.com for further details of all these canal walks.





Martine O'Callaghan

Phillippa on the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal in the Brecon Beacons.

“Where the canal network really comes into its own is in the urban context, providing green rambling corridors amid the bustle and buildings of our towns and cities.”

Narrow Canal; the dramatic flight of 16 locks at Caen Hill on the Kennet & Avon Canal near Devizes in Wiltshire; and the new state-of-the-art Falkirk Wheel on the Forth & Clyde Canal that replaced a long-gone boat lift.

But there's also high-quality walking to be had in its own right, too, including long-distance routes, such as the 234km/145-mile Grand Union Canal between London and Birmingham, and the Cheshire Ring Canal around Cheshire and Greater Manchester incorporating six different historic canals. Indeed, a glance at British Waterways' map of Britain (which doesn't show the many arms of minor canals) demonstrates the extent of the canal network and the role played by towpaths in linking together our overall trail network.

THE HIGHEST AND QUIETIST

Like river-walking, canal-side rambles are not confined to the flat lowlands. The highest point on the network is 200m/656ft above sea-level on the Huddersfield Narrow Canal, near Marsden in the South Pennines. For a mountain backdrop try walking the towpath of the Caledonian Canal that intermittently runs along Scotland's Great Glen. Or if you have a head for heights, explore the Llangollen Canal on the Wales/England border. The experience of walking across the narrow Pontcysyllte aqueduct, 40m/125ft above the River Dee near Llangollen, will stay with me for a long time!

Canals like the Caledonian (on the Great Glen Way) and Llangollen (along Offa's Dyke national trail) are both scenic and popular with walkers, but other rural towpaths allow you to get away from it all and not see a soul, save the odd moorhen or dragonfly. For lesser-walked waterways head for canals like the Bridgwater and Taunton, the Royal Military Canal on Romney Marsh in Kent, the picturesque Oxford Canal or the wildlife-rich Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal. ■

OUR TOWPATH CHALLENGE

Narrowboat owners and inland waterway fanatics **Phillippa Greenwood** and **Martine O'Callaghan** explain what motivates them on their epic attempt to walk all of Britain's canals.

Martine and I are walking every canal in Britain. We don't need maps, fancy gear or to worry about rampaging cows - we just follow the water!

The towpaths trail over 3,200km/2,000 miles from the Highlands of Scotland to the sands of Cornwall, slipping effortlessly in and out of almost every major city in Britain, rambling over the Pennines, the Peak District, Welsh mountains and other glorious landscapes in between.

So far we've walked 320km/200 miles, bagging 8 canals. We've been chased by dragonflies and slipped in relentless mud on dark towpaths. Yet it's an idyllic walk with easily forgotten lows and extreme highs to keep us going for more.

Awesome engineering spices up these motorways of the Industrial Revolution. We dared to look down from the Pontcysyllte aqueduct where the Llangollen canal flies 40m/125ft above the River Dee, elevated by towering arches and fresh air. That's an adrenalin rush!

Our walk began for personal adventure, but we've discovered unexpected secrets. This gentle giant of a trail closes gaps between diverse landscapes, bringing together walkers in mud-cracked walking boots, trainers, flip-flops or wheelchairs. Ironically, while the government combats couch-potato culture, British Waterways face Defra cuts, threatening one of our most accessible and charismatic walking trails.

The waterways need support, not just to keep towpaths open, but the waters too. Canals without narrowboats are like oceans without waves or motionless rivers.

So we travel onwards by foot, on a journey intended for narrowboats, letting the balm of the waterways turn our epic trek into one long stroll.

Follow Martine and Phillippa's progress at www.coolcanals.co.uk, which also carries lots of useful information for anyone planning their own canal walk or eco-friendly holiday.



FURTHER INFO

For more information on walking Britain's inland waterway network, including suggestions for walks on local canals and rivers, go to British Waterways' recreational website at www.waterscape.com.