

# WILD swimming *Walks*

Dartmoor and South Devon  
28 lake, river and  
beach days out

Sophie Pierce  
Matt Newbury

A stylized illustration of a woman in a red swimsuit sitting on a rock by a waterfall, with another person swimming in the water below. The scene is set against a backdrop of large, rounded hills and a bright yellow sun.

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## WILD SWIMMING WALKS

Leads you on 28 adventures into the beautiful scenery and wild swimming paradise of Dartmoor and South Devon. Discover wooded river pools and tumbling waterfalls, secret coves and amazing sea caves, safe in the company of Devon's two most intrepid and fun-loving explorers.

All the walking routes include places to swim and ideas for pubs and refreshments along the route.



**WILD  
THINGS**  
PUBLISHING





Sophie Pierce lives on the edge of Dartmoor and started the South Devon Wild Swimming Club after getting caught in a rip-current during a New Year's Day dip. She has worked as a reporter for the BBC for 20 years.



Matt Newbury is a writer and marketing specialist born and raised in Devon. He has completed many swimming challenges including escaping from Alcatraz and swimming to the Isle of Wight.



Sophie and Matt are authors of *Beyond the Beach: the secret wild swims of Torbay*.

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# WILD SWIMMING SAFETY



**S**plan your walk, taking necessary supplies and protection; don't forget water, a map, compass and waterproofs, especially on the moor.

Remember that cold water can limit your swimming endurance. If it is your first outdoor swim of the season, be careful to enter the water slowly and acclimatise. Stay close to the shore until you are comfortable. Wear a wetsuit for added warmth and buoyancy. Do not overestimate your ability. Remember that the cold water quickly creates hypothermia – shivering is the first stage.

Don't enter water without first establishing an exit point, especially in fast-flowing water. Never jump or dive into water without first checking the depth and whether there are any obstructions. Even if you have jumped/dived there before, always check every time. Large obstructions like tree branches and rocks move about underwater and an area that was previously clear may well be blocked.

Swim in a group wherever possible or, if swimming alone, let people know your movements and take extra special care.

Take extra care following heavy rainfall, when rivers might be in spate and flowing much faster than normal.

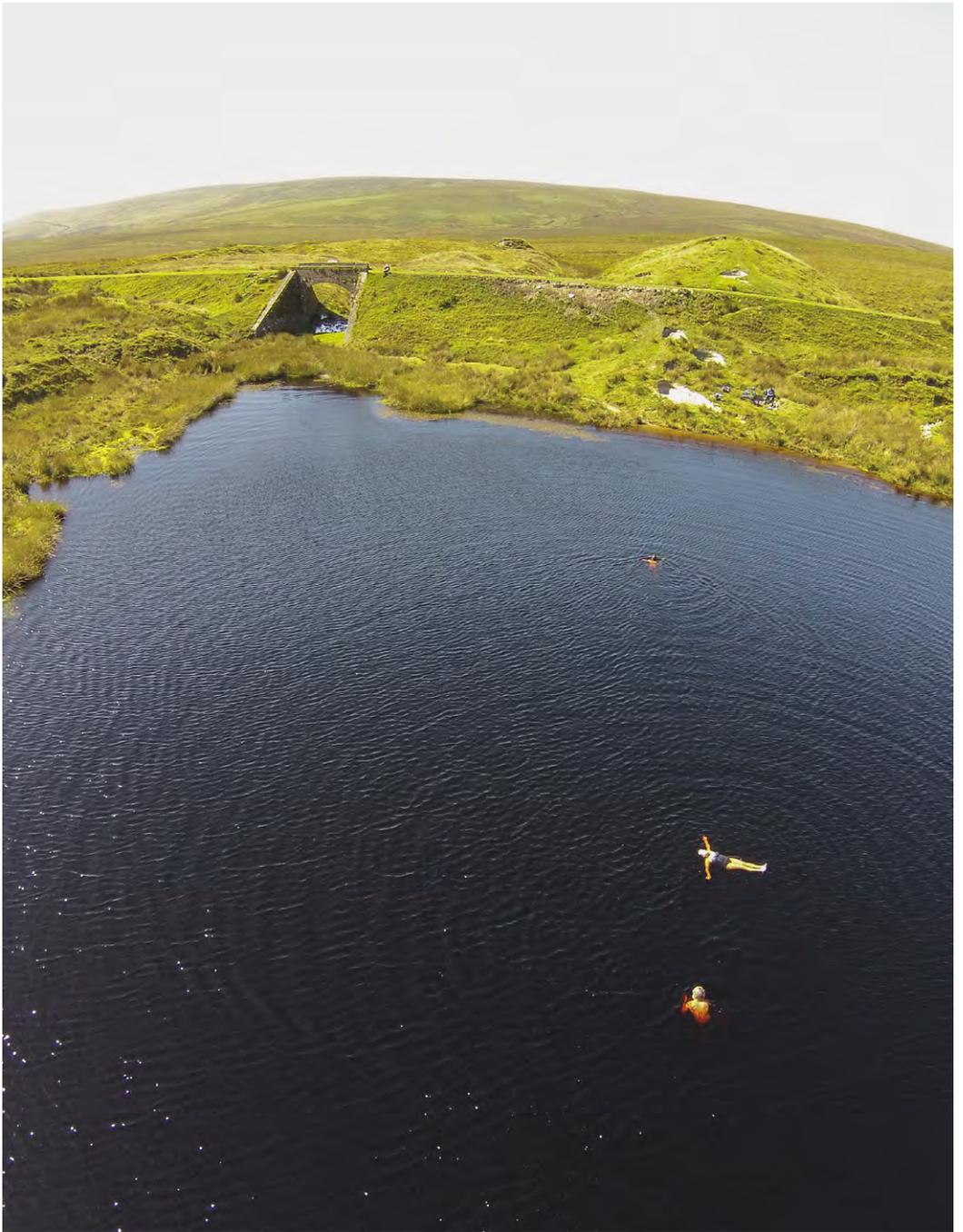
Watch out in high surf - rip-currents can form which take you out to sea, to behind the breaking waves. Swim perpendicularly from them to escape, then body-surf back in.

Beware of tidal currents, especially near estuary mouths and around headlands, especially at mid-tide, and on fortnightly spring tides, when flows are strongest.

If you are concerned about water quality, cover cuts and open wounds with plasters and do not swim front crawl.

## TIDES AND WEATHER CONDITIONS FOR SOUTH DEVON

When planning a swim on the South Devon coast, it's very useful to look at the wind forecast as well as the tides. If you want calm water, you need to know which way the wind is coming from. The prevailing winds in Devon are south westerly, and if this is the case, then choose a swim spot that faces east. Conversely, if the winds are easterly, then it's a good idea to pick a west or south west facing beach. The principle here is that you don't want the wind blowing from the sea onto the land, as the sea is more likely to be rough. Tides are of course very important. Before you go, find out what the tide is doing; it is important to know whether it's going out or coming in. The interesting thing to note about tides in South Devon is that on spring tides (the biggest tides, occurring at the time of the full and new moons), high water will always be at about 6pm, while low water will always be at about noon.



## Walk 13

# CENTRAL DARTMOOR LAKES

This walk takes you right into the heart of Dartmoor, to these lonely lakes in their forlorn grandeur, watery remnants of a once-active mining industry on the moor.

**W**e think of this walk as the ‘Long March’. It’s an effort to get to the lakes, but it’s worth it, because swimming here is an otherworldly experience, like being on some faraway planet. It’s a whole day trip, but it also makes a great adventure to camp overnight at Red Lake. Keep equipment to a minimum though as you have to carry it a long way!

For by far the greater part of this walk you will be on the Two Moors Way, which in this part of Dartmoor follows the track of an old tramway which carried miners to the china clay works at Red Lake. Mining began here in 1910, when the railway track was created. The path is known locally as the Puffing Billy track, as small steam engines travelled along it, carrying workers and equipment up to the mine in little carriages.

It’s strange to imagine the trains busily steaming up and down this track, carrying miners who no doubt lived and worked in pretty dire conditions. Dartmoor has been exploited by man in many different ways throughout the ages for many commodities, including tin, peat and water. Indeed china clay mining is still going on today at nearby Lee Moor, and a new tungsten mine has just opened at Hemerdon. For most of us now Dartmoor is a place of recreation, a place to visit, and a place to find beauty and solace from our busy lives. But in the past it was a place of industry, where people lived, worked and battled to survive.

As you walk, enjoy the feeling of isolation as you get further and further away from civilisation. On sunny summer days the larks sing overhead, and you can see for miles across the vast

### INFORMATION

**DISTANCE:** 12 miles there and back

**TIME:** 6-7 hours

**MAP:** OS Explorer Dartmoor OL28

**START POINT:** Harford Gate car park near Ivybridge ( SX 643 595, PL21 0JQ)

**END POINT:** Harford Gate car park

**PUBLIC TRANSPORT:** None to Harford Gate, but buses and trains at Ivybridge, from both Plymouth and Exeter. From the town it is a 2.6 mile walk along the Two Moors Trail which links up to the Puffing Billy Track

**SWIMMING:** Leftlake (SX 647 634), Red Lake (SX 645 669)

**PLACES OF INTEREST:** Eastern White Barrow, mine remains at Red Lake

**REFRESHMENTS:** Pubs and cafés in Ivybridge, including the Riverbank Café with great views over the River Erme (01752 698576, PL21 9PS). Also the Cornwood Inn, in the nearby village of Cornwood, is a friendly Dartmoor pub serving a good range of reasonably priced food (01752 837225, PL21 9PU).



open scenery. Look out for Piles Copse, down the valley to the west of you, one of Dartmoor's three ancient woodlands, with twisted stunted oaks and mossy boulders. There is a wonderful little stream and waterfall there too. Beyond that you can see Stalldown Barrow; you might even be able to make out its famous stone row on top of the ridge, and further on Erme stone row – one of the longest stone rows in Europe. An alternative circuit, which loops back via these sites in the Erme valley, is briefly described in the directions.

The environment starts to become almost featureless as you make your way towards the moor's interior, but that is one of the most beautiful aspects of this walk. You can almost lose yourself in the enormity of the landscape, its muted colours, and the vast sky. You can get into a good rhythm walking along the track, and it can be a meditative experience. When you reach the first swimming spot, Leftlake ②, the water greets you like an oasis, a vast shiny pool, and it's impossible not to want to jump in.

On Dartmoor, 'lake' usually refers to a stream, rather than a large area of water. Indeed you will see small streams on the OS map marked as 'lakes'. The author Eric Hemery, in *High Dartmoor*, says he believes the use of the word indicates the fact that the source of the streams was often a lake or tarn. For convenience, we refer to the actual lakes in this chapter as 'Red Lake' and 'Leftlake' as well, which we hope is not too confusing!

There is a bridge over Leftlake – again, a remnant of the old railway, which is pretty well preserved. Swimming in the lake is intensely pleasurable. The water is the colour of dark amber, and moving through it, your limbs look as though they've had rather an overenthusiastic dose of spray tan. You can float on your back, listening to the larks above, drifting in the enormous pool. There's plenty of room for practising your strokes, or why not organise some swimming races? Anything is possible!

After your dip at Leftlake, you continue along the Two Moors Way, deeper into the heart of the moor, towards Red Lake. Look out for the spectacular Bronze Age cairn, Eastern White Barrow, a mile to your right, known locally as the 'Dartmoor Submarine' because of its unusual shape. William Crossing describes it (in his *Guide to Dartmoor*) as "a very fine example of an ancient burial heap". The Bronze Age person who was buried here must have been pretty important. The cairn has an unusual stone tower on top, which gives it the appearance of a submarine. It is thought the tower was a later addition but no one really knows who added it or why.

The final approach to Red Lake ④ is tantalising, because the path is sunk between two banks.







You know you're getting nearer, because you can see a large cone-shaped hill up ahead – the spoil heap from the china clay workings. However you don't get to see the water until you're right there. The first thing to do is climb to the top of the conical hill, a.k.a. the Red Lake Volcano, and take in the full scale of the place. There is an enormous lake – four times the size of an Olympic swimming pool – with two smaller lakes to the side. It really is the most spectacular, and almost outlandish, sight.

Down by the side of the largest body of water are the remains of the engine house, which contained a steam-plant, used to pump water out as the clay was mined. The clay itself was washed before being sent down a pipeline to Bittaford, on the southern edge of the moor. There was also a hostel here where the workers lived during the week, which was run by a Mr and Mrs Bray. However the clay they dug here turned out not to be as fine as they had hoped, and the enterprise, known as the China Clay Corporation, went bust in 1932. The railway track was lifted soon afterwards, but fascinatingly, up until the 1960s, according to Eric Hemery (in *High Dartmoor*), people used to drive along the old track in their cars. Eventually the authorities put a stop to this. Can you imagine fleets of cars parked by Red Lake now?

The three pools are quite simply a swimmer's paradise. In summer they are warm and inviting, but they are magical in winter too - desolate, remote and dark. It feels like swimming on the edge of the world. You can get a really long swim in the big lake, but the smaller pools are fun to explore too, and are lined in the summer with delicate bog cotton, with wispy white flowers like sheep's tails.

The remoteness of Red Lake means you'll be pretty exhausted by the time you get there.



It's really good fun to camp – as well as being a welcome chance for a lie down after that massive hike – but make sure you take precautions against midges. Whether you stay the night or return the same day, once you get back to civilisation the memory of these isolated lakes, in the middle of such a stark, unforgiving landscape, will stay with you for quite some time.

# DIRECTIONS

**1** From Harford Gate car park, follow the path north east until it links up with the Two Moors Way. Follow the Two Moors Way north until you get to Leftlake, which is on the path. It is a good wide path which follows the high ground above the Erme valley.

**3.3 miles**

**2** From Leftlake, follow the Two Moors Way for another three miles until you get to a pyramid shaped marker stone – which marks the start of the Red Lake Tramway heading north.

**2.3 miles**

**3** Keep ahead on the Tramway – not the Two Moors Way - for the last half mile to Red Lake.

**0.7 miles**

**4** To return, retrace your steps. If you have the stamina or time you might like to return (or indeed ascend) via the Erme valley. You will need a good map and be prepared to do some serious exploring and bush-whacking. It adds on about three miles and several hours. Follow the course of the Red Lake stream west from Red Lake and pick up the northern end of the Erme stone row. Follow this for two miles to the dramatic stone circle then drop down to the river and follow this. You will pass a man-made weir plunge pool and arrive at Piles Copse where there is another pool. This is a popular camping spot. Follow the path south west for a mile up past the waterworks, and onto the lane to return via the lanes to Harford, via Tor.

