

Wild times in the River Wye



Liz Lowe counts on the current as she tackles her first distance swim

It only takes a few persistent voices for an idea to become a goal and a journey to begin.

“We can totally do it!”

I didn't matter that I hadn't even swum two kilometres before. Nor that the previous spring I'd been unable to complete 50 metres of front crawl without stopping.

“You can always sell your ticket on, but it won't come to that.”

Words of encouragement flowed until more than twenty members of Wiltshire Wild Swim had signed up for the Wild Wye 7km Swim in just over seven months' time.

I felt jubilant and instantly fitter. And then I went for a swim. How did I ever think I was going to do this?

Between the Welsh mountains and the Severn estuary, the Wye covers around 250 kilometres, with sections forming the border between England and Wales. It bristles with life, supporting healthy populations of many species including otters, white-clawed crayfish and Atlantic salmon. With diverse geology and wildlife, it's both a Special Area of Conservation and a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

We were to swim the seven kilometre stretch between Lower Lydbrook and Huntsham Bridge. Thankfully, we would be heading downstream.

The event (emphatically 'not a race') is run by the Severn Area Rescue Association (SARA) and makes good use of the organisation's water safety expertise, equipment and manpower. Organiser and SARA volunteer, Richard Newhouse, explains how he “fell in love with that stretch of the river,” and enjoys enabling more swimmers to experience it. He describes the dramatic landscape, saying “sometimes you have mist clinging to the trees and can look up to tall woods and to Yat Rock. It's a bit like a jungle.”

JUST KEEP SWIMMING

I knew I needed to prepare, so I googled ‘six-month training plan for five-kilometre swim’, counting on the current to take care of the remaining distance. Two months later, with little swimming done, I returned to Google looking for a four-month program.

And then I made a plan to ‘just keep swimming’. I hauled myself out



of bed for early pool sessions and met swim buddies at Vobster Quay, a local open-water swimming venue. On tired, unmotivated days I went for a short dip and forgot about training. Often, although not always, I'd achieve more than I thought.

Increasing swim fitness took time. For a long while, despite swimming

several times a week, I didn't seem to be getting any further or faster. A couple of coaching sessions helped and one day it finally started to fall into place. Managing my breathing, lengthening my stroke and improving my positioning all helped me swim further using less energy.



← WILDLIFE AND WILD WATER

In June, a group of us spent a day in the Wye with Angela Jones, an outdoor adventure expert and fitness coach specialising in wild swimming. Angela knows the Wye better than anyone, spending up to 40 hours a week in it during summer and often camping out on the banks of her 'office'.

"Every time I go in, I feel blessed, because it's an invitation to share its beauty," says Angela. "Wild swimming is about wildlife and wild water and the Wye has that whole combination."

Angela and her team planned two swims, with a long break in between, together covering around ten kilometres. None of us had swum that distance before and, as neon tow floats spread across the water at Kerne Bridge, few of us thought we'd complete both.

We learnt how to swim technically through a fast-changing river environment: sighting frequently to avoid obstacles, 'ottering' safely through rapids while protecting our backs, looking for ripples that could indicate hidden boulders and sculling for depth testing.

Angela guided us through tangled water-crowfoot, past flat, dark salmon pools and beneath the prehistoric setting of Yat Rock and the calls of Peregrine falcons. Her enthusiasm was infectious and also brilliantly distracting. Before we knew it, we'd completed our second swim.

PANIC BUYING NEOPRENE

I felt invincible and could only imagine how strong I'd be after training all summer. Ah, summer. Six weeks of quality time with my children and far too much rosé wine (there is frequently a correlation between these two things). With just three weeks to go I was questioning my swim ability. And it was getting colder.

At our final training session, I smiled as our gang of wild swimmers scattered across the water amid autumn leaves, leaving snacks and drinks lined up along the diving platform. We used to swap flapjack recipes, now we discussed our

favourite electrolyte tablets.

Rather than boosting my confidence, that swim drained it. I felt sluggish and cold. I knew I needed to be comfortable in 15-degree water for around two hours and although I'd technically swum through winter, I'd barely stayed in long enough to get the Instagram shots. As Sarah Thomas crossed the Channel in skins for the fourth time, I was panic buying more neoprene and feeling like a total wimp.

I considered why I'd signed up in the first place: to get better at doing something I love and for the fun of a shared challenge.

In truth, I'd already succeeded, but my nerves were increasing. I'd also joined some friends, one of whom is a cancer survivor, in raising sponsorship for the Bone Cancer Research Trust. No pressure then.

HELD BY THE WATER

Before the event I followed Angela's advice: eating well, staying hydrated and attempting some early nights. The day finally arrived, preceded by a night of heavy rain. Under dense skies, we huddled in the wet mist at Huntsham Bridge.

Nervous giggles, cheery supporters and friendly marshals kept the atmosphere buoyant as we made our way into the river. I couldn't believe we were finally doing it.

As we swam, I lost track of familiar faces and struggled to find the right pace. Others had told me how they zone out while swimming: Helen does maths; Sally goes through the steps of baking a cake. I remembered something Angela said about relaxing and being "held" by the water, managed to settle into a rhythm and stopped fighting it.

Passing the halfway point, I

relaxed and looked up at Yat Rock and out to fields and woodland. There were 400 swimmers, but it was one of the most tranquil swims I've experienced.

When a marshal in waders told me there were two kilometres to go, I was in disbelief. I sped up, but the last stretch was tough. Despite being almost entirely encased in neoprene, I was cold, and my arms were weary. I felt increased admiration for those friends swimming in skins, with chronic pain or having not been able to train properly due to life's challenges.

And then, after just under two hours' swimming (thank you fast-flowing current), I saw crowds on the riverbank. Ropes slung down a steep bank signalled the exit point and I hoisted myself up to meet my husband and daughter. Many of my swim group had already finished and we stood, glass of bubbles and chocolates in hand, cheering others in.

Comedian and actress Amy Poehler said: "Find a group of people who challenge and inspire you, spend a lot of time with them, and it will change your life forever."

The power of the group continues to amaze me. I did it, we did it. I'd better mute the Whatsapp chat before I sign up for something really silly next year 🙄



THE POWER OF THE GROUP
CONTINUES TO AMAZE ME.
I DID IT, WE DID IT



Success!

Swim details

Wild Wye Swim

Next event:

September 2020

Distances: 10.5km,
7km, 1km

Wetsuits: Optional

Tow floats:

Not allowed

More info:

wildwyeswim.org.uk

Angela Jones

run-wild.co.uk

Vobster Quay

vobster.com