

# A wild time in Wessex

 **Phil Curry** escapes from the suburbs to enjoy natural wonders and wildlife in the West Country

Lulworth Cove, Dorset, is an important part of our World Heritage coastline



**R**ed squirrels, avocets, butterflies, lilies and roses – the UK is home to an amazing breadth of wildlife and plant life. It truly has to be seen to be appreciated and there are hundreds of places where you can get close to them, and enjoy wild Britain. So, when the chance came up to tour some nature spots in our Autocruise Tempo test 'van, I jumped at it. I was also keen to see how the Tempo fared on tour with a week's worth of camping gear aboard.

I aimed to concentrate on Dorset and its coast for my wildlife tour as I've never been to this part of the UK – not because I haven't wanted to, I just haven't got around to it, until now. I loved the idea of looking over the World Heritage-status Jurassic Coast and, passing through the New Forest was a bonus. Dorset also has a wide variety of sites where I would be able to get close to nature in all its glory.

## The stars at night

A few checks, a bit of water in the fresh tank for stops along the way, bags stowed, and that was that. Hitting the open road – via the supermarket to pick up some forgotten essentials (I can't live without tomato ketchup) – I travelled down the A127 to get onto the M25. The visibility from the cab, and the driving position, was so good that within five miles I was feeling relaxed and looking forward to the trip ahead.

Later that day, it was great to leave the M27 and get into the New Forest. I was instantly greeted by a wealth of greenery, something I rarely see at home, in the suburbs of Essex. In fact, most of the travelling I have done around the UK has along some motorway or other, so it was refreshing to see trees and vast fields at the side of the road.

With the sun shining through, late in the day, I finally hit traffic, but the responsive clutch control and low-down torque of the diesel-powered Peugeot Boxer meant that keeping pace with the cars in front was a doddle.

As the light began to fade, I arrived in Winterbourne Abbas at my first campsite – Newhaven Camping and Caravanning Club CS. It is a well set-up site with plenty of space, quite a few

hook-up points, lots of grass pitches and a couple of hardstandings. Before settling in for the night I first needed to top up the water tank, but by the time I got around to it the night had grown quite dark. As I clambered out of the rear doors I happened to look up, and, I can honestly report that I've never seen so many stars in the sky. I pulled out my binoculars and trained them skywards, easily picking out Orion's Belt and The Great Bear constellations.

Next morning I awoke to the prospect of a long day's drive ahead, via Poole, to my next stop at a site in Wareham. I wanted to give the Tempo a good, long, non-motorway drive to see how it coped with the hills and narrow roads that make up most of the surrounding countryside. It was also an ideal opportunity to explore areas such as Wareham Forest, Sandford, and Poole.

It was an enjoyable drive and I soon racked up the miles on the Tempo. Parking up in the Sandbanks area of Poole and having a bite to eat while overlooking the beach and harbour gave me the opportunity to plan the week ahead in detail. The view from the Tempo's

These gravel islands, at Brownsea, make ideal nesting sites for terns



*Far left* Part of Brownsea Island is a nature reserve  
*Left* Sarah, Phil and Chris Thain (*left*) the Reserve Manager, walking one of the nature trails *Above* A birds-eye view of Poole Harbour

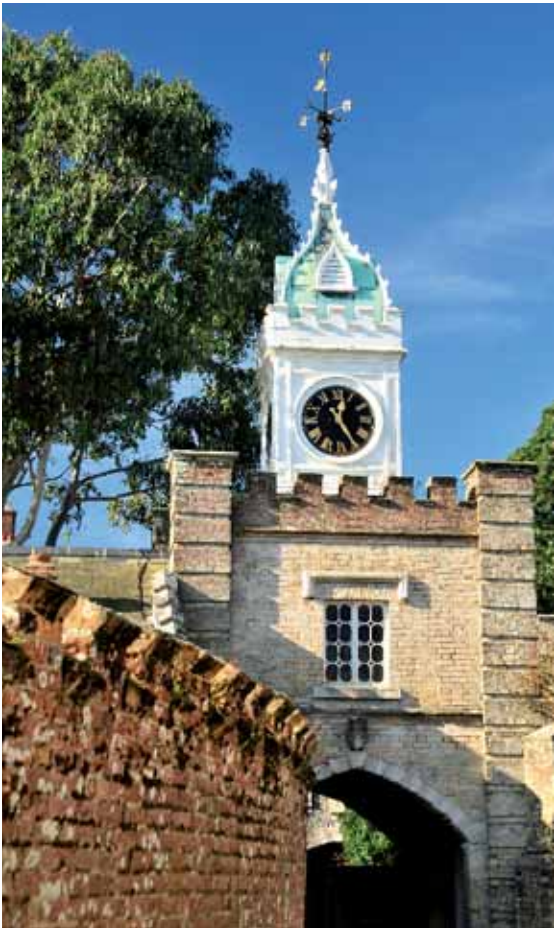


*“Brownsea Island is one of the best places in the southern part of the UK to see red squirrels”*



Brownsea Island is the largest of the islands in Poole Harbour

*Below* This clock tower is part of the castle at Brownsea Island *Foot of page* (L to R): Sarah, Phil and Brownsea nature reserve manager Chris Thain (l to r) inside one of the many hides; red squirrels are one of Britain's best-loved animals



window was amazing: a sun setting over the sea, and the forest of trees on Brownsea Island in the middle distance. Then it was off to Hunters Moon Caravan Club site where I hooked up and spent the night surrounded by rabbits running through the open fields there.

### Back to nature

I awoke next day to a warm, sunny morning and drove the Tempo out of the campsite for my first stop of the day, to meet our Sarah Wakely, who had travelled down to assist me. Being a Dorset belle, Sarah already knew the area pretty well but was looking forward to accompanying me on the visits I had planned. So, off I went to meet her in Poole before we headed off to the first nature site on my itinerary.

If you are looking for wildlife, and want to visit an area of unspoilt beauty, you cannot do better than the

550-acre Brownsea Island which sits in the middle of Poole harbour, surrounded by shipping lanes and pleasure boats. It is owned by the National Trust and, between March and October, you can visit by hopping onto the island's small passenger launch which leaves from Sandbanks. If you need to park your 'van you may be lucky, as we were, and find a side street. Otherwise there is a pay-and-display car park beside the beach, about half a mile from the ferry stop, with no height restriction barriers. Motorcaravans are charged the same rate as cars. It is not worth using the car park by the ferry point as you are only allowed a maximum stay of one hour – nowhere near enough time in which to fully explore Brownsea Island.

The National Trust bought Brownsea in 1962 and have now leased the northern part to the Dorset Wildlife Trust which has turned this part of the island into a nature reserve. We met Chris Thain, the Reserve





**Left to right:**  
This little boat  
ferries visitors to  
Brownsea Island;  
the Bramble Bush  
Bay ferry takes  
you across  
Poole harbour;  
Brownsea's wood  
ants bask in the  
sun to get warm,  
then return  
underground to  
spread the heat  
– there can be  
up to 200,000  
in one nest



Manager, and he gave us a look around at the various areas and hides. The first looked out over the lagoon (a semi-artificial feature). As Chris told us: "The land was originally reclaimed from the sea and used to graze cattle. But, as the years went by and the farmland was no longer tended, the drainage was not maintained so the area flooded, which made it perfect for the birds!" More recently, the National Trust has repaired the sea wall to ensure that the lagoon is safe from the waters of the harbour beyond.

The lagoon is a popular place for avocets (black-and-white wading birds with a long, up-curved beak): 25 percent of the world's population stops on the island. Brownsea is also a popular stopover for black tailed godwits (another wading bird, but large and with a very long, straight bill and long legs).

While looking through our binoculars, sitting in one of the hides overlooking the lagoon, Chris pointed out the man-made gravel islands which make ideal nesting sites, especially for terns. There, he told us, you can get closer to the birds than anywhere else in the UK.

Perhaps Brownsea is most well known for its population of red squirrels, and we soon spotted some at a feeding station near the information office. "Red Squirrels have just come out top of a national survey of Britain's best-loved animal," said Chris as we watched another one come up to feed. As the grey squirrel has never reached the island, Brownsea is one of the best places in the southern part of the UK to see them. But there is more to Brownsea than birds and red squirrels and, as Chris pointed out, "even if you don't see one, you won't leave feeling disappointed."

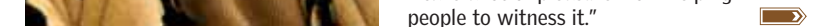
He's right. I found the wood ants' habitat fascinating. Chris explained to us how they bask in the sun to get warm, then go underground to spread the heat around. Usually there are around 200,000 ants per nest.

To get over to Brownsea, you have to pay to use the ferry, then a landing charge (National Trust Members are exempt from this). Admission to the nature reserve costs £2 but children aged under 12 get in free.

Once back on dry land at Sandbanks, it was time to jump back in the 'van. At Sarah's suggestion we set off to catch the Bramble Bush Bay chain ferry from here to South Haven Point, just across the harbour, on the way to our next nature site. When we boarded the ferry I felt rather sorry for those in line behind us as we had to pull the Tempo up beside a double decker bus and, as the traffic lanes are narrow and the bus was wide, we ended up blocking half a lane! After disembarking, we drove along the winding roads around the area,



**IN THE KNOW**  
**Chris Thain, Brownsea Island Nature Reserve Manager**  
 "Brownsea Island is of enormous importance and significance to the local area, and it is great to be able to engage with people and give them a good interaction with the animals and birds. The island is a wonderful place and, personally, I take a lot of pleasure from helping people to witness it."



Part of a plantation of trees  
at Abbotsbury Gardens

## NEED TO KNOW

### Pettiest roads

- The B3070 and B3071 to Lulworth Cove and Durdle Door.
- The costal B3157 road takes you through Abbotsbury and past West Bexington – both are quaint, attractive villages.

### Fuel costs

**Distance** 864 miles  
**Fuel used** 31 gallons  
**Average diesel price** 109.9p per litre  
**Economy** 27.8mpg

### Where to see nature

**Abbotsbury Sub-tropical Gardens**  
Tel 01305 871130.  
Web [www.abbotsbury-tourism.co.uk/gardens.htm](http://www.abbotsbury-tourism.co.uk/gardens.htm)  
**Brownsea Island**  
Tel 01202 707744.  
Web [www.nationaltrust.org.uk](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk)  
**Cricket St. Thomas Wildlife Park**  
Tel 01460 30111.  
Web [www.cstwp.co.uk](http://www.cstwp.co.uk)  
**Dorset Wildlife Trust**  
Tel 01305 264620.  
Web [www.dorsetwildlife.co.uk](http://www.dorsetwildlife.co.uk)  
**RSPB Arne**  
Tel 01929 553360.  
Web [www.rspb.org.uk](http://www.rspb.org.uk)





towards Wareham and found the Tempo surprisingly nippy when tackling long inclines.

Our next stop was the Arne RSPB site, in Stoborough. The car park there has no vehicle restrictions or marked bays and charges are £4 for all-day parking or £2 for two hours. So, having parked and paid we were treated to a talk about the area from senior warden Mike Trubridge, after which we were free to explore.

Arne is the only place where you can see all six types of reptile that are native to the UK, "...and I'll bet you want to know what they all are, too!" said Mike, probably regretting having mentioned the fact. The adder, smooth snake, grass snake, sand lizard, common lizard and slow worm all reside within the park.

Arne is also known for its population of avocets and dartford warblers (a small, dark, long-tailed bird) in addition to other species of birds, mammals, moths, and butterflies (1124 in total), and almost 500 types of flowering plant.

Sarah and I took the Long Trail, which offered a great view across to Poole harbour, and all the birdlife thereabouts. While walking we came across a sika deer that was busy searching the fauna and found that it was quite happy to let us approach quite closely.

No visit to Dorset is complete without a trip to Lulworth Cove and Durdle Door. These are in a coastal area of great beauty, with the natural cove of the former and the latter's archway offering a striking backdrop to the blue sea. At the base of the hill leading down to the cove is a café, and the natural pebble beach there extends right around the cove. It's a perfect spot in which to relax.

Durdle Door is a breathtaking place. The arch of rock, which runs parallel to the shoreline, was created through natural erosion. We stopped here while I fired up the Tempo's three-burner hob, put the kettle on and made us both a cuppa, which we drank while we looked out to sea. Then it was time to head back to the campsite, and settle down for the night.

## A touch of the exotic

I woke to the Tempo's own alarm clock, cursing the fact that it doesn't have a snooze function. So foregoing any chance of a lie in, I got myself ready for the day ahead. I had plenty to look forward to, with a trip to Abbotsbury Sub-tropical Gardens, near Weymouth. So without delay, I picked up Dave Smith, our photographer on this trip, and headed off.

Arne RSPB site, in Stoborough, is the only place where you can see all six types of reptile that are native to the UK



The roads to Abbotsbury were quite narrow but we didn't find them a problem in the 2.25m-wide Tempo and even had the opportunity to enjoy looking at the local architecture. Abbotsbury is a beautiful village, set atop a hill overlooking the coast. It is made up mostly of stone cottages, with quite a few of them sporting thatched roofs.

Abbotsbury Gardens is perhaps best known for its swannery, which is now open to the public, but the gardens are worth the visit in their own right. They started their life as a kitchen garden for the nearby castle in 1765, before expanding under the 4th Earl of Ilchester, who collected various plants from around the world. Today, the castle is no more, but its garden has been preserved and is home to many species of plant life which thrive in the unique micro-climate created by the dense tree surround and its high position, on a hill.

We walked around the grounds with Steve Griffith, the head warden. One interesting item we noticed was

**Left to right: Phil and Sarah enjoy tea and cakes by the beach at West Bexington; the Durdle Door rock formation, near Lulworth Cove; a sika deer on the Long Trail at Arne RSPB site**



“Abbotsbury is a beautiful village, set atop a hill overlooking the coast”

A typical Dorset cottage, like this one, is made of stone and topped with a thatched roof



Left & below  
A stroll through  
Abbotsbury  
Gardens is  
a colourful  
experience and  
its Jurassic  
Garden (bottom)  
is a marvel




the *camellia sinensis*, or tea plant, which is more often found in the warmer climate of India. Also making for a great view were the colourful *magnolia campbelli* which brightened the landscape with their pink petals. A slight uphill walk through Magnolia Way took us to a stunning view of the Jurassic Coast, and sitting on a bench we were able to look out on the ruins of St Catherine’s chapel through a carefully cut ‘window’ of trees which, Steve admitted, had taken took a lot of work to cultivate, having drawn inspiration from a feature in a old, 1890 issue of *Country Life*. “It is my *pièce de résistance*!” exclaimed Steve. We were also taken to the Jurassic Garden, newly created to link with the walk to the coastal viewpoint. Here, we strolled around warm-water pools, ducking under the branches of various trees and plants most of which would normally grow only under glass in the UK, yet here they were flourishing thanks to the benign micro-climate of Abbotsbury.

With the sunshine fading into the clouds we headed off, driving along the B3157 coastal road. We stopped for a picnic lunch by the beach at West Bexington, and for pudding I brought out my own *pièce de résistance*, an angel cake that I had bought as a sweet treat for myself, Sarah and Dave our photographer. The route to our next wildlife venue meandered briefly into Devon, then north into Somerset, and finally to Cricket St. Thomas Wildlife Park, east of Chard. We pulled into the spacious car park and made for the visitor centre. Once inside, we had a look around, before meeting up with Andy and (another) Sarah, our two guides, who promised to show us something really special. Our first visit was to the reindeer enclosure for the chance to meet these sleigh-pulling animals and even stroke them. Next, we walked to the lake, where our Sarah took delight in feeding a rather greedy fish which was literally jumping out of the water to catch the food.

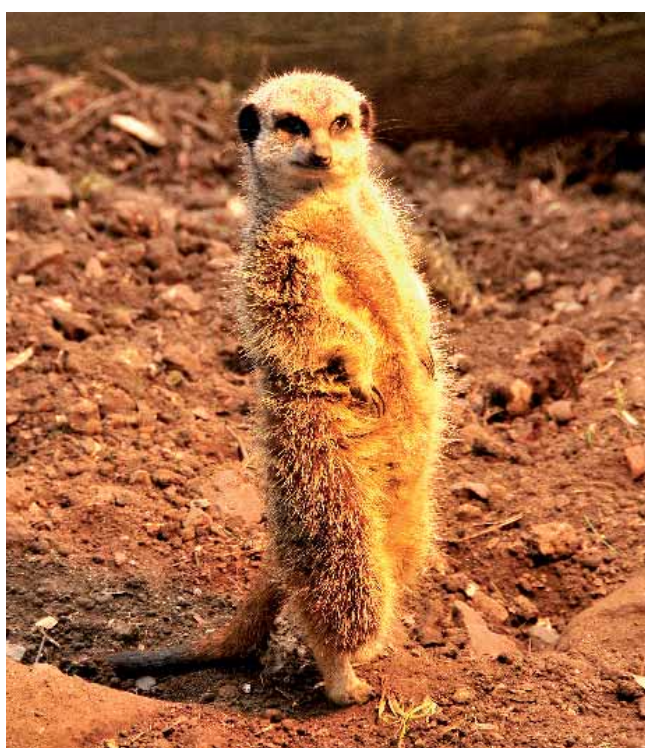
Our tour included a look at the meerkats and waterbuck, as well as the camel enclosure. But then came our highlight of the week. We were taken to the park’s Lemur Wood and allowed to feed the ring-tailed lemurs. According to Andy, “Grapes and bananas are the main currency, here in the wood.” So, with a bowl of these, along with some orange and apple, Sarah and I were sat down in the feeding area, and the animals were called over. They climbed all over us to get the food, and even tried grabbing the bowls out of our hands as we held them tight! We soon saw what Andy had meant about grapes and bananas because after a little while we had nothing but orange and apple left over. The females get first dibs on the food, so there were still plenty of hungry male Lemurs stalking the ground around us, waiting to leap up on our shoulders. The experience was tremendous fun and the chance to be among these animals, and watch them interact, was unrepeatable.



**IN THE KNOW**  
**Steve Griffith, Head Warden, Abbotsbury Sub-tropical Gardens**  
 “For this coast to be given World Heritage status is a really big boost. This is a beautiful part the world, and Abbotsbury Gardens has been able to show it from a new viewpoint, while the Jurassic Garden tells the story of how the area used to look, millions of years ago.”



Below (top to bottom): the road to Cricket St Thomas led to all types of wildlife at the Park there, including reindeer and meerkats



Phil and Sarah feed the hungry lemurs at Cricket St Thomas Wildlife Park

I never imagined that I would ever have a ring-tailed lemur on my shoulder!

Cricket St Thomas is the only wildlife park in the UK with a natural river running through it and this helps to maintain the habitats of some of the wilder animals, such as those in the Africa Paddock. In fact, the park makes use of the phrase 'Where wildlife lives naturally', to emphasise just how much work they put into making the settings as close to the animals' natural habitats as possible.

The park also runs a 'Walk on the Wildlife' tour, where members of the public can get right up close to the animals, feed them, and even have a photo taken while they are doing it. The walk costs around £50, or £80 for couples, but it is worth it. Feeding the lemurs was a great experience that both Sarah and I will remember for a long time to come.

## Forest stay

At the end of the day, I faced a long drive back after our visit to the wildlife park so I decided to stay the night at the Forest Holidays site at Holmsley, in the heart of the New Forest. I arrived at the park a little late, because I had approached from totally the wrong direction and driven through the New Forest instead of taking the easier A35 route. I couldn't really see much in the darkness, so I just hooked up, settled down and went to sleep. In the morning, it was like magic: I had woken up in the middle of a forest! It was great to be able to step out of the 'van, into one of the largest forests in the UK.

Having left the site, I stopped briefly in the village of Burley, which has everything you would expect of a New Forest village: old buildings, pretty countryside and a manor house sitting atop the hill. I browsed the shops and bought some traditional, hand-made fudge, then pointed the Tempo towards Essex and home.

Dorset is a great county to tour, with fantastic views and nature aplenty. The New Forest, too, is a great place to enjoy, I'm certainly heading back there again – next time with my bike, so I can explore the area!

Finally, I'd like to thank all my fellow motorcaravanners who flashed, waved or came over to chat with me. I'm still quite new to this hobby and it feels great to be part of such a warm and friendly community. I look forward to meeting more of you on my motorhome tours soon!

● Turn to page 144 to read Phil's opinion of the Autocruise Tempo that he took on this trip.

## Where we stayed

• **Newhaven, Winterbourne Abbas DT2 9LH**  
Tel 01305 889327 Web [www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk](http://www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk)  
A great little CS with plenty of space, mostly grass, with a couple of hardstanding areas and plenty of hook-up points. The site is only 800 yards from the village pub and a petrol station with shop.  
**Price £9** (two adults + hook-up, high season).

• **Hunters Moon, Wareham, BH20 7PA** Tel 01929 556605  
Web [www.caravanclub.co.uk](http://www.caravanclub.co.uk)

Just on the edge of Wareham Forest, Hunter's Moon (pictured here) is an idyllic site with plenty of serviced pitches and motorhome service points.  
**Price £19.60** (two adults + hook-up, in high season).

• **Holmsley, New Forest, Christchurch, BH23 7EQ**  
Tel 01425 674502  
Web [www.forestholidays.co.uk](http://www.forestholidays.co.uk)  
Run by Forest Holidays, in partnership with the Camping & Caravanning Club, this park is deep inside the New Forest, and has over 600 pitches, a mix of hardstanding and grass. There is a

shop and take-away on site, and you can enjoy nearby walks or cycle trails. Forest Holidays also offers a Ranger Tour, whereby you can have a guided tour, with a forest ranger, of the areas near your campsite.  
**Price £16.70** (two adults + hook-up, in high season).

