

# Winter around the Weald

Leave your garden to nature on a crisp winter's day and take a walk around the Weald's beauty spots instead

Words by Caroline Edmunds pictures by Darryl Curcher

If you have to choose between tidying the garden or enjoying a walk around our beautiful Wealden countryside, don't feel guilty if you choose the latter, as a tidy garden with plants deadheaded and pruned, and weeds cleared away isn't the best option for wildlife. By leaving our borders untended, we are not only helping to look after wildlife, but we're also helping to create structures that will make our gardens pretty on winter days, when the frost and snow clings to stems and leaves to create a little bit of magic in the December sun.

It's interesting how many mammals and insects rely on our gardens for shelter in winter. Moths are great flower pollinators and the privet hawk-moth, with its distinctive pink and black body markings and bright green and lilac caterpillar with white stripes that feeds on privet (*Ligustrum*), lilac (*Syringa*) and ash (*Fraxinus*) has a better chance of survival when we leave our borders intact. This makes it easier for the larvae to survive as they wait six inches underground or under leaf litter until June, when they emerge.

Lifeless annuals can provide frost protection to other plants as well as vital shelter for hibernating insects. Ladybirds, earwigs and lacewings are all beneficial insects, and they need somewhere safe to spend the winter, finding homes in tiny crevices in the plants.

It's worth remembering that mature ivy makes a very dry home for a number of insects, including butterfly pupae. In summer it provides homes for adult butterflies, and birds can nest in it.

If you have a log pile in the garden, slow-worms and hedgehogs will hibernate there. Leaf litter too provides useful shelter for mammals and insects foraging for food.

Even weeds provide shelter and food and, as long as you catch them just before they burst into growth in spring, they don't really cause your plants a problem.

So, instead of worrying about how the garden looks on a crisp, bright winter's day, leave the garden to nature and take a walk round the Weald's beauty spots and enjoy what nature has to offer.

One of the best places to visit at this time of year to enjoy winter



landscapes and wildlife is the National Pinetum at Bedgebury, which is one of the Seven Wonders of the Weald.

On a snowy day it becomes a winter wonderland as snow clings to needles and cones. It's a great place to take your camera for those perfect winter landscape pictures and the adventure play trail and cycle tracks will provide endless fun for the whole family.

The Pinetum is also a haven for wildlife and provides a winter habitat for many of our birds, including one of Britain's rarest, the Hawfinch. At this time of year you can combine a walk with buying a Christmas tree at Bedgebury. The One Mile Winter Trail takes visitors to the best of the winter beauty around the Pinetum. A map of the trail can be

## Bedgebury Pinetum becomes a winter wonderland as snow clings to needles and cones

printed off the website or picked up from the visitor information centre.

Bowl Water is also open all winter, offering invigorating walks along the reservoir. Its Look-Out Restaurant is open at weekends between 10.30am to 4pm, offering somewhere to enjoy outstanding views while enjoying a hot drink or bite to eat.

The estate at Scotney Castle also offers the perfect place for a romantic winter walk in an enchanting setting. At this time of year when the trees are bare, you can enjoy amazing views across the valley. For the first time there will also be extended garden opening at weekends until 17 December to give people the chance to experience the garden in winter. Usual admission fees apply to the gardens and estate walks are free. Knole Park in Sevenoaks is also a lovely place to walk in winter with the chance to observe the fallow deer up close. ■



### What's on in the Weald

**26 Dec: Boxing Day Walk, Bedgebury**

**10 Dec: Hunt the Snowman, children's event at Bedgebury**

The East Sussex Bach Choir at Finchcocks will delight music lovers with a selection of carols and Christmas music on Sunday 3 December at 3pm (details and bookings 07759 878562) and on Sunday 10 December at 3pm and 8pm there will be a Christmas concert and party (Friends of Finchcocks only at 3pm, open to general public at 8pm).

Christmas lunch at The Swan or The Bistro, Lamberhurst Vineyard, booking essential.

For more information and contact details, on all the attractions mentioned visit: [www.sevenwonders.org.uk](http://www.sevenwonders.org.uk) or [www.visitheartofkent.co.uk](http://www.visitheartofkent.co.uk)

