

The RSPB hopes to have breeding ospreys here 'within the next ten years; five if we're really optimistic', says Singleton. 'If we can get one or two breeding pairs in the areas where we've put nests, then hopefully their range will expand out of that.'

Another patch of lowland heath is the Studland and Godlingston Heaths National Nature Reserve, near the sandy beach and dunes of Studland Bay. From a hide in the reserve, I can see across Poole Harbour towards Bournemouth and the moneyed suburbs of Sandbanks, as well as Brownsea Island, the birthplace of the Scouting movement and home to one of southern England's few red squirrel colonies. In the foreground, little egrets frolic in the freshwater lagoon of Little Sea. The combination of wetland and heath provides a home for wading birds such as the avocet, godwit and spoonbill, as well as the rare Purbeck mason wasp and ladybird spider.

'You can see the diversity: you have the wet woodland, the heath grading into the dunes, and then the wetland, so it's a really nice mosaic of habitats,' says Alison Turnock, the AONB's biodiversity officer. 'It's one of the reasons this area is so important – it grades very quickly from one to another.'

### COAST WITH THE MOST

Dorset's undeveloped coastline forms the bulk of the Jurassic Coast. Heading westwards from the hard limestone cliffs of Purbeck, the rock gets progressively softer – the sandstone, shale and mud coast between Bridport and Lyme Regis suffers frequent landslips that have yielded famous fossil discoveries, lending the coast its Jurassic moniker.

Chesil Beach is a significant part of this region. Stretching from Portland to West Bay near Bridport, it was formed at the end of the last ice age when rising sea levels dumped ashore gravel deposits that had originated in Devon and accumulated offshore over millions of years. Between it and the mainland is the Fleet – at 13 kilometres long, the largest tidal lagoon in Britain and home to the only managed colony of mute swans in the world.

'That gravel source is used up; that process of sediment moving has stopped – so we're in an enclosed system here,' says Ian Rees, countryside officer at the AONB. 'So what gravel we've got

## LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

### DELVING INTO DORSET

#### SNORKEL BENEATH SCRATCHY BOTTOM

'On a summer's day, the downland of Scratchy Bottom leading to the beach west of Durdle Door is alive with grasshoppers and butterflies. The beach is always inviting; the sea's often crystal clear and it's a favourite snorkelling spot, with mullet, bass and spider crabs loitering around the rocks.'

*Tom Munro, AONB manager*

#### HILLFORT VIEWS

'Cycle up Spyway Hill and you'll be rewarded with stunning views from the Iron Age hillfort of Eggardon over the Marshwood Vale. Pilsdon Pen and Lewesden Hill mark the horizon and the network of ancient fields spread out below you to the sea. It's well worth the slog.'

*Ian Rees, AONB countryside officer*

#### RIDING ON THE MOOR

'I often cycle on Hartland Moor – the ride over the River Frome and then around the heath looks different throughout the year, but is always stunning. It's a place for an abundance of wildlife – on late evenings in the summer, it's particularly evocative for the eerie churr of the visiting nightjar.'

*Alison Turnock, AONB biodiversity officer*

#### SOUTH DORSET SENSATIONS

'Walking the South Dorset Ridgeway excites all of the senses. It's a visual feast, with 360° views over Lyme and Weymouth bays, Chesil Beach, Purbeck cliffs, chalk downland and hillforts. There's the sound of buzzards and sheep, the taste of the sea, and the sweet smell of gorse on the wind.'

*Sue Mitchell, AONB transport, access and recreation officer*

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 Marc Grainger stayed at Highway Farm, Bridport ([www.highwayfarm.co.uk](http://www.highwayfarm.co.uk)). For more information about Dorset AONB, visit [www.dorsetaonb.org.uk](http://www.dorsetaonb.org.uk)



is what we've got, and if it's taken away or eroded, it's gone.' The varying size of the stones is helpful if you want to gauge how far along the coast you are, he says: 'They're potato-sized up there [to the east] and pea-sized down there [to the west]. Smugglers used to come ashore and just [feel the shingle] – "Aha, I'm in Abbotsbury".'

To the east of Portland, the processes of coastal erosion have created two of the AONB's most photogenic and geologically significant locations: Lulworth Cove – a perfect horseshoe-shaped example of such a landform – and Durdle Door, an impressive natural arch. Groups of geography students mill around both locales, taking notes; at Durdle Door, newlyweds have their photographs taken on the beach with the arch as a backdrop.

### PREHISTORIC PATH

A walk along the South Dorset Ridgeway, part of the South West Coast Path, reveals the AONB's long human history. Successive prehistoric peoples have left their mark on the inland chalk hills with Neolithic long barrows, Bronze Age round barrows and stone circles, and Iron Age hillforts such as Maiden Castle, the largest in Britain. With at least 500 scheduled monuments within its 36 square kilometres, the Ridgeway rivals Stonehenge and Avebury in archaeological importance.

'They were built to be visible,' says Munro. 'They're on the hilltops where the villagers can see them. There's good archaeological evidence to show that they had been weeded or re-covered with chalk to keep them gleaming white.'

Elsewhere in the AONB, historical farming practices are also apparent. Strip lynchets, step-like soil formations that date back to Saxon times, adorn the sides of hills, much like the rice terraces of Asia.

The coast path cuts through the military range at Lulworth, which means that it's closed to the public during firing – a situation that has certain benefits. 'There's a long history of military practice between there [Lulworth] and Bovington Heath,' says Munro. 'It does put pressure on tourism, because people can't use that bit of coast – but then again, it keeps people out, and the biodiversity of the area is fantastic and very well managed.'