

Into the night: why walking in the dark is good for the soul

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Warmer

- What time does it get dark at the moment where you live?
- Do you often go out after dark? For what purpose?

2 Key words

Find words in the article that match the definitions below. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. move further away _____ (para 1)
2. comes closer in a threatening way _____ (para 5)
3. a slow walk for pleasure _____ (para 6)
4. the black round parts in the middle of your eyes _____ (para 7)
5. strange and mysterious, and sometimes frightening _____ (para 8)
6. small man-made bodies of water often found on hills and used as sources of water for livestock _____ (two words, para 8)
7. seem to gradually change into something else _____ (two words, para 9)
8. made to protect you from the cold _____ (para 10)
9. wakes _____ (para 11)
10. a steep slope that forms the edge of a long area of high land _____ (para 11)
11. move or travel with no particular purpose _____ (para 13)
12. showing a lack of respect for God or religious objects, places or beliefs _____ (para 13)

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Shorter days don't have to put a stop to walking trips, as our writer finds on a night-time ramble on the South Downs

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- 1 The lights from the cottage windows recede, all too rapidly, as we walk along an unlit country lane and take a footpath through a field into open countryside. Thick cloud cover prevents the moonlight from illuminating the way ahead. Yet, as my eyes begin to get used to the darkness, the landscape around me reveals itself in a new light – albeit a shady one.
- 2 The contours of Mount Caburn, an iron-age hill fort, are like shadows against the sky. On the horizon, a tree bent by the wind is silhouetted, and the rocky outcrop at the top of the field turns out to be a flock of sleeping sheep. A fox cries, a pheasant crows and the air is full of a heady earthy scent.
- 3 “For most of human history, man lived in close contact with the land,” says Nigel Berman, my guide, whose company, School of the Wild, organizes guided night walks on the South Downs. “Only in the past few hundred years have we shut ourselves off from our natural surroundings. Walking at night is a powerful way of reconnecting. When your vision is reduced, your other senses are sharpened.”
- 4 Darkness is a thing we have come to fear and shy away from. It has become a metaphor for evil and depression, a place held at bay by our electric-lit world. But in the parts where darkness holds sway for much of the winter, inhabitants embrace it rather than yearning for longer days. In the Arctic Circle during the polar night, when the sun never rises and the Earth is swathed in darkness for several months, the Norwegians simply wrap up, strap on a head torch and head for the hills.
- 5 As nights in the UK close in and a Covid-induced indoor isolation looms, it is a perfect opportunity to go into the countryside, or walk across a deserted beach, to see starlit skies and moonlit rocks, spot owls, see bats swooping and breathe in the night air.
- 6 Nigel and I walk from Glynde, a village near Glyndebourne Opera House, across the South Downs towards the town of Lewes. It's a walk I know well by day, but at night everything is different, and a familiar stroll becomes a mini adventure. The lighter strip of sky above it highlights the ridge of the downs that we head towards to start. At the top, we edge along a wire fence looking for the gate that will take us along a path through the Mount Caburn nature reserve to Oxtedde Bottom.
- 7 When Nigel told me not to bring a torch, I was alarmed. I can't remember the last time I used my night vision, and I'm not even aware of how it works. Nigel explains that, in the dark, our pupils not only expand to allow light in, they also switch to use different light sensors. In bright light, cone-shaped sensors respond to different colours of light and allow us to see fine detail, but in the dark, the eyes switch to rod-shaped sensors, far more sensitive to light but unable to sense colours.
- 8 We descend past clumps of trees into the darker, hill-surrounded valley, aiming for the eerie shimmer of a dew pond where we pause to sit. I'm aware of the breeze caressing my face, the rustle of leaves and, as I watch the clouds swirling and slowly changing colour against the sky like a natural sound-and-light show, it feels mesmeric.
- 9 Normally, at this time of night, I'd be having a glass of wine in front of the television, but being out in the countryside is a purer form of relaxation. I forget about work and family tensions and begin to blend into the surroundings. There is no one other than Nigel to see or hear me and, with little visual distraction, my mind calms.
- 10 Walking at night is not without risk, but with knowledge and preparation, it opens up a new side to walking. For example, it's important to know your route by day so that you know what features to pick out by night; to have good navigational skills; take the right kit (hat, gloves, insulated layers and a daypack with a flask of hot drink); and pick favourable weather.
- 11 A deep unfamiliar sound rouses me from my reverie, and Nigel tells me it is the “cronk” call of the raven. We continue walking and, having got used to the dark, the chalk path that leads up the escarpment of Saxon Down now appears to almost shine in front of us. We climb carefully, feeling, rather than groping for, our way on the uneven ground.

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- 12 As we reach the top, Lewes appears below as a twinkly mass of lights, a sight I'd generally think of as inviting. But in just a few hours, I have gone over to the dark side and find myself reluctant to walk back down.
- 13 Walking at night is like discovering a new world on your doorstep, one that allows you to roam beyond the duration of winter's short days and explore in

the time of Covid. As Henry David Thoreau wrote in *Night and Moonlight*: "Night is certainly more novel and less profane than day."

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3 Comprehension check

Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. Who is Nigel Berman, and why is he important to the article?
2. What does the author see, feel, smell and hear on her walk?
3. What is her reaction to being on the walk?
4. What happens to our eyes when we walk in the dark without a torch or other source of artificial light?
5. What tips does the article give about walking in the dark?

4 Phrases

a. Underline these phrases in the article.

1. shut yourself off from
2. shy away from
3. hold at bay
4. hold sway
5. nights close in

b. Talk about what the phrases mean. Look up the meanings of any you do not know.

c. Use the phrases in sentences of your own about different topics. Which is the most useful expression for you?

5 Discussion

- What impression does the article leave on you? Does it motivate you to roam the countryside in the dark?
- How often do you go for a stroll in the dark?
- Talk about something eerie that you once saw in the dark.
- Say why you agree or disagree with Henry David Thoreau when he says, 'Night is certainly more novel and less profane than day.'

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6 Webquest

1. Find out about more ways to explore by night with these groups.

- National parks are some of the best places to see the star-studded autumn and winter skies, and there are a number of dark-sky festivals that include organized stargazing walks. darkskiesnationalparks.org.uk
- The Bat Conservation Trust has groups across the UK and most run local bat walks. bats.org.uk
- Ramblers groups offer group night walks. ramblers.org.uk
- Many charities now run organized night walks as a way of raising money. The original MoonWalk, organized by breast cancer charity Walk the Walk, now takes place all around the world. walkthewalk.org

2. Find out more about one of these places from the article and share your findings.

- the South Downs
- Lewes
- Glynde and Glyndebourne Opera House
- Mount Caburn