

*“Anywhere so rugged that it challenges the Army is definitely capable of taking me out of my comfort zone – and leaving me there!”*

# Wild Running

Fed up of tarmac, traffic and busy streets? Leave the beaten track behind and heed the call of the wild as you go for your first run in one of Britain's wildernesses. Get set for a total workout and complete peace of mind

Words James Witts Pictures Jon Brooke



*“It’s a dark Friday evening on Dartmoor, and 1,000 square kilometres of moorland await”*



*“Even the clouds look menacing”... James (left) strides into the unknown*

**I**T'S A DARK Friday evening on Dartmoor and, against the backdrop of almost 1,000 square kilometres of moorland, a weekend of off-road running awaits. Normally Bristol's concrete jungle provides the urban terrain for my runs. Three times a week, pockmarked cycle paths and suburban pavements conspire to ensure any memorable moments are confined to over-exuberant locals stumbling out of the local Wetherspoon's. These runs serve a purpose – to improve my half-marathon time – but at what cerebral cost?

I'm searching for a running reawakening, and my quest has brought me to *Hound of the Baskervilles* country. Trail running, I hear, will not only boost my fitness but also provide a shot of stress relief, clearing my mind of the daily grind. But it also sounds daunting. Running on city streets may not be inspiring, but it's predictable, there are street names to aid navigation, and a bus or cab to get me home if it all goes wrong. Dartmoor, on the other hand, is wild enough to accommodate

military firing ranges, and anywhere so rugged it challenges the Army is definitely capable of taking me out of my comfort zone – and leaving me there. Thankfully I have a comfort blanket in the form of local runner and guide Ceri Rees, who's promised to help me maximise my trail-running experience, and not leave me high and wet on the moors.

My plan is to run 10 of Dartmoor's most rugged miles, followed by a seven-mile coastal run the next day. Dressed in full trail regalia (*see overleaf*), I take my first stride at 10am on Saturday morning, right on the cusp of Widcombe-in-the-Moor, a pretty village which serves as a gateway to the rusty ferns and granite boulders that lie just beyond. Even the clouds look menacing. It's time to step into the unknown.

The first 10 minutes comprise steep ascents, leaping over brooks and off-loading (and reloading) my run jacket several times. It's tiring but truly uplifting, and despite my high heart rate, my mind is clearing already. I'm struggling to explain the experience, but Ceri articulates it perfectly.

“Running can be a kind of mindfulness,” he says. “It doesn't have to be an internal journey like meditation – it can be a form of outward meditation.”

Part of that psychological enema is down to focus. On the roads, I just run. Head off-road to nature's rugged carpet, and I have to watch every step. “Every footfall is different,” says Ceri. “It means you're not just using the running muscles but the stabilising and synergistic muscles too. You're also less likely to get a stress fracture or shin splints.” (He's right, by the way. The following Monday, back in Bristol, my muscular system feels fine aside from slightly achy obliques. There's no repeat of the regular niggle I get in my right knee from pounding pavements. As long as you don't turn an ankle, trails are far more forgiving.)

Out here in the national park, Ceri reminds me to monitor my energy levels. There's no Tesco Metro around the corner if I bonk. He recommends a hydration backpack filled with an energy drink or water, accompanied by an energy bar or two, though his own snacks are confined to seeds and nuts. »

With two trail marathon wins under his belt, Ceri's got the chops when it comes to wilderness wisdom



**i HILL RUN KNOWHOW**

Hills are a staple of wild running. Guide Ceri Rees has tips to tame them.

**DOWNHILL RUNNING**

- 1** Pick out a route down that's relatively clear of obstacles.
- 2** Your arm action is naturally wider when running downhill, but let your arms ride close to your sides, to bang out their rhythm like drumsticks, rather than acting solely as stabilising aids.
- 3** Downhill running can be counter-intuitive, even if you're a speed fiend. I'd recommend trying to lean forward. It'll send your hips over your ankles, which means less impact and less braking momentum.
- 4** On steep descents, keep it playful; change angles all the time and slalom, dropping your hips on the bends. This will put less strain on your quads. Skip, jump and dance downhill.

**UPHILL RUNNING**

- 1** A mental trick: when running uphill, don't look to the top of the hill. It's bound to be dispiriting.
- 2** Allow your arms to set the rhythm, so the faster the pace, the greater your range of movement. When it gets really steep off-road, rest your hands on your knees and fast-walk it.
- 3** Relax and feel like you're breathing from your lower abdomen rather than your lungs. If you can do that, you're less likely to reach the top completely out of breath. Aim to feel like your momentum is taking you up and over when you descend, rather than stopping at the top – unless you have to.
- 4** Every hill is different and subtle technique tweaks happen based on the gradient. Shorter, faster steps are usually better than longer, slower ones. So if it's a one in four slope, you may be little more than walking. Even the top fell runners often walk up the really steep bits.

*“Our run weaves from fields to sand, and a stretch of flat feels like a godsend. My cadence increases and I’m in the flow”*



**Beach running is pure exhilaration – and less punishing on the joints than tarmac**

Saturday’s run concludes in the pub back at Widecombe... but 18 hours later we’re back on rugged terrain for some more no-holds-barred running. The start features a rarity this weekend – tarmac – and it’s amazing how much quicker I suddenly feel after the energy-draining bogs we’ve run on thus far.

I can see why athletes of the calibre of the Brownlee brothers see trail running as an integral part of their elite triathlon preparation. Enhanced training gains and much reduced chances of injury make it a no-brainer for Yorkshire’s finest.

Our coastal trail run weaves from fields to hard sand, and after the unending undulations of Dartmoor, a stretch of flat feels like a godsend. Taking Ceri’s advice to breathe deeply from my abdomen for greater oxygen uptake and relaxation, I discover my cadence increases and I’m in the flow.

“That’s the stretch reflex,” he explains. “It’s a natural elastic propensity of the muscles to accelerate and decelerate at a certain rhythm. The more sensory feedback your body can give – in other words, muscle proprioception

through running off-road – the better your body is at recognising and controlling this.”

Whether it’s the stretch reflex I succumb to, I’m not sure. But as we wind our way back through country lanes to the finish, I reflect on the past two days of wild running. I’ve faced wildest Dartmoor and Devon’s coastal cliffs, sunk into bogs and been spat out by beaches, slithered across fields and hit walls of wind. And it’s been the perfect antidote to road running. No GPS, no obsession with pacing – just pure running in a stunning environment. I’m already looking forward to my next trail adventure – a four-day run trek across Dartmoor with bivouac and pony!

■ **PLAN YOUR WILD WEEKEND**

**Ceri Rees won the Salomon Kielder off-road marathon in 2012 and 2013. He is a guide with Wild Running, whose weekend breaks start from £130 (07773 560335, wildrunning.co.uk). James Witts stayed at the Great Grubb B&B in Totnes (01803 849071, thegreatgrubb.co.uk), which costs £40pp per night including a fine breakfast.**

**THE KIT YOU NEED**

**Running in more exposed terrain demands a few gear essentials...**

- WATERPROOF JACKET** small enough to screw up and stow in your pack.
- RUNNING TIGHTS** for insulation and to protect your legs from scratches.
- LONG-SLEEVE BASELAYER** or running top (push sleeves up on warmer days). Keep T-shirts for hot summer weather.
- RUNNING RUCKSACK** – a 10-litre pack should be enough to carry your jacket, drink, snacks, spare socks, gloves and a hat. Make sure it fits snugly and that you can adjust the straps so that it won’t bounce or chafe as you run.
- ORDNANCE SURVEY MAP** – go for the Explorer 1:25,000 scale. A GPS is also welcome when the mist descends.
- TRAIL RUNNING SHOES** – make sure they fit and look for shoes with a deeper tread pattern for off-road grip.

