



PHOTO: GRAHAM WYNNIE

Crawl of the wild

Anna Turns begins her open-water swimming season at the crack of dawn for the **Bantham Swoosh**.

After endless faffing, deciding which isotonic gels to stuff up the leg of my wetsuit and whether to wear wetsuit socks or not, I'm at Aveton Gifford at 6.30am, ready to start the Bantham Swoosh. I'm among 400 other swimmers being briefed by the Outdoor Swimming Society volunteers before we begin our 6km journey down the River Avon to Bantham, with the outgoing tide speeding us up as we swim the last few hundred metres, hence the 'swoosh'. There's a lovely buzz and friendly chatter between participants as we enter the water at 7am when the spring tide is at its highest – definitely no elbows at dawn.

It's a muddy start, so we're told to swim breaststroke with our heads up for the first couple of hundred metres, and once the river opens up and visibility improves, we start to front crawl and the mass of swimmers begins to spread out. I've been training for months in the pool and in nearby estuaries, building up my stamina and improving my front crawl technique, but I'm by no means in racing mode – I want to find my pace and enjoy the ride. From the start, I look for my own space among the busy crowds of swimmers, and try to find my own rhythm. It's not cold – water temperature is 14°C, I'm told – so I'm thankful I ditched the very buoyant wetsuit socks, which no doubt would have changed my leg position in the water.

All the things my swim instructors have said to me in the past pop back into my head: 'lengthen out each stroke', 'slow down to speed up', 'keep elbows high on exit from the water'. Efficiency is key; there's no point rushing and getting totally out of breath. I know that once I reach the end of the tidal road, that's a fifth of the way – although landmarks look different from the water's surface, and it's easy to lose sense of where I am as the tree-lined banks all look the same along the river. Thank goodness I know this route fairly well; many swimmers have travelled from all over the country, some from Yorkshire, Birmingham and London, just for the Swoosh.

My goggles keep misting up – the spray I used has washed away in the drizzle at the start line – and my wetsuit is chafing, despite wearing a rash vest (next time I'll use Vaseline, like the seasoned wild swimmers). There are moments when I'm taken by surprise by large swathes of seaweed, but changing scenery is a welcome distraction and I soon spot the white speed limit sign that marks the waterski area halfway along our route. I eat the isotonic gel (rhubarb and custard flavour – sickly sweet but a welcome boost) and another swimmer does the same next to me. She says she's struggling, so I try to impart a few words of encouragement, telling her it's only 3km to go, but I'm just as apprehensive as her.

As I swim along, focusing on my breathing while taking in the scenery every time I turn my head, I realise how incredibly liberating it is to lose total track of time. I have no watch, so I have absolutely no idea how many



ALL PHOTOS: GRAHAM WYNNIE



More than 400 swimmers enter the water at the start of the tidal road at Aveton Gifford



ALL PHOTOS: GRAHAM WINNE

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minutes I've been swimming for or how much longer this journey might take me; it's quite a contrast to clock-watching in the pool. I'm not competing with anyone today, not even myself. That's quite freeing, and all that matters is that I enjoy it and finish.

Now that I'm swimming to the side of the main group of swimmers, I'm away from the chaos of limbs everywhere. As the river widens, the wind picks up and the water gets fairly choppy; it takes more effort to cut through the water. Around the next bend, the wind over the tide eases off and I spot the first boats, so we're on the home straight – well, it's another 1-2km back to Bantham. I think of all the times I've walked down to the river bed at low tide and now I'm swimming over the same sand. Others stand to have a rest, but I keep swimming and I vow to keep going once I start spotting shore crabs walking sideways across the seabed; they're everywhere, and I don't fancy having my toes nipped so I just keep swimming.

For me, swimming is my headspace and a way for me to gently push myself out of my comfort zone. As I swim, I admire the beauty of this landscape, the clarity of the water, the greenness of the trees, the flow of my body through the river, and I feel lucky.

Once I see the pink boathouse at Jenkins Quay, the outgoing tide pulls me about four times my normal swimming speed. I take my goggles off and get swooshed



Once the pink boathouse comes into view at Jenkins Quay, swimmers are swooshed up to four times their normal swimming speed with the outgoing tide



The swim down the River Avon finishes at Bantham where the mouth of the river opens up to the sea and beautiful Burgh Island

along, laughing and chatting with fellow swimmers. As I clamber out of the river at the sandy beach, a volunteer offers a hand to pull me up. It feels strange to suddenly stand upright for the first time in almost two hours. I hear my name being called and I'm so pleased to see my family.

My back aches, my eyes are puffed up, my neck is sore but I'm happy. We walk back through the dunes for a well-deserved hot chocolate. I took this swim in my stride – I had no idea how the pacing would work over such a long distance, so I didn't push myself. Next time, I know I'll swim smoother and with more confidence. One thing is for sure: this girl can. **M**

Anna swam the Bantham Swoosh in aid of City to Sea, a campaign to reduce ocean plastics at source. If you'd like to sponsor her, please visit: citytosea.org.uk/Anna-Swim



PHOTO: KATE TREBLE/AVEN

Wildly happy: Anna after her swim

ANNA'S TOP TIPS

- Never swim alone – swim with a buddy or have someone close by watching you from the shore.
- Check tide times and ask lifeguards about rip tides. Swim within your limits.
- Wear a brightly coloured silicone swim hat (or a tow float if you have one) to increase your visibility.
- For extra protection from rocks, weaver fish and the cold, wear wetsuit boots and gloves.
- Wetsuits are not essential but if you prefer the extra layer, invest in a triathlon wetsuit – more flexible and less chafing.
- Changing in and out of wetsuits is fiddly at the best of times when your fingers are cold after a sea swim, don't even attempt to put a bra back on.
- Make sure you have a flask of hot drink and plenty of cake to hand.
- Sign up to an event and get experience swimming in open water in different conditions.
- Connect with other wild swimmers via Facebook groups (search for Devon Wild Swimming or Cornwall Wild Swimming), go to outdoorswimmingsociety.com and devonandcornwallwildswimming.co.uk

DIP YOUR TOE IN

Drake's Island Swim: swim across Plymouth Sound to Drake's Island. 15 July. chestnutappeal.org.uk

Burgh Island Swim: an evening, mile-long swim around this iconic landmark, in association with Surf Life Saving GB; there's also a half-mile option, ideal for those new to open-water swimming. 20 July. ashfords.co.uk/event/burgh-island-swim

Swim 4 Logan: one-mile swim from the promenade slip in Penzance. 30 July. cysticfibrosis.org.uk/get-involved/fundraising/events/swim-4-logan

St Michael's Mount: 1.5-mile swim from the beach, out and around the island. 5 August. chestnutappeal.org.uk

The Big Swim: beach to beach races at Port Isaac. 5 August. thebigswimcornwall.co.uk

Padstow to Rock Swim: a mile across the Camel estuary on the late afternoon tide. 6 August. padstowtorockswim.org.uk

Inn to Inn Swim: from Devoran to Mylor near Falmouth. 12 August. nearwaterevents.co.uk/inn-inn-swim

Plymouth Breakwater Swim: travel by boat to the breakwater then swim 2.2 miles back across the Sound, landing next to Tinside Pool. 13 August. chestnutappeal.org.uk

Polkerris Swim Festival: swim 1km, 2km or 3km in the sheltered harbour. 26 August. madhattersportsevents.co.uk/polkerriswimfestival

Scilly Swim Challenge: swim the islands in one day. 5 and 6 September. scillyswimchallenge.co.uk

Dart 10k: from Totnes along the River Dart to Dittisham. 9 or 10 September. outdoorswimmingsociety.com

Polkerris Sea Swim: 5km swim out to the buoys and back towards Gribbin Tower in south Cornwall. 16 September. madhattersportsevents.co.uk/swim

Burgh Island Swim: 1 mile around the island, in aid of Chestnut Appeal. 17 September. chestnutappeal.org.uk

Around the Mount: swim the mile and a half from Marazion around St Michael's Mount. Organised by the RNLI, in aid of Penlee Lifeboat Station. 17 September. Search for RNLI Around the Mount Open Water Swim 2017 on eventbrite.co.uk