

# BRISTOL CITY COUNCIL

## Downs Committee

28th January 2019

**Title:** Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife Project Annual Report 2018

**Ward:** Citywide

**Officers Presenting Report:** Becky Belfin Parks Development Officer, Parks Development Team  
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### Summary

To report, for information, on the activities of the Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife Project during 2018.

#### **The significant issues in the reports are:**

A summary of the Project's main achievements with regards to conservation management and the education programme.

### 1. Policy

Not applicable

### 2. Consultation

Internal:

Ben Skuse, Area Supervisor Downs, Blaise, Kingsweston estates

External:

### 3. Context

The Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife Project was launched on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1999. It is a partnership of Bristol City Council, the Downs Committee, Merchant Venturers, Bristol Zoo Gardens, Natural England, the University of Bristol, and Bristol Zoological Society. We also work with the National Trust, Forestry Commission and other landowners on the North Somerset side of the Gorge, as well as the Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge.

The aim of the project is 'to secure the future of the outstanding wildlife interest of the Avon Gorge and Clifton and Durdham Downs and to raise awareness and understanding of this unique location and its importance to people and wildlife'.

### Annual review

This report provides a review of progress and key achievements of the Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife Project between January and December 2018.

## Habitat management works throughout the Gorge and Downs

The winter conservation works on the Bristol side of the Gorge continue to focus on the removal of scrub and invasive species, in order to protect the rocky limestone outcrops, and restore them back to species-rich grassland.

In the Gully, the goats are still effectively controlling the regrowth of scrubby species. The regular monitoring of the goats by the Council's Downs' Team and the Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge (FOD+AG) is continuing to ensure that they are well looked after. On the Downs, implementation of the Scrub Management Plan has continued for its fourth year, and is contributing to the gradual restoration of areas of species-rich grassland. The wildflower meadow areas continue to be managed on a hay cut which is important to maintain their value.



## The education programme

Overall, **11,102** people took part in one of our events, activities or educational visits this year.

## Events programme

The events programme continued to be popular with **690 people** taking part in our walks, talks, courses, children's and family events. We ran fewer events for the general public this year to enable us to deliver more community projects.

- **162 people** attended **nine walks**, including the 'Ups and Downs in the Avon Gorge' walk run in partnership with FOD+AG as part of the Bristol Walk Fest, and a new walk to look at summer-flowering rare plants in the Avon Gorge,
- **289 people** came to **four talks**, including the 'Wild Bristol' and 'Looking after Leigh Woods' talks;
- Our **six courses** were attended by a total of **83 people**; these included a new 'Introduction to sketching plants' workshop and the 'Identifying trees in winter' course;
- **156 children and adults** attended a total of **seven children's and family events**, including the 'Autumnal antics' children's half-term event (pictured right).



*"It was absolutely wonderful. Well explained. Brilliant guides. I feel so lucky to have taken part."*  
'Ups and Downs in the Avon Gorge' walk

*"I thought the format worked really well and we had the right mix of indoor preparation and practice in the field. We were supremely lucky with the marvellous fly-past and spiralling of the peregrines. Wonderful moments!"* 'Birdsong' course feedback

*"Thanks for the lecture last night - they are always good and so informative. It is amazing the wildlife we have around us to appreciate."*  
'Wild Bristol' talk feedback

## The Audience Development Plan

In November 2017, we began working on our Audience Development Plan (ADP) and completed it in early 2018. The ADP process involved assessing our current audience, identifying the gaps, meeting with potential partners, and developing and planning new and exciting projects that will widen the audience visiting the Downs. In 2018, we have worked with refugee families, children facing family challenges and enabled children from schools and playschemes in socially deprived areas of the city to come to the Avon Gorge and Downs.

## Formal Education Sessions

### Primary schools

In 2018 we taught **1,749 school pupils** in **69 education sessions**. As part of our ADP project we contacted schools from areas of deprivation that had never been to the Downs for education sessions before. We were able to cover the transport costs for these groups with a grant from the John James Foundation (the cost of transport is a huge barrier to many groups, especially those from the less well-off areas of the city). We welcomed five new schools as part of the scheme which saw 303 pupils visiting us for education sessions.

Children and teachers really appreciated the scheme.

One child said: *"This is the best trip I've ever been on!"* Following their visit one of the teachers wrote:



*"I'm so impressed by the thought and preparation you've put into your sessions - your resources are great. It's been wonderful to see children who don't normally engage in learning in the classroom totally come alive and fully engage outdoors."* Year 3 teacher, St Nicholas of Tolentine Primary School

We gave an education session feedback form to the leader of each school group that visited us. Scores for session content, presentation, length and level were all between 9.2 and 9.5 out of 10 and 100% of groups said they were 'very likely' to book sessions with us in the future.

### Higher education

We also taught **231 higher education students** in **12 sessions**. These included a lecture and guided walks for first year students from the University of the West of England's foundation degree in Integrated Wildlife Conservation and a lecture for students on the Bristol Zoo Gardens conservation evening course. A large group of students from the University of Bristol School of Biological Sciences Department also spent a day on the Downs learning different biological surveying techniques. Following their sessions with us, several students joined our team of volunteers.



### Holiday playschemes and uniformed groups

**241 children** from playschemes and uniformed groups visited us for a total of **14 sessions**. As part of our ADP project we contacted summer holiday play schemes from areas of deprivation and two groups took up our offer of free transport. This enabled 41 children to enjoy an educational visit (only five of them had ever visited the Avon Gorge and Downs before). Following the session one of the group leaders wrote:



*"Brilliant! Couldn't have asked for more. We had a fabulous time. The team are amazing and we really appreciate what they do!"* Space Cadets playscheme leader

The feedback we received was very positive with leaders giving average scores of 9.5 out of 10 for session content, presentation, length and level. 12 groups said they were 'very likely' to book sessions with us in the future.

## Audience Development Plan Community Activities

### Wild Adventures Family Project

For this ADP project, we partnered with Bridges for Communities (an organisation working with refugees), the Bristol City Council Inner City and East Bristol Health Improvement Team (ICEBHIT) and FOD+AG. We worked with **five refugee families**, providing a programme that aimed to welcome them to Bristol, offered opportunities to learn about British wildlife, introduced them to the Avon Gorge and Downs and deepen their relationships to nature. We also wanted to provide space for them to connect with other refugees and members of the local community and to spend time together as a family. We hoped that the project would promote wellbeing and that it would help participants to feel more at home.



Sessions included walks to the Clifton Suspension Bridge and Observatory, bird and tree identification trails, peregrine watching and learning about our rare plants and goats. At the end of each session we had a picnic with the families and gave the children activity packs to take home containing wildlife related activities to enable them to continue learning between sessions. As most of the participants were not yet fluent in English, Bridges for Communities provided translators throughout the project and we developed resources in Arabic.

We held focus groups with the adults at the beginning and end of the project to measure its impact. They said that they had enjoyed the project and that being out in nature made them feel 'relaxed and happy'. The beauty of nature also supported participants' sense of wellbeing and optimism. By the end of the project, participants were able to recall the names of various birds and trees they had seen as well as details about the historical changes to the landscape. However many said that the most important benefits of the project were getting to meet other people and spending time together as a family. Strong friendships were formed between adults and children and participants said that meeting local people helped them to feel a part of the community.

*"I loved watching the birds on the tree. I learnt that life is not only war. Life is very beautiful."*

*"Nature helps you to feel refreshed and far away from the house and the pressure and job, to feel refreshed – the smell of the trees, it's better than the smell of cigarettes. Today was cold but we enjoyed it."*

*"(Now) I don't feel a stranger, I don't feel isolated, I feel I am a part of this community and society."*

*"For me one of the best things was the opportunity to get out as a family and to be able to relax and breathe from time to time, this was lovely."*

With the children we made a 'guide book' for others new to Bristol describing what they had learnt and illustrating their favourite memories.

*"The peregrine falcon is the fastest bird in the world."*

*The goats eat the trees so the rare plants have more room to grow."*

*My favourite bit was having my family all together."*

*"My favourite bit is when I was looking for the birds and when I was working with my friend."*

Overall, this was a very successful pilot project with significant impacts on wildlife knowledge, connection to nature and social integration, and it would be fantastic to run this again in the future.

### The Downs Challenge

The 'Downs Challenge' programme was an ADP project developed in partnership with Imayla (an organisation that works with children facing difficulties). During a series of five sessions **18 children** completed different 'challenges' to discover the wildlife of the gorge and Downs and develop a sense of attachment to place.

The challenges were: To visit our herd of goats to find how they are saving rare plants in the 'Rave about rare plants' session; to meet the Bristol whitebeam and learn to identify trees in the 'Have tree-mendous fun' session; to learn about peregrine falcons in the 'Fly like a falcon' session; to get up close to minibeasts in the 'Explore spiders and minibeasts' session; and to 'Brave the dark' to learn about bats and moths. After each session we gave the children activity packs to enable ongoing learning, discovery and creativity between sessions.

The project ended with a celebration event where we were able to find out what the young people had learnt, what they had enjoyed and what they were most proud of. We were amazed at how much they had retained from the sessions with children able to recall facts including:

*"Peacock butterflies rub they're (sic) wings together to make a hissing sound to scare off predators."*

*"There is a type of tree called the Bristol whitebeam. Interestingly they only grow in the Avon gorge and nowhere else in the entire world."*

*"Peregrine falcons are unlike any other bird in Bristol. They are known to be the fastest bird in the whole world. Shockingly they can go up to 200 miles an hour."*



Some had overcome a fear of spiders, and others were proud of scaling the steep slopes in the Gully where the goats live.

We created a display in the café of St Paul's Learning Centre, which was up for several weeks so that visitors could find out about the project and learn a bit about the Avon Gorge and Downs.

### Roots to Wellbeing Project

This ADP project was developed in partnership with the Bristol City Council ICEBHIT and FOD+AG and aimed to provide a series of seasonal guided walks on the Downs for elderly members of the community from St Paul's and Easton. In early May we met the group at their centre and gave a short talk about the project and the Avon Gorge and Downs to **12 people**. Later in the month we held our first walk on the Downs. Unfortunately, due to funding cuts to the ICEBHIT team they were no longer able to cover the transport costs for group and support the participants. Sadly we had to cancel the project as a result.

### **Community events**

During 2018, we engaged with **8,068 people** through outreach talks, walks for community and special interest groups and community events. Highlights include the following activities:

#### Clifton Suspension Bridge 'Garden to Gorge' event

This public event was held at the Suspension Bridge Visitor Centre in May. We joined other wildlife projects from across Bristol, taking along our display and leaflets. The event was attended by **136 people**, 41 of whom stopped to find out about the wildlife of the gorge and Downs.

### Bristol Festival of Nature

This was a hugely successful event with **7,267 people** visiting the Bristol Zoological Society 'Saving wildlife together' tent over the weekend. We took along our display and leaflets and ran activities for children to discover and learn about the fantastic wildlife of the Avon Gorge and Downs. **584 youngsters** decorated wildlife masks and **211 children** had the opportunity to role play at being young ornithologists, weighing, measuring and ringing life size toy peregrine chicks.



### Lord Mayor's 'At Home' event

In July, the Lord Mayor invited us to run some activities for her 'At Home' event at the Lord Mayor's Mansion. We created a bird trail in the garden and held a wildlife mask making activity to introduce her **29 guests** to the wildlife of the Avon Gorge and Downs.



### Downs Festival

We attended the Downs Festival at the beginning of September. We took along our display and range of leaflets and talked to festival-goers about the wildlife of the Avon Gorge and Downs and the work of the project.



### Cycle Sunday

Organised by Sustrans, the roads on the Downs were closed to cars enabling cyclists to enjoy the site safely and at their own pace. This was especially popular with families who were able to let their young children ride their bikes and scooters around the site. We took along our display and leaflets, and **128 children** joined us to make wildlife masks.

### University of Bristol Welcome Fair on the Downs

At the start of the new term, the University of Bristol Students' Union invited us to bring a stall to their 'Welcome Fair' on the Downs. We had neighbouring stalls with FOD+AG in the 'Keep it local' tent. Three of our volunteers (current Bristol University students) helped us to engage with **216 students**, three of whom have already signed up as new volunteers.



### **Volunteer support**

Many of our events and activities couldn't take place without the support of volunteers and work experience students. We're thankful to the **59 people** who gave **878 hours** of their time over the year.

### **Funding**

We are grateful to the following organisations for funding the education programme during 2018: Bristol Zoological Society; Commoners of Durdham Down and Durdham Downs Charity, Downs Committee, Ernest Cook Trust, John James Bristol Foundation, Merchant Venturers, Natural England, OVO Foundation, Smiling Eyes International.