

## **Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife Project – plans for a National Lottery Heritage Fund bid**

The Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife Project has been running since October 1999 with the aim 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'*.

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 England and other landowners on the North Somerset side of the Gorge, as well as the Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge.

There are three main strands to the Project: surveying and monitoring; habitat management; and the education programme.

The Project has been running very successfully, but there is an ambition to expand the education/community engagement programme across the two sides of the Gorge, increase the level of engagement beyond what is possible with current resource, and investigate the longer-term sustainability and resilience of the Project. We have the opportunity to apply for a grant of up to £250,000 from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, a funding level which is decided upon regionally by the NLHF. The Project has an excellent track record, and the project aims are aligned with many of the NLHF's strategic outcomes, so this appears to have an excellent fit. In particular, the recent Audience Development Plan highlighted the fact that there are many and diverse communities in Bristol who don't yet connect with this important landscape, and the small number of pilot projects carried out has shown a demand to engage, showing great benefit for the participants. This wider engagement will also benefit the site through more people valuing its importance for both people and wildlife. The NLHF will only fund new work, not existing, so the current funding pledges to the Project from Downs Committee and Bristol Zoological Society are crucial to maintaining current delivery.

An additional one-off contribution from Forestry England and The Downs Committee unlocks the ability to apply for this grant. Some of this money may be needed to prepare this bid. The rest will be used as match funding, and towards the preparation of an even larger bid to take the whole Project to a much bigger level, looking at natural and built heritage across the landscape as a whole. However, this current bid is just for the education/community engagement programme, and to look at the best ways of ensuring the sustainability of the Project into the future.

It is proposed that the Project consolidates the partnership to fully include the National Trust and Forestry England, with an updated and strengthened partnership agreement. This facilitates the expansion of the programme across the landscape (covering the Downs, the whole of the Avon Gorge and Leigh Woods). We will ensure that our bid is shaped to support existing AGD delivery on the Downs and Bristol side of the Gorge, and allows us to expand the programme (for instance the seasonal education officer becomes full-time) as well as supporting delivery on the North Somerset side.

A Project Enquiry Form was submitted to NLHF in August, and a telephone call has recently taken place to expand on some information which could not be fitted in to the 800-word limit of the PEF. A meeting is being scheduled with NLHF in late September or early October, and we are hoping to submit by the 19 November deadline. If this proves impossible, then the bid will go for the next deadline in March 2020.

A series of meetings is currently taking place between the Project partners to bring together the information required and to plan the education/community engagement programme detail to be able to submit the bid in the required format. The outline plan is to apply for funds to increase education staffing for three years, provide an operating budget, and to also spend money on planning how we best structure the existing Project Partnership and its governance to ensure that the Project is sustainable into the future.