

## Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife Project Annual Report 2022

**Officers Presenting Report: Becky Belfin Nature Conservation Officer and Mandy Leivers, Avon Gorge and Downs Biodiversity Education Manager**

### **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, Bristol Zoological Society, the National Trust and Forestry England. We also work in partnership with 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, Clifton Down, Durdham Down and Leigh Woods, as well as raising awareness and understanding of this unique location and its importance for 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 2022.

### **Habitat Management Works Throughout the Avon Gorge and Downs**

The winter conservation works on the Bristol side of the Gorge continued to focus on the removal of scrub and invasive plants to restore the species-rich grassland on the rocky limestone outcrops. These are the features that are of particular interest with regards to the SSSI designation on the Bristol side of the Gorge. This work is primarily carried out by specialist rope access contractors, due to the tricky terrain.

In March last year four bagot goats joined the remaining two Kashmir goats to graze the scrub in the Gully. A few months later, in July, we were also able to introduce a further four Kashmirs which the Downs team had helped round up and collect from the Great Orme. With the grazing herd back up to full strength we are now getting the scrub regrowth back under control again.

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 seventh year and is contributing to the ongoing restoration of the wildflower meadow. These wildflower meadows also continue to be managed on a hay cut which is important to maintain their value. FOD+AG has helped to protect these meadows through the annual construction/maintenance of a series of dead-hedge structures adjacent to part of Circular Road, to encourage runners and walkers to stick to the path around the edge, rather than cutting across.

The increase in people using the Downs in 2020 due to covid, also meant an increase in people walking across the vulnerable meadow areas, especially during winter when the grass is shorter. Concerns over the impact of this, particularly on the orchid species, resulted in further temporary measures being put in place at the beginning of this winter. A student from the University of Bristol is now carrying out some research on the orchid population on the Downs, and we look forward to finding out more when they've completed their study.



## The Education and Community Engagement Programme

### Coronavirus Pandemic

Due to the coronavirus pandemic the Avon Gorge and Downs Biodiversity Education Manager was on furlough until April and the seasonal Avon Gorge & Downs Learning and Engagement Officer did not start until the end of May (normally that role begins in early March). Most of the focus in April and May was about restarting the programme including setting up events, contacting schools and booking in educational visits, as well as rebuilding the volunteer team. As a result of the pandemic the number of people we engaged with during the year was well below normal. Overall, **825** people took part in one of our events, activities or educational visits during 2022.

Due to covid restrictions we ran a very reduced events programme and restricted the number of people attending each event. We also didn't hold any of our usual large events such as talks. As we had to implement enhanced cleaning regimes for our school session resources we had to spread out our school visits and we had lower uptake for our playscheme sessions than usual. Our planned Bridge 2 Nature community project had to be postponed due to covid and none of the large-scale events such as the Bristol Festival of Nature happened in 2021.

On a positive note, the people who did attend our events, school and playscheme sessions were extremely appreciative and glad to be outside, learning about nature again on the Downs.

### Events Programme

Due to the pandemic, our 2020 events were cancelled but two of the courses 'Birdsong on the Downs' and 'Spring on the Downs in batik' were re-scheduled for spring 2021. Part one of the Birdsong identification course took place, via Zoom, on 9<sup>th</sup> April and the second part happened, on the Downs, on 23<sup>rd</sup> May.

The batik workshop was re-scheduled to 26<sup>th</sup> June but as it was taking place indoors, and there was going to be a delay in lifting the restrictions, we took the decision to cancel the event until restrictions were fully lifted.

During the year we ran **3 courses**, including the 'Birdsong on the Downs', 'Identifying birds on the Downs in Autumn' and 'Willow reindeer'.

We also ran **3 walks**, titled 'Postcard and poetry promenade', 'Meet the Avon Gorge goat keeper' and 'Owl prowls on the Downs'. The Postcard and poetry promenade was part of the Wastes and Strays project.

We organised a children's event for the October half-term but when three of the children dropped out, it had to be cancelled due to insufficient bookings (cases of covid were rising at the time).



*"Many thanks to you, John and Francis for a wonderful event. My mother and I had a super time, learning more about Clifton and the Downs, its history and plants, and loved the creative approach."*  
Postcard and poetry promenade

### Formal Education Sessions

#### Primary schools

In April, the Avon Gorge & Downs Biodiversity Education Manager returned from furlough to lots of emails from schools, eager to book education sessions with us. In 2021 we taught **529 school pupils** in **27 education sessions**.

This is a lot less than we would normally teach but we spaced out groups to allow us to follow covid precaution protocols. This included giving extra time for cleaning and disinfecting equipment between school visits.



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One of the schools who visited was Andalusia Academy who brought the whole school over two days. Coming from a school located within the heart of Bristol without any grounds and the majority of children living in high-rise flats, this was an exciting experience for all, especially after a year of lockdown.

We gave an education session feedback form to the leader of each school group. All groups said they were 'very likely' to book sessions with us in the future. The form gives the opportunity for comments and views on the sessions, and we were thrilled to receive positive and enthusiastic feedback from many teachers. Comments included:



*"Observing the goats was the highlight for children and staff! The session was brilliantly run by the team. Parents who came on the trip were very impressed with the content and how engaged the children were. Thank you so much! A really fantastic session – well resourced and delivered. We had a great time!"* Hotwells Primary School

*"Thank you for such a great day. The children loved learning about the Downs and the butterflies. The activities were engaging and pitched at a great level that meant all children could access the sessions. It was the right level of listening and activities. We will definitely recommend you to others!"*  
Andalusia Academy

#### Higher education

**Nine final year South Gloucestershire and Stroud College students**, on the BSc Zoological Management and Conservation course, came to the Downs for a session on bird ringing. The Education Manager supported licensed bird ringer, Ed Drewitt, as he taught the session which was part of the students' module on Management of Birds for Conservation. The Education Manager gave a talk about the wildlife importance of the Avon Gorge, Downs and Leigh Woods, and the work of the project.



*"The session with Ed and Mandy on the Downs was such a valuable opportunity to see first-hand the vitally important conservation work that goes on right on our doorstep here in Bristol".* Students' tutor

#### Playschemes and uniformed groups

**65 children** took part in our playscheme sessions. This included a group from Lawrence Weston who visited us for the first time and the 57<sup>th</sup> Bristol Brownies.

Compared to 2019, we were dramatically down on the number of sessions we ran. The Avon Gorge & Downs Learning and Engagement Officer contacted as many playschemes in the area as possible to encourage bookings. Unfortunately, some of the groups that had booked regularly in the past had closed down (after a difficult year, last year) and some were not offering trips due to covid. We also had a couple of groups who were initially keen to book sessions but then decided they couldn't come after all, or cancelled due to covid-related staffing issues.



*" Thank you so, so much! We really appreciate all you did for us and for the Downs in general. The level of preparation was exceptional and we will never look at the Downs as 'the boring green space' again".*  
57<sup>th</sup> Bristol Brownies

## Audience Development Plan (ADP) and Your Downs Activities – Widening the Audience

### Bridge 2 Nature

The 'Bridge 2 Nature' project is a nature connection, art and wellbeing project for young people (aged 18 – 25) that we are running in partnership with Off The Record (OTR) and Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge (FOD+AG).

Through a series of guided walks and nature connection activities the group will explore the fascinating wildlife the Avon Gorge, Downs and Leigh Woods and gather inspiration for a collaborative piece of art.

The pandemic made this a tricky project to run. Initially it was due to take place in 2020 and the plan was to work towards creating a mural for the Upfest Street Festival that year. Then covid hit. In April 2021, we resumed planning and OTR began recruiting participants.

In June, we heard that Upfest was cancelled due to covid. Luckily, the Friends of the Rainbow Bridge in Montpelier had recently approached the OTR art therapist about a project to re-paint the bridge and we all agreed that this local landmark would make a great canvas for the group's mural.

So, in July we were all set to begin the programme. Despite the OTR staff working really hard to recruit and support the 16 young people who had signed up to the project, eight of them dropped out in the week before we started, only one young person was able to make the first session and no one could make it to the walks in early August. At the time, covid numbers were increasing dramatically, young people were unvaccinated and there was a lot of covid-related anxiety.

We did consider whether we could run the project in the autumn but in September, we heard that the two co-ordinators for the Friends of the Rainbow Bridge were moving away. We therefore took the decision to re-launch the project in spring 2022, by which time the young people would have had both vaccinations and covid pressures and anxieties would hopefully have lessened. We're also reverting to the original idea of creating artwork for Upfest which is due to take place in May 2022.

This project is being funded by the Co-op Community Fund and the Commoners of Durdham Down and Durdham Downs Charity.



### Your Downs

In June we co-lead a guided walk with FOD+AG, for **18 members** of the Long Ashton Horticultural Society.

*"We all had a wonderful time and a big thank you to Robin, Vanessa and yourself for putting on such a well organised and fascinating guided walk. One thing I took away from Sunday was to slow down and take a proper look at what is around you as you risk missing out of some wonderful wildlife".*



## Wastes and Strays

The Downs were chosen as one of four 'Urban Commons' that are being studied as part of Wastes and Strays, a project coordinated by Newcastle, Exeter, Sheffield and Brighton Universities. The project involves:

- Researching their history and contemporary perceptions of biodiversity and use
- Trialing new methods of engaging communities
- Working with stakeholders to generate ideas for the future

In May, a research associate at Newcastle University began gathering oral histories. The Education Manager, FOD+AG members and Ben Skuse (the Downs Supervisor) were amongst those interviewed.

Dr. John Wedgwood Clarke (from Exeter University) was 'Poet in Residence', on the Downs. As part of our school education sessions, John ran workshops with two classes from Westbury Park School, creating poetry about the wildflowers in the meadows on the Downs.

John also co-lead the 'Postcard and poetry promenade' with Francis Greenacre, as part of the public Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife events programme. The guided walk looked at the history of the site and this informed the creative writing aspect of the event.

We also took part in assignments for the In-Common Sites / Urban Commons Futures creative mapping part of project. Through a series of tasks, participants are asked to explore the Downs, map areas that are special to them and think about areas that could be improved. At the end of the project, everyone's contributions will be drawn together to create an exhibition and will be used for generating ideas for the future.

Further activities for this project are planned for 2022.

## Community Events and Activities

### The Downs Festival

At the beginning of September we attended the Idles Downs Festival. 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.

### University of Bristol Welcome Fair on the Downs

At the end of September, the University of Bristol Students' Union invited us to bring a stall to their 'Welcome Fair' on the Downs. Two of our volunteers, who are current Bristol University students, joined us to share their experiences of volunteering with their fellow students. During the day we engaged with **111 students** and 75 expressed interest in volunteering with us.

### Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife Project Website R

When we launched the project website [www.avongorge.org.uk](http://www.avongorge.org.uk) in 2019, we ran out of time to develop four of the 'Activity of the month' resources for the Kids Zone section. For each activity, children can find out about wildlife highlights for that month and download instructions to enable them to make something that helps them discover and learn about nature. During November,

*"I wanted you to know how much I enjoyed the walk with you, John and Francis on Sunday.  
Francis' depth of knowledge about our route is amazing! I was riveted by all the fascinating information he shared with us.  
John's contribution really enhanced the walk, I felt. The meditative, mindful approach he offered was, to me, so original."*



the AGD Learning & Engagement Officer completed the set as follows: February - Make a birdfeeder from recycled bottles; March - Make a bird id dial and sound map; April - Make a butterfly wand; May - Make a goat Gully diorama.

## **Publicity**

### **Publicity about the new goats**

At the end of March, four rare breed Bagot goats joined our two Kashmir goats in the Gully. After they had had a month to settle in, we issued a press release which resulted in Ben Skuse (the Downs Supervisor), Carol Laslett (Bristol Street Goat) and the Education Manager being interviewed for a piece on the ITV teatime news.

In July, Ben Skuse collected four young Kashmir goats from the Great Orme and brought them back to the Gully. On the day that they arrived, the Bristol Zoological Society (BZS) PR & Communications Manager and our one of our volunteers were on-hand to film and photograph the BZS Vet Team carrying out the health

checks and the goats being released into the Gully. The BZS PR and Marketing team created and issued a press release to explain their conservation role and re-inforce messages about how visitors to the site could help keep the herd safe.

Posts about the goats on our Project Facebook page [www.facebook.com/avongorge](http://www.facebook.com/avongorge) were very popular; one reached 1,897 people.



### **Volunteer Support**

Our volunteers are vital in helping us to deliver the education programme so it was important to spend time re-building the volunteer team in May. The Education Manager spoke to all of our pre-lockdown team to find out who was still able to volunteer with us, and thanking those that had moved on. With support from the BZS Volunteer Services Manager we began recruiting and training new volunteers. We ran a successful 'Volunteer welcome evening', via Zoom, and ended up with a great team made up of returning Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife Project volunteers, newly recruited volunteers, and BZS volunteers who switched roles (whilst their previous or current volunteer roles were limited due to covid). We're thankful to the **13 people** who gave **208 hours** of their time over the year.

### **Clifton Conservation Hub**

When Bristol Zoological Society closes Bristol Zoo and relocates to Wild Place, it is proposed that the main entrance building will become the Clifton Conservation Hub. It is intended that the Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife Project education team will be based there, along with a café and an exhibition about the history of the Zoo. We have participated in a number of meetings with the Transformation team, the Business Development Manager and the architects, to plan the refurbishment of the building.

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[www.avongorge.org.uk](http://www.avongorge.org.uk) [www.facebook.com/avongorge](http://www.facebook.com/avongorge)