

Summary of activities of the Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife Project education and community engagement programme

Reporting Officer: Mandy Leivers, Avon Gorge and Downs Biodiversity Education Manager

From April to June we directly engaged with 1,906 people through the education programme.

Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife Project events programme

As part of the events programme we ran: two guided walks ('Gorge-ous spring plants' and 'Early birds and bacon butties'); a talk called 'Butterfly Britain'; a music event for toddlers and two courses ('Spring on the Downs in batik' and 'Writing the Downs'). The Writing the Downs course was run in partnership with the Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge (FoDAG) as part of the Wastes and Strays project. Unfortunately, the Easter holiday 'Feathered Friends' children's event had to be cancelled due to insufficient bookings. The impression gleaned from conversations with parents who had booked is that many people were only looking for free activities to do due to uncertainty relating to the rising cost of living.

The summer to winter 2022 programme of events has been published and bookings are already going really well.

School education sessions and sessions for uniformed groups

During this period, we taught 1,065 school children (with two of the schools visiting the Downs for the first time). One of the teachers commented on their evaluation form,

"The activities were well designed to connect the children to the Downs and its wildlife. We liked the link to the Year One Science curriculum about senses – it was good to see the children using them in exciting and new ways. The session packed a lot into it and was beautifully resourced – the floral butterflies were stunning! All activities were delivered with pace and enthusiasm by people who clearly had the knowledge of, passion for and enthusiasm about all things natural on the Downs".

The 44th and 40th Guides and 62nd Bandarlog Cubs enjoyed exploring the Downs and learning about mammals during our 'Nature Detectives' sessions. The leader of the 44th Guides sent the following feedback,

"The girls all really enjoyed it and we've had lots of parents email us to let us know how much their daughter enjoyed the session. It was a big hit!" They added, *"The girls had a lovely time and are already asking if we can do something similar again! I'm sure I'll be in touch to arrange another session next year!"*

Downs Commoners' sheep grazing ceremony

We were really pleased to be part of the historic Downs Commoners' sheep grazing event in May. In conjunction with the shepherdess, we delivered education sessions for three school groups visiting the event. During a modified version of our usual 'Hairy Conservationists' session the children learnt about the special wildlife of the Avon Gorge and Downs, how the landscape has changed over time, how sheep grazing influenced this and the conservation role of the goats in the Gully.

We also took along the Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife Project travelling display and had our range of leaflets about the Downs for visitors to take away.

Your Downs activities - Bridge to Nature project

The 'Bridge to Nature' project - a nature connection, art and wellbeing project for young people aged 18 to 25 - was a huge success. We ran the project in partnership with Off The Record (OTR), Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge, the National Trust and Forestry England.

Through a series of three guided walks on the Downs and two in Leigh Woods, the group explored the fascinating wildlife the Avon Gorge, Downs and Leigh Woods and gathered inspiration for a collaborative piece of art that they would be creating at Upfest (Europe's largest street art festival). During these visits, the young people took part in nature connection activities and captured their impressions through sketches and photos. They also went on a street art tour of Bedminster and Southville to begin formulating ideas for the mural.

Over two design sessions at one of OTR's venues, the group worked collaboratively with street artist Damien Jeffery (the artist facilitating the painting of the mural) to create a design for their artwork.

Over the weekend of 27th and 28th May, our team of young people saw their final design come to life as they painted their mural at Upfest. The finished piece looked fantastic and attracted lovely comments from visitors to the festival.



For the festival we created and took along double-sided A3 posters to give to festival-goers to read. On one side of the poster was an explanation of the project and on the other side, photos and descriptions of the special wildlife of the Avon Gorge, Downs and Leigh Woods that the young people had incorporated into their design. Visitors of all ages enjoyed spotting the wildlife in the mural with many of them commenting that although they live in Bristol they had no idea that the Gorge, Downs and Leigh Woods are such a special place for wildlife. We also took along our range of leaflets and events programme which were snapped up. Upfest visitors aren't our typical audience so it was great to raise awareness amongst a wider group of people.

During the weekend, we interacted with 853 visitors but we were only there until 5pm each day. The festival ran until 8pm each night so many more visitors will have seen the mural.

Further photos from the project visits and the Upfest weekend can be seen on www.facebook.com/avongorge

In the final evaluation, we asked the young people to write about what the project had meant to them. Here are some of their quotes:

“Bridge to Nature has been a great experience. A chance to connect with our surroundings, and be part of a safe space. I have made friendships and felt inspired. It’s made me realise how much I need to be in nature to help my mental health.”

“I really enjoyed getting to explore the Avon Gorge and the Downs and learning about the complex ecosystem there. Especially loved learning about the rare plants and animals and what can be done to protect them.”

“Thanks you so much for this opportunity! I’ve had an amazing time and I can’t believe how beautiful the finished piece came out. I’ve made amazing memories and even more wonderful friends! I can’t wait to return to the gorge in my own time.”

“What I enjoyed: Doing lots of exploring, seeing new places; Being outside; Learning about plants and animals around Bristol; Getting the opportunity to be creative and work together to make something really exciting! I liked the collaborative aspect and that we could make something that reflected all our experiences.”

Just before Easter, the BBC online team wrote an article about the project which you can read here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-61111015>

The Bridge to Nature project was funded by the Co-op Local Community Fund and the Commoners of Durdham Down and Durdham Downs Charity.

Your Downs Activities - Granny Downs Tree Trail walks

In partnership with FOD+AG we co-led guided walks for Long Ashton Horticultural Society and Man Alive! (a wellbeing project for men from Knowle West) around the Granny Downs tree trail. The Granny Downs Tree Trail has been very popular. We have seen a number of groups independently running walks using our leaflet (presumably picked up from Café Retreat). In addition, we have had a number of requests from groups for copies of the trail leaflet so that they can do the walk.

Guided walk for Defra

We co-led a guided walk and talk with Natural England for 12 staff from Defra’s ‘Access, Landscapes, Peatland and Soils’ team. The group heard about the site’s wildlife, designations and management as well as our education and community engagement programme. The group had the most fantastic, close-up views of the goats. One of Defra’s Senior Policy Advisors later sent an email:

“I just wanted to say thank you so much for taking time out to speak to us on Wednesday, we all learned a great deal...especially those of us who live in Bristol! It was amazing to hear how many diverse groups of people have been given access to green space and learned about the area and its wildlife as a result of the Avon Gorge and Downs (Wildlife) Project, which has clearly been a fantastic opportunity for people in Bristol”.