

Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife Project Annual Report 2022

Officers Presenting Report: Rosie Jackson Nature Conservation Officer and Vanessa Adnitt, Avon Gorge and Downs learning and engagement officer.

Context

The Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife Project was launched on 23rd October 1999. It is a partnership of Bristol City Council, the Downs Committee, Merchant Venturers, 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 (FOD+AG).

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 will continue to focus on the removal of scrub and invasive species. These works are essential in order to protect and restore the areas of species-rich grassland and the rare species found on the rocky limestone outcrops. A drone survey is planned to be carried out by the Council this winter. The footage will provide views of the important habitats and will also help us to monitor changes in scrub levels and inform future management.

Works are scheduled in January/February 2023 to remove ash trees infected with ash dieback disease, which pose a heightened risk to highway users along Bridge Valley Road. The working area has been reviewed with no rare habitats or species to be impacted by these works. The removed trees will be replaced by natural regeneration from surrounding mixed species broadleaf woodland.



In the Gully, the herd of four Bagot and four Kashmir goats are keeping the scrub regrowth under control, with continued monitoring from the Council's Downs' team and the Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge (FOD+AG). The University of Bristol Botanic Garden will be carrying out planting of honewort in the Gully this winter. The plants have been grown from seed collected from the existing Gully population. Honewort is a nationally rare plant, and the Avon Gorge is the northernmost place it grows. This plant requires open limestone sites and will therefore benefit from the goat grazing.

On the Downs, implementation of the Scrub Management Plan has continued for its eighth year and is contributing to the ongoing restoration of the wildflower meadows. Councillor Katy Grant has been working with the Council, the West Bristol Climate Action Group and Avon Wildlife Trust to enhance areas of grassland on 'Zoo Banks' and the former Bristol Zoo overflow car park. They are planning to enhance these areas using wildflower seed of local provenance. Volunteers will help to prepare the ground and rake off arisings when the site is cut.

A student from the University of Bristol has now completed their research on the autumn lady's-tresses and bee orchid populations within an area of calcareous grassland on the

Downs. These species were found to have clustered distributions and showed spatial segregation, which allows these species to co-exist. The study highlights the symbiotic relationship between orchids and mycorrhizal fungi, which could act as a limiter to their local distribution along with other habitat and soil characteristics. The researcher also recorded human disturbance on the grassland and suggested increasing the height of the dead-wood barriers.

Silky Wave Moth Survey

The Avon Gorge is the only English site for the silky wave moth. Since 2011, Bristol Zoological Society has carried out annual surveys throughout the moth's flight season. This year, the presence of silky wave moths was confirmed at 12 out of the 13 sites surveyed. The total peak count was 202 moths, which was lower than the 2021 count and considerably lower than the high counts in 2019 and 2020 and therefore more in line with counts from 2013-18. Silky wave numbers this year indicate that the current habitat management regime for this species may need to be reviewed given the recent moth declines; however, it should be noted that moth populations can experience cyclical changes, which may be affected by other environmental factors, such as weather patterns.

The Education and Community Engagement Programme

Overall 3,254 people took part in one of our events, activities or educational visits in 2022.

Events Programme

We ran a larger number of events in 2022 following a couple of years with a much diminished programme due to Covid. **147 people** attended **eight walks** including, 'Gorge-ous spring plants', 'Owl prowl on the Downs', 'Spiders of the Avon Gorge'; a bat and moth night and 'Trees in winter on the Downs'.

We also ran **three talks** attended by **116 people** entitled, 'A year in the life of birdsong' (based on recordings made on the Downs by Timothy Dowling during lock-down), 'Butterfly Britain' and 'Eight-legged wonders' (about spiders).

40 people took part in **four courses**: 'Learning birdsong on the Downs', 'Spring on the Downs in batik', 'Writing the Downs', and 'Identifying birds on the Downs in autumn'.



"Absolutely superb day in every way! Thank you so much to Ed and all of you who made it such a lovely experience. I genuinely feel I'll be out & about with different ears (& knowledge) now, especially listening out for those magical little goldcrests! It was a great group too, really enjoyed being able to share with fellow aspiring bird nerds. Fingers crossed for a Spring reunion!"
Identifying birds on the Downs in autumn.

We held **three children's and family** events attended by **68 children and adults** including a **Gorge-ous goats family** walk. Unfortunately, our spring half term children's event was cancelled due to a lack of bookings, but the 'Awesome owls' half term event was fully booked.



Formal Education Sessions

Primary schools

In 2022 we taught **1,422 primary school pupils** in **63 education** sessions. Fair Furlong Primary School visited for the first time, as did Kingsweston Special School (the group consisted of 16 children and teenagers with autism). Katie Atkins (who runs Bristol's Nordic4 groups on the Downs), came with six children with autism who Nordic walked their way across the Downs from Stoke Bishop Primary School to take part in a 'Peregrine Falcons and Food Chains' session.



"... I was impressed with how you interacted with the children including those with extra learning needs. There was a really good balance of input and interactive learning and the children really enjoyed the session."

Fair Furlong Primary School

"The highly informed teaching and resources delivered in an energised way, [were] pitched perfectly for Y5 - the children became more engrossed as the session went on."

"Two parents have written emails of effusive thanks and the children loved their time."

Nordic Walking Group Leader, Stoke Bishop Primary

As part of the Downs Commoners' Sheep Grazing event, we delivered a modified version of our 'Hairy Conservationists' session to classes from three schools from different areas of Bristol (including Kingfisher school from Brislington who were visiting the Downs for the first time). During the sessions we talked 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.



Through our evaluation process, we asked the leader of each school group to fill in an education session feedback form. The overall average score for content, presentation, length and level of the sessions was 9.52 out of 10 with 95% of teachers saying that 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 delighted and encouraged by the positive and enthusiastic feedback we received.

Higher education

A group of **11 final year students from South Gloucestershire and Stroud College**, completing their BSc in Zoo Management and Conservation, attended a bird ringing demonstration on the Downs with licensed bird ringer Ed Drewitt. The learning and engagement officer spoke about the wildlife importance of the Avon Gorge and Downs as well as volunteering opportunities.

We led two walks on the Downs with **39 first year undergraduates from the University of the West of England** studying for their BSc Wildlife Ecology and Conservation Science. The module was entitled 'Wildlife and Society'. The learning and engagement officer gave an introductory talk about the Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife Project before taking the students out onto the Downs for a walk to consider the balance between people and recreation, and wildlife conservation.



"Seeing how the Downs have evolved over time brought the area to life and made me hopeful for its future. I can't wait to witness the wildflowers in season! Thank you so much for a fun and informative tour of Bristol's inconspicuous gem." Student on 'Wildlife and Society' walk.

Playschemes and uniformed groups



273 children took part in our playscheme and uniformed group sessions this year including two guide and cub units that visited for the first time. Numbers have increased from 2021 as many of our regular summer playschemes returned after Covid had restricted their willingness to go on trips and limited their transport options. Southmead Development Trust visited twice bringing a different group of young people each time. They were able to fund the transport for one of their trips through a grant from the Commoners of Durdham Down and Durdham Downs Charity. This grant was also used to pay for public transport to allow Totterdown Children's Community Workshop to attend.

"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!"
40th and 44th Bristol Guides

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

Your Downs

As part of the Your Downs partnership with FOD+AG, the Downs supervisor and Walking for Health, we continued our activities designed to widen the range of people who visit the site. As well as the Bridge to Nature project, we co-led two guided walks around the Granny Downs Tree Trail for members of the Long Ashton Horticultural Society and for 'Man Alive!' (a group from Knowle West that supports men suffering from depression or at risk of isolation). Our 'Christmas star party on the Downs' had a high number of bookings and was due to take place at the end of November but was cancelled due to cloud cover.

Bridge to Nature

The Bridge to Nature project was a nature connection, art and wellbeing project for young people (aged 18 – 25) that the Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife Project co-designed and delivered in partnership with Off The Record (OTR), FOD+AG, the National Trust and Forestry England. It was funded by the Co-op Community Fund, the Commoners of Durdham Down and Durdham Downs Charity and a private donor.

The project was relaunched in the spring of 2022 after setbacks in 2020 and 2021 caused by the pandemic. Over eight sessions, the group explored the Avon Gorge, Downs and Leigh Woods through a series of guided walks and nature connection activities. During this time they learnt all about the fascinating wildlife that lives there and gathered ideas for a collaborative piece of street art. The young people took photos and recorded their thoughts and impressions in their sketchbooks using a range of materials and techniques. Using these as inspiration, the young people came up with a design for a mural under the guidance of street artist Damien Jeffery.

Over the course of a weekend at the end of May, the young people painted their stunning mural at the Upfest street art festival. The occasion provided a great opportunity for the AG&D WP staff to talk to members of the public about the special wildlife found in the Avon Gorge and on the Downs, reaching an audience that might not necessarily come into contact with the project otherwise. Festival visitors enjoyed spotting the plants and animals in the mural that were featured on a poster that we



produced to enable them to learn more about the wildlife.

During the weekend we interacted with 853 visitors, but many more would have seen the mural and read the information when we were not present in the evenings. After the event, the mural was transported back to the Zoo where it was included in the 'Zoo and You Legacy Art exhibition' over the summer as part of the Zoo's final farewell activities.



"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."
 Young person from Off the Record

"These walks are the highlight of my week! I'm going to continue walking in nature each week when we're done."
 Young person from Off the Record

Community Events and Activities

University of Bristol Welcome Fair on the Downs

In September, our learning and engagement officer ran a stand at the University of Bristol Students' Union Welcome Fair on the Downs. She spoke with 152 students about the wildlife project, events on the Downs and volunteering opportunities, many of whom signed up to find out more.



Publicity and Interpretation

Bridge to Nature

Just before Easter, the education manager and a representative from OTR were interviewed by the BBC online team about the Bridge to Nature project for an online article. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-61111015>

Interpretation Panel Revamp

The majority of our interpretation panels on the Downs were delaminating and in a very poor state of repair, so nine of them were replaced in early September. The panel revamp has been generously funded by the Commoners of Durdham Down and Durdham Downs Charity and by two private donors.



The Brunel Garden

The worn identification labels in the Brunel Garden have been replaced and a new sign support has been installed to replace one that had been broken off. A volunteer has joined the gardener from Bristol Zoological Society to help maintain this garden.

Partnerships

Natural England Walk

Dave Collingbourne (Natural England) and AG&DWP's biodiversity education manager gave a guided walk and talk to 12 staff from Defra's 'Access, Landscapes, Peatland and Soils' team. Dave talked about the wildlife, designations and management of the Avon Gorge and Leigh Woods and the education manager talked about our education and community engagement programme.

"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 Gorge and Downs Project, which has clearly been a fantastic opportunity for people in Bristol."

Email from one of Defra's Senior Policy Advisors

Clifton Suspension Bridge engagement team training

We gave an illustrated lecture, about the wildlife of the Avon Gorge and Downs and the work of the project, to five members of the Clifton Suspension Bridge engagement team. They will share this knowledge with groups visiting the bridge on school trips and guided tours.

Volunteer Support

This year, **33 volunteers** gave **505 hours** of their time over the year for which we are very grateful as we would not be able to operate without their support. New volunteers were recruited who joined our regular volunteers from previous years, including some Bristol Zoo volunteers (who didn't want to transfer across to the Wild Place Project).

New Biodiversity, Engagement and Learning Manager

After 21 years in post, Mandy Leivers left the Avon Gorge and Downs biodiversity education manager role. The learning and engagement officer's contract was extended until the end of the year to provide cover whilst a new manager was being appointed. Under the slightly altered title of Biodiversity Engagement and Learning Manager, Anna Stevens joined the project at the end of December and Vanessa has stayed on as learning and engagement officer to provide continuity.



Funding

We are grateful to the private individuals who made donations during the year and to the following organisations for funding the education programme during 2022: Bristol Zoological Society, Downs Committee, Natural England, the Commoners of Durdham Down and Durdham Downs Charity and the Co-op Community Fund.

The Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife Project is working to secure 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.