



## Learning and Engagement

### Overview

In 2023 the Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife engagement and learning team's aim was 'to encourage awareness and understanding of the unique Avon Gorge and Downs and its importance for wildlife, people and local habitat.' In 2023 our focus was to understand who was engaging with the project and why, how the project is benefitting these people and how they are responding to the wildlife of the Avon Gorge and Downs. In this way the project has been able to identify main target audiences and to understand and gauge where its resources are best focused to achieve the most successful outcome for the people of Bristol and for the wildlife of this 'jewel in the crown' of Bristol.

To this end in 2023 Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife (AGDW) continued to provide free engagement sessions to primary school aged children, welcoming new schools who had not previously visited the site or the project as well as the local schools who have regularly visited in past years. We have changed many of our programmes to offer a full day option for a more in-depth engagement with our wildlife and added some new programmes, including an option to pond-dip and learn about freshwater habitats and wildlife in conjunction with University of Bristol (UoB) Botanical Gardens. We have changed our numbers recording system so that children attending two sessions over a single full day visit are recorded only once and not twice, as previously.

We increased the range of our formal learning target audience by implementing a weekly pre-school age plus adult session from September onwards which allows children from age two to four to learn about, engage with and develop a love of the natural world. These factors are also taken on board by their attending adult which again increases our audience. We held a pilot A level curriculum day session with a geography / biology group in November where we carried out sampling on the Downs and statistics work on our results. The success of this day allows us to now offer secondary schools and colleges the opportunity to enjoy curriculum focused field work with us, and if part of their curriculum, in addition carry out their statistics requirements. This once again allows us to increase the range of our formal learning target audience.



**4,562** people actively engaged with Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife in 2023.

**409** playscheme, uniformed groups and pre-school children visited us for sessions.

**381** people took part in one of our walks, talks, courses, children's and family events.

We engaged with **1,216** people through giving guided walks and talks to community groups and at community events.



**2,512** school and college children and 44 higher education students visited or were visited by us for formal learning engagement.

**30** volunteers gave us **781** hours of their time.



## Events Programme

We enjoyed a wide and varied programme of events this year with some annual and much loved favourites as well as some new and different activities. We enjoyed collaborating with UoB Botanical Gardens, Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge (FoDAG) as well as Forestry England (FE) in order to host our events.

Our inside **talks** included an in-depth look into the priority species **hazel dormice** in Leigh Woods, the nationally rare **silky wave moth** in the Avon Gorge and a sneaky peak at Silverback Film's new production on critically endangered **Sumatran orang-utans** and an overview of their natural history. **Ninety-three** people attended our talks.

Outside our adult focused **walks** and engagement opportunities provided a wealth of information and hands-on discovery from expert leaders on so many fascinating subjects: our nationally **rare botanical** species in the Gully; our extraordinary plethora of **whitebeam** species; our fantastic **wild goats** and the scrub management they provide for us; our UK and **local bat** species; the **history** of the Downs; our Downs bird species in the **dawn chorus**; the wonderful array of unusual tree species on the **Granny Downs**; the richness of native **wildflowers** in our calcareous summer meadows; the diversity of **butterflies** on Zoo Banks; summer tree identification and woodland management at **Leigh Woods**; the tricks to identifying our **Downs trees** in winter. In all **179** people attended our range of walks.

Ed was a fantastic host...such a great pace, rapport & energy with the children. It was a lovely evening.

*AW, Owl Prowl*

Excellent walk. Look forward to joining on others.

*SC, Ramble with a woodland ranger*

Luke was extremely knowledgeable & his presentation very informative and fun. It was exciting to see so many bats!

*Batty Beauties!*

We ran both three **family events** for children to enjoy with their adult as well as two **holiday** sessions for **children** to enjoy on their own without an adult during the half term breaks. These covered themes of: brilliant **birds**; **spring** into Easter; meadow **mini-beasts** for the Festival of Nature; an **owl** prow!; **nocturnal** nature. Very sadly our Christmas star party was postponed due to the weather for the second year running and so we have decided to choose a different format in order that this event can go ahead regardless of cloudy skies! This event is now taking place in February 2024. There were **81** people at our family and children's events.



## Formal Learning Sessions

Overall in 2023 we taught **2,549 primary, secondary children** and **higher education students** in **104** learning sessions. Our summer **playscheme, uniformed groups** and **pre-school age children** totalled **409** in **27** engagement sessions. We are also on a push towards introducing and encouraging full day in-depth sessions on one topic rather than two separate unrelated half day sessions.

### Primary

We welcomed to the Downs **primary schools** who have been visiting the project for many years with all of their year groups, as well as new schools who had not previously visited us from within Bristol, such as Ilminster Avenue E-ACT academy, Clifton High school and St Augustine's Catholic primary school. We also welcomed new schools from outside the city such as Fairfield school in Backwell, Winford primary school, Somerdale Educate Together from Keynsham and St George's primary school in Weston-super-Mare.

For the first time we offered four schools an opportunity to learn about their local Bristol wildlife in the Gorge and Downs **in-school**; one a very local school and three further afield in Southville, Headley Park and Stoke Park. This worked well during quieter times with school visits in the winter/early spring months. The workshops for the schools are bespoke and designed for each class to complement their in-school curriculum as well as linked to the wildlife of our site. In addition two of these schools with higher levels of Ever6FSM children, and which are more geographically distanced from the Downs, received an assembly where a larger number of pupils (and often teachers) discovered what unusual and incredible wildlife we have in the Gorge. One school visited the Downs for related workshops with each of their year groups and it is planned that the other three schools will visit us in 2024.

The workshops were linked to our science curriculum and met the needs of our individual year groups brilliantly.

The workshops were engaging and full of incredible local knowledge for our children. We are from a community who do not always access the Downs but AGDW brought the location to us and a smile to our children's faces.

Our visit was wonderful. The activities were very accessible to the children ... they linked very well with the learning we had already completed in school.

*Headley Park primary school*

*St Augustine's Catholic primary school*



### Secondary and Higher Education

For the first time the project offered a pilot **A level session** to Year 12 biology and geography students from South Gloucestershire and Stroud College (SGS). This incorporated an introduction on why we survey and carry out statistical analysis as well as an introduction to the wildlife in the Gorge, followed by fieldwork sampling of botanical species on the Downs – a required practical component of A level, BTEC and T level courses with an

Photo credits: Chris Westcott, Mark Parsons, Denice Stout, Libby Houston, John Martin, Beverley Guard, Jon Craig, Kathi Held

ecology element. Back inside for the afternoon the students used their recorded datasets to carry out statistical analysis looking for relationships.

Two large groups of University of West of England (UWE) BSc Wildlife Ecology and Conservation Science **undergraduate students** enjoyed a session learning about the Downs and Gorge's wildlife with a focus on the ecological relationships between people and habitat in this special ecosystem, for their Wildlife and Society module. The session was a mix of an inside introduction and a long walk studying evidence of human impact and habitat management.

A group of **supported** Year 13 **internship students** from City of Bristol College joined us for some work experience which we followed up in the summer with a sensory and invertebrate sampling session on the Downs, by way of a thank you for their kind help.

Biology & geography SGS students had an excellent experience with the education department. Thank you very much to AGDW who gave our students such an excellent opportunity.

They really enjoyed the 1<sup>st</sup> hand experience collecting data ... they learnt how to analyse data which will be exceptionally useful during their exams & NEA write up.

Being able to get them out of the lecture theatre to observe the work going on in their local area & discuss the challenges of balancing wildlife conservation with recreation is really beneficial.

MG, South Gloucestershire and Stroud College



BS, UWE

**Summer playschemes, uniformed groups, home schooled and pre-school age**

During the summer holiday months some children in Bristol are in need of support, food and activities when they are not at school. Bristol City Council runs Your Holiday Hub which financially supports many **holiday schemes** through the HAF funding scheme, and we were lucky to welcome several of these playschemes during the summer holidays as well as other schemes funded by different means. Each playscheme enjoys activities on the Downs learning through fun activities about wildlife and eats a healthy lunch whilst with us. In total we welcomed **11** holiday schemes and **182** children during the summer holidays.

Some **brownie, cubs** and **beavers groups** enjoy sessions with us during the lighter evening months of the year, following fun learning activities. This year we welcomed **three** uniformed groups with a total of **64** children. We also welcomed two Bristol based **home-schooled groups** of children with their adults for **two** sessions on the Downs and at the Botanical Gardens, with **43** children and adults learning through pond dipping and mini-beast hunting. These home-schooled groups cover a wide range of areas within Bristol and children came from the following range of postcodes: BS20, BS8, BS5, BS25, BS6, BS16.

Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife introduced its new **pre-school age** with adult **nature club** 'Little kids on the Downs' in September. This club runs weekly following seasonal themes to introduce the natural world of the Downs year to children aged between two and four and their accompanying adult. The club follows fun age appropriate activities on native wildlife and always incorporates a creative element towards the end of the session. These sessions instil a love and an understanding of the natural world which develops as a child grows, and takes with them a respect of wildlife as they mature. During the autumn term we ran **11** pre-school sessions.

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We wanted to extend a massive thank you to you & your team as the children had a great time & learnt so much.

Kind & welcoming & informative. Lots of interaction & varied activities each week.

Thank you for engaging the children so well & giving us the opportunity to learn about this very important habitat.

Unity holiday hub

FS, Little kids on the Downs

NB, Home schooled group



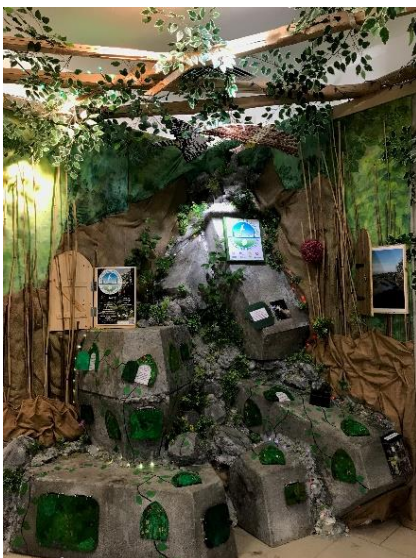
## Community Events and Activities

### Talks to local groups

In 2023 we gave **three** talks and walks to local community groups who were interested in discovering more about the wildlife in the Avon Gorge and Downs and the work that goes into conservation, as well as encouraging people to value it. In total the numbers of people who attended was approximately **100**.

### Sparks

We successfully completed our installation at **Sparks Bristol** the day before the opening of the site in May. This creation by AGDW in the style of 'Wake the Tiger' came together with help from a member of staff from UoB Botanical Gardens as well as several of our very dedicated and creative volunteers. The installation is designed to hook the general public, engaging them through a series of scenarios with an aim to ultimately confirming positive behaviours for the benefit of Downs and Avon Gorge wildlife. It also provides information on the amazing species which we are so lucky to have. Whole site attendance is monitored by Sparks and on the first weekend of opening more than **8000** people visited, thereafter with **1,500** people on weekdays and **2,500** on weekend days. In addition we spent an afternoon with the general public crafting additions to the installation whilst talking about Gorge and Downs biodiversity. Our installation is situated in the Nature Area right at the front of the Broadmead entrance to the site.



## City Nature Challenge

We worked in collaboration with Clifton Suspension Bridge Trust (CSBT) at the Suspension Bridge learning hub to run one of our sites for the **City Nature Challenge (CNC) Bioblitz** in early May. Our second site was on the Downs at the site of the Downs Café. The aim of CNC was to engage the public in recording as much wildlife as possible on the Downs onto an app for our AGDW iNaturalist project. We offered owl pellet dissection and bug hunting as well as fun activities on birds and mammals to engage a variety of age groups. We directly engaged with a total of **110** people over the four and a half hours we were present, and over the full four days of the CNC a total of **136 observations** were added to our iNaturalist project. In September we set up at the Suspension Bridge learning hub once again to take part in the **Eurobioblitz** and engaged with **108** people.

## Festival of Nature

AGDW spent two days in the Bristol Zoological Society (BZS) tent at the **Festival of Nature** in Millennium Square offering several engaging activities of owl pellet dissection and guess the weight of the baby peregrines for a scientific perspective, and willow bird feeder creation for more generic interaction. These activities were hugely popular with adults and families and gave us the opportunity to chat with the general public about the Downs and Avon Gorge and the wildlife which thrives in these habitats. In all we carried out activities with a minimum of **532** people.

## Forwards Festival

The project attended the **Forwards Festival** on the Downs in early September to engage with the general public and directly interacted through activities with **175** people over two days. This was a fantastic outcome and allowed us to talk about the biodiversity on the Downs and in the Gorge with people who may not ordinarily come to the site. We were also able to talk about our upcoming programme for the autumn.

## Student Fayre

The project attended the **Student Welcome Fayre** on the Downs in the autumn to engage students into the project through volunteering, as well as push the message about the damage that barbecues and fires can do to biodiversity on the Downs. We spoke to **131** students at the Fayre.



## Social media

### Analytics for website, Facebook and Instagram

We started using analytics for our **website** and our social media in July 2023 in order to understand what drives traffic to us and which aspects our users find most engaging and tailor our content accordingly.

For our website most users come through an 'organic' search and we are trusted and referred by many other websites as a highly regarded source of information. Since we started using analytics in July visitors increased steadily over the last 6 months of the year, with a total of **4,952 visitors** on **6,380 sessions** between **July** and **December**.

With regard to our Facebook page many of our users find us through other Facebook pages showing good connections with other organisations. During 2023 our **Facebook** posts reached **31,994** people, up by **31.5%** on the previous year and our followers on Facebook currently stand very near to **2400**. We opened an Instagram account during 2023 to boost awareness of the project and our **Instagram** reach stands at **470**. Our Facebook page can be found [here](#), our Instagram page [here](#) and our website can be found [here](#).

## Surveying and Monitoring

At the beginning of 2023 we started a **monthly bird survey** on the Downs and in the Gully with Alastair Fraser, a bird identification expert who already works with the native species team at Bristol Zoo Project (BZP). We cover four transect walks in rotation, one per month covering the four different habitats on the Downs and in part of the Gorge. These are Fairyland and Zoo Banks, Peregrine Watch point into the Gully, Sea Walls and Sneyd Park copse, scrub patches. We record the data on BirdTrack which automatically uploads to the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and allows us to view our data at any time. There is a lack of bird survey data within AGDW and this will allow us to monitor any changes in species richness and abundance at different times of year, over time. Highlights so far are sightings of the elusive firecrest and the peregrine falcons. Students on the MSc AWCiP (UWE/BZS) and volunteers help us on these surveys to ensure we record the full wealth of data available.

We took part in the **silky wave moth** annual survey in June to help us understand more about the nature of this rare species and to help the BZS Native Species Team in the data collection. Numbers were strong this year although in a long term trend of overall decline.

We continue to receive the **butterfly** datasets which are recorded by Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge (FoDAG) yearly, and submitted to UKBMS, and this year we ran a butterfly walk to aid the collection of data with the general public along Zoo Banks. This was very well received and a total of **17** species were recorded during the walk including the silver washed fritillary.

**Rare plant** species and species of the **Sorbus genus** continue to be monitored by Libby Houston, the local botany expert in conjunction with NE and UoB Botanical Gardens. We ran walks and workshops on these rare species with both Libby and the Botanical Gardens.



## Partnerships

### Clifton Suspension Bridge Trust

Botanical detail was commissioned by the project from Libby Houston and supplied to the **CSBT** for a fundraiser in partnership with #HazardOne, a Bristol street artist who created an amazing **mural** of the rare Avon Gorge species for the public to enjoy. It was sited at the Suspension Bridge. In addition, AGDW volunteers were able to enjoy a fantastic **tour** of the **Vaults** at the Suspension Bridge free of charge with the team from the CSBT, which received wonderful feedback.



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## Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge

We work closely with **FoDAG** and are together able to work towards a balance of the biodiversity of the Downs and Avon Gorge alongside the public function of the sites as a necessary green space on the edge of a city of more than 500,000 people. FoDAG chairs the **Downs Advisory Panel (DAP)** which was set up in 2023 to advise the Downs Committee from the perspective of a variety of interested parties and AGDW sit on the panel to represent biodiversity and public engagement.

## Forestry England

The south side of the Gorge was more in focus last year as it plays a fundamental part in the eco-network of the Avon Gorge and we hope to represent this in the engagement element of AGDW. We enjoyed jointly delivering a public engagement session with FE in **Leigh Woods** to this end last summer and aim to continue this strong partnership into the future through further delivery on the Leigh Woods side.

## University of Bristol Botanical Gardens

We have been delighted this year to have been able to use the **Botanical Gardens** for freshwater activities with children to enhance their understanding of this habitat and its species, and as a comparison with meadow and woodland habitats. We have also enjoyed the expertise and collaboration of members of the UoB based at the Gardens for delivering our workshops and in the development of our installation in Sparks.

## Volunteer Support

Last year, **30** volunteers gave **781** hours of their time over the year for which we are very grateful as we would not be able to operate without their support. They joined us in all sorts of different ways from helping weekly with the pre-school age nature club, to crafting with the general public in Sparks, to bringing up the rear on a night-time walk!

## Project Funding

AGDW is incredibly grateful to all its funders for their financial and other support in encouraging awareness and understanding of the unique Avon Gorge and Downs and its importance for wildlife, people and local habitat. Organisations who funded the project in 2023 are: **Downs Committee, Bristol Zoological Society, Society of Merchant Venturers, Natural England, Commoners of Durdham Down and Durdham Downs Charity**. Thank you to all those individual donors for their kind support.

**Anna Stevens, Biodiversity engagement and learning manager**

## Bristol City Council Report 2023

### Winter Conservation

The winter conservation works on the Bristol side of the Gorge 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. Bristol City Council (BCC) are working with botanist Libby Houston to identify priority areas for these works. Scrub removal was undertaken on the cliff faces around the Great Quarry and St Vincent's Rocks areas by rope access contractors in February 2023. Further works are scheduled to take place around Sea Walls, the Gully Edge, Great Quarry cliff-top and St Vincent's Rocks in January and February 2024. The BCC Downs team are also undertaking scrub management works along the bases of Great Quarry and Black Rock Quarry this coming winter 2023-2024. On the Downs, implementation of the Scrub Management Plan has continued for its ninth year and is contributing to the ongoing restoration of the wildflower meadows. The plan expires in 2025, and therefore the progress of the management prescriptions will be reviewed over the next year.

### Ash Die Back

Works were carried out in January and February 2023 to remove ash trees infected with ash dieback disease, which pose a heightened risk to highway users along Bridge Valley Road. At the same time, the BCC Downs team were able to utilise the traffic management and removed invasive scrub on the Dolomitic Conglomerate Outcrop, where several rare plant species are found.

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## Drone Survey Mapping

A drone survey was carried out by the BCC GIS team over winter in 2023. The footage has been used to create an interactive 3D model of the Avon Gorge. This currently only shows the Bristol side, but there are plans for further flights to include both sides. This will allow more accurate mapping of the rare habitats and species found in the Avon Gorge. There is also the potential for repeated drone flights to monitor changes in levels of invasive scrub and inform future management.

## Walcombe Slade (the Gully)

In the Gully, the herd of four Bagot and three 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 carried out planting of 111 honewort plants in the Gully during January 2023, assisted by volunteers and the BCC Downs team. Honewort is a nationally rare plant, and the Avon Gorge is the northernmost place it grows. The plants had been grown from seed collected from the existing Gully population. The plants will continue to be monitored by the Botanic Garden.

## Ongoing

During the coming Winter 2023-2024, the BCC Downs team will be carrying out removal of climbing and self-seeded vegetation on the rock faces alongside Bridge Road (adjacent to the former toilet block and café) and adjacent to the Clifton Playground site. This is to facilitate rock safety assessments.

**Rosie Jackson, Nature conservation officer, Bristol City Council**

