

## Report for February and March 2024 summary of activities of the Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife learning and community engagement programme

Reporting Officer: Anna Stevens Avon Gorge and Downs wildlife biodiversity engagement and learning manager

### Avon Gorge & Downs Wildlife (AGDW) events programme

Our first event of the year took place in February half term with the **'Family stargazing party'** taking place to replace the postponed event on the Downs at the end of 2023. This event was very popular and sold out with a large waiting list, and as a result we plan to repeat the event in the late autumn. Later in February we ran a **native species talk** on the conservation of the keystone freshwater **'white-clawed crayfish'** delivered by Bristol Zoological Society native species team, with our first **workshop 'Tweet talk'** on **birdsong** of the Downs taking place in late March.



We feedback survey all attendees to our events as well as our formal learning sessions and we have very positive feedback. Here are several quotes from the two public events which have recently taken place this spring.

*"Just more events please. I love the Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife project."*

*"Both speakers passionate & extremely knowledgeable about the subject."*

*"Lovely presentation and friendly helpful volunteers."*

### Formal educational sessions

Bookings are coming in from schools who are planning a visit to us on the Downs in the late spring or summer terms. We continue to contact schools through emailshot and are in the process of

updating our website for existing sessions and adding new sessions available to complement the primary and secondary curriculums. The first **school group** and our first **uniformed group** of the year visit the Downs with us in late March.

### Pre-school age sessions

We completed our first 2024 term of 'Little kids on the Downs' where we explored the winter world of local wildlife. The group was fully booked last term and we have expanded slightly to welcome a larger group, which is also fully booked for this late spring term. Sessions have begun once again and we have explored Downs' soil, fossils and the Bristol dinosaur, as well as spring trees on the Downs.



Thecodontosaurus antiquus



### Nature Works

As the learning engagement officer has now left the project we have contacted the representative from Off the Record to suggest that we book in sessions for a group of young people in August or September 2024. We are keen to get some sessions in the calendar so that we can create an appropriate plan to meet the learning and engagement needs of this community.

### Bird survey

Our bird survey continues monthly in conjunction with Bristol Ornithological Club (BOC) and with new volunteers joining us this year, to help record species richness and abundance in our four Downs transects. Highlights of the January and February surveys at the scrub patches, Fairyland and Zoo Banks have been the shy **bullfinch**, **goldcrest** and at last some welcome sightings of **redwing**. Surveys will continue as we build up a useful overall picture of birdlife diversity on the Downs. Results are held on the BTO website under BirdTrack.



Note: this is a goldfinch, not a goldcrest!

### Community engagement talks

Two evening talks were delivered to large groups of the **Women's Institute** in Mangotsfield and Stoke Gifford about the wildlife of the Avon Gorge and Downs. Not only do these talks provide a small income for the project, but they are very well received with much enthusiasm for the topic, great fun and also effect an opportunity for engagement with communities further away from the site.

### Volunteers

Our volunteers started to help again this spring with Little kids on the Downs and our events programme and are now signing up via our new volunteer management system Better Impact. Volunteers are able to manage their own allocations via this new system. An **induction** of ten new volunteers for AGDW took place in February.

### Website updates and social media

During the past month a total of 1374 sessions were recorded on our **website** with the majority of users focussing on the Home page and the What's on page. We are aiming to consolidate the website somewhat to make it more user friendly as well as more engaging to the general public. Our follower numbers on **Facebook** currently stands at 2,447 and on **Instagram** at 373. Since the beginning of the year our Facebook posts reached 3900 people and our Instagram posts 323. Our Facebook page can be found [here](#) , our Instagram page [here](#) and our website can be found [here](#).

Our website schools pages are currently being updated to provide details on new sessions at primary and secondary school levels as well as updates on current sessions.

### 25th Anniversary of AGDW

#### Family tree trail at the Observatory

One of the main plans for 2024 and the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary is to completely revamp the tree trail at the Observatory and Promenade. Work continues in partnership with Sarah's Wildlife Projects on developing the public engagement activities on AGDW website as well as the website of the above group. In addition arboretum grade tree tags are being sourced by Sarah's Wildlife Projects.



### Sponsorship of 3x3s

A proposal was approved by the Downs Committee for the engagement team to run a sponsorship programme in celebration of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ADGW and ongoing, whereby members of the public can financially sponsor a 3mx3m plot of the Downs or Avon Gorge. This will be a fundraiser for the project and helps to raise awareness and nurture 'ownership' and value of the sites. It also encourages people to look after their plot through litter collection and reporting of any issues. The legalities of the Terms and Conditions need to be approved by a legal team and the engagement manager has now contacted the legal team at BCC to ask for a check of the Terms and Conditions.

### Other

#### Steering group

A Steering group meeting took place in late January where partners were able to update on activities connected with Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife. These included the very important report that funding is now available to 'download' and digitise information from our local botanist expert on the richness, abundance and location of rare species in the Avon Gorge. This is fundamental to the ongoing land management in the Gorge as well as on the Downs and provides a solid record to refer to in the future. This is the first time this type of comprehensive record will have been made and will be of great importance to the status of the Avon Gorge as an SAC and a SSSI.

The UoB Botanical Gardens also offered the project use of the toilets on their site for school groups whilst we wait for the new Wildlife Conservation Hub to be refurbished at the former Bristol Zoo Gardens site.

#### Other meetings

The biodiversity engagement manager met with **Forestry England** (FE) Westonbirt personnel at Leigh Woods to view and discuss the new plantation of rare endemic whitebeam species created on site to provide further protected areas for these species. FE are carrying out a nationwide gap analysis of whitebeam species and are interested in finding out much about them from various interested parties, in addition to the work ongoing to promote the species.

We also met with the **National Trust** education lead at Leigh Woods to discuss the possibility of collaboration at Leigh Woods for learning opportunities with school groups.

The engagement manager also met with Professor Jane Memmott of **UoB** to discuss the value of student sampling and surveying on the Downs in the future. In addition to this the engagement manager attended a networking event organised by the Natural History Consortium to promote the work of local organisations delivering conservation messaging to the public.

Finally the engagement manager met with a young filmmaker to showcase the 'work' that the wild goats carry out in the Gully area of the Avon Gorge, to aid conservation of the rare botanical species here. We are looking forward to seeing the final short documentary when it is complete.

#### Sparks Project

A new sculpture created by schoolchildren along with Heart of BS13 stands alongside our installation to highlight local biodiversity. In regard to this the engagement manager has contacted the CEO of Heart of BS13 to ask if they are willing to meet in 2024 to discuss ways in which we might collaborate, to introduce and engage both adults or children in the community with their incredible city wildlife.

#### Brunel Garden

A meeting took place with the curator of the Botanical Gardens, a local botanist, the engagement manager and a Bristol Zoological Society gardener. The engagement manager is keen for these flagship gardens of the rare species of the Avon Gorge to be engaging and informative to the general public in such a popular location. As such the ongoing management of the gardens is being undertaken in 2024 by a BZS gardener and a team of AGDW volunteers, with the volunteers currently being trained to take over the task for 2025. The signs are being considered for messaging and updating and the overall appearance of the garden being improved. We are considering using small moveable signs in addition to the larger generic ones to pinpoint exactly where the public can see clear examples of the rare species.

