

Learning and Engagement

Overview

Highlights of 2024 for Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife (AGDW) have been year-round delivery of our Little Kids on the Downs pre-school age nature club; expanding delivery across the primary to secondary school age range; engaging the general public at a variety of festivals and events to help them discover the Avon Gorge and Downs through the wildlife prism; and launching the Treeburt tree trail on the Promenade.

In total we engaged with 6,586 across the year in all our activities and we pride ourselves on real engagement with children and adults, which means delivering activities, rather than just talking to people about the wildlife on site! Even when we deliver talks to local and community groups, we involve attendees in discussion and interactive conversation. One of the stand-out figures of this year is 4,244 people engaged at community events or talks and walks delivered to community groups.



6,586 people actively engaged with Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife in 2024.

635 attendees joined us in playscheme, after school club or uniformed groups or in our pre-school nature club sessions.

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

We engaged with 4,244 people through giving guided walks and talks to community groups and at community events (not including Sparks).



1,423 school and higher education students visited us for formal learning engagement.

14 volunteers gave us 192 hours of their time.

Formal Learning Sessions

Overall, in 2024 AGDW taught **1,423 primary, secondary children and higher education students** in **56 learning sessions** – the majority of those sessions being for a full day this year, rather than a half day which used to be common in the project. We have built on collaboration with the University of Bristol (UoB) Botanical Gardens and the Clifton Suspension Bridge Trust (CSBT) to enhance children's learning experiences whilst visiting us. Numbers are down on 2023 as we did not deliver any assemblies in-school in 2024, focussing on Downs site visits with children.

Primary

We welcomed to the Downs **primary schools** who are new to the project and were visiting us for the first time such as; Brunel Fields, Courteney, Victoria Park, St Bernadettes, St Joes, Whitehall, Steiner School (Hereford). We were also delighted to welcome back to us regular and local schools, many of which bring a wide variety of year groups to learn with us. These include Hotwells, Holy Cross, Westbury Park, Clifton High School, Westbury on Trym, Christchurch, Southville, Stoke Bishop, Winford, Oasis Academy Longcross, St Augustines. We have seven primary school bookings in the spring/summer calendar for 2025 already.

Our full day sessions, which are now the norm for the majority of schools rather than a half day session which was commonly previously delivered, allow for a more in-depth focus on a particular curriculum-linked topic. This deepens children's understanding of wildlife and the natural world, and will help them to retain information pertaining to the curriculum learning objectives.

I thought all the activities were brilliant (extremely well thought out and absolutely age appropriate). I think what you do is just fantastic and I've thoroughly recommended you to as many people as I know!

St Joe's Primary

We were impressed with the variety of activities that engaged children. They were targeted perfectly to their age and linked with what we have covered in class.

Oasis Academy Longcross

Thank you for yesterday – the children absolutely loved it! Are we able to book for next year yet? Are bookings open?

Westbury on Trym Primary

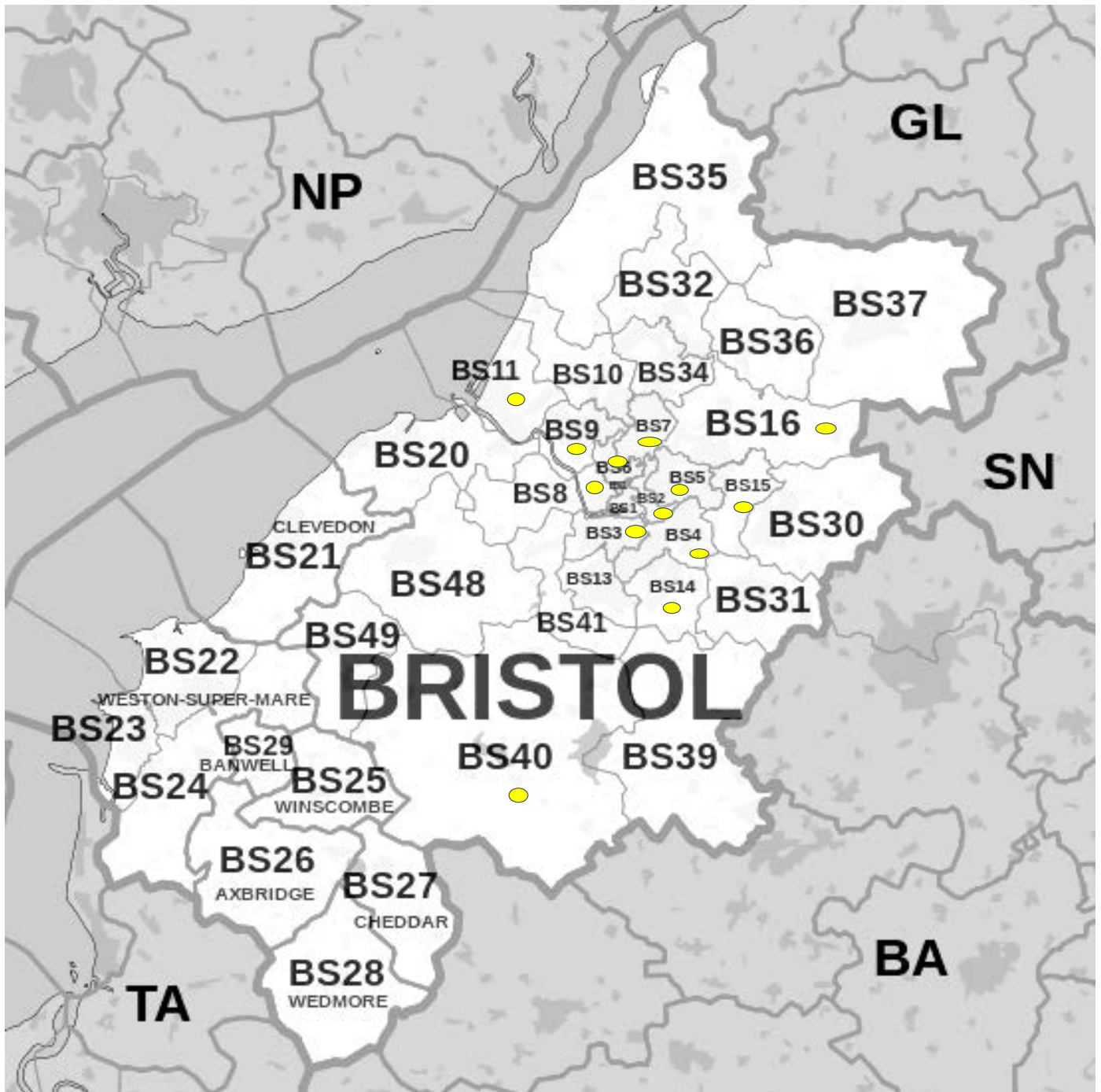


In 2024 **100%** of teachers who responded to our **feedback** survey **agreed** that:

- as a result of their visit to the Downs and Avon Gorge, the children now had a better understanding of the natural world;
- the programme met the needs of and complemented the curriculum studied at school;
- teaching was of 'very high' or 'high' quality.

AGDW received 11 feedback responses from teachers out of 18 establishments which visited.

We welcomed schools and playschemes from the following postcodes this year:
BS8, BS40, BS4, BS6, BS7, BS3, BS9, BS15, BS16, BS14, BS11, BS5, BS2, HR2.



Secondary and Higher Education

Recognition that AGDW deliver **secondary learning** is gradually becoming known amongst schools and colleges in Bristol and as AGDW delivers more of these sessions, which learning focuses and locations work most effectively are becoming more apparent to us. AGDW delivered sessions on **A level fieldwork** and statistics and **community focus** with years 10 and 12. AGDW has not yet marketed secondary engagement and this is planned for early next spring to let Bristol schools know what we offer.

AGDW delivered fieldwork on an **undergraduate** degree in Wildlife and Society helping South Gloucestershire and Stroud College students to experience first-hand some of the conflicts pertaining to many urban green spaces and conservation projects. For the first time, AGDW also delivered to students on a **postgraduate** degree at the University of the West of England, focussing on their local Avon Gorge wildlife conservation project and discovering something of the challenging realities conservation projects face worldwide.

Tutor was great, very friendly and full of local info. The students were very engaged throughout.

Redland Green School

The guided walk enabled students to learn about local biodiversity whilst also highlighting the challenges of managing the Avon Gorge and Downs for both people and wildlife, highlighting the conflicting priorities of different stakeholders.

South Gloucestershire and Stroud College



Events Programme

We enjoyed a fun and interesting programme of events this year with some annual and much-loved favourites as well as some new and different events. We jointly delivered with Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge (FoDAG), Explorer Dome, Bristol Zoological Society (BZS), as well as Forestry England (FE), in order to host our events. In total **284** attended our engagement programme this year in a mix of walks, talks, workshops and family events.

AGDW guided **discovery walks** were as usual the most popular with a mix of Downs and Avon Gorge related subjects being explored. This year walks were led by a mix of in-house and visiting experts and comprised: a free of charge **deep dive** for the Festival of Nature into the Downs and Gorge, the Gully **rare botanical** flowering plant species; **winter tree** identification on Clifton Down; our **local bat** species on the Downs; the **history and heritage** of the Downs; our Downs bird species in the **dawn chorus**; the wonderful array of unusual trees on the **Granny Downs**; the diversity of **butterflies** on Zoo Banks; summer tree identification and woodland management at **Leigh Woods**. A **wildlife talk** was given on the fascinating **white-claw crayfish** by the BZS native species team and an **in-depth workshop** on **birdsong identification** was also delivered.

The two presenters were excellent. Entertaining and engaging with children and adults. I am recommending it to my friends.

Stargazing Party

Very good educational information given by our knowledgeable and friendly guide.

Deep Dive into the Downs

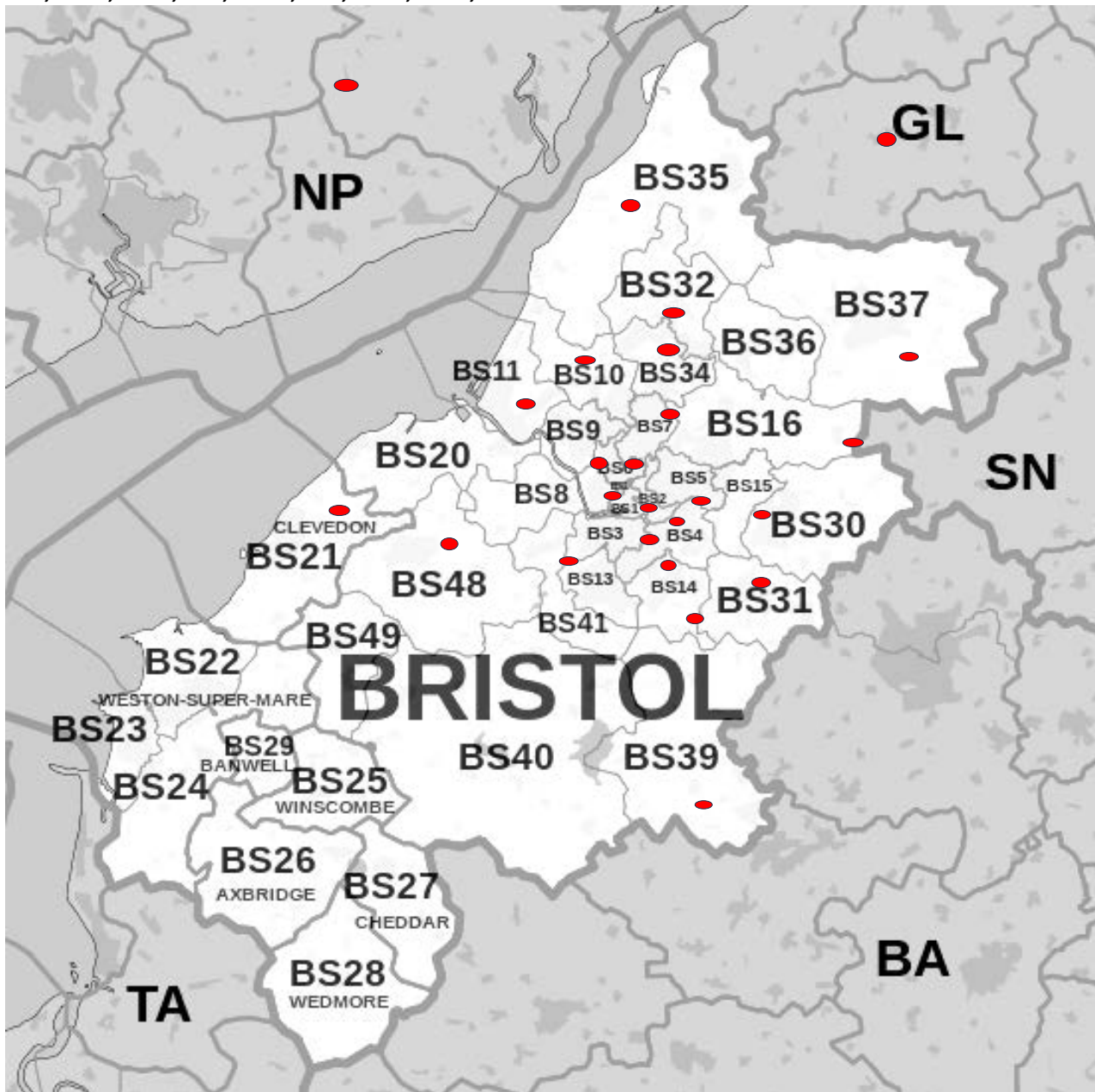
Autumn antics was a fun and educational way for my son to spend a day in nature. He felt really well supported by the staff and felt like he had had an adventure.

Autumn Antics nature club

AGDW ran five fabulous **family** and **holiday events** on the Downs – the most popular was our **stargazing party** which ran twice with Explorer Dome. This focuses on the **Downs dark sky discovery site** and doesn't need to be cancelled even if the weather is inclement! AGDW also ran family sessions on our gorgeous **conservation goats** in the Gully, an **owl prowl** and pellet dissection session, and an **autumn antics nature club** day.



Attendees to our events, sessions and pre-school nature club came from the following postcodes:
BS9, BS6, GL15, NP16, BS7, BS10, BS4, BS34, BS3, BS8, BS32, CH48, BS15, GL12, BS31, BS41, BS35, BS21, BS37, BS2, BS16, BS14, BS5, NP26, BS1, BS11, BS48, BS39.



Summer playschemes, uniformed groups and pre-school age

Our summer **playscheme, uniformed groups** and all year-round **pre-school age** nature club totalled **635** in **33** engagement sessions.

Once again we were delighted to welcome children in **playschemes** from around Bristol who visited us as part of their summer holiday activities. Many playschemes cater for children who may not have access to summer activities and/or adequate food provision at home during the holiday period. AGDW is able to offer children a free session on the Downs which engages them with the natural world as well as getting them outside into a green space, having fun with other children. **Uniformed groups** love to experience the dusk or evening Downs finding out about wildlife at this time of day.

Our **pre-schoolers nature club** ran all the way through term times in 2024 except for at the height of school visit season in June and July, when AGDW caters most days for schools. For two to four years-olds and their adults, sessions follow the seasons discovering what happens to native plants, trees, mammals, birds and invertebrates at different times of year. Young children are signed up for a term at a time so that they and their families build weekly on previous environmental engagement and learning. There are often different generations at sessions which brings learning to many age groups, something which is much appreciated and often commented on!

The day at the Downs was very well planned, it was adjusted according to childrens' needs. All the children had a lovely day out.

Khass playscheme

Each session was beautifully planned, which given the range of ages of children was remarkable. Health and Safety consideration were all extremely well thought through. Just keep doing what you are doing, it was great!

Little kids on the Downs nature club

The way that the information was presented to the children in such an enthusiastic and interesting way, so the children were able to learn new things about nature and have their imagination fuelled.



In 2024 **100%** of respondents to the AGDW **feedback** survey for all events, pre-school nature club and playschemes **agreed** that:

- as a result of their activity with Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife, they felt that (their children and) they had a better understanding of the biodiversity in this area and the natural world;
- their session(s) was/were good value for money.

Community Events and Activities

Talks to local groups

In 2024 AGDW gave **eight** talks and walks to local community groups and a DEFRA away day, who were interested in discovering more about wildlife in the Avon Gorge and the work that goes into conservation, as well as encouraging people to value it. In total the numbers of people who attended was **312**. This is a big increase on numbers from last year and talks are always full of lively conversation about the Avon Gorge amongst those

attending. Discussion and interaction during a talk is much encouraged. Talks were given in Keynsham, Pill, Stoke Gifford, Mangotsfield, Stoke Bishop, Redland.

Treeburt family tree trail

The new **family tree trail** on the Observatory and Promenade on Clifton Down is a joint venture between AGDW and Sarah's Wildlife Projects and is an opportunity for families to enjoy the (mainly native) trees on this part of the Downs; to learn a little about species traits and features; and to follow some fun interactive children's activities at each tree. The launch took place during autumn half term where AGDW engaged with the community visiting the Observatory and the children's playground. The event ran for three hours and during that time around **60** children and adults set off to complete the trail with their passport and stickers. Children also engaged in plenty of fun autumn nature activities at the playground site with their families. The event was written up by local media **24/7** and their report is available [here](#).



Festival of Nature

The summer **Festival of Nature** at Millenium Square is always a special opportunity to highlight our local native wildlife and surprise locals with what they can do to help local wildlife as they discover what an incredible site the Avon Gorge is. AGDW spent two solid days with the public – a mixture of adults and children - creating newspaper seed pots for pollinators, crafting willow bird feeders and guessing the weight of 'baby peregrine falcons' in the BZS marquee. In all we interacted with **3161** people.

Festivals and Fayres on the Downs

For the first time this year AGDW had a family stand at **Pride Festival** on the Downs in July. This was a fantastic community event full of local Bristol families and AGDW engaged in activities with children whilst talking to their adults about the wildlife on the Downs and its importance to them. In all AGDW engaged with **342** children and adults during four hours. Over two days in late August and early September AGDW enjoyed a presence at the **Forwards Festival** and engaged with a huge variety of age groups, creating with and chatting in particular to adults from Bristol and beyond, about Downs wildlife and AGDW activities. In all, beautiful felt pictures and fun festival rings were created with **151** people. In September AGDW took part in the **Student Fayre** on the Downs, talking to **128** students at their stand about volunteering and looking after the Downs site. This is always an exceptional opportunity to engage with the student age group.



Photo credits: Libby Houston, Kathi Held

Media

AGDW **filmed** in the autumn with **ITVX**, ITV's online streaming service, for a piece on the conservation efforts of the goats in the Gully, and the value of rare botanical species on this site. The piece is expected to be released in early 2025. There were several **live radio interviews** for AGDW this year during May's Bristol Walk Fest both in-studio and out at the Gully and Downs sites. The live interviews were with **Bristol Community Radio** and **BBC Radio Bristol**.

AGDW created **emailshots** for the first time in 2024 as a means to keep schools and general public subscribers informed on wildlife and events on the Avon Gorge and Downs, in addition to providing information on upcoming sessions. These are sent out on a regular basis. Our open rate for these emailshots is very high at **50%**.

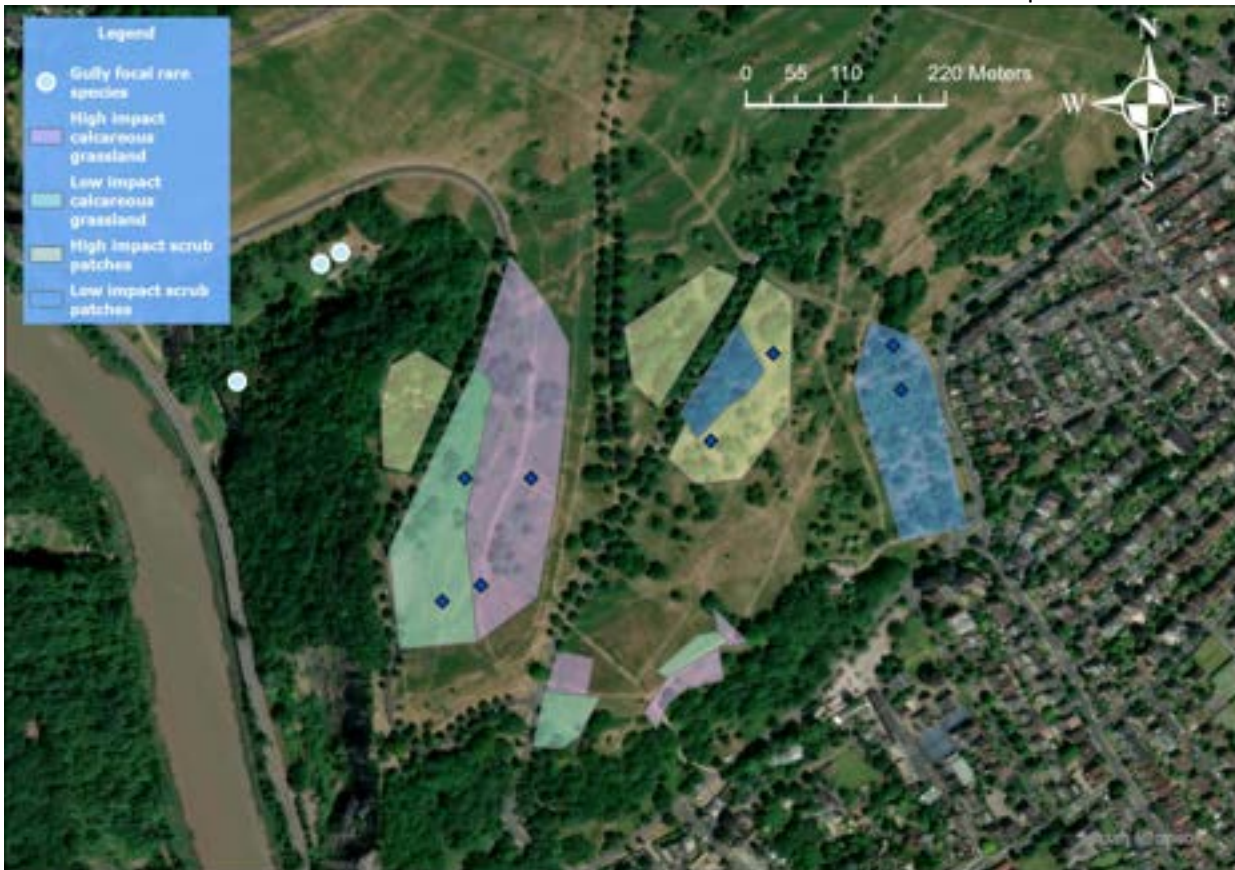
AGDW uses analytics for its **website** and social media. AGDW continues to receive traffic to its website through other site links and also through organic searches, with a total of 35,296 page views since it was built in 2019 and 1,248 page views in December 2024. The AGDW website however is cumbersome and is due for a renewal.

AGDW continues to use its Facebook page to reach an audience now standing at **2600**, 200 up on 2023. During 2024 our **Facebook** posts reached **29700** people. We opened an Instagram account during 2023 to boost awareness of the project and our **Instagram** reach stands at **539** up from 470 at the end of 2023. Our Facebook page can be found [here](#) , our Instagram page [here](#) and our website can be found [here](#).

Surveying and Monitoring

AGDW continues to survey **bird** diversity on the Downs in 2024 over four different transects on a monthly basis, whenever possible. A diversity dataset is gradually being built up on BTO's **Birdtrack** with species having now been recorded for around two years. As birds are a useful indicator group, continuing to survey over a five-year period and beyond will help to build up a picture of ecological health on the Downs and in the Gully.

This summer AGDW surveyed **pollinators** in four strata on the Downs, within the calcareous grassland and scrub habitats. These surveys took place to establish the significance of human impact on pollinator diversity on the Downs, and the degree of connectivity between the Downs and the rare species in the Avon Gorge. A report has been written on this and will be submitted to the Downs Committee once it has been peer reviewed.



AGDW took part twice in the summer **silky wave moth** annual survey to help gather data on this rare species and to help the BZS Native Species Team with their data collection. The total peak count was lower than the 2023 count, and the lowest count since 2013.

AGDW continues to receive the **butterfly** datasets which are recorded by FoDAG yearly, and submitted to UKBMS. Abundance overall was poor this year in keeping with the 2024 national trend.

Rare plant species and species of the **Sorbus** genus continue to be monitored by Libby Houston, the local botany expert in conjunction with Natural England and UoB Botanic Gardens. AGDW engagement personnel continue to develop expertise on the locations and characteristics of the rare endemic whitebeams, as well as the rare and scarce plant species in the Gully, Black Rocks and St Vincent's Rocks. Expertise is passed on to us from Libby Houston and the Botanic Gardens curator.



Honewort



Bullfinch



Wilmott's whitebeam



Common carder bee

Partnerships

AGDW continues to build and extend partnerships with other local organisations, and members of the Steering Group, to further the ability of the project to reach as many people as possible and achieve a successful and ongoing positive biodiversity outcome for the Downs and Avon Gorge.

Merchant Venturers of Bristol (MVs)

AGDW has offered support in terms of Downs and Avon Gorge **ecological detail** to the MVs wherever possible to support their projects, and for schools engagement at the Downs Grazing Ceremony.

Clifton Suspension Bridge Trust

AGDW actively encourages schools to investigate workshops and events with CSBT on our website and through email contact. A visit to both the Downs with AGDW and the Suspension Bridge on the same day works well to give children a rounded perspective of the value of the Avon Gorge. As organisations we actively **support** one another's engagement offers in many ways. Looking forward, CSBT provides an inside lunch space and toilets which will no longer be available at the former Bristol Zoo Gardens (BZG) site from mid 2025.

UoB Botanic Gardens

During 2024 AGDW delivered **pond dipping** at the Botanic Gardens with schools alongside a visit to the Downs for complementary activities. This works very well as a dual site experience, in particular when learning objectives are focussed around adaptation, food webs and sampling. We also enjoyed delivering a talk at the Botanic Gardens pollinator festival and hope to continue to use the site for expanding schools' learning through 2025, not least in the Durdham Downs Grazing Ceremony in May. Once again the lunch space and toilet facilities at the Botanic Gardens for school children offer an opportunity to AGDW when the BZG site is no longer available.

FoDAG

AGDW has been delighted to sit on the **Downs Advisory Panel** throughout 2024, to represent biodiversity and engagement, and also host its members at meetings. This provides the opportunity to bring a somewhat overlooked ecological perspective to many of the variety of topics discussed in relation to the Downs, which are then in turn brought to the Downs Committee. A focus on wildlife helps to maintain the Downs in a healthy ecological state, providing a better experience for all those people benefitting from this green space. We were also delighted to give a talk at the FoDAG AGM this year.

Photo credits: Libby Houston, Kathi Held

Forestry England

As a member of the Steering Group, FE invited AGDW to be present to discuss a national **Sorbus Gap Analysis** at a plantation field site in Leigh Woods, with national FE personnel. This was a chance to examine certain rare and endemic species in situ and to discuss the abundance and locations of these species in the Avon Gorge in relation to the distribution of *Sorbus* nationally.

Bristol Museum

AGDW has collaborated with the Bristol Museum for the first time to aid their educational department with their **online educational** offer to Key Stage one and two school children, based around the Avon Gorge. We provided extensive information and guidance on the Avon Gorge, a fact checking service, as well as AGDW activities for the museum to use in their online resource.

Volunteer Support

We are incredibly grateful to our volunteers for all their support, help and enthusiasm which they bring to AGDW on numerous occasions throughout the year. We cannot thank them enough for helping with a huge variety of activities from Festival of Nature crafting to helping weekly with pre-schooler's nature club to bringing up the rear on a night-time walk! Last year, AGDW volunteer management was brought into a new online system run by BZS. It has taken some time for AGDW and volunteers to familiarize with this new and very different system, in terms of accessing volunteering options and logging hours! In total **14** volunteers gave **192** hours of their time over the year.



Project Funding

AGDW gives its utmost thanks 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 2024 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 especially **Sarah's Wildlife Projects** for their commitment.



Photo credits: Libby Houston, Kathi Held