

FOD Avon Gorge + AG

Friends of the Downs

Issue 36

Spring 2021

New Arrivals in the Gully



Chair's Report Spring 2021

Welcome to the spring edition of the Newsletter. Hopefully we can now look forward to a spring and summer with a bit more optimism. The roll out of the vaccine offers promise of freedom from the tedium of successive lock downs. Cases still remain obstinately high but everything seems to be on track for a return to enjoying long anticipated social activities with family and friends. Spring has sprung and although winter has its devotees there's something to be said for spring with its new life and warmer weather.

It has been a long and hard-fought battle to bring the Covid-19 pandemic under control and the Downs has played its part in helping us all get through it. Citizens have been able to enjoy regular exercise, fresh air and relief from the mental strain of coping with the virus. Never have our public open spaces been more important to the physical and mental wellbeing of our citizens.

Numbers of winter visitors have never been so high with estimates suggesting an increase of 50% and on some fine days as high as 75%. This as you would expect has had an impact on the Downs. The Downs team have battled throughout the winter to stay on top of increased litter and rubbish left behind by inconsiderate visitors. In addition, FOD+AG volunteers have throughout the winter months removed unprecedented amounts of rubbish from some of the less accessible areas of the Downs.

In normal winters the Downs has had a chance to recover from the impact of busy summer months. The popularity of the Downs and major events do have a bearing on ground conditions. If you have walked around Circular Road recently you can't fail to notice that the jogging trails or desire lines have become wider and wider as runners and walkers look to avoid the muddy areas and maintain safe distancing from gasping harriers. The good news is that the Downs are resilient, most damaged areas will recover naturally, other parts will need a little TLC from the Downs team.

In March FOD+AG held its first Zoom talk. Dr. Yealand Kalfayan presented to an invited audience of 95 a fascinating talk on the subject of Butterflies. The presentation was warmly received by those attending as Yealand described Butterflies both local and from farther afield and how to set about finding and photographing these appealing insects.

We were hoping to roll out remote meetings to the full membership but for the moment due to technical reasons we are unable to do so. Hopefully as the burden of lock-down is eased we will be able to meet again in person. My own view is that although remote meetings have allowed us to stay in contact with loved ones and for business to continue the process does little for social interaction and meetings can become stilted and somewhat subdued.

One of the key drivers from the FOD+AG Action Plan was to increase our membership. In particular to reach out to a wider audience and to a more diverse demographic. I am delighted to report that FOD+AG has been steadily growing over the past couple of years, but there is one section of the population that we are failing to attract and that is our younger citizens. If we are to grow as an organisation it is imperative that we look to redress this imbalance. It is important that the legacy of the Downs is protected and for those who follow us to recognise the part they might play in ensuring that legacy is safeguarded.

The trick is what do we need to do to make us as an organisation more appealing to a younger audience. The obvious route is social media and we are working to update and refresh all our media platforms.

One thing we could consider is creating a youth wing to bring fresh ideas and to get involved. We know young people are keen volunteers so there is a resource to tap into. We just have to find the way.

If members have ideas of their own or wish to comment on the proposal please feel free to get back to us.

The first phase of Bristol Zoos redevelopment of the Clifton site will be a planning application for the West Car Park located in College Road. The application will include a proposal to develop the West Car Park with a 4.5 storey apartment block and 2 storey mews houses on the western part of the site, 65 dwellings in all. There will be only 45 car parking spaces but 'plentiful cycle parking'. Whilst this proposal is not directly a concern to FOD+AG architecturally there are other obvious implications; particularly in respect of the allocated car parking provision.

65 dwellings with only 45 parking spaces suggests there could be a problem. It is understood that the College Road site will not be eligible for the Residents Parking Scheme so where would any additional vehicles be accommodated? The obvious answer is to look to securing additional spaces near-by and that can only lead you to one conclusion, the North Car Park and this is where we would have an interest. Members will be aware that the North Car Park falls within the remit of the Downs committee who may well be encouraged to consider another lease arrangement. Any release of land for car parking will also impact on the next phase of the development, the main zoo site.

FOD+AG remains opposed to any part of the Downs being used to provide permanent car parking spaces.

You can read more about the proposal at **<https://bristolzoo.org.uk/latest-zoo-news/bzs-opens-consultation-on-development-of-its-west-car-park>**

If you have been out and about around the top of the Whiteladies Road area recently then you may well have noticed the splendid display of spring bulbs. These were the bulbs planted late last year by FOD+AG volunteers. The display ensures all year-round interest as we look forward to the summer months when the herbaceous planting scheme will be in full flower.

The Downs Committee met on March 22nd The main items from the agenda were Finance where it was reported that loss of events income due to Covid-19 has had a serious impact but the shortfall would be met from previous underspends. Next year would be critical in terms of income generation. {Please see separate item} The Downs supervisor reported vastly increased visitor numbers this winter with all the attendant problems previously described. Significant scrub clearance had been undertaken to contain encroachment and maintain open grassland habitat. The supervisor explained that some areas of previously mown grassland would be left unmown to improve biodiversity. The new wildflower beds at Christchurch Green would not be seeded until the Autumn. Downs football would restart for approximately six weeks without dressing room provision. Events officer reported schedule of events for 2021. {See separate item}

Your FOD+AG committee are pleased to have been able to return to hard copy for this Newsletter, but a member has asked the question. “Why not continue with the electronic version and save the cost of printing” This is a pertinent question that needs consideration. What do you the members of FOD+AG feel about discontinuing printed versions of the Newsletter and distributing just an electronic version? Your feedback is important and will be considered by the committee.

If you would like to comment and feel that we should retain the printed version of the Newsletter or you would prefer an electronic version then please respond directly to the chair at robertjwestlake@gmail.com

I will finish much where I started with a message of hope, hope that we will all have come through this most difficult of times relatively unscathed. Hope that we will soon have had our vaccines and can enjoy all that we hold dear. Hope that just maybe, Covid will give us all a chance to reboot and remind us of the fragility of life and the need to spend our precious time more carefully.

Stay Safe & Well

Robert Westlake

Planned Events 2021

The following events are planned for the Downs in 2021;

Breaking Bread	- April – September, Water Tower site.
Comedy Garden	- late June/early July, Showground site
March for Men	-June Parry's Lane site
Cycle Sunday	-July - On closed roads/Circular Road
Adventure Cinema	- August Parry's Lane site
Foodies Festival	- September Parry's Lane site
Love Saves the Day	- September Circular Road site
Circus	-September/October Showground site
Student Union event	- September Parry's Lane site
Race for Life	-will not be held at its usual slot in June and is looking to postpone until the autumn.
Pride	- discussions are ongoing on whether to go ahead with this in July as usual or postpone until later in the year.

The events programme has been carefully planned to ensure that different sites on the Downs are utilised and that sufficient time is left between events to allow the site to be reinstated if necessary.

It should be noted that events will only go ahead if organisers can demonstrate to the Safety Advisory Group that their event complies with any Covid restrictions and guidelines that may be required at the time.

Resident consultation on events

Organisers of long running and high impact events e.g. Breaking Bread are required to consult with residents as part of the planning process for their events

Dead Hedging

Two sessions were held this year with strict distancing and no tool sharing and the task was completed by the end of the second session. More volunteers than ever took part – so enormous thanks to all who came. The age range of volunteers ranged from 14 to.....er....ho...hum

The purpose of the dead hedges is to guide the runners (more than ever because of covid) out of the important wildflower meadow – otherwise it would be trashed. All those who stopped to ask what we were doing really understood and got the message. We need to keep up our efforts with this: members will have seen the extra desire line paths appearing. Fingers crossed for the orchids this year.

Robin Haward



Car parking on Downs

FoDAG members know that part of the Downs off Ladies Mile has been used for many years by Bristol Zoo as an overflow car park. FoDAG members also know that the Zoo has announced plans to sell its Clifton site. Does this move bring an end to the long-running fight to stop car parking on the Downs?

The group Downs for People, who are leading this fight, has never been “anti-Zoo”. Our debate is with the Downs Committee. From reading the 1861 Downs Act we think the Committee does not have the power to rent out the Downs as a car park for non-Downs activities. We hold that the Committee is both wrong in principle – the Downs should not be used as a car park – and wrong in law.

There are in fact two areas of the Downs used by the Zoo for car parking. The land immediately outside the main entrance to the Zoo on Clifton Down, the Zoo North car park, is also a part of the Downs. It has been leased to the Zoo for decades. Naturally there is interest from potential developers in this valuable piece of land since it adds greatly to the value of the Zoo site. However selling this piece of land would allow part of the Downs to be used as a car park; exactly what we are campaigning against, although our focus is on Ladies Mile of course.

We know that other local organisations in the past have asked to use the Downs for car parking (e.g. Clifton Village Traders Association, Clifton College, Festival of the Sea). Demand for car parking is not going away. The Zoo may go, but other organisations will surely come along and make their case for car parking for their visitors. By allowing the Zoo to park cars for more than 50 years the Downs Committee has set a bad precedent. “You allowed the Zoo. Why not us?”

Does FoDAG support the Downs Committee’s stance that allowing car parking for non-Downs activities is a good way to raise funds for the running of the Downs? Or does FoDAG, like us, believe that “open and unenclosed” means just that; the Downs are for “the resort and recreation of the people of Bristol”, not car parking. FoDAG’s views are important to local people who care about the Downs. I urge FoDAG to stand up to the Downs Committee to end Downs car parking for non-Downs activities.

Downs for People continues its fight. Should the Downs being used every summer to park visitor’s cars? Without legal protection there is a real risk of the Downs continuing to be rented out as a car park.

Peter Weeks

New Arrivals in the Gully

Towards the end of March, the Covid delayed arrival of four replacements to the depleted Downs goat herd finally happened. It was a great treat to be on hand to welcome four young goats to their new home.

It was in 2011 when the original six male Kashmiri goats made the long journey from the Great Orme in North Wales, back to a newly created enclosure in the Gully. Careful attention to their welfare by the Downs team supported by FOD+AG volunteers ensured the goats quickly established themselves in their new home.

This was the culmination of a flagship project using livestock to help manage scrub on difficult terrain and was undertaken by the Downs and Avon Gorge Wildlife project and Natural England. The six all male Kashmiris settled in well and set about their task with relish, managing with efficient ease to keep the steep slopes of the Gully clear of encroaching scrub. Disappointingly over that period two of the animals were driven over the cliff edge to their deaths by dogs and two more died of natural causes. Hence the need to replenish the stock.

The new livestock would have been with us much earlier but due to lockdown restrictions the staff who manage the Great Orme were unable to do their annual round-up of their own herd leaving us without the possibility of obtaining any ready alternatives from that source.

If the project was to avoid floundering and all the previous work to clear the Gully of scrub go to waste it was decided to look elsewhere for suitable livestock. The solution was nearer to home than might have been expected. A local organisation based in Bristol called Street Goat were able to supply the requisite animals. For more information check out their website at <https://www.streetgoat.co.uk/> Street Goat are running an ambitious project using goats to connect communities to managing livestock.

Our four new charges are Bagot goats, a small hardy breed, of little use for meat, milk or skins, but perfect for scrub management, their diet will be any of the scrub found in the Gully. They browse rather than graze and will keep invasive woody scrub in check. On release they immediately started to feed and familiarise themselves with their new home. The four Bagot Billies are all one-year-old and are in fact two sets of twins. To date all four seemed to have settled in well and are busy feeding and making the acquaintance of their Great Orme cousins.

FOD+AG volunteers will continue to support the Downs operational team carrying out weekend monitoring duties.

Robert Westlake



Lovely Bristol Rock Cress



Angus at the Hutchinsia site



Libby and Angus preparing to descend on ropes to survey gorge plants.

Jogger Assaulted on the Downs

Last month a Bristol woman was the victim of a serious sexual assault as she was out running on the Downs. The 21-year-old student was accosted after dark by a man dressed all in black who sexually assaulted her as she jogged near Bristol Zoo Gardens. It is thought the man had followed her down Fountains Hill and onto the main road that runs past the entrance to the Zoo. The attacker groped the terrified woman in what Police have described as a 'serious sexual assault' before making off, back up the hill to disappear into the darkness of the Downs.

The victim did not manage to get a good look at his face but said he was wearing a dark tracksuit with white Adidas stripes on the sleeves.

Police were quickly in attendance but were unable to find any trace of the assailant

It transpires that a similar attack occurred earlier in the month when another lone female was targeted after dark whilst out jogging near Worrall Road. The woman aged 25 became aware of two men behind her who may have been two men, she had spotted earlier near Ladies Mile. The victim was aggressively groped from behind. "By the time I turned around he was kind of crouched down while he did it" reported the victim. "It was so quick that I didn't get a proper look at his face"

The assailant who is described as around six feet tall and of chunky build was wearing a black Adidas tracksuit with white stripes on the joggers and with the hood up. After the assault the man sprinted off into nearby dense shrubbery.

Avon and Somerset Police are keeping an open mind on whether the attacks are linked as they investigate these frightening incidents.

Robert Westlake

Looking for spring – late winter, early spring 2021

23 January: here's a turnup – clump of primroses! Thrum of pin-eyed. Too muddy to go and look.

Rubbish, risk the mud and they are thrum. Job done.

24 January: and here's another turnup – SNOW . This should be interesting!

Nuthatches urgently protesting about the weather conditions. Two wrens the only other active birds. Where are the redwings?? Surely now they should turn up?

Talking of turnup, just had a dental appointment and dentist has fine view over the Granny Downs! Watched a raven pair rise and dip against a black sky.

3rd February: green woodpecker laughing, not full laughter yet, only 5 peals which increases to between 9 and 11 later. Plus a drumpecker (great spotted woodpecker) drumming and a nuthatch concerto. Bluetit little fluttering flight between trees.

4th February: Like brown leaves rising from the ground, hundreds, hundreds of redwings in the Granny Downs , leave the grass to take to the branches of the limes. I see bursts of redwings throughout February and March.

12 February: gets ever colder and small birds not singing or flying to conserve energy. Mrs Blackbird still foraging in her usual place, though.

17th February: Blackbirds and wrens firstout in the thaw.

21st February: Robins singing from higher perches and the air seems to hold their notes and caress them.

March: so much happening now. More primroses, white violets on the Granny Downs. Celandines straining to catch every quantum of sunshine. Horse chestnut buds opening, that wonderful yellow green.

21st March: what's this? FOUR robins all in one small space. I stand and watch and they stare back at me. Several years ago, not far from here, I saw the mating ballet of robins. Extraordinary. My mind supplied the music.

26th March: even more celandines training their petals to the sun. Song thrush song more sophisticated now.

And this weekend the clocks go forward so spring is official.

Geraldine Taylor

Dear Editor

I found your article 'Van Dwellers on the Downs' very thoughtful, interesting and well written. The lady 'Esther' raised some very good points in favour of the status quo being allowed to continue. Whereas I learnt a lot from her letter that I did not know before or even think about, I still, perhaps, with a little reluctance, now go back to my former position and I think they should be moved.

If they are allowed to stay, what will the situation be like in five or ten years' time? Will the number of vehicles have increased as more van dwellers decide, as some do, that Bristol is a soft touch and we then end up with more and more of them and consequently a far greater number will be much harder to shift? Society needs rules and regulations to run smoothly and it's no use having one rule for one and one for another.

Name and address supplied

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Everybody is delighted that so many more people have been using the Downs during the Covid crisis. Comments have been made to me that the Downs has been a life-saver. Certainly many more people are coming to know the Downs and value them.....BUT what can be done about the problem of litter? The photograph illustrates what is left after a weekend – and that is only one area near some of the Downs Team’s bins. Member Timothy Dowling asks – do we need more bins? 60? Or 600? Or should they be removed altogether? Surely people realise that this level of litter is unsustainable? We just cannot afford to live like this. Most of what is left is recyclable and all those bags could be reused or recycled “at larger stores”. So, what to do? If any readers have ideas please email them in using contact details in the newsletter.

Robin Haward

COMMITTEE:

Robert Westlake (Chair), Jac Solomons (Secretary) Bob Bell (Treasurer) Martin Collins, Derek Catterall, Joan Gubbin (Membership) Terry Hannan, Caroline Baker, Robin Haward, Tim Clarke, Luke Hudson, Barry Horton.

Key Contacts:

Jac Solomons (Secretary)

Joan Gubbin (Membership)

Martin Collins (Butterfly surveys and Goat Monitoring)

Robin Haward (conservation working parties, dead hedging)

Articles for the newsletter: fodagcontent@gmail.com

Copy date for Summer: June 14th Articles/letters warmly welcomed.

Subscriptions:

£10.00 per individual or £19 per household per calendar year.
Please ask for a standing order via the website or by post to The Membership Secretary, 3 Wallcroft, Durdham Park, BS6 6XJ

Noticeboard

EVENTS:

“Grasses” with local ecologist Neill Talbot **Sunday June 20th 11.30 -1.00** (£10.00)

“Wild Flowers” also with Neill **Sunday July 11th 11.30 – 1.00** (£10.00)

To sign up for these contact Robin on robinhaward@blueyonder.co.uk

Further details will then be supplied.

SOCIAL MEDIA:

Website: <http://FOD+AG-bristol.weebly.com> The website has further information on events and a regular blog on the Downs.

Facebook: do please join the group on facebook and like/share the page to spread the word [@fodagbristol](https://www.facebook.com/fodagbristol)

Instagram: [Friends_of_the_Downs](https://www.instagram.com/Friends_of_the_Downs)

Do please send any Downs and Gorge photos to:
fodagcontent@gmail.com

The Downs App is back!

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