

AONB UNIT & PARTNER REPORTS

Purpose

To advise members of activity of the Wye Valley AONB Unit and other partners.

FOR INFORMATION

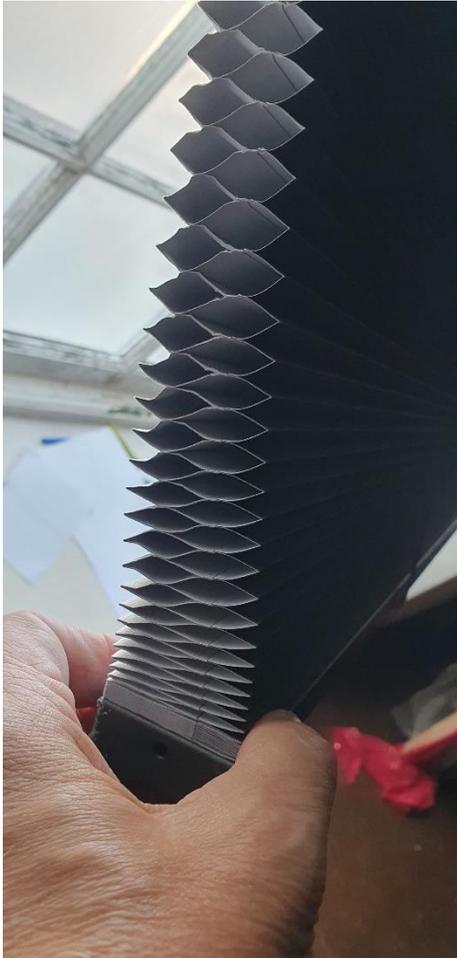
Below are update reports on the following AONB Unit & partner initiatives: -

- a. Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP) projects
- b. Cleddon Bog & NRW Peatland funding
- c. AONB Species Action Plans
- d. Lower Wye Nature Networks Partnership Project
- e. Integrated Recreational Access Strategy - Monmouthshire.
- f. INNS & WISP Gloucestershire CPRE Award
- g. Access For All
- h. Youth Rangers
- i. Offa's Dyke Collaboratory

a. Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP) projects

Community Halls – *Lucinda James, AONB Community Links Officer*

We have supported 5 community halls to date through the Welsh Government SLSP funding to help helping them work towards decarbonisation and supporting sustainable tourism. 4 of the halls received a free energy audit from Andrew David, Southeast Energy Agency, who has pledged to offer free advice to all community facilities in Monmouthshire. Following his advice Pelham Hall, Penallt, replaced their electric showers and installed a cycle repair station. Llanishen Hall were able to install a new boiler and LED lighting to the hall and toilet area. Monmouth Sports Pavilion has also been able to replace their boiler and install roof insulation in their extension. The Drill Hall, Chepstow, purchased thermal blinds to keep the heat in during the winter and the heat out during the summer as more insulation for the roof. Llandogo Hall, who had already put in an application for a Lottery grant, received some match funding to install solar panels and a storage battery.



Thermal Blind at Drill Hall



New Boiler at Llanishen Village Hall

Wye Valley Walk at Wyesham – Nickie Moore, Lower Wye Projects Officer

A 600m section of the Wye Valley Walk at Wyesham, Monmouth is at risk of erosion and being lost. With Welsh Government SLSP funding, the AONB Unit has been working with consultants to identify solutions to stabilise the riverbank and improve the accessibility, whilst ensuring protected species are not impacted and the project results in a biodiversity net gain. A topographic survey, footpath infrastructure designs, protected species surveys have been produced and a habitat management plan will help to inform the next steps for this winter, which might include tree canopy reduction, willow spiling and tree planting. Any practical site works will be accompanied by well planned stakeholder engagement and communications.

Piercefield – Andrew Blake, AONB Manager

We are working with Gwent Wildlife Trust, the private landowner, Monmouthshire Right of Way team and contractors to carry out repairs and upgrades to the Permissive Path. New people counters will shortly be installed to measure use of this important section of the Wye Valley Walk.

The cliff below The Alcove viewpoint and the riverside meadows at Piercefield benefitted from a clean-up in with Gwent Wildlife Trust leading a partnership work task with volunteers from the AONB and Severn Area Rescue Association (SARA). Most of the rubbish collected was an accumulation over the years, with litter dropped from the viewpoint (and some relatively large items thrown over the cliff) and on the river meadows flotsam from the Wye river which gets deposited by high tides. With the reserve being a belt of SSSI Woodland along the cliffs between Chepstow School / Leisure Centre and Wyndcliffe, retrieving the rubbish from the bottom

riverside meadows posed a problem. Fortunately, the Beachley based Severn Area Rescue Association (SARA) volunteers, piggybacking on one of their routine training exercises, retrieved the collected rubbish and took it out via boat on the Wye. Monmouthshire County Council then got involved by collecting and disposing of the waste at the boat's drop off point.

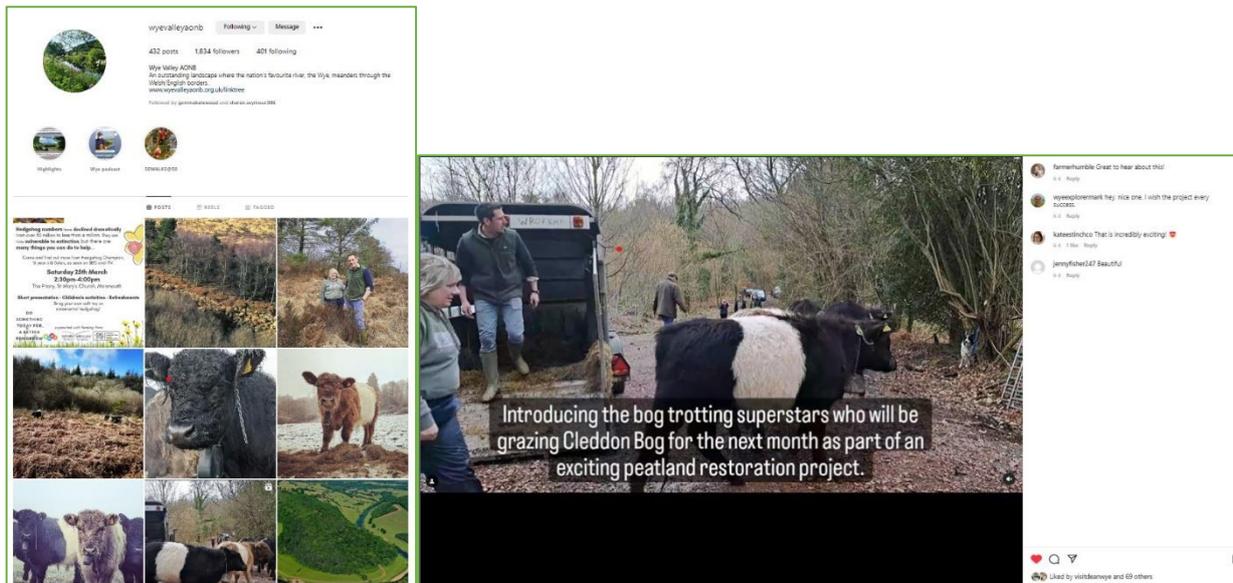
b. Cleddon Bog & NRW Peatland funding – Nickie Moore, Lower Wye Projects Officer



Photo: Cleddon Bog SSSI, Trellech.

With a small grant from NRW through to 2025, we have pulled together a programme of restoration work to start to reverse the decline of the 15ha lowland peatland at Cleddon Bog SSSI. We're working with NRW's SSSI team, Forestry and the National Peatlands Action Programme (NPAP), the local commoners, local communities and local contractors to deliver the following:

- **Stakeholder engagement and awareness raising** – ensuring the commoners, local community and users of the common are involved and kept up to date through social media, our website, press, site visits and work parties.
- **Sapling control** – trees and peatlands are not a good mix and the density and spread of saplings across the Bog's southern edge is a concern. This coming winter, we are planning to team up with a local contractor to replicate the successful 2022 winter work party, aiming to clear at least another ¼ acre.
- **Conservation grazing** – through March 2023 a grazing pilot with Brockweir-based Grazing Management Ltd. and their 4 Belted Galloways - Ginger, Oak, Penguin and Ringo – took place. We are currently following up the lessons learned from the pilot in readiness for the cattle's return to the Bog this autumn. The success of this element is dependent upon a group of 10 local volunteers who registered to qualify as a Livestock Checker (LANTRA certification). Each checker has signed up as an AONB Volunteer, received training in lone working and risk assessments and is covered under the AONB's volunteer insurance (through Monmouthshire County Council). The group ensures the cattle stay healthy and safe through daily visual checks, reporting observations via the lively WhatsApp group.
- **Monitoring** – We are monitoring the level of regrowth of the cleared birch, how the cleared areas are re-colonised and the impact of the grazing cattle using fixed point photography, aerial film and photos.



Images: Example social media updates provided throughout the conservation grazing pilot

c. AONB Species Action Plans – Ellie Baggett, AONB Nature Recovery Officer

Noble Chafer (orchard species)

After conducting pheromone lure trapping surveys in June 2022, a small meta-population of this rare beetle was discovered within the Woolhope Dome in Herefordshire. A successful application to FiPL resulted in a small grant to run a traditional orchards project in Herefordshire, planting 20 fruit trees at priority orchard sites, installing 12 beetle boxes, running 2 orchard management training events, producing leaflets, and securing a pheromone supply to run the survey again in June 23. Apart from the leaflet which is still being developed, all of these measures have now been implemented, with 48 landowners being engaged in the project so far, either through taking part in the pheromone survey or attending orchard training events. Partner organisations in this project so far have included People’s Trust for Endangered Species (PTES), Royal Holloway University of London (RHUL), Plantlife, Herefordshire Wildlife Trust, and Colwall Orchard Group. Pheromone surveys for 2023 will start this month with a much more targeted approach, surveying orchards in the Herefordshire part of the AONB only, to better assess the size of population here and identify priority sites species connectivity.



Dr Richard Comont (Bumblebee Conservation Trust) and Jilly Rosser (Colwall Orchard Group) running workshops on invertebrate ID and mistletoe management at the Orchard Management for Biodiversity training event.



Noble chafer beetle box installed in an orchard in Checkley and planting plum trees and building tree guards at Joan's Hill Farm with Reserve Manager Jonathan Stone from Plantlife.

Hedgehog (engagement species)

The Species Action Plan for Hedgehogs is in the final development phase. Action for this species has largely been focussed on engagement with local communities in partnership with hedgehog champion Dylan Allman and his Hedgehog Aware campaign. In March, a joint event was hosted in Monmouth between the AONB Unit and Hedgehog Aware, which included presentations, stalls and children's activities on the theme of hedgehogs, threats they face, and actions that we

can all take to help support them. This was attended by over 50 people, including Malgwyn Davies, High Sheriff of Gwent, and resulted in the signing up of 5 new Hedgehog Champions for Monmouthshire.

The AONB Unit has also been able to support Dylan's hedgehog conservation efforts further through allocation of an SDF grant and by acting as a supporting organisation for a grant from GAVO. Dylan's long-term goal is to set up a volunteer hedgehog rescue centre in Monmouth, to address the gap in available help for poorly and injured hedgehogs after several local rescue centres closed down during the covid-19 pandemic. The AONB Unit is keen to support Dylan with this goal, and awarding of these grants has already allowed him to attend hedgehog 'first response' training and start purchasing resources and equipment to support hedgehog champions with their work. We will continue to work closely with Dylan and are hosting a joint talk for the North Gardening Group later this month.

Through our wider projects, we will continue to support rural hedgehog populations by advising farmers on nature-friendly farming practices, through programmes such as FiPL, and improving connectivity across the landscape through projects such as Nature Networks, which has so far enabled the creation of 503m of new hedgerow in Monmouthshire.



Hedgehog Aware and AONB joint event in Monmouth.

Ellie teaching children about the lifecycle of hedgehogs and the audience watching Dylan's presentation.



Ellie and Ruth (Wye Valley AONB) with Dylan Allman and High Sheriff of Gwent Malgwyn Davies. An example of hedgerow created through the Nature Networks project, improving connectivity for hedgehogs across the landscape.

d. Lower Wye Nature Networks Partnership Project – Nick Critchley, AONB Development Officer

This is a Lottery funded partnership project between the AONB Unit, Gwent Wildlife Trust and the Woodland Trust. Delivery continues with a project extension until the end of September 2023. Seven SSSI sites have received valuable investment in habitat management, site infrastructure and equipment. Ten Farms have received advice and mapped opportunities for habitat connectivity; the AONB team are now working with nine landowners to deliver grant aided work on farm. On private farmland 500m of hedgerow have been created and 2,900 trees (provided by Woodland Trust) planted. To date £192,959 of the £279,366 grant has been spent and claimed.



Longhorn cattle and Kubota purchased through Lower Wye Nature Networks project to aid conservation grazing.



New orchard planting at Ty Mawr reserve

e. Integrated Recreational Access Strategy - Monmouthshire – Nickie Moore, Lower Wye Projects Officer

We previously reported on the issues around the use and condition of the countryside access network with the AONB. In particular, the unclassified county road (UCR) network remains a cause of community concern. The issues are complex and relate both to the condition of these routes, generally in very poor condition often linked to water erosion and run-off issues from surrounding land, and their use, including legal motorised use.

In December 2021 the Local Access Forum (LAF) resolved to support in principle the proposed approach to develop an inclusive user-strategy for all lower Wye UCRs and linked public rights of way, subject to receiving further details. Since then, conversations have continued between the AONB Unit and MCC Highways and Countryside Access and have reaffirmed that a strategic approach is desirable, rather than cherry-picking routes that could prove difficult to justify versus other routes, and/or not actually be what the local communities and users want or need.

It was agreed that the AONB Unit, with its strong multi-sector stakeholder connections, was best placed to lead this new strategy, which will incorporate MCC's statutory requirements as the Public Rights of Way and Highways Authority, but also consider the effects of climate change, nature recovery, heritage, tourism and active travel agendas, and the context of the AONB Management Plan.

We secured funding from the Welsh Government Sustainable Landscapes, Sustainable Places programme to take this forward up to March 2025.

Working with Herefordshire Council's Procurement team, the Invitation to Tender process has been successful and we are just in the process of awarding the contract to lead on the consultation, consensus building and development of an Integrated Recreation Access Strategy and Action Plan. The programme will include detailed consultation with the LAF, AONB Partnership, local communities and user groups.

f. INNS & WISP Glos CPRE Award – Nickie Moore, Lower Wye Projects Officer

The aim of the Wye Invasive Species Project – WISP – (the umbrella for all the AONB Unit's Invasive Non-Native Species - INNS - work) is to support landowners and communities of the lower Wye Valley in controlling the spread of the worst offending INNS - Himalayan balsam, Japanese knotweed, American skunk cabbage - helping to reverse the catastrophic decline in biodiversity and improving the resilience of our river catchments.

Since 2020, we've been actively working with partner organisations, landowners, community groups and contractors, working at scale across the Welsh and English side of the lower Wye Valley, in Gloucestershire and Monmouthshire. Working with nature, particularly of the invasive kind, WISP cannot be restrained by administrative boundaries, so we've had to be creative in bridging those boundaries to make sure communities on both sides of the River Wye receive the support they need.



In recognition of the scale, innovation, level of community engagement and achievements, WISP has been awarded the CPRE Gloucestershire Award, and we're very grateful to the award panel for considering our cross-border project. The WISP team in the AONB Unit, Nickie and Ellie, will be collecting the award at the CPRE award ceremony in November.

Highlights from this May's INNS Week include:

- Two days of American skunk cabbage control in the Cleddon, Whitebrook and Brockweir sub-catchments with local contractor. Unfortunately, this invasive plant is on the increase in 2 of the 3 sub-catchments where the source of seed is still proving elusive.
- A colourful social media campaign, including two new, short call-to-action films.
- Signposting to our online *Report it!* and *Landowner Consent* forms <https://www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk/caring-for-wye-valley-aonb/our-projects/wisp/wisp-report-sightings/>.
- Launch of our Balsam Action Toolkit (B.A.T) in Welsh and English – providing all the support individuals and local communities might need in controlling the Himalayan balsam growing in their locality. Do visit our website to view the B.A.T and please help to promote this valuable resource widely: <https://www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk/caring-for-wye-valley-aonb/our-projects/wisp/balsam-action-toolkit>



Photos: Bucket of 200+ skunk cabbage seedlings dug up by landowner at a new site in Brockweir; local contractor, Alan Martin showing the size these plants can grow to; skunk cabbage spreading from a bog garden along a tributary in Whitebrook.

g. Access for All – Lucinda James, AONB Community Links Officer

The DEFRA Access for all funding has enabled many great projects to develop over a short space of time. The funding was an uplift of £62,000 to our core budget for access improvements in late 2022/23. All of the funding was spent within the 5 months.

One of the main projects is to replace stile with more accessible gates, creating 'Miles without Stiles'. The Miles without Stiles project is a collaboration between the AONB Unit, Ross Walkers

are Welcome (WaW), Herefordshire Ramblers, Ross Town Council and Herefordshire Council PROW team. The WaW volunteers have surveyed and identified 41 stiles to be replaced and liaised with the landowners for permission. The Herefordshire Ramblers ran a training session on how to properly install gates. The gates will be installed over the next 12 months by volunteers from the Ramblers, the AONB and Envirobility and are being stored by kind permission of Ross Town Council. The AONB will also be hosting a 3 day challenge with the Army, who plan to install 7 of these gates in the Walford area during the first week of August.

In total we purchased 56 gates with Parish Councils requesting gates to improve access in their area. The Heritage loop walk at English Bicknor has also been improved and now barrier free.



Training day with Herefordshire Ramblers & AONB Volunteers at Walford



Heritage Loop Walk- English Bicknor



Gate Training with the AONB, Herefordshire Ramblers and British Army at Hoarwithy

The other main project that has come out of the Access for all funding is the development of a new fully accessible loop walk off the Wye Valley Walk- 'The Willow Walk', from Ross-on-Wye to Townsend Farm (RegenBen) at Brampton Abbots. The Willow Walk will be the only accessible walk that can be used by Trampler/off road buggies used by the 'Wheeler' community in English part of the AONB. The walk will include a picnic site being developed at Townsend farm, which will also be accessible from the Farm via a hard surfaced track enabling those using a standard wheelchair to access the picnic site alongside the river. A leaflet is being designed to accompany the walk which, will include the nature and heritage of the areas that the walk passes through. Other improvements include a new footbridge at Netherton, along a permissive section of path by the river between Ross-on-Wye and Townsend Farm.



The old Footbridge at Netherton



New Footbridge at Netherton



Disabled Compost Toilet at Townsend Farm

The next stage of the project is to replace the very narrow footbridge on the Public Right of Way by Ross-on-Wye Rowing club. A further phase is proposed to extend the Willow Walk beyond Townsend Farm to Foy Bridge (and eventually to Foy Church).

h. Youth Rangers- Pilot Project – *Lucinda James, AONB Community Links Officer*

The Youth Rangers programme is currently being reviewed with the new programme hopefully being launch during the summer holidays. The new programme will see the age range change from 14-16 years to 11-16 years of age. It is also proposed that there will no longer be an application process nor 2-year cohorts. Monthly sessions will be promoted to young people of all abilities and backgrounds to try and reach out to those who may not normally get out into the countryside and learn new skills and knowledge around nature and conservation. The new programme will need a number of new volunteers to support Lucinda in running the events. Without volunteers the programme will not be able to start. A new volunteer role description is being written with the view to recruit during July.

The first session will be a taster, with activities put on by Wye Coppice CIC, Small Wood Charity and others with a BBQ at lunch time. A simple questionnaire will be available for the young people to fill out asking them what activities they would like to attend. The questionnaire will also be available on-line and promoted though our social media network, schools and MCC etc.

i. *Offa's Dyke Collaboratory* - *Andrew Blake, AONB Manager*

Andrew joined Professor Keith Ray for half a day as one of 18 'co-walkers' on Keith's 'Encounters and Explanations' walk which involved 23 days' continuous walking covering 337km / 209 miles (without a day's break). It was designed to establish in the public eye that Offa's Dyke structure and monument and the long-distance National Path are not coterminous, as only around 50% of the length of the Dyke is followed directly by the Path. The walk was also part of ongoing

reconnaissance work being done, including in the Wye Valley, which indicates that Offa's Dyke might have originally run 'from sea to sea' and that Asser's late ninth-century statement to this effect was not mere hyperbole (Ray *et al.* 2021). As such, it was the first walk, ever, to follow the whole course of the designed and built linear earthwork. The walk will provide further material for Professor Ray's forthcoming guidebook *Offa's Dyke: Encounters and Explanations* which aims to complement walking guides by focusing on how to understand the linear earthwork. The walk, having 'traversed' the border landscapes, will inform the writing of an entirely new version of the 2016 book (Ray and Bapty 2016), provisionally re-titled *Offa's Dyke: Structures, Landscapes and Hegemony in 8th-Century Britain* to include fresh discoveries and insights. The walk was shared online via a series of videos & blog by Professor Ray, see [OffaProf \(@digitself4\) / Twitter](#)