

A Resilient Greater Gwent

Newsletter July 2021



The Covid-19 global pandemic has served to emphasise the importance of taking care of our natural environment and has helped us to appreciate how having accessible local green spaces and gardens can help us in terms of our physical and mental wellbeing. Having the opportunity to take time out to explore these spaces and discover nature's beauty has never been more important.

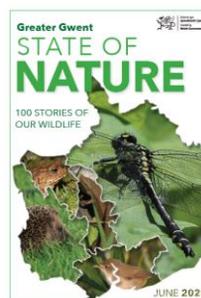
As the Resilient Greater Gwent (RGG) project moves into its final year, and the complementary Gwent Green Grid Partnership (GGGP) commences, the project partnership will continue to promote wellbeing through increasing our connectivity to the natural environment and will continue its efforts to reverse biodiversity decline and increase ecosystem resilience through the various sub-projects and workstreams.

This Newsletter outlines some of the good news and outputs produced so far by the project partnership.

State of Nature report

The Greater Gwent State of Nature is all about asking, and answering the question: 'What have we got?' and 'What do we know about it?' in terms of the species found within Greater Gwent. The RGG partnership and Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs) chose 100 species to represent the breadth of wildlife found within the region, whose stories inspire us, concern us, or simply make us curious.

Ultimately, these stories can also tell us about what is happening within the ecosystems that make up our wider landscape.



As you would expect, there are winners and losers. Bitterns are back on the Gwent Levels, and our colonies of Greater Horseshoe Bats are thriving, but our Salmon is struggling, we are losing Lapwings, and our Adders are almost gone. Hopefully, this is a launch point, and a baseline, to inform the forthcoming Local NRAPs and other conservation work, that can address and reverse these trends. Additionally, Greater Gwent State of Nature is a testament to wildlife recording and monitoring, which has increased phenomenally in recent times. There is now an amazing wealth of data available, and for many of our 100 species, this is the first time regional distributions and trends have been produced.

Urban biodiversity: An Urban Buzz

Last year An Urban Buzz in Torfaen delivered 'Wildlife and Wellbeing' packages to NHS staff residing in Torfaen, as a way of acknowledging their hard work during the pandemic and also to bridge the gap social restrictions caused, allowing engagement to take place in a socially distanced covid-safe way. Activities were delivered virtually through email and online meet-ups.

The packages contained a number of items, such as wildlife gardening books/kits and ID guides, as well as a selection of flowering herbs and fruit plants. Alongside an appreciation of local wildlife emphasis was placed on the importance of submitting biological records to SEWBReC. The feedback was extremely positive and as such more packages will be put together and delivered this year to social care staff in the borough. There is an added bonus this year of offering project participants an opportunity to take part in an Urban Bat Biodiversity Survey using the latest smartphone compatible bat detectors, and learn about the importance of citizen science.

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Urban biodiversity: Urban Hedgehogs



In Blaenau Gwent the Urban Biodiversity project started back in 2019. Hedgehogs were identified as a species in need of our help. Members of the local community came forward and packs were distributed across the different Council wards. In total, 60 packs were given out to those who met the criteria.

The packs comprised of a book written by one of the leading experts on Hedgehogs, a hedgehog house, Eco hole template and a hedgehog tracking tunnel. Information and recording sheets were also provided.

Hedgehogs are declining in Britain. Experts think that there are a number of different factors that are contributing to this dramatic decline such as habitat loss, and changes in land use, for example, gardens are becoming more concrete with impenetrable boundaries. By participating in this project members of the community helped hedgehogs in the neighbourhood. Highways have been included in some new Tai Calon fencing to help enable the animals to move safely through gardens feeding and finding mates, without being forced on to roads.



Eight Blaenau Gwent primary schools have recently signed up to be part of a national trial project to become Hedgehog friendly schools. The British Hedgehog Preservation Society (BHPS) have also provided grounds maintenance staff with bright yellow stickers to remind them to check areas for hogs before cutting.

Hedgehogs are an indicator species. This means that if they are not doing well, they are indicating that the biodiversity around is also not doing so well. By working together and making the project a community wide goal we hope that hedgehogs will be here for the next generation.

Sustainable Communities

The Sustainable Communities workstream aims to encourage people to make changes in their behaviour so they are more connected with nature, to support their physical and mental wellbeing. Some of the activities that have taken place under this workstream are outlined below:



- Pollinator packs have been distributed across the Gwent authorities. The packs contained insect houses, wildflower seeds and illustrated wildlife guides, and were distributed to schools, community groups and interested households in the community.

- Wildlife cameras have been purchased through the project and are currently sited in school grounds and community spaces. We hope to see some exciting footage captured by these cameras.

- A series of short videos about pollinators with accompanying complementary digital resources.
- Wildlife habitats have been constructed in two sites which are accompanied by interpretation boards to advise the public about how to observe and record biodiversity data and to promote positive behaviour change in the local community.
- New interpretation boards on several of Torfaen's LNRs with the addition of QR codes to encourage people to submit biological records to SEWBReC (South-East Wales Biological Records Centre).



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Review all sites of importance for nature conservation



Gwent is home to many great wildlife sites, most of these fall outside of the well-known Nature Reserves and SSSI's however. Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) are scattered across Gwent and provide essential refuges and form the vital connectivity that allow wildlife to move within our increasingly fragmented landscape.

However, in general there is little survey information available for SINC's and many landowners may be unaware that they own this land. This is why the work being undertaken as part of the RGG project is so important.

Despite the obvious challenges of Covid we have been engaging with the owners of SINC sites, carrying out detailed surveys and making this information available to the landowners. The survey information allows us to assess the sites current value, provides a baseline for future monitoring and informs the production of bespoke management advice to ensure the preservation/enhancement of these crucial sites. Following this work, the site becomes known as a Local Wildlife Site (LWS). There is already a network of 400+ LWS in Monmouthshire, our work for the RGG has so far produced a further 59 LWS and crucially these are spread across the whole of Greater Gwent working towards our long-term goal of a complete LWS Network within the region. To reinforce the LWS Network and build a real community we have continued with our production of an Annual Newsletter and Landowner's Day with guest speakers (virtual this year but more popular than ever!). In addition to this we have reviewed hundreds of additional SINC sites to get a general idea of their current condition, it is intended that this information will form the basis for targeting more detailed LWS surveys in the future, towards our long-term goal of a complete LWS Network across Gwent.

Colliery Spoil Invertebrates

There are few sites more iconic in the South Wales Valleys than colliery spoil tips. These unique environments are readily overlooked and underappreciated for their biodiversity value, despite supporting species and habitats of considerable local and national conservation importance. In recent years, the conservation significance of these sites for invertebrates has become increasingly recognised following extensive invertebrate survey work undertaken in Glamorgan. To date, however, relatively little is known about the invertebrates associated with these sites in Gwent.

Led by Buglife Cymru, the Colliery Spoil Invertebrates project aims to increase our knowledge of the distribution and diversity of invertebrates found on colliery spoil sites within Gwent. Invertebrate surveys are currently underway at selected sites across Gwent, the results of which will be used to inform habitat management works to ensure these sites remain, or are returned to, favourable condition. Despite the disruptions caused by Covid-19 in 2020 and 2021, the invertebrate surveys has so far given useful insights into the invertebrates associated with these sites in Gwent. This has included some rather exciting discoveries, such as the nationally scarce Tormentil mining-bee (*Andrena tarsata*) being found for the very first time in Gwent from Torfaen and the discovery of a previously unknown population of the near threatened Scarce blue-tailed damselfly (*Ischnura pumilio*) in Blaenau Gwent. It is hoped that further survey work in 2021 will help us to gain further insights into the invertebrates of colliery spoil sites in Gwent.



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Bugs Matter



The RGG Sustainable Communities project is supporting the citizen science #BugsMatter survey. Insects underpin our natural world and their numbers can help us to better understand what is happening in our environment and form a picture about the state of our nature in Gwent.

To take part, order a Splatometer and download the BugsMatter App. Start surveying on any journey you make in a vehicle between 1st June to 31st August.

Rivers

South Wales has a long legacy of river pollution and issues including litter, urban and agricultural run-off, outfalls, misconnections and diffuse pollution, barriers to fish migration, invasive weeds and habitat degradation.

A number of organisations and groups are working hard in partnership to deliver co-ordinated improvements to restore the riparian environment. Not only do the improvements benefit the riparian environment but also the health and wellbeing of those that live, work and play in close contact with the rivers.

Volunteers throughout the Gwent area are delivering practical conservation work on the rivers to help clean, protect and improve the riparian habitat. This has included reporting of pollution incidents, assisting in removing litter and debris from the rivers and taking part in projects to reduce riverbank erosion. Volunteers who have attended invertebrate monitoring record the abundance of species that indicate the quality and health of the rivers.



What next...

Activities, community engagement and delivery of outputs continue in all sub-project areas. Current and upcoming activities include:

- a study into the management of wildlife in churchyards;
- a commissioned piece of work to support schools in delivering biodiversity as part of the new Curriculum for Wales;
- bioblitz days to engage and support local communities in assessing, recording and increasing biodiversity;
- Colliery spoil public engagement events and training to raise the profile of colliery spoil habitats and invertebrates among local communities, statutory bodies and the wider public;
- Once Covid Regulations allow, further invertebrate monitoring courses and citizen river habitat survey courses will take place.

As the GGGP project activities get started, the two projects will work towards a shared communications and engagement plan. There are also some shared outputs of the two projects, namely the Health Impact Assessment for Gwent and the Mental Well-being Impact Assessment for Gwent. It will be a busy time ahead for both projects!

This project has been supported by the Welsh Government funded 'A Resilient Greater Gwent' work programme. The Programme runs until summer 2022 and is working towards a South East Wales where nature is in recovery and sustainable communities value their landscapes and wildlife and get involved for their own health and well-being.