**Environment Report May 2021**

**Cllr Roger Dollins**

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**Visitor survey on the Mendip Hills AONB revealed a surprise:**

The annual visitor count took place in May on the Mendip Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and it revealed the hills are busier, as expected, but not everywhere. The survey is part of the Counting on Mendip project which is funded by the National Grid Community Grant Programme.

Volunteers and staff from the Mendip Hills AONB Unit counted the number of visitors at sites across the area from Crook Peak in the west to Ebbor Gorge in the east. The data was then compared to previous pre-pandemic data collected at the same locations in 2019. Overall, there was a 19% increase in visitor numbers. However, this was not evenly spread across all of Mendip, with some sites experiencing a far greater increase in visitor numbers than others.

Locations which were near a car park and had short, well-defined walks were also the sites which had the greatest increase in visitors.

Dr Kelly Davies from the Mendip Hills AONB Unit said, “This is really valuable data. We are all aware that visits to the countryside have increased over the last year. Understanding how and where people access the countryside is important for managing the AONB for the benefit of both wildlife and people alike."

The data will be sent to the public rights of way teams, the landowners and managers of all the sites to help make decisions about visitor management. This survey complements wider statistics being gathered by electronic visitor counters spread across the area.

All visitors to the Mendip Hills AONB, no matter how long or short their walk, are asked to follow the Countryside Code and keep to paths so as not to disturb wildlife, especially birds that nest on the ground.

**Return of the Young Rangers:**

After just over a year the Mendip Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) welcomed back our intrepid Young Rangers greeted by some of Mendip's finest weather, rain and fog! Due to lockdown and the circumstances of the last year the AONB Unit have been unable to run the Young Ranger sessions in person and doing their best to stay connected remotely.

The Young Rangers take part in sessions that incorporate all aspects of the Mendip Hills AONB. These young people are our future ambassadors of the Mendip Hills. Investing in young people allows us to secure the future legacy of conserving and enhancing the Mendip Hills AONB, offering something totally different to other youth groups.

Lauren Holt said "We found it really difficult to have the same impact running sessions online as the objective of the Young Ranger programme is to be an outdoor learning experience. We decided that the best thing to do would be to offer an extension of the programme instead. Our current cohort started in

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September 2019 and would normally graduate this July. However, they will now be graduating in July 2022. This means they will have another year to make up for all the time we lost and get the experience they signed up for. All our Young Rangers are so excited to continue with the sessions and spend another year as a group.

Well done to the Young Rangers for a great first session back with Mendip Hills AONB. An additional thank you to the volunteers who support the programme and our partners who help facilitate sessions for them across the hills. Welcome back Young Rangers!"

For their first session back, the Young Rangers were hands on supporting a local community tree planting group and tending to some newly planted saplings on one of Mendip's nature reserves. They plan to continue helping with this project in autumn, when they will have the opportunity to plant out some trees that are growing in the local tree nursery. They learned about the challenges of tree planting on Mendip and the value of getting the right tree in the right place, so woodlands are resilient in the future.

Volunteers with the Mendip Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Unit are back out rebuilding drystone walls. The volunteers were rebuilding walls that form part of the Deer Leap nature reserve above Westbury-sub-Mendip.
As Covid-19 related restrictions are lifted the AONB Unit have been able to start these practical sessions that comply with current legislation to keep the volunteers safe. Apart from a few practical tasks in the autumn the AONB Unit has not been able to run practical volunteering tasks since March 2021.

Drystone walls are one of the defining special qualities of the area. There are over 450km of drystone walls, they are an important visual feature in the landscape but are also vital for wildlife as creatures use them to move along. The AONB Unit are targeting walls for rebuilding that connect nature reserves to help wildlife recover. Volunteers with the AONB Unit undergo training in how to rebuild the walls.

Lauren Holt said, 'It's been a special day on the Mendip Hills, and not just because the sun was shining! We welcomed back our first drystone walling volunteer group in just over a year. We're limiting our group sizes, keeping lots of space between us and getting plenty of fresh Mendip air. Thank you to our Wallers for their spirit and commitment to the cause of caring for the drystone walls of Mendip.'

More details on the drystone walls of the Mendip Hills AONB can be found here:

[Special Qualities - Mendip Hills AON](https://www.mendiphillsaonb.org.uk/exploring/special-qualities/)