

**The Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Partnership received funding in 2014 from the Heritage Lottery Fund and other supporters for the Blackdown Hills Natural Futures (BHNF) project.**

The project aims to discover more about the wildlife of the Blackdown Hills by supporting local people to set up community wildlife projects, helping people gain new skills in ecological surveys and nature conservation and encouraging everyone to enjoy and understand the wildlife of the AONB.

**The project officially started in January 2015 and this report summarises the work undertaken during the second year – 2016.**

### Training Programme



**The project offers three voluntary traineeships each year to people planning a career in ecology or nature conservation.** During the six-month placements, trainees help survey wildlife sites within the AONB and receive in-depth training in botanical identification as well as wider ecological survey techniques. All survey data is provided to landowners and the Devon and Somerset environmental record

centres to increase our knowledge and understanding of the special sites, species and habitats of the Blackdown Hills.

Our 2016 trainees Max Anderson, Tamsin Quinn and Fiona Wood joined the project in April 2016 and helped survey more than 40 sites across the AONB. As a result of these detailed wildlife surveys, six new county/local wildlife sites will be designated, recognising their special conservation value. In addition after BHNF surveys a number of landowners are adapting their land management practices to improve the conservation value of their land thanks to survey feedback from trainees. A notable botanical discovery from the second year of surveys was the first record for Somerset of Boenninghausen's sedge (*Carex x boenninghausiana*).

Alongside these botanical surveys the trainees learnt how to survey for newts, reptiles, bats, crayfish, freshwater invertebrates and dormice. At the start of the year BHNF staff and volunteers put up 300 dormouse nest boxes at a number of new sites across the AONB. These are registered as part of the National Dormouse Monitoring Programme and our trainees were involved in regular checks of the boxes with BHNF staff and other volunteers. This involves weighing and sexing any dormice found and submitting the data to the national monitoring programme.



On a routine box check in September the survey team found a black dormouse – the first of its kind ever recorded in the UK. Dormice are usually a golden brown colour but due to a rare genetic abnormality this one had jet black fur. [Read more and watch a film about the discovery here.](#)

We sadly bid farewell to our 2016 trainees in September but all have now secured jobs in the ecology and conservation sectors. Max has a position with the Devon Local Nature Partnership and Fiona began a job with Warwickshire Biodiversity Records Centre. Tamsin continued to volunteer with Devon Wildlife

Trust before securing a job with the National Trust in North Devon.

The final three BHNF trainee positions will start in April 2017. You can discover more about what they are getting up to by reading their monthly blogs: [BHNF trainee website blogs](#)

## Community Nature Projects

**Blackdown Hills Natural Futures is supporting communities throughout the Blackdown Hills to develop and deliver their own Community Nature Projects.** The projects are focusing on habitat creation and improving management on areas of publicly accessible land, such as village greens, playing fields, school grounds and churchyards to benefit wildlife and raise local awareness.



BHNF staff and Clarity, a Community Interest Company (CIC), have been supporting more than 15 volunteer-led Community Nature Projects across the AONB. The projects are wide ranging but share common nature conservation themes including pond restoration, creation of flower-rich grassland, woodland creation and hedgerow management, as well as encouraging more people to visit and enjoy public green spaces. Free rural skills training has also been provided through the project including scything and hedge-laying.



New projects started in 2016 include: **Wild About Ashill** which is focusing on creating wildlife friendly habitats around Ashill village hall; **Project Splash** which has seen the beginnings of a long-term pond restoration project at Coldharbour Mill, Uffculme; **Buckland St Mary School** has been supported to plan and design a new wildlife friendly garden including new pond and outdoor teaching space; expert support at **Offwell Education Centre** has seen a new management plan created; **Wiltown Turbary** in Clayhidon where volunteers are aiming to improve woodland management and remove invasive plant species; the **Healthy Living Centre** in Hemyock where a bare concrete patio is being transformed into a bird and pollinator friendly area by senior citizens and a parent and toddler group; and **Swains Lane**, a local nature reserve on the outskirts of Wellington, where support from BHNF has seen the creation of a new management plan and interpretation boards.

Volunteers from most projects came together in July 2016 for a networking event to exchange ideas, meet experts, discuss challenges and share project achievements. The event was a great success and is being repeated in May this year.

The support provided to all groups by BHNF includes developing initial ideas, prioritising activities, planning community events, arranging specialist expert advice and assisting with funding applications. To date almost £12,000 of additional funding has been secured for these community projects with support from Clarity CIC and BHNF.

Visit the website for details of all the Community Nature Projects supported through the project: [blackdownhillsnaturalfutures.org/community-nature-projects](http://blackdownhillsnaturalfutures.org/community-nature-projects).

## Environmental Education



**2016 saw the start of the project's environmental education sessions at Blackdown Hills primary schools.**

The aim of these sessions was not only to engage and inspire children about nature conservation, but also to raise teachers' awareness of the distinctive wildlife and countryside of the AONB and show how the natural environment can be used as a teaching resource. They also gave staff the confidence, skills and resources to continue to deliver similar environmental sessions or arrange outdoor wildlife activities independently.



At each school children identified the wide range of wildlife in their school grounds through a 'mini-bioblitz' including pond invertebrates, mini-beasts, hedgerow species, trees, grasses and wildflowers – at one school more than 100 different species were identified! After these ID sessions children created new habitats including bug hotels, bird and bat boxes, reptile and amphibian hibernacula, bee tubes and deadwood piles.

Throughout the spring and summer terms 13 sessions were delivered in 11 schools across the AONB area involving 731 school children and 46 teachers, head teachers and teaching assistants.



In addition to the primary school sessions, BHNF facilitated a four-day 'environment careers' week with Richard Huish Sixth Form College, Taunton, in September. This brought together A-level students and a range of environmental professionals for careers advice, talks and site visits. The sessions demonstrated a range of possible careers to students, and raised awareness of the AONB to students and teaching staff as a local resource for educational visits and research.

## Events and Activities



2017 was a bumper year with more than 20 public wildlife events and training activities organised by the Natural Futures project, attracting 1,250 people in total. Events included guided walks, reptile surveys, butterfly walks, bat detecting and moth trapping, as well as specialist identification training activities covering fungi and trees. All events were extremely well received, with 90 per cent of attendees reporting they were inspired to learn more about the natural heritage of the Blackdown Hills. Additional feedback from people attending 2015 events has allowed the project to develop a much wider range of events for 2016.



The project's second 'Wildlife Discovery Day' flagship event, held at the Tracey estate, near Honiton, was a great success with more than 350 people attending and taking part in various wildlife identification activities. This event was supported by a wide range of volunteers who helped ensure the day ran smoothly and was a great success.

[Visit the project's website to find out more about the exciting range of activities planned for 2017.](#)

## Find out more about the project and get involved



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Blackdown Hills Natural Futures is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund with additional financial support from:

Devon County Council Locality Budgets (Cllr Paul Diviani, Cllr Andrew Moulding and Cllr Ray Radford), Somerset County Health and Wellbeing Budget (Cllr James Hunt), South Somerset District Council Community Grant, South West Water, Wessex Water, Wessex Watermark and the Viscount Amory's Charitable Trust.

**The project is run by the Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership and is supported by:**

The Blackdown Hills Trust, The Blackdown Hills Parish Network, Devon Biodiversity Records Centre, Devon Wildlife Trust, Plymouth University, Somerset Environmental Records Centre and Somerset Wildlife Trust.