

LEARNING WITH CHEDDAR GORGE

LIVING THINGS IN CHEDDAR GORGE

Cheddar Gorge is a very special place. It's a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The Natural England citation tells you a lot about what you'll find.

We have many different habitats, each with its own trees, smaller plants and animals. If you walk from Cheddar Caves up Jacob's Ladder to Pulpit Rock you'll come to each of them in turn.

THE CAVES

Very few things live in caves, because of the dark. Hart's Tongue ferns began to grow when electric lighting was put in. Their seeds were washed in by the water which was formed in the caves. And of course there are bats!



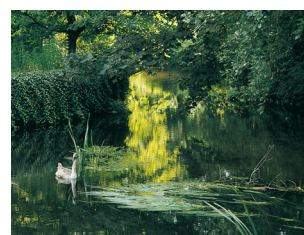
Lesser horseshoe bat roosting

THE RIVER

The fast-flowing river has been dammed to form reservoir ponds. There are a few brown trout, but you'll mostly see water-based insects (like water scorpion, water-boatmen), dragonflies, frogs and toads. Water voles and otters also utilise the river through the Gorge.



Water Vole



River

WOODED SLOPES

The lower slopes of Cheddar Gorge have been alternately wooded and farmed for thousands of years. Climbing Jacob's Ladder you'll see trees growing in stone-walled fields, while the other side of the Gorge is still cultivated. The old twisted and gnarled yew, whitebeam and holly are typical of the Gorge. The tall, straight Scots pine were deliberately planted for timber. Around them, the grassland has become choked by sycamore and ash saplings, and by ferns, hawthorn, blackthorn and brambles. (Ash was encouraged, as it was used for making tools, walking-sticks, wagons and furniture.) In this woodland you may find foxes and badgers, as well as dormice and squirrels. The dormice often construct tennis ball sized nests made from honeysuckle bark.



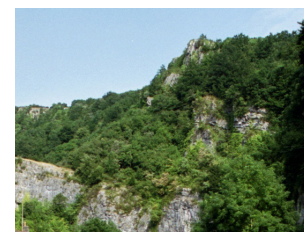
Dormouse



Dormouse Nest



Fox Cub



Wooded Slope

SCRUB & COPPICE

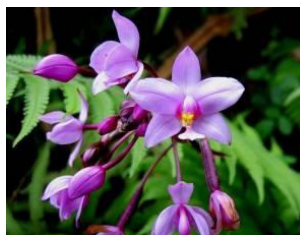
This is used to be grassland, but has become overrun by trees and brambles. It's popular with butterflies such as Brimstone, Meadow Brown and Blues. Most of the trees are hazel, which have been "coppiced" (the main stem cut down so that new stems will grow from the base) providing wands for charcoal, basket-making and fence hurdles. The nuts taste good as well! Rabbits often "nest" in the scrub, as the rocky soil is too shallow for warrens.



Brimstone Butterfly

UNIMPROVED LIMESTONE GRASSLAND

The thin soil lies over rock here, so grass roots become twisted and matted in the soil, producing a springy, spongy turf, which can be moved, like skin over bone. The grass is grazed by sheep, cows, goats and rabbits that stop the coarse grass growing up and choking the more interesting plants. These plants survive because they are too short to be grazed and don't need much soil. No herbicides are used here, so many unusual species flourish. There is a large and varied orchid population. Watch out for Harebell, Rock Rose, Marjoram, Eyebright and Valerian, especially on outcrops of rock. Also on the warm rocks you'll find basking lizards, adders and grass-snakes.



Wild Orchid



British Primitive Goat

THE GORGE CLIFFS

A gorge is a slice cut out of a hill, creating a mountain landscape, with crags, cliffs and rock ledges, among the limestone upland. The rocks and ledges where soil has collected support interesting trees like yew, elder, pussy willow and turkey oak. There are also plants which only grow on rock ledges. Some of the rarest are Cheddar Pink, and Little Robin. Mosses and lichens add subtle colours to the greys of the limestone. Just as the insects that love grassland are eaten at night by Horseshoe Bats from Gough's Cave, so the snakes and lizards that bask on the rocks are a sitting target for the birds of prey that nest high up on the cliffs. You might see a kestrel hovering for minutes in one place with quivering outstretched wings, or a buzzard, also taking advantage of thermal currents above the Gorge before descending to snatch up a rabbit. You may even see peregrine falcons, the fastest creature on the planet. They can reach speeds in excess of 200mph whilst in a stoop



Cheddar Pink



Peregrine Falcon

OPEN MOORLAND

Further up the hill, away from the Gorge, grassland gives way to open moorland, with gorse and broad-leafed ferns. Some of these areas were once farmed, but have "reverted". Natural woodland and forestry plantations interrupt the open moors. Watch out for the Blue Gromwell, a characteristic flower of Mendip woodlands, although rare elsewhere. Best of all, you may see roe deer and red deer, a last reminder of Mendip's ancient status as a royal hunting forest.



Red Deer

THE SOMERSET LEVELS

From here you can also see the Somerset Levels, which join the Mendip Hills at Cheddar. Originally part of the sea, the levels were marsh and moorland for centuries, but have now been drained for meadow land. A system of man-made ditches – "rhynes" – some nearly stagnant, creates a rich habitat for pond-dwelling insects and animals, while some of the peat workings have been returned to marshland as nature reserves. The Levels have their own version of "coppicing". The willow trees that line the rhyne banks are "pollarded" at head height, so that grazing animals will not eat the freshly sprouting wands. Elsewhere on the Levels these new shoots - "withies" - are grown from the ground in plantations.

Many of the habitats described have been affected by human activity. Sheep grazing once kept the limestone grassland well cropped. When this was abandoned as uneconomic, and when the rabbit population had been reduced by myxomatosis, gorse and bracken took hold of the grassland, threatening the rare Alpine flowers around the Gorge. Cheddar Caves has reintroduced grazing as a management regime, in an attempt to re-establish the Mendip plateau as species-rich calcareous grassland. In the Gorge itself, vegetation can threaten the stability of rocks by splitting and undermining them, and a regime of regular inspection and safety work is maintained.



Inspection work being carried out