

How to hold a BioBlitz



A BIOBLITZ IS AN EXCELLENT WAY TO INVOLVE ZOO VISITORS IN THE ONGOING CAMPAIGN TO RAISE BIODIVERSITY AWARENESS



BANK VOLE AT GAIAZOO
© R. HAVIK



DIPPING FOR SNAILS
AT GAIAZOO



COMMON TOAD AT AFRICA
ALIVE! © RUTH WALLIS

Seeing and interacting with local species is one of the most active ways in which people can learn about native biodiversity. This is what the Let It Grow campaign has largely been about – raising awareness and engaging the public – and over the last year, several of the Let It Grow participants have found creative ways to expose their guests to as much local wildlife as possible.

On 22 May, the International Day for Biological Diversity offers a great opportunity to promote biodiversity by organising special activities for visitors. This year we want to go big! We'd like to ask you to make plans for a biodiversity event at your institution on 22 May, or the weekend of 20–21 May. This can be whatever suits your institution, but one suggestion is that you hold a BioBlitz. This is where expert naturalists and members of the public work together to do a rapid survey of all forms of life in a natural space. It's a great outdoor event that's

particularly enjoyable for families, but, of course, any visitors can take part.

Below, two zoo educators share their stories of successful BioBlitzes that were held at three different institutions. We would like to encourage you to read about their fantastic experiences and take their advice in order to host your own BioBlitz in the coming year. After all, it is a great way to Let It Grow!

Catching the BioBlitz Bug!

**Sara Goatcher, Education Coordinator
Zoological Society of East Anglia
Africa Alive! & Banham Zoo**

As well as the African animals that live in Africa Alive!, I was well aware that a large amount of native wildlife called the park home. I was lucky enough to live in the park for a number of years and had seen a huge array of wildlife there, including waterfowl, invertebrates, amphibians and mammals, but none of these

species had been recorded officially. This was my original reason for holding a BioBlitz. However, as we began planning the event, our aims quickly expanded! It was the perfect opportunity to engage guests with native wildlife through a number of hands-on activities; it was also a perfect way to forge new links with local wildlife groups and to engage staff from a number of departments with biodiversity.

The first event took place in June 2014 and ran over a weekend; the 24-hour count took place from lunchtime on the Saturday. The wildlife surveyors included local wildlife groups, county recorders and volunteers. During opening hours we also had wildlife

stations for our guests around the park offering activities such as pond-dipping, bug-house making and ‘What lives under the log?’ quizzes.

As night fell and our guests left the park, we were joined by our second wave of experts – the nocturnal variety! Using specialist equipment such as bat detectors and moth traps, we were able to survey the nocturnal wildlife around the park. The information collected by the recorders over the 24 hours was added to a national database, managed by the Suffolk Biological Information Service.

The final figure of species recorded at our first event was 406, which included some local rarities such as the mining bee (*Andrena fulvago*). However, the biggest success, which made us determined to repeat the event, was its popularity with both our guests and our staff, and the opportunities it gave us to promote local biodiversity. We have now held three BioBlitzes in Africa Alive! and the species total is growing and growing.

In September 2016 we held our first BioBlitz at Banham Zoo. This was a huge success, with a current species total of over 550, and more records coming in regularly. We are now looking forward to 2017 and are busy coming up with new plans for our ‘Let It Grow’ events.

These are my top tips for a successful BioBlitz:

1. Start planning early, even if it’s just the date, as recorders and local wildlife groups need lots of notice for these events.
2. Use I-spot (ispotnature.org). It’s a great way for guests and staff to get involved with the recording.
3. Involve as many staff and volunteers as possible, and not just from the animal or education departments. Ours brought a wealth of enthusiasm and in some cases untapped knowledge of native species!

BioBlitz in GaiaZOO

Hanneke de Boer, Education & Conservation, GaiaZOO

GaiaZOO values biodiversity and species conservation very highly, not only in countries far away, but also in our own surroundings. For example, GaiaZOO has been breeding and

releasing the locally extinct common hamster (*Cricetus cricetus*) for over 10 years, and since 2015 we have been providing shelter to the last Dutch common fire salamanders (*Salamandra salamandra*) to protect them from extinction. The EAZA, BGCI and Ecsite Let It Grow campaign perfectly fits GaiaZOO’s philosophy. To involve our visitors in local biodiversity, we decided to organise a BioBlitz over the weekend of 10–11 September.

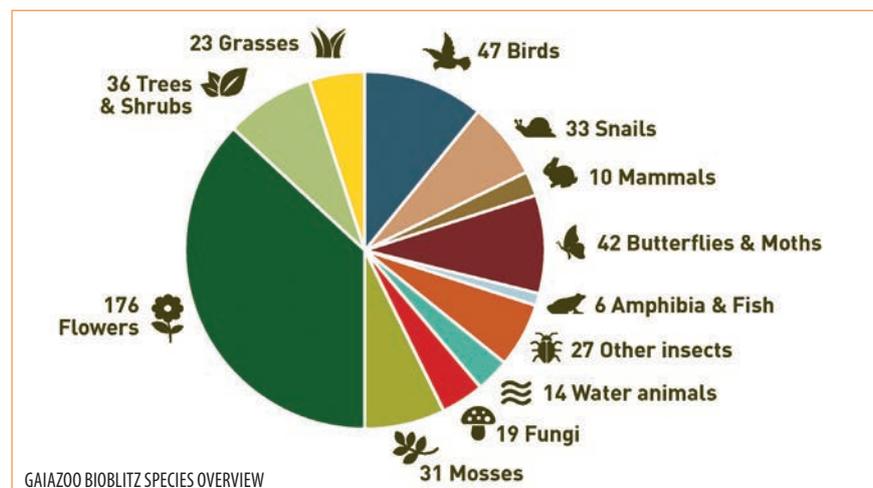
During the two months before the BioBlitz, we contacted local experts as well as national organisations (which is also one of the goals of Let It Grow). They were all very excited about the concept as none of them had ever monitored in a zoo before. In total, 60 external experts from 16 different organisations attended the BioBlitz. They monitored every part of GaiaZOO to find every species of plant, bird, moss, fungus, snail, water creature, bug, amphibian, dragonfly and butterfly that lives here. The experts wore orange safety vests so that they could be recognised by visitors and employees alike. After all, we don’t see men and women sweeping insect nets, shaking trees or lying flat between the vegetation with a magnifying glass on a daily basis.

Many of these experts also guided visitor activities; for example, children were provided with special equipment so that they could search for slugs or go on a creepy-crawly hunt. Thanks

to many GaiaZOO volunteers, we were able to provide information booths on biodiversity and a craft stall where children could make their own bird feeders and insect homes. In our education centre, the experts invited visitors to research mushrooms, owl pellets and slugs. Through a live chat on Facebook and Twitter, even visitors that were not able to come to GaiaZOO were inundated with BioBlitz facts.

Since animals don’t stick to the opening hours of GaiaZOO, the experts continued monitoring far beyond sunset. Visitors could subscribe for a special night expedition, including a ‘meet and greet’ with the experts at work in the darkness. For many of them, it was a once in a lifetime experience to see the expert emptying the live traps for mice, to hear bats calling through a bat detector, or to see the 30 different moth species that were attracted to the light trap.

After 24 hours of monitoring, 454 different species had been counted. If we had been able to monitor all the mosquitoes, spiders, beetles and lichen, we could easily have reached a thousand species. The number of birds, butterflies and flowering plants would also be higher if the BioBlitz were held in late spring. In GaiaZOO we can’t wait to repeat this great biodiversity awareness weekend and we advise every zoo to try it for themselves!



Expert tips for increasing biodiversity in GaiaZOO

GaiaZOO has a very green and natural set-up. The BioBlitz experts had some extra tips to give native species more chances to flourish:

1. Less weeding for mushrooms and insects
2. Leaving dead trees and trunks for mushrooms, snails, insects and birds
3. Sowing native flowers for insects and birds