



A big thank you to all our volunteers for their hard work and continuing support throughout another challenging year.

This time last year, we had all hoped that 2021 would see more of a return to normality for volunteering operations (and life in general!), and although outdoor activities have resumed with mitigations since June, ongoing Covid-safety considerations for indoor roles has meant that many of you have not had the opportunity to actively volunteer throughout 2021. We look forward to being in a better position in 2022 to progress the safe return of more volunteering activity at LVRP, and to welcoming you back when we can. In the meantime, we wish all the LVRP volunteer team, your families and friends, a safe and Happy Christmas and all the best for 2022.

A Message from our Chair



Dear Fellow LVRP volunteers

I am a new face for many having just taken over the Chair of the LVRP Board. Robert Wasson stepped down from this role in June and he is a hard act to follow! But I am lucky to be surrounded by a great team led by Andy Bridge and by experienced and dedicated Board Members who, like you, are passionate about the Lagan Valley Regional Park.

This year we welcomed 1.9 million visitors to this special place. That makes us the most visited outdoor site in Northern Ireland! A testament, not only to the Park's beauty, but also to its ability to provide a safe haven for sports, family time or relaxation.

We are delighted that volunteering efforts are starting to pick up again slowly, and I'd like to pass on a big thank you, as always, on behalf of the Board for sticking with us over the last two years and for your ongoing support and hard work. It is always appreciated, never taken for granted.

Wishing you and your families a very happy Christmas, and looking forward to seeing you in the Park sometime soon.

Sara

A Message from the Park Manager

I hope that you are all keeping well and safe.

It has been challenging for all of us making the necessary adjustments to the new normal both in terms of our actions and perhaps more so the impacts on our longer term emotional wellbeing.



Nevertheless, we are moving forward. It has been great to see Genevieve running regular conservation volunteer tasks throughout the year, and we are in discussion with Belfast City Council about possible opening of at least the Cottage next year. Whilst this may take a while, and may initially be for just a few days a week, it would be great to see this open to the public again - hopefully by spring.

I would like to wish you and yours a very warm and cosy Christmas and look forward to seeing you in the year ahead.

Andy

Update on Conservation Tasks: Oct – Dec



Above: One of the LVRP Conservation Volunteer teams at a grassland management task at Sharman Road

Throughout the last quarter, on alternate Saturdays and Thursdays, our teams of LVRP Conservation Volunteers have been busy carrying out habitat management tasks at several sites across the Regional Park:

- 4 grassland management tasks, in partnership with Belfast City Council, on the BCC grassland site at Sharman Road
- 2 oak 'haloing' tasks in Belvoir ASSI, under agreement with Forest Service and NIEA
- 2 scrub thinning and site management tasks on Department for Infrastructure (DfI) land near Lockview car park - in conjunction with the LVRP Rangers
- 2 bramble clearance tasks on the species-rich grassland banks of the Giant's Ring, in liaison with HED (Historic Environment Division)

Great work all round folks!

Sharman Road – Grassland Management Project

Working in partnership with Belfast City Council, LVRP started on a new annual Conservation Volunteer project on the BCC grassland site on Sharman Road in October/November.



The semi-natural grassland along Sharman Road used to be very species rich with Common spotted orchids, amongst other species, and were formerly cut and baled annually by a farmer through Belfast City Council – which is appropriate management for meadows and species-rich grasslands to maintain their biodiversity value for pollinators and other wildlife.

Above and R: Sections of grassland at Sharman Rd

Following community requests for a few sections of the site to be mown by BCC for amenity purposes a while back and subsequent planting of fruit trees in one of these sections, it became unviable for the farmer to use machinery on the remaining small areas, and the biodiversity value of the grassland has suffered as a consequence.



L to R: Cutting with traditional scythes; digging out docks and nettles and scything; creating bare patches for Yellow rattle seed sowing; yellow rattle seed sown!

In an effort to improve the biodiversity value of the semi-natural grassland at Sharman Road, the LVRP Conservation Volunteer teams carried out four meadow management tasks on site this season – cutting and lifting the grassland with traditional scythes to reduce nutrient input (wildflowers like low nutrients, unlike garden plants), alongside digging out the more competitive rank species such as docks and thistles, and creating some bare soil patches for Yellow rattle *Rhinanthus minor* seed sowing – a plant which semi-parasitises the more competitive coarse grasses - all of which over time will give the wildflower and meadow grass seeds in the seedbank there the chance to re-establish, providing food for pollinators and more colour and interest for the local community and LVRP visitors.



Did you know...?

Semi-natural grasslands are a precious resource – we have lost 97% of meadows since the 1930s – and enhancing/restoring existing grassland is hugely important for our pollinators, and other wildlife further up the food chain.

Above: One of the volunteer teams at Sharman Road

Belvoir ASSI (Area of Special Scientific Interest) – Oak Haloing

As part of the habitat management plans for Belvoir ASSI (drawn up by LVRP in partnership with NIEA and under license from the Forest Service), scrub removal from around the ancient and veteran oaks is being carried out in a process known as ‘oak haloing’.

Haloing involves removing other trees and shrubs which are growing into, or are likely to grow into, the crown of the veteran oaks - based on the premise that as these mighty veterans age, they become less tolerant of shade.



Above: Veteran oaks in Belvoir ASSI



L to R: Scrub growing around a veteran oak in Belvoir; haloing; before and during task at another veteran oak along the river; one of the volunteer teams at the end of a task

Did you know...?

Belvoir supports one of the largest concentrations of open-grown ancient and veteran trees in Northern Ireland and also contains the oldest known trees in Ireland. Haloing work carried out on site assists in the conservation of these hugely important trees and their associated rich biodiversity.

Lockview

In December, the volunteer teams were at Lockview, at the start of the Towpath, carrying out two scrub thinning tasks on DfI land just beyond the car park, to open up the space - thereby discouraging anti-social behaviour and facilitating litter picking by the Ranger Service.



L to R: Scrub thinning/breaking down for habitat piles; slashing; raking and bagging; one of the teams with habitat piles at Lockview

Woody scrub was formed into habitat piles on site by the volunteers, with excess cuttings (bramble, etc) subsequently removed from site by the LVRP Rangers, who have also been continuing to carry out work on site with machinery.

Giant's Ring

For two tasks in October, and for the last task of 2021 – on the Saturday before Christmas - the Conservation Volunteers were back at the Giant's Ring, to continue with bramble removal from the species-rich grassland banks of the henge monument - what nicer setting to be in to greet the festive season!



L to R: One of the volunteer teams in Oct; removing bramble from the grassland at the Giant's Ring; volunteer Liz, with a mega-bramble; volunteer team at the Giant's Ring for the last LVRP Conservation Volunteer task of 2021

Three builder bags of bramble were removed on each task - alongside being important for grassland habitat conservation, the volunteer work on site will also help to conserve the archaeology of this State Care Monument, which is in the care of the Department for Communities Historic Environment Division (HED).

On a separate note, HED are currently looking at measures to prevent further erosion along the top of the henge monument. Erosion has accelerated recently due to the huge increase in visitor numbers at the Giant's Ring since the pandemic, and the use of the site by mountain bikes, and eats into the archaeological fabric of this important monument, which was built around 2700BC, pre-dating the Egyptian pyramids! More news on this in 2022...



A massive thank you to all our conservation volunteer teams for their work this last quarter and throughout 2021 – well done folks!

Heritage Guide Update: Lock Keeper's Cottage

As the Park Manager has said above, we plan to progress a phased re-opening of the Lock Keeper's Cottage in 2022 - hopefully by spring. In the period prior to re-opening, we will implement all necessary Covid-safety measures, and ensure that working practices are robust to keep all volunteers, visitors and staff safe.



Details of these will be discussed on a one-to-one basis with each volunteer Heritage Guide before they decide about returning to their roles, and relevant training and guidance will be provided prior to the resumption of any volunteer duties.

It may be that we only open for a few days a week to begin with: if this is the case, we will of course consider how to facilitate as many of you as possible initially, whilst also being aware of your existing day/rota preferences, until longer opening hours are resumed.

Industry Barge

LVRP is continuing to liaise with Belfast City Council regarding the actioning of ongoing maintenance issues on the Barge, and on future re-opening of the site.

We will keep you posted on developments here, as and when they happen.

Staff News



Aaron Lavery joined the LVRP team on 21 October, taking over from Derek Wilson as Assistant Ranger for the Regional Park, and is proving to be a great addition to the small staff team here.

Aaron comes to LVRP with a strong nature conservation background, having trained with Ulster Wildlife's Nature Reserves team on the UW Nature Skills Traineeship, and subsequently working with Ulster Wildlife on a number of projects, including Belfast City Council's Parklife education programme. He has also done some work with the National Trust and volunteered with the RSPB.

I know some of you have already met Aaron out and about in the Park (on foot, on bicycle, in the Kangoo van), but if not, hopefully you will get the opportunity in the not too distant future.

LVRP Board – Thanks to Andy Halliday

Andy Halliday, a regular and enthusiastic member of the LVRP Conservation Volunteer team, stepped down from the LVRP Board in September, after having served three terms.

The Chair, Sara McClintock, thanked Andy at the September meeting for his six years of service to the Board, commenting on his dedication and support to the Board, and the really important role that he played in representing volunteers.



Above: Andy at a conservation task at the Giant's Ring

Andy will of course be continuing with his conservation volunteering and with managing the LVRP Instagram account. He has also recently offered to make a peening bench to mount the jig to 'peen' the Austrian scythe blades – that bit will make sense to the LVRP Conservation Volunteers at least!

Fantastic work all round Andy – many thanks for all your work in its many facets!

LVRP Board Vacancy – Appointment of new Director to represent volunteer interests



Andy's departure from the LVRP Board leaves a vacancy for the appointment of a new Director to represent volunteer interests on the Board.

If you are interested in applying for this voluntary position, please send an initial Expression of Interest via email to the Park Manager at: parkmanager@laganvalley.co.uk by Fri 28 January 2022.

(If you do not have access to email, please contact the Park Office on 028 9049 1922 for more details.)

Park Events

LVRP have been running a limited events programme through 2021, with just two events in the last quarter: the annual Fungal Foray, headed up by mycologist (fungi expert!) Alistair McCracken, along with Senior Ranger, Dan in October; and Dan's own annual Holly Hike in December. Both were well attended and received great feedback.

We look forward to running an expanded events programme in 2022, Keep an eye out for future events on our Facebook page and website, on LVRP poster boards around the Park, and in our printed Events Programme in the New Year.



Annual Report

The **Annual Report for 2020-21** is now available to view on our website on the Publications page. A small number of paper copies are available on request.

Volunteer Feedback

We are always keen to get input and feedback from our volunteers – please get in touch with any issues, questions or suggestions you may have.

At the end of this newsletter, and nearing the end of what has been another challenging year for everyone, it just remains to wish all of you the very best for the Christmas holidays, and may the coming year of 2022 be kind to us all!



All the best

Genevieve
Volunteer & Visitor Officer, LVRP