

Volunteer Update Winter 2020



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

Although it has not been possible for many of you to actively volunteer since early 2020, we appreciate that your dedication to LVRP, and the connections and friendships made here, remains undaunted, and we look forward to the day when it is safe to resume all of our volunteering activities, re-open our heritage visitor sites, and have all of you - our fantastic LVRP team - back together again.

We wish you all a safe and Happy Christmas, and roll on 2021!

A Message from our Chair



Dear Fellow LVRP volunteers

I'd like to pass on a big thank you, as always, on behalf of the Board for all your support and hard work this year. It is always appreciated, never taken for granted.

I hope that you and yours have come through 2020 relatively unscathed, and that you continue to stay safe.

Have a lovely Christmas, and let's all look forward to some great days in 2021 out in our wonderful park!

Best regards
Robert

A Message from the Park Manager

What a year! Who would have thought when we were all settling into 2020 back in January and February, how the year would have shaped up.

I hope that you are all keeping well and safe. I have been thinking about you all, and have missed seeing you and getting a wee yarn, though I have bumped into many of you from time to time in unexpected places, such as the local supermarket and garden centre, or out and about in the park. Not always easy to recognise each other with these face coverings though! I want to wish you all the very best for Christmas and here's to a New Year with renewed hope for a semblance of normality and recovery. Look forward to seeing you all again soon.

Keep well and Keep safe.
Andy



Update on Conservation Tasks

Our conservation volunteering was able to resume in September with mitigations for keeping everyone safe during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, including working with reduced



group size of 5 volunteers per task on a booked rota system, not sharing tools, not undertaking any tasks which usually require close physical teamwork for safety, and of course, the now customary practices of 2m social distancing, lots of hand sanitising and sanitising of surfaces – in this case tools.

Unfortunately, as part of the new safety mitigations, LVRP has been unable to provide the shared flasks for tea and biscuits as in former times, though volunteers have brought along their own refreshments, and the break time catch-up chats and craic with each other are as good as ever – albeit standing further apart, and having to talk a bit louder!



Tasks have been running weekly on alternate Saturdays and Thursdays from early September right through to the week before Christmas, with just a two-week interruption during the recent 'circuit breaker', though we managed to reschedule one of these back in before the holidays by running two tasks in the final week before Christmas.

As this newsletter goes to press, we are currently entering into another period of lockdown, with volunteering activities which were arranged for January again currently suspended. We will review the situation in the New Year, in line with public health advice and government guidelines, and resume activities when the time is right to do so.

A summary of the work carried out with our teams of Conservation Volunteers this season - which has mainly focussed on managing vitally important grassland habitat on sites across the Regional Park – along with some background info, is outlined below.

Grassland Management

LVRP grassland management conservation tasks focus on scrub removal and/or the cutting and lifting of annual growth on meadows and grasslands, depending on individual sites and management agreements with partners and landowners.

Why do we remove scrub from grassland?



All habitats are constantly undergoing the process of succession – which changes one habitat type to another – and ultimately leads to woodland. Woodland is important, but so are all the other habitat types, as each has its own species, ecosystems and functions. Natural and semi-natural grassland habitats have been lost at an alarming rate over the last century, due to agricultural improvement and intensification, development and other factors, so conserving what quality grassland habitat remains is vitally important.

For grassland to remain as grassland, it must be managed to avoid its succession to scrub, and in the absence of wild herbivores/grazing animals, grasslands require conservation management by people.

Removing scattered scrub, (such as gorse at Giant’s Ring, pic above left) from grassland will prevent the scrub patches from spreading and becoming dominant over the grasses and wildflowers which abound there. This will have positive impacts for plant diversity, for our pollinators and other insects which depend on these, and on up the food chain, for our birds and other wildlife.



On meadow sites, where LVRP are undertaking an annual cut with the power scythe, or indeed with Austrian scythes, it is also important that scrub is removed prior to cutting, to avoid damage to tools and machinery. In the picture above right, volunteers are removing blackthorn from the meadow in Belvoir ASSI, prior to the meadow being cut with the power scythe by LVRP staff, and raked and lifted by teams of volunteers on a number of task days there this season.

Why do we ‘cut and lift’ meadows?



In the absence of grazing, grassland habitat must be cut and lifted each year, in much the way that hay meadows were managed in the past, using traditional tools such as Austrian scythes on smaller wildflower meadows (at McIlroy, pic left) and/or power scythes to cover larger (or denser) areas more efficiently (pic right, at Belvoir ASSI).



Cutting and lifting the vegetation from a meadow each year will improve its quality by reducing the nutrient load and improving its sward (structure), allowing more species to flourish and preventing the grassland from becoming rank and dominated by coarse grasses, and nutrient-loving species such as nettles and docks. Maintaining and improving the quality of grassland habitat across LVRP will benefit our pollinators and other insects, and in turn our birds and mammals, and of course, also our visitors and local communities.

Belvoir ASSI (Area of Special Scientific Interest)

Belvoir is of special scientific interest for its parkland and wood pasture habitats and associated species. It 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. 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), meadow management is being undertaken on the semi-natural grassland site just below Corbie Wood.



There was a lot of blackthorn scrub to be removed from the meadow prior to it being cut by staff with the power scythe, and then raked and lifted by teams of volunteers over four tasks in September.



Other habitat management work at Belvoir ASSI in the New Year will focus on further haloing work around the ancient and veteran oaks, continuing on from works carried out last season. Haloing involves removing other trees and shrubs which are growing into, or are likely to grow into, the crown of the veteran oaks, and assists in the conservation of these hugely important trees and their associated biodiversity.

Mcllroy Park



In October for three tasks, the volunteers moved on to the wildflower meadow at LCCC's Mcllroy Park, which was sown with wildflower seeds a few years back by the LVRP Ranger Service, LCCC and local schoolchildren, and has been managed by our volunteers using traditional Austrian scythes ever since. Again the cuttings were raked and removed - here leaving a small over-winter border uncut for food and shelter for the resident beasts!

A final task in December saw the volunteers, opening up the young woodland at Mcllroy - removing a lot of overgrown bramble, and other dying back vegetation (mainly rosebay willowherb) from around the young oaks and previously coppiced hazel, improving conditions for them, by letting in more light and air flow, and reducing competition.



Clement Wilson Park



Late October and November saw the volunteers at the meadows in BCC's Clement Wilson Park, with one task removing scrub – this time aspen saplings/suckers which grow into the meadow from the roots of mature trees along the main public path – and three tasks raking and lifting a large portion of the meadows, which had been cut in sections by LVRP staff with the power scythe. All cuttings were transferred to green waste skips, provided by BCC, for recycling – the cuttings filled an impressive two and a half skips!

Giant's Ring



A task apiece in October, November and December (the last task of 2020), had our volunteer teams at the Giant's Ring removing scrub – gorse, blackthorn and some self-seeded oaks – from the grassland banks of the henge. Six builder bags (tonne bags) were removed and the cut stumps treated with herbicide to prevent further growth. Alongside being important for grassland habitat conservation, this work 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).

*Thank
you*

A massive thank you to all our conservation volunteer teams for their work this season. Raking meadows, lifting vast amounts of cut vegetation into builder bags, dragging the bags offsite or lifting their contents into green skips is heavy physical work, and everyone did an amazing job.

Your efforts ensure our wildflower meadows and grassland habitats and their associated biodiversity thrive now and into the future.

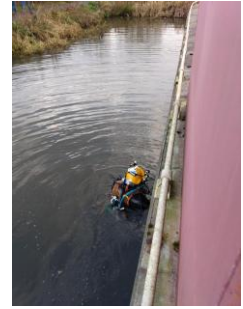
Park Events

Although much of this year's Events Programme had to be cancelled due to the pandemic, Dan, our Senior Ranger, led three events in the autumn/winter period, when easing of restrictions allowed, and these were booked out in record time for the maximum number of 14 attendees allowed under government restrictions of 15 people gathering outdoors. The Events Programme for 2021 is currently in planning – keep an eye on our Facebook page and LVRP website for updates.

Barge News



The contractor appointed by Belfast City Council to undertake survey work on the Industry Barge was on site on the 14 December to carry out the above, and below, water survey. They will report on their findings and make recommendations to the Council which will inform short term conservation work, and a longer term maintenance schedule.



LVRP Park Manager, Andy, was on site on the day and reported that the contractor thankfully seems fairly confident that most corrosion is above the waterline. We will keep you all posted as and when the works progress.

Annual Report

The **Annual Report for 2019-20** will be available to view on our website on the Publications page in the New Year.

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 a very challenging year for everyone everywhere, it just remains to wish all of you the very best for the Christmas holidays, and may 2021 shine bright!



All the best,
Genevieve, Volunteer & Visitor Officer, LVRP

