

Volunteer Update Summer 2021



*Thank
You!*

A big thank you to all our volunteers for their hard work and continuing support of the Regional Park through 2021.

Although the country has been in a better place this year in relation to Covid-19 with the roll out of the vaccination programme, unfortunately it has still not been possible to safely re-open the Cottage or Barge to our visitors, and have our full volunteer team back in action. We know that many of you have been missing volunteering at the Park

– as we have missed you all being here.

We look forward to welcoming you back to volunteering when it is safe to do so, and are ever thankful for the enrichment that each of you brings to the LVRP team, to the Park and its visitors.

Update on Conservation Tasks



Following the post-Christmas lockdowns and ongoing restrictions on group activities (due to two households only for some time), our conservation volunteering was finally able to re-resume in June 2021, and we were now happy to increase our maximum group size to 10 volunteers per task, rather than 5 as before. The other Covid-safety mitigations - a booked rota system, not sharing tools, not undertaking any tasks which usually require close physical teamwork for safety, along with 2m social distancing, hand sanitising and sanitising of tools - remain in place to keep our conservation volunteer teams safe. Though, unfortunately, still no shared tea!

Above – Raking and lifting the meadow at Belvoir ASSI

As before, tasks since early June 2021 have been running weekly on alternate Saturdays and Thursdays, with the addition of one ad-hock Tuesday task in June for additional fight back against the gains made at Derriaghy Glen by the invasive species, Himalayan balsam, in spring/summer 2020, when lockdown and ongoing restrictions meant that the usual volunteer task on site could not be carried out.



Above – balsam pulling at Derriaghy Glen

A summary of the tasks undertaken by our teams of Conservation Volunteers this summer - which has mainly focussed on invasive species control (Himalayan balsam), and on contributing to the management of vitally important grassland habitat on sites across the Regional Park – along with some background info, is outlined below. Many thanks for all your hard work folks!

Invasive Species Control – Himalayan balsam



Invasive non-native plant and animal species are the second biggest threat to biodiversity worldwide after habitat destruction. They negatively impact on native species, can transform habitats and threaten whole ecosystems causing serious problems to the environment and the economy.

Himalayan balsam is a serious case in point.

This, unfortunately now very familiar, non-native invasive species, was originally brought into NI as a garden plant, but now is now well established and is designated as a Widely Spread Species across the country.



Drumbridge growth - from mid-May to early July!



Thriving along river banks and wet ground – within grassland and woodland, for example - Himalayan balsam grows quickly each season, and can form dense monospecific stands, shading out other species - causing biodiversity loss – and, with the species being a shallow-rooted annual, this in turn leads to soil erosion when it dies back in winter, and to potential bank collapse along rivers, leading to environmental and economic impacts along watercourses.

The main control method for balsam is manual control – i.e. pulling the plants out of the ground by hand – a physically relatively easy task, given the shallow root system. However the sheer amount of plants, and a persistent seed bank (each plant produces hundreds of seeds which may survive for up to 18 months) means it takes many years, and a huge amount of manpower, to keep on top of balsam on even one site. Balsam pulling tasks are undertaken annually by volunteers at several sites across LVRP.



Above: Liz at Drumbridge - demonstrating just how tall balsam can grow!

Himalayan balsam can reach heights of 2 - 3m, making it one of the tallest annual plants in NI!



Right: Jackson pulling balsam at Derriaghy Glen

June and July Tasks – Balsam, balsam and more balsam!



The LVRP Conservation Volunteer teams did sterling work through June and July in the fight against Himalayan balsam. The teams carried out a total of 8 balsam pulling tasks – 5 at Derriaghy Glen, 2 at Sir Thomas & Lady Dixon Park and one at Drumbridge, at the canal cut and around Lock 6.

The teams' hard work at all three sites has ensured that thousands upon thousands (maybe millions if scaled up!) more seeds will not enter the seed bank, and increased efforts focused on Derriaghy Glen have fought back brilliantly against the inroads made there by the species last year during lockdown.



L to R: The first task of 2021; Karen pulling balsam on the first task; Paul, later in season; by law, as with any non-native invasive species, all pulled balsam must be left on site to prevent its unintentional spread

The task at Drumbridge on 8 July was fantastic. With all the dry weather over spring and early summer, the base of the cut could be safely accessed and cleared, alongside some clearance being carried out at Lock 6. There was a real sense of achievement from the before to after that day!



L to R: Just because you're bigger than me... – Jackson, prepares to tackle the towering balsam: Michael and Liz pulling in the cut; a section of the cut – before: and after the task

The two tasks at Sir Thomas & Lady Dixon Park were in an area with some lovely wildflower species, such as Wood avens (*pictured below*), and with the site being adjacent to the public path, there was really positive engagement with passing visitors about invasive species and their control, and about all the work the LVRP Conservation Volunteers are involved in to help conserve biodiversity across the Regional Park. Indeed, this has been the case at all sites recently - with many visitors expressing great appreciation of, and really valuing, the work of volunteers, and saying 'thanks for everything you're doing'.



L to R: Saturday task at STLD; Wood avens, Sally and Karen; group working by the path; a wet Thursday at STLD – and still smiling!

August and September - Grassland Management

At the very end of July, the focus shifted to grassland management tasks - namely scrub removal and/or the cutting and lifting of annual growth on meadows and grasslands, depending on individual sites and agreements with partners and landowners.

Scrub Removal

After the successful removal of gorse, blackthorn, and self-seeded trees from the species rich grassland banks of the Giant's Ring in 2020, further tasks had been planned for Jan 2021 to move on to bramble clearance.

However with lockdown, ongoing restrictions, and balsam pulling season to contend with, it was late-July, and a lot more bramble before the volunteers got back there!



L to R: Carol at the July task; Gemma in July; August task, with help from local residents; group at August task

Our thanks go out to local residents, Roger, Gordon and Rachel, who sit on the Giant Ring Stakeholder Group, for joining the volunteers at the second task on site in August - putting in a great amount of work and enjoying the craic! We look forward to welcoming them again at future volunteer tasks on site.

A scrub removal task also took place at Clement Wilson in August, to remove the regrowth of Aspen suckers from the meadows there. It was a very wet day – but nothing stops the LVRP conservation volunteers!



L to R: Liz, Gemma and Paul removing Aspen suckers on a rainy Thursday; before and after on section of site

Cutting and Lifting Meadows



Above – Volunteer task at McIlroy Park wildflower meadow

In the absence of grazing, meadows require cutting and lifting - to reduce the nutrient load and improve their sward (structure), thus allow more species to flourish, and preventing the grassland habitat from becoming rank - dominated by coarse grass species and other nutrient-loving species, such as nettles and docks.

Volunteer tasks to maintain and improve the quality of grassland habitat across LVRP bring benefits for biodiversity - for wildflowers and meadow grasses, pollinators and other insects, for birds and mammals - and also bring benefits for our visitors and local communities - through increased biodiversity interest on sites, and through volunteer/community involvement and engagement on the ground.

The meadow at Belvoir

There were two conservation volunteer tasks in late August/early September to rake and lift the meadow in Belvoir ASSI. As in 2020, the meadow here was cut before each task by LVRP staff using an Allen (or power) scythe. The volunteers raked all the cut hay into piles, lifted it into builder bags and moved it to a suitable location for it to break down naturally.

A massive well done to all the volunteers on these two tasks, who really flew through the meadow this year - considering we had initially allowed for three tasks to complete the work!



L to R: Hay raking on first task; bags filled and waiting to move off site; raking on the second task; meadow at end of second task

Austrian Scything: Mcllroy Park wildflower meadow + Volunteer training at the City Cemetery



Above: scything training at City Cemetery

The LVRP Conservation Volunteers have been cutting and lifting the wildflower meadow at Mcllroy Park annually since 2019.

The cut here is carried out using traditional Austrian scythes, by those volunteers trained in their use and maintenance, and in early September Belfast City Council's City Cemetery Heritage Project kindly facilitated a scything training session for LVRP to allow more of our volunteers to be trained in this traditional skill, and a few previously trained volunteers to refresh their knowledge and improve their technique,

Many thanks to BCC Biodiversity Officer, Orla Maguire, for facilitating the training for our volunteers at the City Cemetery, and to Neil Foulkes for his expert training, which the volunteers all thoroughly enjoyed, and have been able to put into practice at the two tasks at Mcllroy in September, and at planned upcoming tasks on BCC grassland at Sharman Road.

Many thanks to all the volunteers for their hard work at Mcllroy – scything, raking, lifting, dragging bags and digging out the docks. Great job everyone!



L to R: Scything at Mcllroy; newly trained volunteer, Paul, sharpens his scythe; Melanie, raking and lifting; group shot at Mcllroy

Volunteer Ranger - Alec



Above – Alec at a task at Giant's Ring

A big thank you to Volunteer Ranger Alec for his continued dedication and hard work assisting the Ranger Service with patrols, reporting issues to the Ranger Service, and carrying out litter lifts across the Regional Park.

Even when volunteering was suspended during lockdown earlier this year, Alec was still making a great contribution to LVRP in his local area, litter picking on his daily exercise – a true litter hero! Many thanks for everything you do Alec.

Wildlife Surveys 2021

It has been fantastic to be able to reinstate the full survey schedule again this year after lockdowns and restrictions in 2020 put paid to all but the Daubenton's Bat Survey, which went ahead in August last year.

The 2021 survey season is now winding to an end for another year, with all data being sent to the relevant partners for the UK/Ireland wide monitoring schemes.

Seven volunteers took part in the **All-Ireland Daubenton's Bat Waterway** Survey in August, (along with four staff), covering 6 transects along the Lagan, with data submitted to Bat Conservation Ireland; three volunteers and three staff surveyed 6 transects monthly (from March to Oct) for the **Bumblebee Monitoring Scheme**, with data submitted to the National Biodiversity Data Centre; and one volunteer and two members of staff covered 3 **UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme** transects weekly (from April to Sept) with data submitted to Butterfly Conservation.



Above – Long-term Butterfly and Bumblebee survey volunteer, Arthur

Many thanks to all our Volunteer Wildlife Surveyors for their contributions this year.

Staff News



Sadly for us, our Assistant Ranger, Derek Wilson, will shortly be retiring from his post after four and a half years of duty with the LVRP Ranger Service.

Derek has been involved with LVRP since July 2015, originally as a Volunteer Ranger, before joining the team in a paid capacity. Derek plans to stay involved with the Regional Park in a voluntary capacity as a Wildlife Surveyor, carrying on with his Daubenton's bat, bumblebee and butterfly survey transects after his retirement.

Derek has worked closely with many LVRP volunteers – particularly the Volunteer Rangers and Heritage Guides – though he will be known to all through conservation tasks run in conjunction with the Ranger Service, and from volunteer outings and get-togethers pre-Covid (remember those?!). I am sure you will all join us in thanking Derek for his fantastic service to LVRP, and in wishing him all the very best for the future. We'll all miss you Derek!

Park Events

With lockdown/restrictions in the first half of 2020, it was August before Dan, our Senior Ranger, was able to re-start a number of guided Park Events for the public. The Edenderry Evening Trail, the Bat Awareness Walk and Talk (in partnership with LCCC), and the Discovery Morning in September, were all fully booked and enjoyed by all who attended. Keep an eye on our Facebook page for upcoming LVRP events.

Annual Report

The **Annual Report for 2020-21** is currently being finalised, and will be available in the Publications section of our website next month. A small number of hard copies will be available on request.

Volunteer Feedback



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