

## MEMBER OF THE MONTH – THE CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS

The Conservation Volunteers, sometimes abbreviated to TCV, is UK-wide practical conservation charity which was set up in 1959, with the Northern Ireland region being established in 1983. Originally The Conservation Volunteers worked entirely on managing habitats on nature reserve sites, but over the years the range of activities has grown significantly to include many other involvements with environment at the core; including improvements to urban open spaces, school grounds, training and skills, food growing and health programmes.

TCV's activities can be summarised into 3 main areas of work:

**Prospects** - helping people to get back to work improves the economic well-being of an individual and their community

**Health** - being active outdoors, growing your own food and having the opportunity to interact with others helps improve social well-being

**Outdoor places** - people taking responsibility for outdoor places improves the environment

TCV works in partnership with a wide range of individuals and organisations including schools, businesses, community groups, local authorities and government agencies, to involve people in projects to improve their environment, learn new skills, and at the same time becoming more environmentally aware and more active in their community.



TCV volunteers are much involved in improving habitats for biodiversity and involving local people, making them more aware of their local environment and biodiversity issues. Habitat creation includes planting new woodlands, species rich hedgerows and creating ponds and wetlands. But equally important is managing existing habitats and the landscape, by working with farmers and landowners to renovate old hedges, fence woodlands against grazing animals and repairing drystone walls.

Over the years TCV has been much involved in eradicating invasive alien species such as rhododendron in woodlands. More recently work on invasive species has expanded to include other species such as Japanese knotweed and giant hogweed and a number of projects in the last few years have worked on clearing riverbanks of these invasive plants, to let our native flora flourish. There is still poor understanding of the problems posed by invasive alien species and much work needed.



Originally TCV provided training to help people gain skills to do conservation work, but over time this has grown into increasing people skills to help them gain employment. At present TCV's Training for Employment programme, which is funded by the European Social Fund through Department for Employment and Learning, provides training and qualifications for 220 unemployed people per year. The training on offer includes a vocational qualification in amenity horticulture or environment and other short courses such as first aid and the Construction Skills Register

card. This programme is offered across Northern Ireland at TCV's offices and at many other locations, working with local community groups. TCV is a City & Guilds Centre for qualifications in a range of land-based subjects.

TCV also runs a biodiversity skills training programme, aimed at land managers and others who manage land, to help them gain greater understanding of biodiversity and the skills to improve habitats.

The Green Gym is where health and fitness meets conservation and is an outdoor exercise class where people are not just working on their own health and fitness, but also helping to enhance green spaces in the town, create community gardens and allotment, or transform parks and woodlands. After a gentle warm-up, participants are guided through activities like tree planting, food growing and creating nature trails. Research has shown that a Green Gym session can burn a third more calories than a typical aerobic class and as well as improving the participants own health and well-being, it also creates beautiful green spaces for the whole community to enjoy. Green Gyms are completely free to join and are established across Northern Ireland, helping communities reconnect with the great outdoors every day. Green Gyms are open to the whole spectrum of the local community – old, young, retired, employed and unemployed. It's not just about having fun and helping the environment. Some people join as they want to feel fitter, some to improve their job prospects, and some for a social life and support network.



Improvements to school grounds for both environment and educational benefits is another big area of work. Most schools are increasingly interested in the environment and improving their grounds to attract more wildlife and also to have features which can be used within the curriculum. TCV has helped many schools to create more beautiful and wildlife friendly grounds, by creating wildflower meadows, ponds, small woodlands and insect gardens. Whenever possible the children are involved in these projects, to help educate and inspire them.

Over the last decade TCV has become much involved in food growing projects and supporting people and communities to grow their own fruit and vegetables. This has involved developing new allotment sites and providing training and support to people who in many cases have little or no previous experience n growing vegetables.

The Conservation Volunteers have offices in Belfast, Bangor, Coleraine and Derry/Londonderry.

For more information contact our Regional Office at 90 645169 or visit our web site at [www.tcv.org.uk/ni](http://www.tcv.org.uk/ni)