

# **HISTORY OF THE WILTSHIRE WILDLIFE CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS**

## **The Very Beginning**

In 1972, the Council of the Wiltshire Trust for Nature Conservation (WTNC), which is now known as Wiltshire Wildlife Trust (WWT), agreed to the formation of a Wiltshire Conservation Corps (WCC). WCC would co-ordinate voluntary labour to help with conservation management in the county.

A paper written by Philip Horton (Assistant Regional Officer Nature Conservancy Council (NCC)) and Dr. Stephanie Tyler, a conservation volunteer, was the subject of a meeting of nine WTNC members at Urchfont on 24 May 1972. Brian Merry was elected co-ordinator. In order to recruit members, he agreed to publicise the Corps to WTNC members and other organisations, with similar interests. It was agreed that there should be close co-operation with the NCC and the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) and that arrangements for financing the Corps, training and insurance for volunteers would be made.

Practical work began in July 1973 with the task of pulling ragwort on Prescombe Down. By the end of March 1974, work had been carried out on nine sites on land owned by the WTNC, the Forestry Commission (FC) and private individuals. The number of tasks undertaken increased steadily each year.

Informal business meetings were held annually, by kind invitation, at the home of an individual member. In 1982, they were moved to Wyndhams, Devizes where NCC and WTNC had their offices. Each year, a draft programme of the work to be carried out in the following season was arranged and the leader of each was proposed. These meetings were partly responsible for long-lasting friendships being established which were transferred to close working relationships and efficiency in carrying out the tasks.

## **From Strength to Strength**

In 1979, Brian Merry handed over the job of co-ordinator to Beatrice Gillam, a member of WTNC's field committee. In 1982, she proposed that the Corps should be renamed Wiltshire Wildlife Conservation Volunteers (WWCV), a title more explicit of its aims and membership. This was agreed. Tasks continued to be carried out at week-ends, usually starting in late September and finishing at the end of March, a period when there would be a minimum of disturbance to the flora and fauna. Tools had gradually been bought and were kept in a farm barn at East Coulston, kindly loaned by Mrs. Patchett and were overseen by David Ovens. In 1984, NCC funded an extra chainsaw and a hut to house the tools. The hut was placed on David Ovens' land where he continued to maintain the tools with the help of Michael Balfe who had also taken on the role of treasurer in 1982 and still holds that position in 2006. Tim Howells audited the accounts for many years until his untimely death in 2005. Several members attended a first aid course and one received training in the use of chemicals. Members over sixteen have always been covered by insurance and travelling expenses are available on request.

At the AGM in 1985, Lesley Balfe, who was also a member of WTNC's field committee, agreed to take over as co-ordinator and continued in that role until 1997 when the WWCV became a Registered Charity and her title became that of Chairman. An official executive committee was elected and the relationship between the two charities, WWCV and WWT, was officially established.

By 1987, it became apparent that there were 'one off' tasks that needed to be carried out, sometimes at short notice and outside the normal winter period of work. John Rayner agreed to be responsible for finding volunteers and for organising this scheme of work which was carried out on week-days, usually Wednesdays. This scheme has been a great success and has included work on the entrance of a tunnel used by bats, ragwort pulling, making otter holts and weeding a small tree nursery, first at Great Chalfield and later in Richard Packham's garden at Bromham.

## **Volunteers Working Countywide**

By 1993, when the WWCV celebrated its 21st anniversary at Home Covert, Devizes at the kind invitation of Sarah and John Phillips, it had worked on over 70 sites located widely across Wiltshire: from Ravensroost and Clouts Woods in the north to Grovely Down and Blackmoor Copse in the south and from Ham Hill in the east to Green Lane Wood in the west. Work continues on some of the WWT nature reserves where volunteers have carried out much of the management needed since they were acquired. For example, at Ham Hill since 1978, Jones's Mill near Pewsey since 1980 and Smallbrook Meadows near

Warminster since 1989. Work has also been carried out on National Nature Reserves Including dewpond restoration on Pewsey Downs and Parsonage Down and woodland management at Langley Wood. At Clanger Wood, owned by the Woodland Trust, a mid-week team has continued the woodland's management on alternate Wednesdays during the winter since 1985. A 'hard core' of individuals travel to tasks countywide to join those who only work near their homes, and sometimes to provide help with the use of chainsaws or chemicals.

In the winter of 2004-2005, 653 man days were worked on a total of 107 sites involving 111 volunteers. However, Wiltshire is a large county with many nature reserves, all of which need management. The WWCV needs more volunteers to carry on the excellent work that they have done in the last 34 years and continue to be asked to undertake. It can be as strenuous as you feel you are able to be but there is always something for anyone aged from 16 to 90 to do.

If you are interested in finding out more about the work of the WWCV please contact Lesley Balfe on 01373 822573 or Ann Durnell on 01793 536019