

| TRAVEL |

# How LGBTQ youth are building community through conservation work

These queer-identified organizations are making the great outdoors more welcoming to all.



A member of the Northwest Youth Corps' Rainbow Crew works to pave a new trail at Mount Rainier National Park. With the rise of queer-owned outdoor adventure outfitters, LGBTQ youth are finding safe places to learn about wilderness exploration and environmental conservation.

COURTESY NORTHWEST YOUTH CORPS

BY MILES GRIFFIS

On an August morning, the [Rainbow Conservation Crew](#) woke and had breakfast at a campsite in [Mount Rainier National Park](#) before commuting three miles by foot with McLeods, Pulaskis, and peaveys—tools used for trail work and wildland firefighting—to their worksite on the historic Wonderland Trail.

For the past few weeks, the small group of teenagers had been hacking at sections of the 93-mile trail that circumnavigates [Washington's Mount Rainier](#)—or *Tahoma* as it is known to the local Puyallup tribe—gliding like a roller coaster through alpine meadows, temperate rainforests, and rivers fed by glacial runoff.

Mel Hanby, the group's leader-in-training, was working his third summer with the [Northwest Youth Corps \(NYC\)](#) after joining the Rainbow Crew in 2017, the nation's first LGBTQ youth conservation corps. As a longtime volunteer, Hanby was taking on more responsibility in the backcountry as he oversaw the teenagers alongside senior leaders Ernie Callaghan and Ash Young. One of the crew's main projects over the five-week program was to construct an urgently needed bridge over a dangerous crossing of the Carbon River.



Rainbow Crew members take a break near Lewis and Clark National Historical Park. As the nation's first LGBTQ youth conservation corps, the organization is leading the charge in career development and environmental stewardship for queer teens.

PHOTOGRAPH BY EDISON VELEZ III

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“The youth corps is not a summer camp,” Hanby says. “For many of us it’s our first paid job, and it comes with a lot of responsibility.” He explains that in order for youth to be successful in the program they have to not only learn the technicalities of trail work, but also basic wilderness, camping, and self-care skills.

With the rise of queer-owned outdoor adventure outfitters such as [Out There Adventures](#) (OTA) and [The Venture Out Project](#) as well as LGBTQ outdoor education trips led by companies including [NOLS](#) and [Outward Bound](#), queer kids are being introduced to outdoor skills and leadership in programs led by LGBTQ guides. Within this emerging space, a new kind of experience is trending that focuses on environmental stewardship and career development. The Northwest Youth Corps’ Rainbow Crew is one of the main groups leading the charge.

## Why queer crews are important

Beyond providing a safe environment for the crew to learn work skills that they can later apply to their professional lives, the Rainbow Crew also gives many of the corps members their first LGBTQ role models. Hanby, who identifies as a transgender man, explains that on his first trip with the corps, he got to know a corps leader who was the first trans man he had ever met.

“It was life changing,” he says, “I didn’t know adult trans men existed. I didn’t know we made it that far in life. What I think is amazing about having identity-specific crews is that a lot of people—including myself, when I was 16—are terrified to learn wilderness skills while having to deal with homophobia or transphobia. In [the Rainbow Crew] we don’t have to worry about that.”

[\(Here’s how rural queer communities connect through storytelling.\)](#)

Near the end of his first summer with the corps, Hanby began to see a place for himself in conservation work. The following summer he joined Northwest Youth Corps' Backcountry Leadership Program (not an identity-specific LGBTQ crew) where members trek deep in the wilderness and work on more technical projects while gaining leadership training. After graduating the intensive program, Hanby returned for a third year with NYC in 2019 where he helped lead the Rainbow Crew he had joined two summers prior.

Having the support of an organization that provides safe spaces and opportunities is essential for queer youth, especially during a time when transgender youth care is banned in numerous states and legislation prevents transgender youth from participating in sports. “It’s hard to be in a body,” says former NYC corps leader Ernie Callaghan, who identifies as non-binary. “When you feel disconnected from your body because of gender-related issues, it can be hard to move it and know how to use it.”



Wildflowers blanket the park around Mount Ranier during the summer.  
PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRISTOPHER KIMMEL, ALAMY

When Callaghan led the Rainbow Crew in 2019, the groups took on various jobs such as cutting tread with tools, pulling out invasive scotch broom by hand, and moving enormous rocks to construct trails. While doing these tasks Callaghan believes the corps members gained greater body awareness and confidence. “To be able to do this work, you need to know the mechanics of what it means to exist in a human body.”

## Establishing success

Sensing a lack of opportunities for queer teens interested in the outdoors and conservation, Elyse Rylander, founder of [OUT There Adventures](#), and Jay Satz, senior director at the Northwest Youth Corps, collaborated in 2017 to form the Rainbow Conservation Crew with support from the [North Face Explore Fund](#) and [Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest](#).

While the Rainbow Crew programming has evolved over the past few years, its main goals have remained the same—get kids outside in a safe space, teach them conservation skills, and get them paid while doing it.

Grants and funding over the past few years from the [National Park Foundation](#) have helped the program grow; the foundation invested more than \$4.5 million in conservation corps across the country in 2021. NYC now offers two separate LGBTQ inclusion crews for youth aged 15 to 19, as well as an eight-week crew for LGBTQ young adults 19 to 25. The various crews have since worked in [Lewis and Clark National Historical Park](#), [Olympic National Park](#), and other national parks across the Pacific Northwest.

*[\(National parks are working to make parks more accessible for all.\)](#)*

“Because of the length of trips and the hard work required, the [Rainbow Crew] really helps participants connect the dots in who they are as queer-identified folks and what they can do in relation to the natural world,” says Rylander, who founded [OTA in 2014](#) with the mission of giving youth the opportunity to explore their identity in a positive environment. She believes the Rainbow Crew creates a long-lasting impact on the youth that helps them shape their future careers in conservation and outdoor education.

But the crew isn't only having an effect on its LGBTQ corps members—it's beginning to change the culture of conservation corps around the country.

In the winter of 2020, NYC's Rainbow Crew was the Project of the Year at [The Corps Network National Conference](#), one of the highest honors in the conservation corps community. "Many corps are beginning to realize that they are serving a lot more trans and queer people than they realized in the past, and are trying to give those young people the space to be themselves," says Jay Satz. Over the past few years, Satz says he's seen the implementation of inclusive pronoun use and greater gender awareness in many corps across the nation.

## Queer-identified crews are a growing trend

Alongside the Rainbow Crew, NYC also supports an [American Sign Language Crew](#), one of many other corps that help remove barriers of participation for minority populations.

Similar support is visible in other parts of the country. The Southwest Conservation Corps's [Leaders of Color Crew](#) for BIPOC individuals trekked into the field this spring and the [Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps](#) has a wide array of crews for Indigenous youth and young adults including an all-women's crew working on habitat restoration in [Grand Canyon National Park](#).

*[\(Efforts are underway to make the outdoors more inclusive. Here's why it matters.\)](#)*

Similarly, [Eastern Sierra Conservation Corps](#) (ESCC), based in California, recently launched the WILDlands (Wilderness Immersion Leadership Development) Technical Crew, a four-month queer corps for adults aged 21 to 30. The LGBTQ corps is currently at work on projects in [Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks](#). Alongside WILDlands, ESCC leads eight-day wilderness immersion trips with trail work education for young women and LGBTQ youth.



Members of the Rainbow Crew construct a stone retaining wall to provide trail stability at Mount Rainier National Park.  
COURTESY NORTHWEST YOUTH CORPS

Although few programs offer long-term programs for queer youth like NYC, [Washington Trails Association \(WTA\)](#) hosts weeklong trips, like its [LGBTQ Youth Volunteer Vacation](#), a six-day trip in Mount Rainier National Park that focuses on trail work. The organization also offers identity-specific volunteer trips for queer adults, like this fall's six-day trip

in [Yacolt Burns State Forest](#), as well as volunteer trail work day events for LGBTQ youth and adults.

Another group, the [Venture Out Project](#), a queer-led outdoor education nonprofit, will guide LGBTQ adults on a six-day [queer trail work trip in Yellowstone National Park](#) this August. Oliver Reitz, one of the trip's co-leaders, says that many LGBTQ people who get outside often are beginning to get more involved with trail work.

“We’ve created a community with each other,” he says about the LGBTQ trail workers. “I think a lot of people are realizing that our community care needs to extend to the trails and to the land itself.”

For many queer people and other marginalized groups, opportunities like Rainbow Conservation Crew and other identity-specific crews offer youth and young adults an accessible opportunity to learn wilderness and conservation skills that they may have been excluded from in the past.

Will Shafroth, president and CEO of the [National Park Foundation](#), believes more LGBTQ corps and other affinity crews will begin to form in the coming years due to a demand for the programs and the need for conservation work in the nation's public lands.

“We need to build future advocates and supporters for these public lands,” says Shafroth, speaking on the foundation's help in funding numerous LGBTQ conservation corps across the country from NYC to ESCC. “One of the things we struggle with in our public lands, not just our national parks, is ensuring that everyone feels welcomed in these places. We want to create safe experiences for people to add to the diversity of what they love in life.” 🟩

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