

JOHN
MUIR
TRUST

Management Plan for Ben Nevis Estate

Prepared in 2023



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Area: 1,761 hectares

National Grid Reference: NN 167 713 (Ben Nevis summit)

For further information on our work at Nevis:

<https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/about-us/where-we-work/ben-nevis>

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1 Introduction

This is a living document that outlines our management aspirations for our Nevis estate over a long-term period. Whilst we understand the urgency of taking action to address the climate and biodiversity crises, we also recognise that environmental restoration will take time, so we will review this plan on a regular basis and update it as required, in consultation with stakeholders and the local community as necessary.

The appendices associated with this plan are currently in development and will be added during 2023.

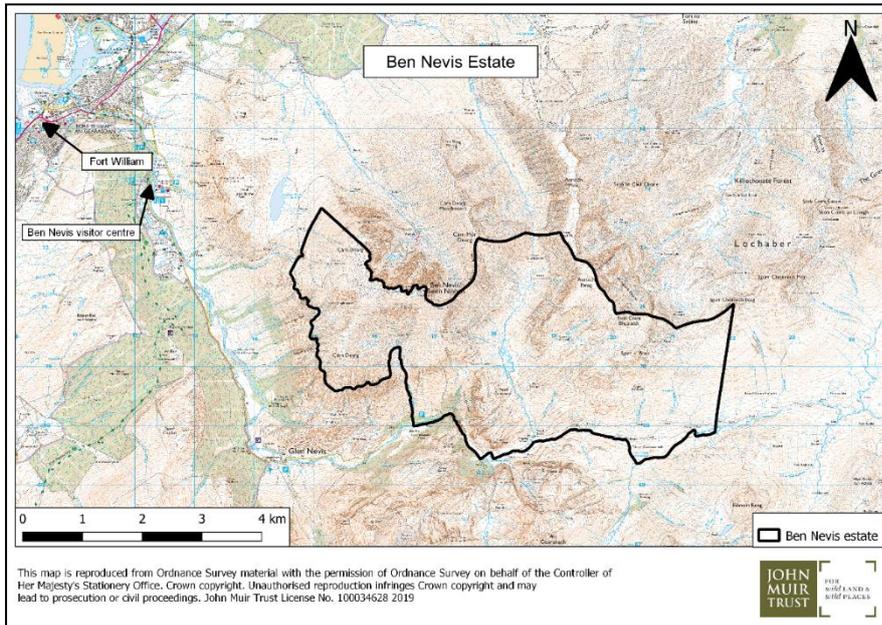
2 Ben Nevis Estate

Ben Nevis lies in the Western Highlands of Scotland to the south-east of the town of Fort William in Lochaber. Ben Nevis is the highest mountain in the UK and attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors every year. The surrounding area is heavily dependent for its economic viability and employment on the tourism value of Ben Nevis and Glen Nevis.

The Ben Nevis estate covers an area of 1,761 ha (4,158 acres). It includes the upper part of the southern and western flanks of Ben Nevis (at 1,345m), and a chain of high peaks to the east (Carn Mor Dearg 1,220m, Aonach Beag 1,234m, Sgurr Choinnich Beag 963 m). These slope down to the Water of Nevis where the river plunges from the grass flats at Steall through the Gorge, a densely wooded cleft with rich native woodland and remnants of Caledonian pine forest. Within the estate boundary lie the remains of the Ben Nevis Summit Observatory which closed in 1904, the upper half of the Mountain Track and the popular Steall Gorge path.

The estate includes areas that are protected through specific designations and is situated within both the Ben Nevis and Glencoe National Scenic Area (NSA) and the Ben Nevis Special Area of Conservation (SAC). It also contains part of the designated Ben Nevis Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and part of a Geological Conservation Review site (GCR). Due to these designations any changes we wish to make to the site may be subject statutory approvals to ensure they do not negatively impact on the designated features.

The Trust participates in the Ben Nevis SAC Steering Group and attend bi-annual meetings to identify and address actions to achieve or maintain favourable status of notified habitats in alignment with the Trust vision for Ben Nevis estate.



3 Our Ambitions

3.1 Our Vision

The purpose of the John Muir Trust is to conserve, protect and restore wild places for the benefit of all. Our vision is a world where wild places are valued for present and future generations. One of the ways we work towards this is by taking on stewardship of wild places, and working with the community to protect and repair them.

The John Muir Trust took on stewardship of the Ben Nevis estate in June 2000. During our first two decades of looking after the site, we have:

- maintained and repaired 5 kilometres of paths every year
- stabilised 100 tonnes of rockfall in Steall Gorge
- replaced two well used bridges to continue to allow public access to the area
- carried out 200 educational visits and nature events for young people
- received 7,000 volunteer hours (equivalent to almost 4.5 years of a full time staff member)
- removed 250 large bags of litter and human waste left by the public on the Ben
- seen the return of nesting golden eagles after a long absence
- been a founding member of the Nevis Landscape Partnership, who brought in £3.4 million to deliver 19 projects between 2015 and 2019

Looking ahead, John Muir Trust's vision for protecting, repairing and enhancing the wild places on Ben Nevis estate is focussed on helping nature, people and communities. To help us achieve our vision, our exemplary management approach is based on the current priorities outlined in the sections below.

At Ben Nevis estate we are maintaining a safe access network to the summit of Ben Nevis and the Steall Gorge trail. We are re-establishing native woodland including Scots pine, including some planting with the local community as part of the Nevis Landscape Partnership. We are restoring peatland habitats and monitoring the impact of deer on natural regeneration of trees.

3.2 Freedom for Nature to repair itself

Our objective is to restore a mosaic of habitats which supports a diverse range of species, working alongside our neighbours and the local community to create a sustainable and functional ecosystem.

The character of the Ben Nevis estate mainly comprises heathland, peatland and blanket bog, grassland, bare rock and scree with semi-permanent snow with a much reduced area of mixed broad-leaved and Caledonian pine woodland than would have been historically present.

Our Ben Nevis estate is nationally important as it holds part of the last remnants of Atlantic or temperate rainforest in Scotland – Scotland's Rainforest: high levels of rainfall and relatively mild, year-round temperatures provide the right conditions for some of the world's rarest bryophytes and lichens.

A range of wildlife can be found there including some species that are locally extinct in other parts of Scotland. Our records include rare, protected birds of prey such as golden eagles and white-tailed eagles, plus red deer, pine marten, red squirrel, water vole, snow bunting, rare species of butterfly and over 30 rare species of lichen.

3.2.1 Woodlands

Objective WN: To allow the broadleaved deciduous woodlands at Nevis to expand in a natural way to restore a functional native woodland habitat and increase woodland connectivity.

Tree cover at Nevis has vastly reduced over the previous centuries. The steep, craggy banks of Nevis Gorge support the most significant area of woodland comprising birch, rowan and willow with Scots pine, hazel, alder and ash. Further up Glen Nevis, scattered birch, willow and rowan cling to the sides of burns and in craggy areas. We know from early maps of the area that woodland previously extended over a much larger area than this.

The remaining remnant woodland shows no significant signs of natural regeneration, principally due to the level of grazing by herbivores, principally deer and sheep. Over the next 25 years we hope to expand the existing woodland from lower-level riparian zones alongside the River Nevis up the sides of Glen Nevis, transitioning to the montane zone where it will become sparse, with predominantly dwarf birch and willows.

Activity	Timeline
Prepare a robust woodland planting plan, working with stakeholders, and attain any necessary statutory permissions.	2023-2024
Assess the impacts of herbivory from deer and sheep on natural regeneration and planted trees	2023 - 2024
Liaise with neighbours through SAC to identify and implement a solution for livestock incursions	2023
Attend bi-annual SAC Steering Group meetings	Ongoing

3.2.2 Peatlands

Objective BN: To ensure intact peatlands remain so, and where degradation and erosion has occurred that restoration enables the peatland to fulfil its potential capacity to capture and retain carbon, and to support biodiversity.

At lower altitudes in Glen Nevis, there is a predominance of peaty podzols, peaty gleys and peats on hummocky valley and slope moraines. A mosaic of *Erica*-dominated wet heath and *Molinia* grassland is predominant above the woodland. There are areas of blanket bog in pockets in the east of the estate around Tom a'Choineachaidh and at a higher altitude in the floor of Coire Guibhsachan. Wet heath is

widespread on the Ben Nevis estate on the valley sides and floor. There would once have been open woodland where much of the mosaic wet heath habitat exists at present. A Peatland Restoration Feasibility Study (2018) showed variability in the peat depth across the blanket bog and wet and dry heath mosaic habitats with deeper peat occurring in pockets.

The blanket bog around Tom a’Choineachaidh was identified as having bare peat, but showing strong indications of habitat recovery by NatureScot in 2013 during their Site Condition Monitoring Habitat Impact Assessment. The feasibility study showed peripheral areas of intact bog, but also occasional wide hags, sometimes with stony beds between, draining into the area of pristine bog. Across large parts of the area there is some revegetation of previously exposed peat. This suggests the drainage is no longer as active as it once was, and dams were installed in 2022 to block the peat-based drainage channels.

Activity	Timeline
Monitor the recovery of blanket bog at Tom a’Choineachaidh to determine if any further action is needed to enhance recovery	2023 onwards
Monitor and review trampling impacts of large-scale events	Annually

3.2.3 Grazing management

Objective GN: To reduce grazing pressure to a level that allows nature to repair itself.

Deer

The Trust recognises that deer have a vital part to play in a functioning ecosystem, however our monitoring data indicates that grazing pressure is too high to achieve natural regeneration.

The Trust will therefore carry out an annual deer cull at a level which aligns with the objective to restore habitats primarily through natural regeneration. Details of which can be seen in our deer management plan (appendix C). The Trust will seek to work together with neighbours sharing a deer range. The Mid West Deer Management Group is informed of the Trust’s cull requirement to aid in wider deer management planning. We also provide community access to hunting and venison.

Sheep

In addition to grazing from deer, Ben Nevis estate also experiences incursions from neighbouring landowners’ sheep. The Trust must address this issue to enable nature to have the freedom to thrive.

Activity	Timeline
Undertake an annual deer cull which is aligned to habitat recovery	Annual
Liaise with neighbours about shared stalking opportunities	Ongoing
Liaise with neighbours through SAC to identify and implement a solution for livestock incursions	2023

3.2.4 Monitoring nature’s recovery

Objective MN: Our sites to show habitat regeneration as a result of our management approach

The Trust takes an evidence-based approach to land management, so it is vital to monitor the impact of any interventions we make on the land, as well as how the land is changing due to external factors. We are currently assessing the following impacts at Ben Nevis:

Impacts	How we monitor them	Timeline
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To assess changes in the level of grazing, including browsing damage, and to inform deer management plans	40 heath plots and 130 tagged seedlings 5 woodland toolkit plots 2 tree transects (every 5 years) 6 mountain ringlet transects	2023 2023 2024 2023
To assess changes due to woodland expansion	2 breeding bird transects	2023
To reduce disturbance of protected species	Monitor the presence of golden eagle nests	Annual
To prevent local extinctions caused by invasive species	We monitor for presence of water voles and American mink, in partnership with neighbouring landowners	2023
To understand the effects of climate change on the species present	6 mountain ringlet transects Butterfly counts Snow bunting counts	2023 2023 2023

The Ben Nevis Estate Monitoring Plan details the existing monitoring plan along with analysis, results and recommendations (see appendix B).

Activity	Timeline
To produce robust site monitoring plans	2023

3.3 An individual's freedom to enjoy the benefit of wild places

We believe people should have access to wild places and the knowledge and awareness of how best to connect with the natural environment and the actions they can take to protect it. This connection builds value and those who value wild places are more likely to care for and take action to protect them.

The John Muir Trust wants to inspire people and communities to experience and feel empowered to advocate for the benefits of wild places, to be able to influence government and land managers to protect wild places. To do this, we maintain an access network across Ben Nevis estate, and keep the sites safe and tidy by regularly removing waste and litter that is left by people. We support our neighbours by working together on visitor management, including directing traffic and dealing with car parking and carrying out a visitor survey to understand the needs of people coming to the area. We install interpretation boards at trailheads and make information available via our website to allow people self-service access.

3.3.1 Access

Objective AN: To support public access by monitoring and maintaining the Ben Nevis path and Steall Gorge path and continue to review the wider path network as required.

The paths across Ben Nevis estate allow over 200,000 people to access this wild place every year. The Trust prioritises maintenance of the main Ben Nevis and Steall Gorge paths. We also endeavour to monitor and maintain a wider network of paths to encourage and support appropriate access on established paths, protecting the areas of ground that are most vulnerable to damage by people regularly walking across them. The latest full condition survey of the paths was completed in 2015.

The main path up Ben Nevis from 700 m elevation to the summit at 1345 m lies on land under the Trust's stewardship. This path is used by c 160,000 people every year. Several locations were identified that were suffering from erosion due to general use by the public, people taking shortcuts, and rainfall. Work is being carried out to direct water off the path, block short cuts and rebuild eroded areas/edges.

Any constructed features need continuous maintenance to keep them clear of scree. There is a concern that a direct erosion line down the north side of the switchbacks (where people are trying to avoid walking along the zig zags in the path) shows some trampling damage. We also maintain a series of cairns that follow a winter 'bearing' to aid navigation when the path is covered in snow.

The Steall Gorge path starts from the end of the road in Glen Nevis and is used by approximately 60,000 people each year. This path winds up through Steall Gorge, high above the Water of Nevis onto Steall meadows before becoming a less distinct 'trampled line' with no built features as it continues eastwards through to Corrour. The meadows and the view of the waterfall are the main destination for most of the path users.

Light touch work has been carried out annually since 2020 by University of the Highlands and Islands National Qualification students under the supervision of path contractors to repair and revegetate braided sections, build cross drains and pitching to reduce erosion. This light touch work could continue eastwards. In 2022 some repair work to improve drainage and reduce erosion and braiding around the path in the vicinity of the peatland repair work (Tom a'Choinneach) was carried out.

Activity	Timeline
Ben Nevis path maintenance	Annual, with a large repair contract for 2023
Steall Gorge path maintenance	Annual inspection of the bridges and wooden walkway by qualified engineer
Steall high path access maintenance (drainage, fallen tree clearance)	Annual
There are a number of unofficial paths that branch off from the main Steall path. The condition of these requires monitoring and some repair work may be required.	Annual
Replace people counters	2023

3.3.2 Visitor Infrastructure

Objective IN: To provide facilities and information for people on the estate to help them enjoy and explore wild places responsibly

Access to Ben Nevis estate is on foot at 700m above sea level on Ben Nevis, or on foot beyond the road and car park at the eastern end of Glen Nevis. There is no vehicle access to our land holdings. Public access to the site is obtained by passing through other sites where there are visitor facilities and/or interpretation. The Trust do not own any visitor infrastructure on the Ben Nevis estate.

As access to our estate is closely linked with access to neighbouring estates, we liaise with neighbouring landowners and the Nevis Landscape Partnership to recommend, develop and support appropriate development of visitor infrastructure e.g. toilets, car parks etc. in the vicinity of Ben Nevis estate. This enables visitors to access the land in both our and our neighbouring landowner's care. It also supports access to relevant safety, cultural and natural history information for visitors to the area.

Activity	Timeline
Identify shared opportunities with stakeholders to improve visitor infrastructure and interpretation	2023
Review and update interpretation	2024

3.4 The community's freedom to thrive in wild places

Thriving communities are core to the Trust's ethos and we work in partnership to enable communities to protect the wild places important to them. We understand that people and communities are not something distinct from nature but that they are interdependent, and we aim to enable communities to get the best from their wild places and thrive alongside the nature that lives there. We can only realise this with the help of communities who can care for wild places.

3.4.1 Partnerships

Objective PN: To actively explore and participate in partnerships that can benefit wild places and enhance the Trust's delivery of the three freedoms.

Our work on the Ben Nevis estate has greatly benefited from being part of the Nevis Landscape Partnership since it was established in 2002. John Muir Trust represents one of four landowners alongside Jahama Highland Estates, Forestry and Land Scotland and Glen Nevis Estate. The NLP was established in 1996 as the Nevis Steering Group and the Trust was a board member of the NLP from 2000 when they purchased the Ben Nevis estate until 2021 when the NLP changed its constitution and governance model to a community organisation with board members elected from the membership.

Over the years the partnership has grown and now consists of fifteen member organisations, with John Muir Trust holding a place on the Advisory Board. In 2014, the partnership was awarded Landscape Partnership Scheme funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund to deliver 19 projects over 5 years. Collectively we have secured £7 million of investment into the area, improving pathways and access for all, providing a visitor hub and ranger team, training members of the local community in outdoor skills, and better understanding the archaeology and history of the area. The NLP Strategy 2020-2040 outlining their vision and action plan can be found here [The Nevis Landscape Partnership | Ben Nevis Tourist Information](#)

There are common objectives and shared desirable outcomes around visitor engagement- Nevis Ranger Team, managing large scale events on Ben Nevis path, visitor facilities and interpretation, path maintenance and repair, habitat restoration and volunteer opportunities that have been delivered in partnership with the NLP and we will continue to explore opportunities to maximise our shared outcomes by working together where appropriate. The Trust's relationship with NLP is formalised through a Memorandum of Understanding.

The Trust will continue to build stronger relationships with neighbouring landowners to explore potential landscape scale projects where there are common objectives and values.

Activity	Timeline
Participate in and contribute to Nevis Landscape Partnership	Ongoing
Explore potential for landscape scale land management partnership with neighbouring landowners and other stakeholders	2023

3.4.2 Volunteering

Objective VN: To help us deliver our Property Management Plan and support people to feel connected to the site

The Trust regularly runs a series of volunteering opportunities for the public and members on Ben Nevis estate. These opportunities mainly centre around path maintenance on Ben Nevis and in Steall Gorge alongside litter picking sweeps of the main Ben Nevis path. Other volunteering opportunities - to carry out monitoring e.g. mountain ringlet or to contribute to specific projects e.g. peatland restoration - are coordinated and organised as and when opportunities arise.

Volunteering opportunities are generally strenuous due to access e.g. starting halfway up Ben Nevis and involving a whole day up and down the mountain or in a remote location beyond Steall Gorge, which can be challenging for volunteers with little experience of being out on remote areas on rough paths. As such, opportunities suit more experienced volunteers or those with outdoor hillwalking experience. It is challenging to accommodate large groups, e.g school groups, as the type of volunteer work suitable to large, enthusiastic, though relatively inexperienced groups are not prevalent.

Activity	Timeline
Create opportunities for volunteers to contribute to and participate in active habitat restoration	Ongoing
Explore possibilities for volunteering opportunities in partnership with NLP or neighbouring landowners	Ongoing
Path work parties	2023
Volunteer monitoring opportunities	2023

3.4.3 Outdoor Learning

Objective LN: To provide inspiring outdoor learning opportunities for people to connect with wild places and learn about our work to conserve, protect, and repair them.

The Ben Nevis estate and the town of Fort William provide a range of opportunities to engage with high visitor numbers (around 160,000 people ascend Ben Nevis every year). There are also a variety of opportunities to engage with the local community, which is made up of approximately 12,000 people within the immediate population of Fort William. This includes seven primary schools, Lochaber High School and a University of Highlands and Islands campus (West Highland College).

Since 2021 we have delivered a Nevis Junior Ranger programme, the aim of which is to offer young people an opportunity to actively contribute to conservation projects in their area, and gain experience in the outdoors and conservation sector. In line with Scottish Countryside Rangers Association (SCRA) and EUROPARC guiding principles, the programme is composed of a combination of practical experiences and training.

Since 2020 University of the Highlands and Islands National Qualification students have delivered practical conservation tasks, including path repairs and habitat monitoring, whilst working towards their John Muir Award.

Activity	Timeline
Deliver the Junior Ranger programme	2023
Work with students from the University of the Highlands and Islands	Ongoing
Support John Muir Award groups with discovering, exploring, conserving and sharing their Award	Ongoing
Explore the potential to link with NLP on ongoing projects to connect with the local community in a collaborative manner.	Ongoing

3.4.4 Public Events

Objective EN: To allow people access to wild places and share our work with the wider community

Ben Nevis attracts a high number of large-scale events every year. There are over 200 large-scale charity/fundraising group ascents of Ben Nevis annually. In 2022, NLP started to coordinate charity event requests on behalf of the three affected landowners and the residents of Glen Nevis.

There are several regular large scale race events requesting permission every year including Ben Nevis Skyline, Ben Nevis Race, Nevis triathlon and a number of requests for other one-off race events each year. There are occasional enquires for large scale events for the public and many regular requests for access and permission for filming for media projects at a variety of scales. The military have an agreement to access Ben Nevis estate for training and inform the Trust of dates and routes. There are around 60 of these annually.

The Trust attends the Fort William Mountain Festival each year.

Activity	Timeline
Respond to and manage impacts of requests for access for large scale events, military access, public events and filming requests.	2023
Attend Fort William Mountain Festival	Annual

3.4.5 Consultation

Objective CN: To work with the community of interested individuals and groups and incorporate their thoughts and ideas into the Ben Nevis management plan.

Consultation is a key part of land management and the decision-making process. This management plan lays out the vision and broadly details our objectives for the estate. The Trust will engage with and undertake consultation with the local community and other stakeholders on specific aspects of land management as they develop.

Activity	Timeline
Consult on our activities as we develop our plans	Ongoing

4 Appendices

A: Ben Nevis Estate Description

B: Habitat Monitoring Plan

C: Deer Management Plan

D: Engagement and Evaluation Plan