



JOHN MUIR TRUST

Journal

79 Autumn/Winter 2025

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Life force

How the Trust is putting natural processes first



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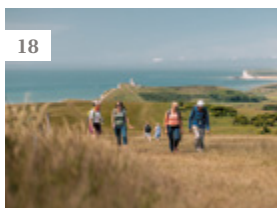




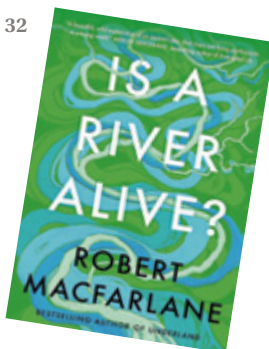
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PHOTOGRAPHY (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP): MARK HAMBLIN/2020VISION; JAKE BAGGALEY; THE RAMBLERS
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Contributing editor:

Rich Rowe

journal@johnmuirtrust.org

Managing editor:

Julie Gough

julie.gough@johnmuirtrust.org

Design and production:

Jade Farquharson and Roisin McGroarty

Connect Communications connectmedia.cc



If you would rather receive publications from the John Muir Trust electronically, please email membership@johnmuirtrust.org

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HEAD OFFICE

John Muir Trust
Tower House
Station Road
Pitlochry
Perthshire PH16 5AN

t. 01796 470 080
w. johnmuirtrust.org

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Much to celebrate

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST



WELCOME to the autumn/winter *Journal* 2025. By the time this arrives, I hope the predictions of a spectacular blaze of autumn colour has materialised.

At the Trust we have much to celebrate, including an amazing team and talented group of staff eager to drive change; a newly developed definition of 'wild places' that allows us to measure progress and impact; clear evidence that our land is recovering from years of overgrazing; a hugely successful Members' and Supporters' Gathering; and our partnership with Phoenix Futures at Glenlude being shortlisted for a prestigious Nature of Scotland Award.

I firmly believe wild places are and always will be ours to define and hold dear. Our experiences and needs change through life and these will always be deeply personal and define who we are. Our lives are enriched by the extraordinary complexity and beauty of wild places. They inspire awe and belonging, shape our identity and offer space for solitude and renewal.

These experiential qualities can never be taken from us. However, as a charity whose purpose is to protect wild places across the UK, we must be alert to the shifting baseline that allows for their steady erosion. Our definition of wild places puts natural processes and natural landscapes first; and land that is managed to enhance both – ideally in perpetuity – are the wild places we will focus on as a charity.

We are committed to ensuring a lasting future for wild places as your legacy to generations to come, and many of the articles in this issue show how we are going to make that happen across the country, from Coventry to Knoydart.

Our first urban wild place project at Charterhouse Heritage Park in Coventry is taking shape (see page 6). We are hopeful that this commitment to natural processes and making the landscape natural within its social and geographic context signals a shift in society's understanding and appreciation of wild places.

The striking results of tree regeneration in Knoydart, with a developing understory of brambles, honeysuckle and wild rose are reported on page 14 during a revealing return trip. We also look at the challenge of managing invasive gunnera on Knoydart (see page 16).

Elsewhere, you can read about how and why we will have to use fencing to protect East Schiehallion and ensure the regeneration of rare mountain woodland on page 26. You can also contribute directly to this effort through our Mountain Woodland appeal.

Elsewhere, on page 28, you can find out how the re-launched John Muir Award is making an impact, with more than 1,300 participants taking action for wild places across Scotland, England, Northern Ireland and Wales.

We also have a welcome interview with Amar Latif, President of The Ramblers, and a guest feature from Wildlife and Countryside Link which outlines concerns about new planning laws and what they could mean for wild places in England.

I hope you find this issue to be an informative and thought-provoking read – please remember to complete our readership survey to let us know your views. As ever, we remain indebted to you for your ongoing support – and I hope you are able to spend some time enjoying the peace and tranquillity of a wild place this autumn. □

David Balharry
CEO, John Muir Trust

We'd love to know what you think of the *Journal*. Please take five minutes to complete our readers' survey at johnmuirtrust.org/readers-survey



PHOTOGRAPH: LES WARD

Charterhouse has a hidden network of green spaces along the River Sherbourne corridor

Charterhouse plans progress

The first steps to connecting Coventry's communities with the city's emerging Charterhouse Heritage Park are now underway

The Trust has secured £89,722 as part of Coventry City Council's successful bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund's Nature Towns and Cities fund to consult and engage with local people as we develop and promote our plans for this unique urban wild place.

The fund will help establish baseline patterns of access, use and local perspectives across this hidden network of green spaces around Charterhouse and along the River Sherbourne corridor. We will run a pilot programme of engagement and training activities to inspire residents, including heritage talks, wildlife walks and river surveys.

Local communities will also be able to feed into early proposals for access improvements, including

new pathways and bridges, habitat creation and enhancement projects such as new wetland schemes, as well as the events and activities that they would like to see happening to encourage the community to benefit more from the site.

In addition, the Trust will work with local schools and community groups to support them to deliver John Muir Awards across the city, providing leaders with training and resources to discover, explore, conserve and share their experience of local wild places.

Finally, we will also map the provision of green skills training across the city with a view to developing Charterhouse as a local training hub.

Old gear put to good use

Following a successful trial earlier in the year, outdoor retailer Tiso is rolling out its Worn But Not Worn Out initiative to all its stores in Scotland – with the John Muir Trust one of several charity partner beneficiaries.

The scheme sees Tiso stores receive donations of used outdoor gear and equipment which meets product standards, then prepared for resale on dedicated Worn But

Not Worn Out stands. All proceeds are donated to four charitable causes: John Muir Trust, Scottish Mountain Rescue, Polar Academy and Mhòr Outdoor.

Many unwanted items often still have years of outdoor adventures left in them, with re-used kit helping reduce the emissions associated with production of new products and less waste ending up in landfill.

In July, following a trial period for the initiative at its Dundee and Perth stores, Tiso donated £1,500 from the resale of donations received to the Trust.

"I am proud to see the profits from our Worn But Not Worn Out initiative go directly to our charity partners," commented Chris Tiso, Tiso Chief Executive. "From building confidence and resilience in young people to saving lives in the mountains, connecting communities with the outdoors and protecting wild places for future generations, they all help to make the outdoors safe, inclusive and preserved for all."

For more on the initiative, visit tiso.com/worn

Some of the litter collected on the beach clean

PHOTOGRAPH: ADRIAN TRENDALL



Camasunary beach clean

John MacRae and Frances Mackinnon from the Trust's Skye team recently supported a group of 30 local volunteers and researchers from Loughborough University for a beach clean at Camasunary – a beauty spot on the Isle of Skye that is regularly overwhelmed by plastic waste and discarded fishing gear.

The group, who were joined by members of Skye Beach Clean and the Johnson family who own the beach and were staying nearby, collected piles of maritime debris, including plastic tubes and piping that had broken free from nearby fish farms. The waste was gathered into huge bags for removal by a boat provided by Mowi Scotland.

Alongside the clean-up, research students mapped the density of plastic debris across the bay. Their findings underscore the scale of the problem: fishing nets, buoys, ropes, plastic ties, bottles and bags are routinely washed ashore, ground into the sand and even buried beneath vegetation.

Dr Tom Stanton from Loughborough University, who launched the 50 Years of Litter campaign in 2022, was inspired by a 50-year-old academic paper warning of marine pollution reaching Skye. Since then, his team has returned for three consecutive seasons to monitor and help clear the beaches.

The project aims to develop new techniques for mapping polluted coastlines – including drone surveys – to better understand the extent of marine litter and inform future conservation efforts.

"Although not part of the Trust's landholding, Camasunary has a special place in the hearts of our members, the local community and countless visitors," explained John. "The chance to collaborate with the Johnson family and others to limit the spread of plastic debris across sensitive habitats is worthwhile both from an environmental and educational point of view."

National park challenge

Ewein Howes, a medical student at Cardiff University, spent a month this summer cycling almost 3,000km across the UK, raising funds for the John Muir Trust. Beginning his journey in early June, he challenged himself to visit all 15 of the UK's national parks and climb the highest peak in each.

"I've always been into hillwalking and climbing and recently got into cycling at university by doing triathlons," explained Ewein. "The idea of doing this challenge started as a joke in the pub, but when I looked up the national parks, I saw that you could cycle between them, and so a plan started to come together."

This mammoth journey was undertaken in celebration of the 70th anniversary of the UK's national parks, with Ewein's awareness of our work to protect and enhance wild places making us the perfect beneficiary for his trip, which raised £1,262 for the Trust.

"As a healthcare student, I feel a connection with the outdoors is important for people's physical and mental health and the John Muir Trust does lots of work for conservation in these wild places," he commented.

Ewein's challenge started in the East of England at the UK's flattest national park, the Norfolk Broads. He then cycled towards London to the South Downs and travelled through the south of England before crossing over to Wales and heading north, finishing his journey in the Cairngorms National Park.

"While trains and cars are a great way to visit and explore far away wild places, you don't get the connection with the land that you do with human-powered adventures," said Ewein. "When cycling or walking you're fully in tune with the environment, and you really have a chance to immerse yourself and appreciate that wild place."

For more on how to raise funds for the Trust, visit johnmuirtrust.org/support-us/fundraise



Ewein on the summit of Ben Macdui

PHOTOGRAPH: EWEIN HOWES

Glenlude award nomination

Our nature recovery partnership with Phoenix Futures at Glenlude has been shortlisted for a 2025 Nature of Scotland Health and Wellbeing Award.

For 13 years we have welcomed volunteers from the Phoenix Futures Recovery Through Nature project, which helps people overcome drug and alcohol dependency issues. Under the leadership of our onsite team, they have been growing the 'Phoenix Forest', which contributes

to our nature recovery plans at Glenlude by creating a mosaic of habitats and replacing conifer plantation with native broadleaf trees.

What was a stark, bare hillside is now a thriving young woodland.

Award winners will be announced on 20 November.



The upgraded toilet block at the car park

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

Loo with a view

Important upgrades now complete at the Trust's Blà Bheinn site

Visitors have been enjoying improved facilities at the Trust's popular site on the Blà Bheinn estate on the Isle of Skye following completion earlier this year of a much-needed upgrade to its toilet facilities and wider car park improvements.

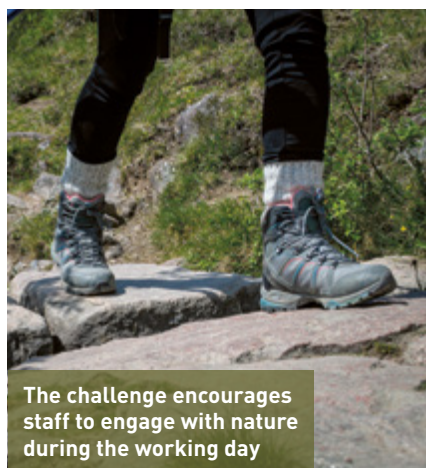
The original composting toilet system at the site was intended to accommodate no more than a dozen users per day. However, usage quickly exceeded expectations, with car and door counters recording up to 40 users daily.

Unfortunately, misuse of the facilities – including

disposal of litter and food waste – impacted the composting process and prompted a reassessment of the system. Several options were considered, including building larger composting toilets, contracting a company to remove waste more frequently and converting to a flushing system using the local water supply.

A decision was taken to commission a local architect to design a sustainable wet toilet system within the existing building footprint, incorporating a small cupboard for cleaning supplies.

Following planning approval in late 2023, full funding was secured from Highland Council in early 2024. Work on the toilet upgrade and further car park improvements – building on a major upgrade in 2019 – began in April and was completed by the end of May in time for the busy summer season.



The challenge encourages staff to engage with nature during the working day

PHOTOGRAPH: ROSS BRANNIGAN

Work and walk

This summer, the Trust launched a first-of-its-kind employee engagement initiative to inspire people to connect with nature.

An opportunity for organisations to support staff wellbeing and foster a deeper connection with the natural

world, the Step Up for Wild Places challenge encourages people to get outside by actively commuting or simply taking a midday stroll.

The challenge is designed to support wellbeing, spark creativity and boost productivity, all while helping people reconnect with nature during the working day.

The challenge itself is simple: each organisation chooses one of four famous UK mountains – Ben Nevis, Blà Bheinn, Helvellyn or Schiehallion – and each participant aims to 'climb' it over the course of a week (or more) by tracking their daily steps.

Every step taken brings them closer to the summit and raises funds for the wild places their chosen mountain represents.

On completion of the challenge, each organisation receives a bespoke certificate featuring a photograph of their chosen mountain, along

with the total funds raised and number of participants. It represents a meaningful symbol of the organisation's commitment to corporate social responsibility.

"I've worked in business-to-business roles throughout my career, with a strong focus on spreadsheets, numbers, ROI and KPIs," explained Ailsa Colquhoun, the Trust's Corporate Partnerships Manager who came up with the idea.

"It's easy to start seeing life through a lens of efficiency, income, influence and management.

"That's why I was inspired to create this initiative – to help people in similar roles reconnect with a healthier perspective, and to remind them that they're part of the most important network of all: nature."

For more on this ultimate workplace challenge, visit johnmuirtrust.org/step-up-for-wild-places

The power of generosity

Since joining the Trust in December 2024, Liv Adams has witnessed firsthand the profound impact of philanthropy on the Trust's mission to protect and restore wild places. In her role as Fundraising Officer in the Trust's income generation team, Liv works closely with donors and supporters, and has been struck by the generosity, passion and

love for wild places that fuels the Trust's work.

This year has already seen several fundraising milestones: the Trust exceeded its £20,000 target in the Green Match Fund, providing a vital boost for the East Schiehallion mountain woodland project (see page 26).

More recently, a one-off donation of £35,000 from a long-

time supporter marked another significant moment.

"For a small but determined organisation like ours, donations like these make a real, immediate impact," commented Liv. "They help us take steps to protect wild places through our land management, community engagement and policy work."

Beyond the numbers, Liv has spent time on Trust properties with land teams, trustees and partners, gaining a deeper understanding of the scale and nuance of the Trust's conservation efforts.

"From restoring montane scrub and peatlands to supporting volunteer groups, it's clear how deeply donor support shapes the land in the Trust's care," added Liv. "None of the Trust's work would be possible without our supporters."

As the Trust looks ahead, Liv will continue to share progress and celebrate the impact of those who make it all possible.



Liv (front) and group at Thirlmere

Enriching communities

Launched in 2024 in partnership with Tiso and Mhòr Outdoor, the Connect Outdoors programme continues to see a variety of new partners committing to enriching their communities through sustainable and empowering outdoor experiences.

A seven-week educational hiking programme, Connect Outdoors is designed to help people from under-represented communities build confidence, knowledge and a sense of belonging in nature.

While the outdoors offers proven benefits for mental and physical health, many people face barriers to access, whether due to ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual identity, physical ability or personal circumstances. Connect Outdoors aims to break down these barriers and promote responsible engagement with Scotland's wild places.

Led by qualified mountain leaders, hikes become progressively more challenging, combining practical navigation with environmental education.

Recent highlights include Community InfoSource, a Glasgow-based group supporting refugees and asylum seekers, summiting their first Munro – Beinn Ghlas – while YAHYAs Hub, a charity supporting unaccompanied young asylum seekers near Aberdeen, explored the coastlines and hills of Aberdeenshire, applying their new skills in real-world conditions.

Three other organisations have recently joined



A YAHYAs Hub group exploring seabird cliffs in Aberdeenshire

the programme: Simon Community, a homelessness charity in Edinburgh; Upmo, a charity providing support and opportunity for adults with learning disabilities and autism across Edinburgh, East Lothian and Midlothian; and Sole Sister, an outdoor adventure group for Scottish Muslim girls and women near Dundee.

"It's been fantastic to see participants build skills and confidence in the outdoors," commented Laura Curtis-Moss, the Trust's Community Outreach Manager. "We hope the passion they've developed continues to inspire lasting connections with nature."

Earlier this year, Connect Outdoors also launched a leadership initiative to support five programme graduates on their journey to becoming outdoor leaders.

Life force

From the northwest Highlands to Cumbria, the Trust's land management work continues to restore habitat and boost biodiversity on the ground, writes **Rich Rowe**

LANDSCAPE-SCALE habitat restoration is rarely a quick fix but, today, areas of land in the Trust's care have been born again – a rejuvenation that has seen life return across an increasingly broad canvas.

With time a key ingredient, this is no more apparent than at Lì and Coire Dhorrcail, a remote wild place on the northeastern slopes of Ladhar Bheinn on the Knoydart peninsula that became the Trust's very first property in 1987 (see page 14). In the almost 40 years since, it has become a showcase for how sensitive stewardship of wild places can help restore ecologically impoverished landscapes.

Once overgrazed by sheep and deer, the landscape here now looks very different. The scarce and patchy areas of woodland recorded on site in those early years has now spread considerably thanks to an ongoing programme of woodland regeneration.

This work, alongside control of deer numbers, has helped further the natural growth of birch, oak, hazel, Scots pine, aspen, rowan and more. Today, these native trees cloak the hillside climbing up into the coire, with further reductions in deer numbers enabling mass regeneration across a wider area.

While Knoydart is also known for its wet heath and grassland, it is this regenerating temperate rainforest habitat that provides the foundation for life: pine martens, otters, roe deer, water voles, bats and many types of woodland birds – while buzzards, golden and sea eagles patrol the skies.

Knoydart is not without its challenges. There are concerns, for instance, over the spread of gunnera – an especially vigorous invasive non-native species (see page 16) – but, overall, the signs are incredibly positive.

DEER MANAGEMENT

The Trust's land stewardship is rigorously science-led, with long-term datasets guiding everything from tracking tree growth and understanding herbivore impacts to monitoring the health of rare species. The use of such data helps staff on the ground understand what's working and what needs adjusting.

Central to this effort is the management of deer numbers, and not just at Knoydart. When it comes to browsing impact, some land will need to remain protected by fencing – with the work on montane woodland at East Schiehallion a good example (see page 26) – while in other areas, reductions in browsing and grazing are such that fencing is no longer required. The ambition is always for sustainable numbers of deer to come and go through healthy woodland that is very much their home too.



PHOTOGRAPH: CHRIS PUDEPHATT

“Since the beginning of 2023, the Trust has stepped up its cull at Quinag to help meet its ecological objectives – with positive early signs”

At Quinag, a dramatic range of peaks in Assynt, work continues to restore and protect a mosaic of native woodland, heather moorland, grassy slopes and peatland that has been degraded by historic heather burning, overgrazing by sheep and browsing by deer numbers that far exceed the carrying capacity of the land.

Since the beginning of 2023, the Trust has stepped up its cull at Quinag to help meet its ecological objectives – with positive early signs. A thermal drone survey carried out in September 2024 measured the minimum deer density at 3.1 deer/km² – down from 6 deer/km² in 2022. With another cull season complete since the drone survey, it is expected that numbers will now be lower still.

“It is so important that we measure the success of deer control by habitat response rather than an arbitrary deer density but, as a guide, consistent densities of around



Native tree growth in the gullies at Quinag

2 deer/km² or lower typically facilitate the most effective natural regeneration,” notes Matthew Coathup, the Trust’s Head of Wild Places Index and Project Manager.

Within and around remnants of woodland to the south and east of Quinag, as well as the ancient Ardvar Woodlands – a Site of Special Scientific Interest on the northern side of Quinag – there is especially encouraging regeneration. In June, the Trust carried out annual marked seedling monitoring, with data gathered on the height of the tree, whether the lead shoot had been browsed during the growth season and evidence of browsing anywhere on the plant.

“The results of the monitoring work are positive and exciting to see, with clear growth in mean seedling height and significant reduction in browse pressure – although the need to sustain strong deer management remains,” notes Matthew. “There is also promising tree growth on open ground outside of the current woodland, showing the potential for woodland expansion.”

JOINING THE DOTS

The management of deer is also a key focus at Nevis where the Trust recently celebrated 25 years of caring

for the UK’s highest mountain and surrounding glen. “This wild mountain and glen have shaped my life,” says Alison Austin, the Trust’s Nevis Manager, who has worked on the property now for almost two decades. “It provides both challenge and joy.”

As the most visited of all the Trust’s properties – some 160,000 people climb to the summit of Ben Nevis each year – landscape resilience here is key, with protection and restoration of connected habitats that range from river valley and grassy meadows at the base of the glen to ancient woodlands and high alpine summits that support communities of Arctic alpine plants.

Working with neighbouring land managers and the local community as part of the Nevis Landscape Partnership, the Trust has adopted a landscape-scale approach.

With much of the native woodland that once covered the slopes of Ben Nevis having disappeared, and only small patches of birch, rowan and willow remaining on steep slopes, one major element of work here has focused on helping native woodland to expand naturally from riverbanks to hillsides. This is being achieved through sensitive grazing management, natural



Pine martens now thrive in many areas

PHOTOGRAPH: MARK HAMBLIN/2020VISION

regeneration and enrichment planting in collaboration with the local community as part of the Nevis Landscape Partnership Future Forest project.

Nevis is also home to an important remnant of Scotland's once widespread temperate rainforest – a globally rare ecosystem with a unique assemblage of nationally rare lichens, mosses, liverworts and other bryophytes.

Meanwhile, work on restoring damaged areas of peatlands that began three years ago has already begun to bear fruit, with the blocking of drainage channels allowing the 'rewetting' of dried, exposed peatland, which in turn has supported vegetation recovery.

"It has been lovely seeing those exposed peat hags slowly rewet, while smaller pools re-emerge behind coir dams and start to recolonise with sphagnum," notes Alison. "It's especially exciting to record for the first time this summer the presence of the rare Northern Emerald dragonfly, which relies on those pools."

For Alison, a key part of her and the Trust's role at Nevis is to build strong and trusting relationships that enable shared partnership projects to establish. In particular, she points to the recent launch of an ambitious nature restoration project together with neighbouring landowners and partners: JAHAMA Highland Estate, Glen Nevis Estate and Forestry and Land Scotland.

"Spanning 9,000ha, the project aims to restore a thriving woodland network in the Nevis landscape, connecting an expanding stronghold of Scotland's rainforest to montane scrub on the high mountain slopes," explains Alison.

THRIVING ECOSYSTEMS

A habitat restoration site that continues to flourish as a wild space for communities, Glenlude in the Scottish Borders is another location where the Trust's work is helping to create thriving ecosystems with an ever-expanding cast of wildlife.

Since July 2024, the Trust has increased native woodland by replacing continuous cover forestry with locally grown broadleaf species and added new tree pockets to open grassland – often supported by volunteer groups such as Phoenix Futures and Jamie's Wood.

Such targeted planting is helping to create joined-up habitats that support the natural process of woodland succession and regeneration – with native species such as birch, rowan, aspen and even the occasional oak taking hold. Some of the oldest planted trees are now spreading and producing seed, which provides food sources for birds such as jays which can now be seen flitting between trees and stashing acorns.

The biodiversity benefits of a woodland network that features a mix of ages, structures, densities, open glades and deadwood are becoming ever clearer thanks to a detailed programme of ecological monitoring. Central to this have been the annual Breeding Bird Surveys which provide an insight into population trends that help build a broader picture of Glenlude's ecological health.

As surveys reveal, Glenlude has experienced a huge growth not just in individual bird numbers recorded – from just 200 individuals in 2014 to 757 in 2024 – but also species diversity, with more than 40 different species now regularly recorded (up from 29 in 2014).



PHOTOGRAPH: MARK HAMBLIN/2020VISION

Glenlude has just recorded the highest number of black grouse in a decade



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

The Trust will monitor the ecological recovery of rewetted peatland at Thirlmere

“Butterflies are a key indicator species. Their presence and diversity reflect the health of our environment and help us understand the impacts of habitat loss and climate change”

One exciting development has been the dramatic increase in numbers of lesser redpolls, a red-listed species in decline due to habitat loss. In 2014, only a single individual was spotted, yet a decade on in 2024, their numbers had risen to 219 – an astonishing jump that staff attribute in part to the greater availability of seeds from regenerating birch and alder at Glenlude.

Numbers of blackcaps, goldcrests, stonechats, willow warblers, siskins, skylarks and crossbills have also increased markedly, while seven male black grouse were recorded this spring – the highest number on site for a decade.

And it's not just birds. This year, a total of 10 adders were recorded on site as well as six species of butterfly, including three (brimstone, large skipper and green hairstreak) that have not previously been recorded at Glenlude.

“These sightings are more than just exciting moments,” notes Ellie Oakley, the Trust’s Conservation Officer at Glenlude. “Butterflies are key indicator species. Their presence and diversity reflect the health of our environment and help us understand the impacts of habitat loss and climate change.”

NATURAL PROCESSES

A little further south, in the heart of the Lake District National Park, the Trust is a core member of the Thirlmere Resilience Partnership, working alongside United Utilities, Natural England and the Cumbria Wildlife Trust.

Here, the focus is on restoring natural processes through the reintroduction of native woodland, regeneration of peatland and the revival of rare upland vegetation. All are actions that together help improve biodiversity, water capture, carbon storage and the landscape’s overall resilience to climate change.

In just two full years since the project began, more than 10,000 native trees have been planted across a 40km² area of catchment. Feeding this work is an on-site tree nursery

dedicated to propagating rare upland trees and shrubs, including downy and tea-leaved willows, dwarf birch and rock whitebeam, from locally-sourced seed.

Once established, all will be reintroduced to crag habitats, helping to restore upland biodiversity and stabilise the steep slopes around Thirlmere. To ensure the successful reintroduction of these species, the Trust’s Isaac Johnston is leading targeted fencing initiatives to reduce pressure from high numbers of red and roe deer, as well as sheep.

A key part of this work is the imminent installation of the Combe Crag Montane Scrub enclosure that will create a sanctuary for regeneration and long-term habitat recovery. “The enclosure will protect these young montane scrub species from grazing pressure, giving rare plants the chance to establish and flourish,” notes Isaac.

Alongside this effort, the Cumbria Wildlife Trust is working to restore large areas of degraded peatland around Thirlmere to improve the land’s water retention capacity and recover habitat for a wide range of upland wildlife and vegetation species. The John Muir Trust will then lead the subsequent ecological monitoring work, with Isaac having already installed measuring rods which can track changes to the water table and determine the recovery rate of sphagnum mosses – both strong indicators of recovering peatland habitat.

Although still in its infancy, the associated landscape-wide ecological monitoring programme at Thirlmere will provide an essential baseline against which future changes in key habitats and species can be tracked. “These surveys will be repeated annually, giving us the data we need to guide adaptive management and restoration strategies,” says Isaac.

It can be a long and often gruelling process but here, as elsewhere, the balance is being tipped in favour of natural processes and life is making a very welcome return. □

About the author

Rich Rowe is contributing editor for the Journal

Before and after

Natalia Barbour charts a return to Knoydart that highlights how a landscape has recovered during its almost 40 years in the Trust's care

NESTLED in a remote corner of Scotland's west coast, the land we steward at Li and Coire Dhorrcail on the Knoydart peninsula is a place of rugged beauty and ecological richness. It's also a landscape that holds many stories of past settlement, livestock grazing and sport shooting.

Today, the fenced area on the lower slopes contrasts sharply with what was until relatively recently land overbrowsed by high numbers of deer. Beyond the fence, fragile remnants of montane woodland, clinging to spots that are inaccessible to deer, wait for the day when their own seeds can flourish without such protection.

Here, where the land and sea meet in dramatic fashion, there are nesting golden and sea eagles, pine martens, otters and more. On the boat crossing from Arnisdale, large pods of Atlantic white-sided dolphins are a regular sight.

While there is acknowledgement of the pony paths, hill dykes, sheilings and sheep fanks that all help explain past land uses, it is now a place where natural processes largely hold sway. Happily, the fencing used by the Trust to help boost woodland regeneration will soon be removed given the reduced browsing pressure.

EARLY BEGINNINGS

This wild place is also where the story of the Trust began. Knoydart was the catalyst that brought the Trust's four founding members – Chris Brasher, Nick Luard, Denis Mollison and Nigel Hawkins – together in response to threats from the Ministry of

Captured this summer (right), the landscape now looks very different from when the original photograph (left) was taken in 1988



PHOTOGRAPHY: DENIS MOLLISON

Defence to purchase parts of the peninsula for military training.

Chris Brasher, an Olympic medallist, and Nick Luard, co-founder of *Private Eye*, had long been involved in efforts to save the area. Meanwhile, Denis and Nigel were developing a draft constitution for 'Wild Land in Trust'. A series of chance encounters and a shared vision to protect and restore wild places led to their collaboration and the creation of the Trust in January 1983.

In the Trust's 40th anniversary publication, Bob Aitken, our first membership secretary, recalled that it was "a small but committed band

"Knoydart was the catalyst that brought the Trust's four founding members together in response to threats from the Ministry of Defence to purchase parts of the peninsula"

of lively and contrasting personalities engaged in a long wrangle with large external processes and multiple agencies and actors with distinctly



“These two photographs – taken nearly four decades apart – are more than just snapshots in time. They are visual markers of latent potential hidden within the land”

different agendas and priorities”.

At the time, Knoydart’s landscape bore the scars of centuries of overgrazing. Native

tree cover had been severely reduced and the habitat was in poor condition. Initially, the Trust used fencing to help on the Lì face to reverse this damage, with efforts made to reduce deer numbers elsewhere alongside the planting of native trees such as birch, oak, hazel, rowan and Scots pine.

Volunteers have long played a vital role in this transformation, planting and protecting trees and beating down bracken to prevent shading, while also clearing some of the non-native invasive species that are present (see Gunning for gunnera, page 16).

ALL CHANGE

Trustees recently visited Knoydart to see the changes that have taken place since the Trust took ownership in 1989. They took with them a photograph taken in 1988 during one of the Trust’s first work parties at Lì and Coire Dhorrcail. Captured from a hillside overlooking the shore close to Eilean a’ Mhuineil, the image shows a very different scene from the current one – with bare slopes, stripped of native tree cover and wildlife pushed out.

“It’s actually quite hard to find the exact same spot now,” commented one of the visiting Trustees. “The growth has changed the view. Back then, the hillside was more open – you could see the shore clearly. This time, we had to push through undergrowth and growing trees to reach the same position.”

Eventually, the location was found and a new photograph was taken. In the updated image, bracken and lichens fill the foreground, while native trees stand tall, obscuring the view of the shore. In the distance, the slopes are beginning to fill with life once more.

These two photographs – taken nearly four decades apart – are more than just snapshots in time. They are visual markers of latent potential hidden within the land. Frustrated by political, financial and practical challenges in deer control, the Trust’s first approach was to adopt fencing.

Today, however, there is a willingness and ability to reduce deer numbers effectively – with efforts now continuing across all our properties.

In many ways, Knoydart reflects the Trust’s journey as well as the resilience of staff on the front line and of the land itself. It is the birthplace of the Trust and the testing ground for our guiding principles. The continued transformation of this landscape reminds us why giving primacy to natural processes matter – and what’s possible when we commit for the long term. □

About the author

Natalia Barbour is the Trust’s Digital Communications Officer



Knoydart offers perfect conditions for gunnera to spread

examining the plants' DNA, the Royal Horticultural Society recently discovered that most gunnera plants in the UK are actually a hybrid between *Gunnera manicata* and the highly invasive *Gunnera tinctoria*, which originates from the wetlands of Argentina and Chile. This hybrid is named *Gunnera x cryptica* in reference to its cryptic existence, having hidden in plain sight for years.

Across its home range in South America, *G. tinctoria* populations are kept in balance by natural controls but those controls don't exist in the UK, leaving the plant free to spread at a remarkable rate. Given its invasive nature, the sale, cultivation and release into the wild of both *G. tinctoria* and *G. x cryptica* is now banned in the UK.

IDEAL CONDITIONS

One of the secrets of the spread of gunnera is that it produces thousands of tiny seeds, which can easily be transported by birds, wind and watercourses, helping the plant to populate areas far away.

Gunnera can also spread through broken plant fragments, including sections of rhizome – plant stems that grow underground and from which roots can establish. This makes removal more challenging, as any remaining fragments underground are highly resilient and may allow plants to grow back.

Rapid water-borne spread is particularly common, as gunnera has fibrous roots which thrive in damp

Gunning for gunnera

Natalia Barbour looks at ongoing efforts to tackle an invasive giant on Knoydart

ANYONE exploring the remote woodlands at Li and Coire Dhorrcail on Knoydart may encounter an exotic looking plant with huge, sprawling leaves covering a stretch of hillside and nearby burns. This is gunnera, a giant, Jurassic-looking plant that is climbing steadily up the hill, towering over other vegetation. It's a striking sight, but the problem is that it doesn't belong here.

More commonly known as giant rhubarb, gunnera is not native to

Knoydart or even to the UK. It is not even related to true rhubarb. With enormous leaves – sometimes two metres across – and thick stalks, the plant's name comes from its resemblance to the much smaller rhubarb that we know well.

Gunnera is believed to have been originally transported to the UK by the Victorians for use in their glasshouses. For a long time, most of the plants in the UK were believed to be *Gunnera manicata*, a species native to Brazil. However, by

PHOTOGRAPH: ADDBESTOCK



areas such as bogs, wetlands and riparian zones alongside streams and rivers. *G. x cryptica* is also more frost-resistant than its parent *G. manicata*, so improving its tolerance to UK conditions. As such, the burn-covered hillsides of Knoydart offer an ideal home for this highly invasive species.

We believe Knoydart's Gunnera may have first been planted in a private garden and then spread by wind, water or birds until it took hold along watercourses halfway up the hillside. While its distribution is reasonably contained at present, gunnera poses a significant threat to the riparian habitat and stability of the banks of the burn as native species are shaded out.

Following our deer management efforts, there is exciting natural regeneration underway at Lì and Coire Dhorrcail, with native woodland, heather and understory all in resurgence. However, as highlighted in our Autumn 2024 *Journal*, invasive non-native species such as gunnera can damage ecosystems and prevent native regeneration if left unchecked.

Such is the widespread potential harm to native species that the Scottish Government has recognised dealing with such invasives as a priority action in its Biodiversity Strategy to 2045.

TAKING ACTION

In an area such as Knoydart, which is sufficiently remote to make regular and ongoing population control



PHOTOGRAPH: NATALIA BARBOUR

Inspecting some of the gunnera plants on site

challenging, complete removal of the plant is the only reliable way to protect native species and habitats.

However, the remoteness of the area is such that traditional methods used to remove invasive species need to be reconsidered. The easiest way to reach the gunnera at Lì and Coire Dhorrcail is first by boat, travelling across Loch Hourn, and then by foot, trekking up the steep hillside and battling thick vegetation and midges along the way.

Cutting off seed heads is one option to control its spread. In this method, the dense seed head is cut off in the summer before the gunnera plant matures, preventing seeds being released into the wild.

Fully eradicating the population, however, involves digging out the plants by their roots and incinerating them, although there is always the risk of remaining rhizomes or plant fragments allowing the population to re-establish.

Both methods are physically challenging and time consuming. Workers would have to make their way up the hill over rough ground, perform the removal and then travel back carrying bags of heavy leaves or seed heads.

Based on the number and size of the plants in the area, we estimate that the gunnera would fill around

200 large bags, all of which would have to be transported by boat for incineration. As a charity dedicated to protecting wild places, we also have to consider the carbon cost of the incineration and of the travel these methods would require.

Overall, a more realistic approach is likely to be stem treatment, which involves injecting a herbicide such as glyphosate into the plant's root system. Typically, stems are injected early in the season and over a number of years the plants break down and die in-situ. With the plants having to be targeted one by one this method does require a high number of injections, with at least 90% of a gunnera patch needing to be injected to achieve successful eradication.

Although not immediate, stem treatment is the most practical and reliable way to clear the gunnera and offers the best chance of long-term removal with minimal disturbance to the surrounding environment. The Trust is currently scoping fundraising for this work, which will form a key part of our land management planning over the coming years. □

About the author

Natalia Barbour is the Trust's Digital Communications Officer



Each gunnera plant produces thousands of tiny seeds

“In an area such as Knoydart, which is sufficiently remote to make regular and ongoing population control challenging, complete removal of the plant is the only reliable way to protect native species and habitats”

Gaining ground

Rachel Mulrenan, from the Ramblers, reflects on 25 years of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act and what further access freedoms are needed

THE rights and responsibilities we hold when it comes to accessing wild places and the countryside in Great Britain have long been – and continue to be – the subject of intense debate. While in Scotland, the 2003 Land Reform (Scotland) Act is the most significant piece of legislation, in England and Wales rights of access to open countryside are underpinned by the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000, which sees its 25th anniversary this November.

Its significance remains substantial. The battle for access in England and Wales stretches back as far as the 18th and 19th centuries, during which time a series of acts transformed common land into privately owned enclosures.

From the late 19th century onwards, a number of attempts were made to regain freedoms lost in the Enclosure Acts in the UK Parliament from the 1884 bill introduced by the Liberal MP James Bryce to the Creech Jones Access to Mountain Act of 1939.

By the 1930s, tensions between those wanting to walk in the countryside and those who owned the land within the countryside reached a boiling point with the famous Kinder Trespass of 1932, when a group of 400 walkers protested about lack of access to land in the Peak District. The Ramblers Association was established shortly after this event, bringing together walking groups from across Great Britain.

The Kinder Trespass paved the way for the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, which saw the creation of



PHOTOGRAPH: THE RAMBLERS

“The passing of CRoW opened up much-loved sections of the English and Welsh countryside that had previously been off-limits”

10 national parks in England and Wales across the 1950s, including the Peak District. Significantly, this act also set a legal framework for the rights of way network, with the creation of ‘Definitive Maps’ of Public Rights of Way paths and legal protection for them.

However, large swathes of the countryside remained off-limits, and so campaigning for greater access, by the Ramblers and others, continued apace throughout the second half of the 20th century. Calls for access intensified in the 1980s, with campaigns including the Ramblers Forbidden Britain Day which ran for a decade, organising rallies to highlight moorland where there was no public access.

By 1997, the pledge for expanding freedom to roam was enshrined in the Labour Party’s pre-election manifesto, setting the stage for legislative action once they came into power.

PASSING OF CRoW

The CRoW Act was passed into law on 30 November 2000. It granted everyone the right of access, on foot, to land mapped as ‘open access land’ in England and Wales; this covers

mountain, moor, heath, down and common land. It also strengthened provisions for recording of, and maintaining, public rights of way, and created Local Action Forums – independent bodies which bring together community interests that advise local authorities and other decision-making bodies.

The passing of CRoW opened up much-loved sections of the English and Welsh countryside that had previously been off-limits. This included much of the Forest of Bowland in Lancashire, Butser Hill in Hampshire and the Brontë Moors in West Yorkshire.

However, while a definite step forward in ensuring greater access rights for the public, the legislation was not without limitations. ‘Downland’ was poorly defined in the Act, causing so-called “access islands” – open access land that does not connect with the public path network, and so cannot in reality be accessed. Significantly, woodland and riverside land are not included as open access land types.

The CRoW Act also included a cut-off date of 2026 for recording new public rights of way. In 2023, this was extended in England to 2031.



Woodland is currently not included as 'open access land' under the CRow Act

information or knowledge stopping people from feeling confident, to the uncomfortable reality that the countryside does not feel as welcoming as it should for some people, there are many ways in which access can be curtailed, beyond the (albeit vital) issue of access rights.

At the Ramblers we are focused on ensuring that people's access to nature becomes a reality for everyone. The passing of CRow represented a significant step forward in advancing access rights in England and Wales, but the fight is far from over. Our research suggests that expanding open access land to include woodland and riverside land would have a major impact on bringing access to nature within walking distance of people living in the most deprived communities.

That's why we are now calling for an ambitious Access to Nature Bill for England, and for greater funding for the path networks in Wales and Scotland, to ensure that our access rights are protected, resourced, expanded and, crucially, translated into on-the-ground action, with our collective rights becoming a reality for all. □

About the author

Rachel Mulrenan is Strategic Advocacy Campaigns Manager at The Ramblers. ramblers.org.uk

In response, the Ramblers launched its Don't Lose Your Way campaign, which saw volunteers map 49,000 miles of unrecorded paths in just six weeks, highlighting how many paths would be lost if this deadline was adhered to.

The UK Government subsequently announced its intention to scrap the deadline for England on Boxing Day 2024; however, this intention has not yet been legally implemented. In Wales, ministers thankfully removed the threat of a 2026 deadline from its version of the legislation in July this year.

FIGHT CONTINUES

Since the passing of the CRow Act there has, positively, been a growing recognition of the importance of access to walking in green and blue spaces for mental and physical health, as well as the economic contribution to our rural communities, and for fostering connection to the natural world.

Unfortunately, in parallel to this, we have also seen public funding for local authorities slashed in recent years – with serious impact on how well councils are able to fulfil their access responsibilities, including

maintaining footpaths. This trend is also evident in Scotland, suggesting that whatever the legal framework in place, the day-to-day business of investment, maintenance and compliance needs real attention.

There is also a growing discussion around additional barriers to getting outdoors, and the need to expand the conversation to include those who are currently least represented in this area. From a lack of paths close to where people live and a lack of



While access rights in England and Wales have improved, there are still significant limitations

For a wilder Scotland

Thomas Widrow outlines the Trust's three key manifesto asks ahead of the upcoming Scottish parliamentary elections

IN May 2026, voters in Scotland will head to the polls for the last time before we hit the critical 2030 deadline for nature and climate action. The next cohort of parliamentarians and the government they form will have the monumental task of delivering a nationwide effort to restore nature by 2030.

Wild places are absolutely critical to the success of this national mission. Without proper protection for wild places, nature will not be able to rebound.

With so little time left and prioritisation critical, we will focus our advocacy efforts on three key asks for Scottish political parties: funding a national deer management plan to bring populations down to sustainable numbers; introducing a Carbon Emissions Land Tax Bill to encourage large landowners to manage land for nature, climate and communities; and to legislate for a new nature restoration designation and review the current planning system.

DEALING WITH DEER

To reach the Scottish Government's nature restoration targets, we need a significant reduction in Scotland's deer population. For this to happen at scale, it also needs to happen at pace. Our proposed National Deer Management Plan financially rewards landowners and land workers who are being proactive and enabling nature restoration by carrying out sustainable deer management.

We are asking political parties to commit to:

- The principle of a National Deer Management Plan
- Funding that plan by redirecting existing subsidies to total £59 million over the first four years of its implementation
- Increasing the annual deer cull from 180,000 to 250,000.

Such actions will help triple Scotland's total woodland creation target while saving £900 million in taxpayers' money. They will enable natural regeneration and colonisation at scale – creating an additional 350,000ha of native woodland. And they will put an end to peatland degradation caused by overbrowsing and trampling.

This policy approach is supported by all major landowning environmental charities alongside Scottish Environment LINK, Stop Climate Chaos Scotland, the Scottish Rewilding Alliance, Community Land Scotland and the Scottish Tenant Farmers Association. It is being co-developed with the Association of Deer Management Groups as part of a pilot scheme for 2025-26 announced by the Scottish Government in its last Programme for Government.

INTRODUCING CELT

The Carbon Emissions Land Tax (CELT) is a great example of a tax that enacts the key principles of Polluters Pay and Just Transition. It is a transparent, behavioural-change tax that rewards nature and climate conscious landowners and penalises those who are unwilling to manage land in the public interest.

The tax will help local communities build wealth and resilience in the face of the climate and nature crises. The tax would be implemented on a local authority level, and the proceeds would therefore go back to the local community. Earmarked for climate and nature initiatives, this revenue would empower local councils to fuel a growing environmental sector, providing livelihoods in rural areas.

Here, we are asking political parties to commit to:

- Introducing a CELT Bill by May 2026
- Ensuring that the CELT Bill

follows the principles of behavioural change taxes by creating an escalating system for tax rates over time

- Ensuring that the CELT Bill applies to all large landowners in Scotland, defined as owning over 1,000ha.

Again, doing all of the above will result in three essential outcomes. It will remove six million tonnes of greenhouse gases from the atmosphere annually by 2040. It will enable nature restoration at an unprecedented scale by positively impacting more than 60% of Scotland's land, owned by the approximately 800 largest landowners. And it puts the Polluter Pays and Just Transition principles into action by disincentivising harmful environmental practices, while ensuring revenue from the tax is reinvested in the communities most affected by polluters.

Our CELT proposal is supported by more than 50 organisations, community groups, trade unions,





Dew droplets on a sundew plant – an indicator species of healthy peatland

PHOTOGRAPH: © BEN HALL/2020VISION

churches and businesses representing over a million people in Scotland. It is also backed by a 4-to-1 majority of Scots according to a recent YouGov poll.

NATURE RESTORATION

In difficult times such as these, we must make choosing nature easier.

Our final ask, legislating for a new nature restoration designation, does just that by empowering communities, private and charitable landowners with the choice and autonomy to protect wild places now and into the future.

Unlike existing designations that focus on preserving what

little remains, this forward-looking approach tackles the threats and pressures to nature and biodiversity. It shifts us away from a degraded baseline and towards a thriving future.

Rather than protecting specific characteristics, the new nature restoration designation will focus on combating a variety of threats, from invasive non-native species to pollution, helping us empower nature to do what it does best: grow, diversify and thrive. This is a nature designation for the 21st century that allows nimbleness in the face of changes brought on by the climate and nature crises.

In this case, we are asking political parties to commit to:

- Creating a new statutory designation aimed at setting aside land as areas where natural processes take the lead
- Ensuring that the new designation protects land from industrial developments
- Designating 10% of Scotland's land as nature restoration areas.

Doing this will bring three essential outcomes. It will institutionalise the land management concepts that underpin nature restoration. It will protect areas of land of low biodiversity value from development long into the future. And it will popularise the concept of nature restoration among the wider public, prompting people to see landscapes through a lens of thriving natural processes.

As we get ever closer to election day, the Trust's policy team will be busy lobbying behind the scenes to obtain these commitments on party manifestos. To be successful, the team will need strong public support from members, supporters and lovers of wild places far and wide. Please join us! ☐

Further information

For more on our policy and advocacy work, visit johnmuirtrust.org/advocacy

About the author

Thomas Widrow is the Trust's Head of Campaigns



The next Scottish parliamentary elections will be held in May 2026

PHOTOGRAPH: ADOLBE STOCK

Plan right

Philip Box, from Wildlife and Countryside Link, highlights concern around what new planning laws could mean for nature and wild places in England

ACROSS England, from ancient woodlands to quiet river valleys, many of the physical landscapes that define the nation's character and spirit could be facing a moment of profound change. The UK Government's new proposals for planning and housebuilding will mark a turning point for the future of development and environmental protection. It's a critical crossroads; one where the choices made in the coming months could shape not only how and where homes are built, but if nature continues to thrive alongside them.

The need for more housing is widely acknowledged, and planning reform has an important role to play in meeting that challenge. But great care is needed. Without thoughtful consideration, reforms risk weakening long-standing protections for some of our most cherished landscapes, habitats and wildlife.

NEW DIRECTION

The UK Government's aim for reform is clear: to build 1.5 million new homes, addressing the housing crisis, and to speed up development, unlocking economic growth. To achieve this, proposed reforms seek to simplify planning processes and, in some cases, take a more strategic approach to dealing with environmental assessment, reducing the scope of site based environmental checks currently built into the system. These include changes to how local planning

authorities consider impacts on protected species, habitats and designated sites.

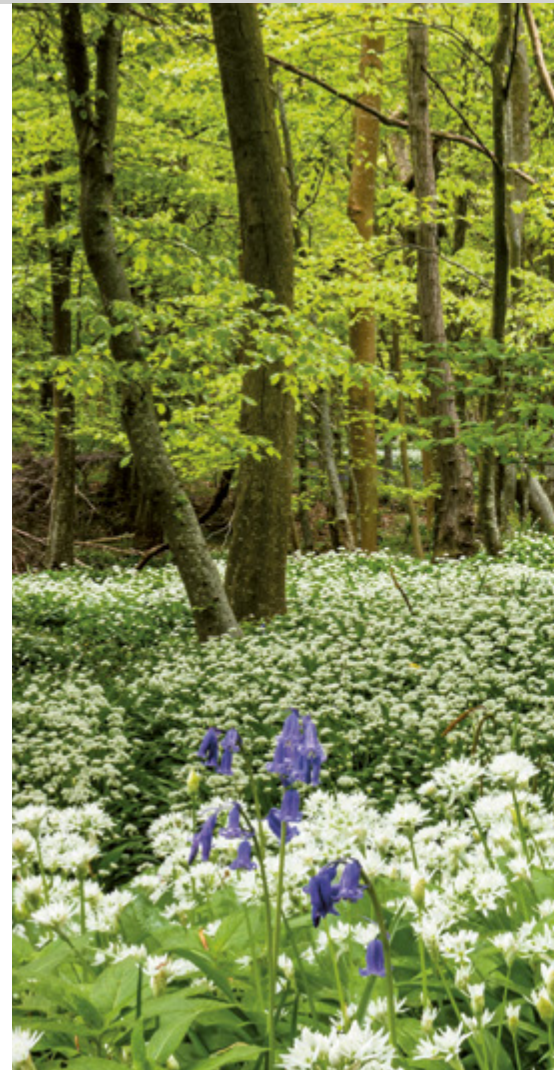
The new Planning and Infrastructure Bill is being pitched as a modernisation of the planning system, one that tackles a broken system, unlocking thousands of new homes while delivering wins for nature. But delving into the detail, the Bill will fundamentally alter how, where and whether England's wild and rural places are protected.

Particularly significant are proposals for Environmental Delivery Plans and a Nature Restoration Levy which, together, would allow developers to pay into a centralised fund, delivering strategic nature enhancements according to a relevant blueprint, rather than necessarily avoiding or mitigating damage on the ground at the actual development site.

In simple terms, Delivery Plans would set out where and how nature should be improved or restored across a determined area. Instead of making sure nature is protected or replaced directly where building takes place, developers could contribute money to this broader, more strategic scheme. These funds would then be pooled and used to support wildlife and habitats elsewhere, potentially far from where the building happens.

If carefully designed and transparently governed, this approach could contribute to broader nature recovery goals.

“The UK Government's aim for reform is clear: to build 1.5 million new homes, addressing the housing crisis, and to speed up development, unlocking economic growth”



PHOTOGRAPH: ADDBESTOCK



Local wildlife sites are at potential risk, including ecologically rich areas of woodland

PHOTOGRAPH: ADOBE STOCK



A typically dense housing development

However, there is understandable concern that, in practice, it could lead to localised and, overall, net losses for biodiversity and local landscape character – especially if applied to habitats and/or species for which such an approach would be unsuitable.

LANDSCAPE CONCERN

One of the most pressing concerns is how these changes could affect the countryside and the rural landscapes that are of such deep value to many. A recent investigation carried out by *The Guardian* identified around 5,000 nature-rich or sensitive sites in England that could become vulnerable to development under the proposed planning framework. These include ancient woodlands, traditional meadows, chalk streams and historic hedgerows – places that have shaped the identity of local communities and supported wildlife for centuries.

The proposed ‘offsetting’ mechanism could mean that new developments are permitted in such precious areas, provided that environmental improvements are delivered somewhere else, potentially even in a different part of the country. This introduces a risk that the connection between place, nature and community is lost. A landscape’s value is not only ecological, but also cultural and emotional. Once a habitat with centuries of continuity is disturbed, it cannot easily be replaced.

If protections are weakened, the character of the English countryside could gradually be eroded, not through a single dramatic decision, but through a series of incremental ones.

NATURE AS PARTNER

Some of the language around the Bill and in describing the need for reform has framed environmental



PHOTOGRAPH: WILDLIFE AND COUNTRYSIDE LINK

protections as an obstacle to progress, implying that wildlife laws and planning safeguards are holding back urgently needed development.

However, the evidence for this claim is limited. Research by The Wildlife Trusts in a recently published report, *Planning & Development: nature isn't the problem*, reveals that bats and great crested newts factored in only 3% of planning appeals. Indeed, the Government's own impact assessments suggested there is little data to support the idea that nature protections are causing significant housing delays. What this highlights is an opportunity to reframe the conversation. Rather than viewing nature as 'something to work around,' we can see it as a partner in creating resilient, healthy communities. Well-designed housing developments that respect and enhance their natural surroundings can contribute to local wellbeing, climate adaptation and biodiversity goals.

This is not about halting development, it's about shaping it in a way that works for both people and the planet.

WELCOME CHANGES

Following feedback from conservation organisations, community groups and planning professionals, the UK Government has made some constructive amendments to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. These include taking a more precautionary

approach, strengthening certainty of environmental outcomes of the proposals, stronger evidence requirements for what might be covered by this approach, and promised protections to rule out irreplaceable habitats such as ancient woodland.

These changes are a step in the right direction and show that public engagement can influence policy. However, several uncertainties remain, particularly around prioritising avoidance first, how habitats will be monitored over time, and whether communities will have a meaningful voice in shaping decisions that affect their local landscapes.

As the Bill continues through UK Parliament this year, there is a real opportunity to get things right. With the correct checks and balances, planning reform can unlock new homes while also contributing to the recovery of England's landscapes and wildlife.

Wildlife and Countryside Link, alongside partners across the conservation and planning sectors, will continue to advocate for nature as the Bill makes its way through Parliament. Above all, the call is for a planning system that sees nature not as a constraint, but as a cornerstone of sound development.

LOOKING AHEAD

For members of the John Muir Trust, the stakes will feel familiar. The natural landscapes that feed our souls, connect us to history and

offer refuge to wildlife are not just backdrops, they are part of who we are. As these reforms take shape, we all have a role to play in making sure these landscapes are recognised and respected.

This is a critical moment. Get it right and we can build the homes that are needed and leave a legacy of thriving, connected and resilient countryside. But get it wrong and there is a risk of undermining decades of progress in landscape and nature protection.

Now is the time to speak up for the places we love – not to stop change, but to shape it wisely. □

Further information

Want to help? Write to your MP, share your story of a threatened local landscape or join the Wildlife and Countryside Link campaign at wcl.org.uk

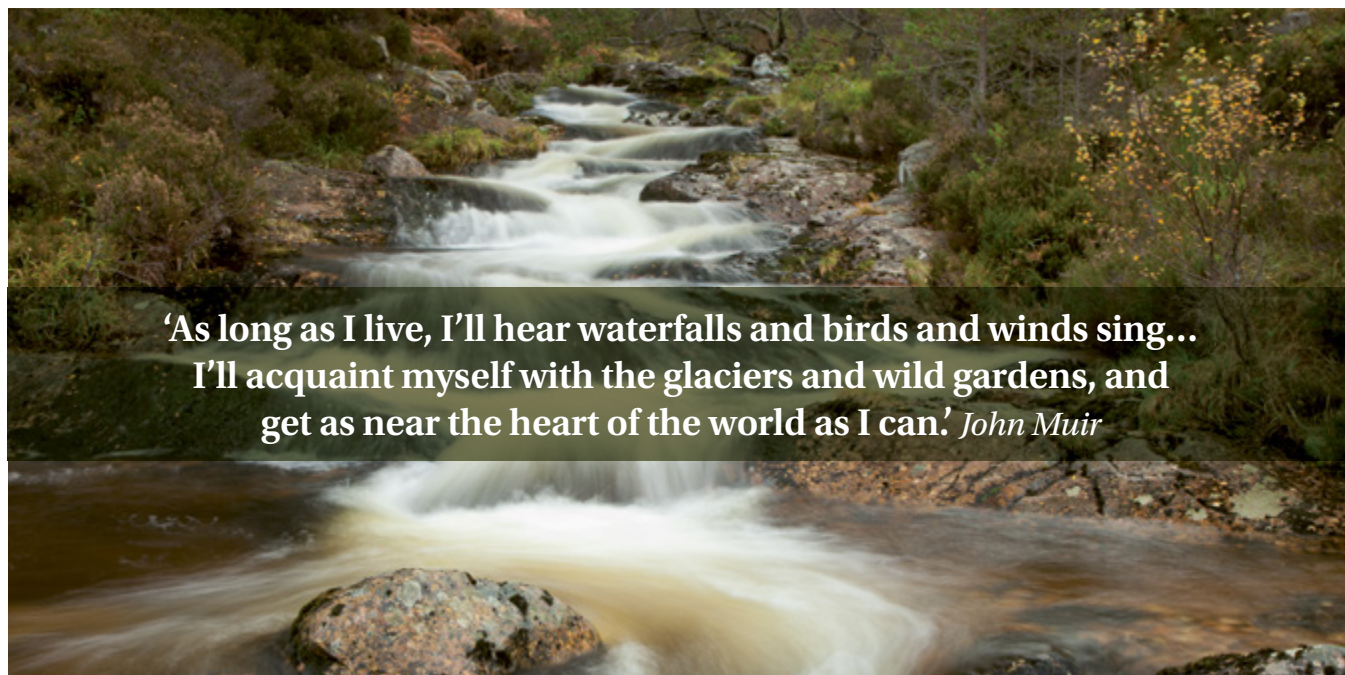
About the author

Philip Box is Senior Policy Officer at Wildlife and Countryside Link

Trust input to planning discussions

Helping to frame discussions around issues such as planning, the John Muir Trust aims to measure the quality of natural process through a Wild Places Index. The development and rollout of the Index will provide an objective mechanism through which the quality of wild places can be assessed and understood – providing an awareness of the threats wild places face, including from inappropriate development plans.

The Index will allow for the relative quality of wild places across the UK to be articulated and for the Trust to demonstrate the steady attrition of wild places over recent decades. This in turn will support our advocacy for their protection.



**'As long as I live, I'll hear waterfalls and birds and winds sing...
I'll acquaint myself with the glaciers and wild gardens, and
get as near the heart of the world as I can.'** *John Muir*

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Natural returns

Wendy Grindle details how the Trust's site at East Schiehallion is playing a leading role in mountain woodland restoration

EAST Schiehallion lies within the Loch Rannoch and Glen Lyon National Scenic Area in Perthshire. It is an area of exceptional scenery and Schiehallion itself is one of the most prominent, and celebrated, mountains in Scotland. A Munro with a summit that rises to 1,083m, Schiehallion attracts more than 20,000 visitors every year. Its name is anglicised from the Gaelic, *Sìth Chailleann*, meaning 'Fairy Hill of the Caledonians'.

In contrast to some neighbouring hills, Schiehallion's underlying limestone sees it support a rich variety of upland habitats that are home to ptarmigan, black grouse and mountain hare. It also features a range of mountain (or montane) woodland. This is typically made up of short, hardy trees that grow from around 400m above sea level up to the higher alpine zone where even they struggle for a foothold in such a harsh environment.

Full of invertebrates that, in turn, support birds such as treecreepers, whinchats and great spotted woodpeckers, mountain woodland is also home to rare plant species that are unique to this kind of scrubby habitat – downy birch, dwarf juniper, montane willows (see page 30), rockrose and Scottish asphodel.

High-altitude woodland also acts as a brake on the impacts of climate change, providing protection against flooding, avalanche, rockfalls and landslides.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

However, grazing pressure by deer and sheep since the 18th century have been a major factor in pushing high-altitude woodland to the brink of extinction. Reducing this pressure is essential to enable the natural regeneration of mountain woodland tree species, and for the very survival of individual species such as montane willows.

Having tried other approaches, we are now resolved to make our site at East



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

East Schiehallion seen from Dùn Coillich

Schiehallion one of the best examples of mountain woodland in the UK.

While not our preferred solution, we believe that fencing, for now, is the only way to help protect the saplings from being destroyed. The aim is to allow nature-based regeneration and restoration of a unique and crucial mountain woodland that, in turn, will make a significant contribution to its comeback from near extinction.

The overall plan is to install a stock fence along the boundary, approximately one metre high, which will have grouse markers for visibility to protect the grouse population. The primary purpose of the fence is to prevent sheep



“By reducing grazing pressure we can enable the natural regeneration of rare tree species and restore a habitat that supports endangered birds, mammals and plants”

25 years of care

Since 1999, when the Trust took on stewardship of East Schiehallion, we have:

- Built and maintained 4km of footpath up to the ridge of Schiehallion
- Repaired the scarring on the landscape of the previous path
- Planted 12,000 native trees
- Enabled 40ha of natural regeneration
- Set up the Heart of Scotland Forest Partnership (in 2017)
- Created the 1km Foss Loop easy access path with our partners
- Worked with our partners to collect and grow thousands of seeds with local providence to be planted out
- Hosted 25 tree planting work parties
- Hosted the Connect Outdoors programme to engage 11 asylum seekers with wild places.

This new phase of restoration marks a turning point in the mountain's story – a chance to return the woodland that once thrived here and ensure its survival for generations to come.



Foss Loop, Dùn Coilich

PHOTOGRAPH: MARION MCKINNON

wandering onto the fragile habitat, but deer control will continue within the area and deer leaps installed to allow the animals to exit with ease.

“This is about giving natural processes the space and time they need to heal,” explains David Fleetwood, Director of Land and Policy. “By reducing grazing pressure, we can enable the natural regeneration of rare tree species and restore a habitat that supports endangered birds, mammals and plants.”

Over the next 25 years, the ambition is to oversee the return of native pine and oak woodlands on the lower slopes of Schiehallion. And as this woodland reaches up the sides of the mountain,

it will be interspersed with rowan, aspen, birch, willow and other native species to create a low-density woodland.

Moving higher still, as the woodland reaches the montane zone, it will become even more sparse, giving way to dwarf birch, juniper and montane willows to create a natural progression of scrubby vegetation all the way up to the highest slopes. □

About the author

Wendy Grindle is the Trust's Director of Communications, Engagement and Marketing

Autumn Appeal

At East Schiehallion we have a tiny remnant population of montane willows.

Please help this rare mountain woodland habitat recover from grazing pressures by donating to our Mountain Woodland Appeal — johnmuirtrust.org/mountainwoodlandappeal



Back with a bang

Steph McKenna reflects on an exciting first few months of the redesigned John Muir Award

FIVE MONTHS on from its re-launch, we are starting to see the impact of the updated John Muir Award on wild places and people.

In that time, 1,300 individuals have achieved their Award, taking action for wild places across Scotland, England, Northern Ireland and Wales. Over 16,000 hours have already been spent actively protecting wild places, including planting trees and wildflowers and advocating for nature with MPs.

As one Award Leader commented: "I am astounded at how much information [the group of young adults] have taken on board and how passionate they have become in advocating for greater care of our river."

The original intention of the Award has remained, which is to encourage people of all backgrounds to care for and protect wild places while fostering a sustainable and long-lasting connection with nature.

Participants discover, explore, conserve and share the wild place they've chosen, growing their awareness of the importance of wild places and leading to meaningful action.



The Trust's Alison Austin (left) and Steph McKenna (right) award University of Highlands and Islands students with their certificates after completing the relaunched Award pilot



DISCOVER

The Discover Challenge is about participants being immersed in wild places and experiencing them through their senses. People are encouraged to take time to notice

their wild place with a sense of wonder and looking at it in a new light, developing an understanding of what makes wild places feel special.

For a group from a school in Glasgow, their visits to a country park had a clear and positive impact on their physical and mental wellbeing. Both teachers and students reported feeling calmer, happier and more focused after spending time outdoors. "I didn't realise how much I liked being outside until we started this," shared one pupil. "It makes me feel less stressed." Another commented: "It's the one time I don't feel like I have to get everything right... I can just enjoy it!"

EXPLORE

Since March, a total of 65 groups and individuals have explored a variety of wild places across the UK as part of their Award. Woodland was the most popular habitat, with 27 groups exploring wooded areas, followed by grasslands.

The remaining wild places included coastal habitats, gardens, allotments and farmland.

Through the Explore element of the Award, participants are encouraged to deepen their connection to their wild place and consider what might threaten it.

The most popular Explore Challenge activity to date has been species identification, highlighting a strong interest in learning about the plants and animals that live in wild places and why it's so important that they are protected.

"I actually know some trees and plants and things, like it's mad to think I know these things now," commented one participant. "I'm a nature nerd and I don't care, thank you for teaching me. It's not hard to help the environment and all the wildlife. Just wee things make a difference."





CONSERVE

By taking action to conserve their chosen wild place, Award participants put what they have learned into action. Achieving the Conserve Challenge requires undertaking practical conservation activities that will protect and restore a wild place. Litter picking currently

tops the list as the most popular activity, with 20 groups to date dedicating time to cleaning up a total of 768 bags of litter from their local wild places.

Other conservation activities resulted in the removal of 9,000 invasive species, the maintenance of 4,845 metres of footpath, planting more than 900 native plants and the creation of hundreds of homes and feeders for wildlife. Three groups created ponds, picking up skills on how to maintain an outdoor environment while recognising the importance of creating homes for wildlife.

SHARE

Sharing the Award is the final challenge, where participants are invited to tell others about their experiences in their wild place and why they are important. As part of the new Award criteria, we've also asked



participants to choose a person to cite as their inspiration.

One individual chose John Muir as their inspirational person, sharing their Award findings with an audience of 30 parents and carers, siblings, fellow participants and volunteers along with information on who John Muir was.

One participant from a university in Lochaber created a wild places themed podcast, while others made scrapbooks and art. Elsewhere, a school in Wales has decided to create a documentary on its Award experience and the wild place conserved, which will be presented to all students at the school.

As participants deepen their connection with nature and develop a sense of responsibility for the environment, they often inspire those around them to do the same, creating a ripple that reaches friends, families and others. This widening circle of influence helps foster a culture of care and stewardship for wild places.

"Participants developed first-person awareness and experience of a leading light in the local regenerative farming movement in Dartmoor – understanding the processes they have gone through to re-structure their farm and inspire other local farmers to join them on the journey," noted one Award Leader in the south of England.

"Participants also gained first-person awareness and experience of National Park Rangers and their work to conserve this remarkable environment. Students shared their wonder at what they learned from these two individuals."

LOOKING FORWARD

The Trust plans to build on the momentum of the redesigned John Muir Award and extend its reach to even more people across the UK.

Together with Award participants, leaders and supporters, we can ensure that the Award continues to inspire meaningful connections with nature, helping tackle the climate crisis while fostering wellbeing and a sense of belonging.

Now more than ever, wild places need people – and people need wild places. □

About the author

Steph McKenna is the Trust's John Muir Award Officer



Young people learning about wild places

PHOTOGRAPH: ISTOCK

Downy willow

A key component of one of the UK's rarest habitats, downy willow is the subject of conservation efforts across much of its former range

HIGH among the crags grows a native willow tree that is in many ways symbolic of the health – or otherwise – of the high hills. Supremely adapted for life in extreme environments, downy willow (*Salix lapponum*) was once a dominant feature of a habitat known as montane (mountain) scrub – a type of low-growing subarctic woodland found in the transition zone between pine forests and the almost bare plateaux of the highest hills.

Subarctic scrub containing downy and other willow species is a rare habitat, now largely restricted to Scandinavia. Here in the UK, it is confined almost completely to the higher mountains of the Scottish Highlands where it persists in small, relic stands, although fragments also cling on in the Southern Uplands and parts of Cumbria.

More shrub than tree – downy willow rarely grows above waist-height – this multi-branched species prefers moist, sheltered ground, usually with a northerly to easterly aspect. The bulk of those plants that still survive do so on precipitous ledges and gullies too steep to be accessed by deer and other browsing animals.

Being confined to unstable rock ledges and steep ground and with small and isolated reproducing populations, downy willows in the UK are quite literally teetering on the edge. But as a key component of landscape-scale native woodland restoration projects, work is being done by a variety of conservation organisations, including the John Muir Trust (see lead feature,



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

page 10), to bring the species back from the edge in various locations.

In the Cairngorms, for example, partners from the Cairngorms Connect project have carried out a series of 'Willow Walks', taking thousands of downy willow saplings up and over the Cairngorm plateau for planting out in carefully planned locations away from grazing mouths.

This project to boost the existing downy willow population began several years ago when scientists first mapped every individual willow plant still present throughout the Cairngorms. During this research period, the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh found that the plants are still genetically diverse – a signal that they are remnants of a much larger historic population.

However, the belief is that any offspring of these remaining downy willows will likely lose genetic diversity, making them more fragile and less resilient to disease. One further challenge is that with each individual plant either male or female, even small

groups of plants would be unable to reproduce if all are of the same sex.

To counter this, cuttings were taken from across the downy willow's range and new, genetically diverse plants have been grown on in Trees for Life's nursery at Dundreggan – with saplings then carried in adapted backpacks for planting around the Loch A'an basin on RSPB Scotland's Abernethy reserve.

The hope is that this and many other similar projects will lead to the return of this lost habitat to many parts of upland Scotland, bringing valuable life and colour with it. □

Further information

As part of the Thirlmere Resilience Partnership in Cumbria, the Trust has established an on-site tree nursery dedicated to propagating rare upland species from locally sourced seed. This includes the growing on of downy and tea-leaved willow, with planting out of saplings planned for this autumn within a dedicated montane scrub enclosure at Combe Crag. For more, visit <http://bit.ly/4274hYz>



Let them walk where you once wandered

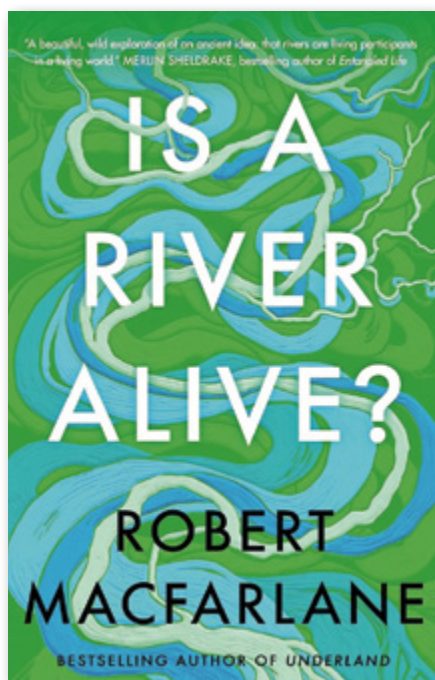
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Is a River Alive? by Robert Macfarlane

Peter McDonald now looks at rivers very differently having revelled in a passionate portrayal of them as living beings

GROWING up in South Africa, our summer holidays entailed travelling to the sea to swim in the waves and build sandcastles or we went into the mountains to hike and sleep in caves and beneath rocky overhangs.

While in the mountains of Natal – or the Berg as we call it – we would come across streams of crystal-clear

water and rock pools in which we would refresh ourselves before carrying on along the trail.

Driving to the Berg we would often pass through rural villages and see people carrying buckets of water on their heads. For them, the river was an essential source of water – and life. But seeing this and swimming in the rivers of Natal, never once did I reflect on whether a river is alive. So, to read Robert Macfarlane's latest book has been a revelation.

Its central theme is a journey to explore the book's title question – is a river alive? We start at a chalk spring near Macfarlane's home in Cambridge and travel to various parts of the world in search of the answer.

In the cloud forests of Ecuador, we learn that every drop of water is special as they help sustain a vast range of life, from fungi to hummingbirds. Sadly, nature meets man in the form of gold mining and the poisoning of the waters, and so we encounter a variety of characters seeking to protect the waters.

In 2008, this small country "with a vast moral imagination" became the first nation in the world to legislate on behalf of water – an enshrining of the Rights of Nature that acknowledges rivers as fragile givers of life. This pioneering legislation has since been followed in other countries around the world (see feature in the Spring/Summer 2025 issue of the *Journal*).

In contrast we move to India, where pollution in the form of

plastic and industrial waste is literally choking the life out of rivers. We read more about a dead river versus one that is alive. Yet even here there is hope as we meet activists and citizens who seek not only to expose the pollution but to show that there is still life beneath the toxic surface layers.

Next stop is Canada, where we are entertained by the Magpie River as Macfarlane navigates 100 miles of white water and experiences what he calls the river "running through him". Even though he travels the 100 miles, threats in the form of hydroelectric dams where engineering works cause significant damage to nature are ever present. Yet in true Macfarlane style, he also shares how rivers can transform not just landscapes but also minds and laws.

As ever, he writes beautifully, bringing each river, each location, to vivid life: fireflies "score the dark like slow tracer bullets"; sunsets carry "slaughter"; while sunrises are "as red as a Coke can". But his work is always anchored by detailed notes and references. It's a joyful, passionate and wonderfully written journey – not just of rivers, but also of ideas and imagination.

£20.99
penguin.co.uk

About the reviewer
Peter McDonald is the Trust's Head of People

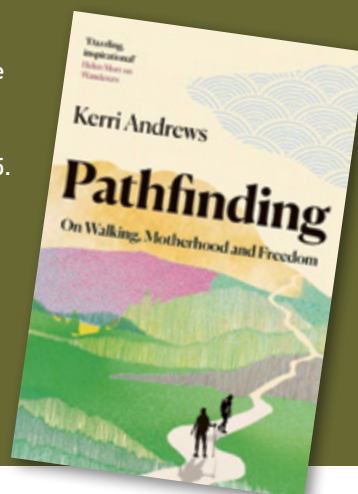
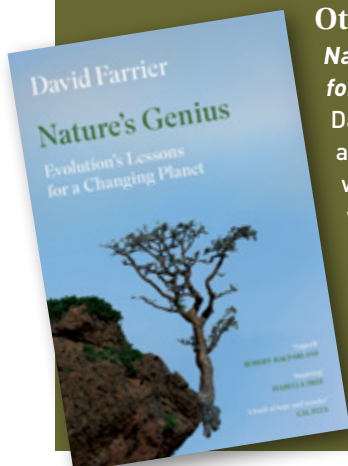
Others we like

Nature's Genius, Evolution's Lessons for a Changing Planet, by David Farrier

David Farrier takes readers on a profound journey into a natural world that has always found new ways to adapt, reproduce and thrive – taking on new forms to meet the environment of the moment – and asks what lessons we can learn from animals, plants and insects. By paying attention we might just find ways to also adapt – and put

a halt to the destruction humans are causing to the planet. Shortlisted for the Wainwright Prize for Conservation Writing 2025. £20. canongate.co.uk

Pathfinding, On Walking, Motherhood and Freedom, by Kerri Andrews
Having experienced the extreme changes that



Treewilding, by Jake M. Robinson

Corrine Lock learns about the mini universes found within and around trees and why our forests are so important for all life during this time of climate change and biodiversity loss

WHAT if trees weren't just tall, leafy plants but bustling worlds full of hidden life? That's the exciting idea at the heart of *Treewilding*, in which microbial ecologist Jake M. Robinson demonstrates that forests are far more alive and astonishing than most of us realise.

Robinson explores the fascinating, sometimes controversial but I felt mostly hopeful world of forest restoration. He writes in a way that's clear, inspiring and full of 'wow' moments. For example, he explains that the bacteria living in just one tree, if stretched out in a line, could circle the Amazon rainforest more than a thousand times. Suddenly, a single oak feels like an entire universe.

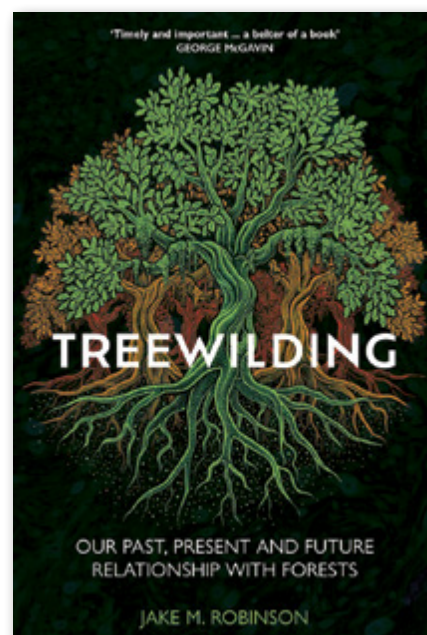
The book mixes science with case studies and conversations with field experts. Robinson highlights how birds, insects, microbes, mammals and more help trees grow. Jays, for instance, store more acorns than they actually need, helping forests spread – to the point where at one wood in Cambridgeshire, more than half of the trees are thought to be planted by jays.

And then there is the abandoned four-hectare monoculture plot next to woodland that naturally regenerated itself in less than 60 years.

Robinson warns us that not all tree-planting projects are good. Planting the wrong tree in the wrong place can harm ecosystems instead of helping them. He explores how much can be learnt from syntropic farming methods – creating dynamic, self-sustaining systems that mimic natural forests. It was also interesting to read about the Miyawaki method from Japan, which involves a combination of collecting local seed source, soil improvement and community involvement.

For me, what makes the book special is Robinson's knowledge and passion for these wildlife supporters, oxygen providers, soil protectors and carbon storers. He makes complex science easy to understand. But his words come with a clear warning that we are teetering on a precipice of biodiversity loss and climate chaos. The restoration of our forests is vital for all life on Earth.

In the end, *Treewilding* is more than just a book about trees. It's about how humans have coexisted with them for many millennia. Despite deforestation and events such as Chernobyl, trees and nature are able to regenerate and thrive. Whether you simply have a passion for nature or are someone who wants to delve deeper into the hidden lives of forests, this book will make you look at trees through



a different lens. It's one that I will return to many times.

£20.00

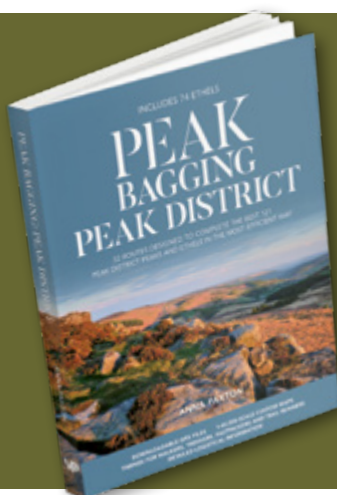
pelagicpublishing.com

About the reviewer.

Corrine Lock is the Trust's Wild Space Visitor Centre Assistant

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having children can bring to bodies and minds, Kerri Andrews undertakes a series of journeys on foot to understand how mother-walkers, past and present, reconcile the joy, connection and freedom of walking in wild places with the complicated ground of motherhood today. Bold and unflinching, it's a book full of ambition, rage and hope. £16.99. eandtbooks.com



Peak Bagging Peak District, by Anna Paxton While Scotland has its Munros and the Lake District its Wainwrights, the Peak District has its own list of summits known as The Ethels – peaks, mostly over 400m, named after Sheffield's Ethel Haythornthwaite, who played an instrumental role in the Peak District becoming the UK's first national park in 1951. Here, local hillwalker Anna Paxton presents 32 wonderful day routes that include the 74 Ethels found within the national park, plus plenty more besides. £22. adventurebooks.com



PHOTOGRAPH: THE RAMBLERS

Amar Latif

Julie Gough speaks with Amar Latif, President of the Ramblers, about how time spent outside is even more sensory given his loss of sight at a young age

Why does access to wild places matter?

Being outside and connecting with natural landscapes is so important for our mental health. When you have been out in the countryside, out in the wild, it follows you back in your thoughts. I truly believe that opening up access to the outdoors responsibly will enrich everyone's lives and boost the nation's health and wellbeing.

What do wild places mean to you?

I've been on incredible hikes around the world, but I'm never happier than when out in the British countryside. People wonder what I get out of walking when I can't see what's around me, but I love it. The wildness lives inside you and it builds confidence.

What barriers have you had to overcome?

When my parents came to this country from Pakistan in the 1960s, walking in the countryside wasn't something that we did as a family. They had three blind kids to look after and a lot of other challenges to deal with. My first hiking experience was in my early 20s when I completed the Yorkshire Three Peaks challenge. Since becoming blind I've become good at overcoming barriers and preconceptions. I think that having an Asian blind guy as President of the Ramblers is an incredible opportunity to inspire people who think that walking isn't for them.

What's your favourite walk?

One of my favourite places is Nidderdale in Yorkshire. In winter, I can feel the frozen ground beneath my feet, hear the wind sweeping over the moorland and the fast-flowing water of the River Nidd. In summer, I love feeling the warmth of the sun on my back and smelling the wildflowers. When you explore with all your senses, nature comes alive.

Tell us about your biggest adventure

It was a 220-mile, coast to coast walk across Nicaragua through dense tropical jungle. At night, the jungle comes alive and you hear noises in 3D – nature's own surround sound. When I realised that I was blind at around the age of 18, I remember thinking that my life was over. But then my mindset changed: the world doesn't wait for you. People often remark that I'm so positive all the time, but it's not true. When you have a disability, it's a challenge. But adventures such as crossing Nicaragua have made me realise that having a resilient mindset is a great help.

Any tips for others with a visual impairment when out in nature?

I like to get my sighted companions to build a picture for me and I then build on those myself. It's a little like when reading a book which, as we know, is often better than the film. □

Further information

For more on the work of the Ramblers, visit ramblers.org.uk

About the interviewer

Julie Gough is the Trust's Communications Editor

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Connect Outdoors is an educational hiking programme run by Tiso and charity partners the John Muir Trust and Mhòr Outdoor.

Spending time in the outdoors can have wonderful benefits for our mental and physical health, but many people find it difficult to get outdoors for a variety of reasons. We want to change this.

We want to help people connect with the outdoors, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual identity, physical ability or personal circumstances. We want to show people who are new to the outdoors how they can interact with wild places, responsibly.



Championing inclusion and engagement with wild places in Scotland.

Connect Outdoors is made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund. Thanks to National Lottery players, we have been able to promote inclusion and responsible engagement with wild places in Scotland.



Find out more at
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