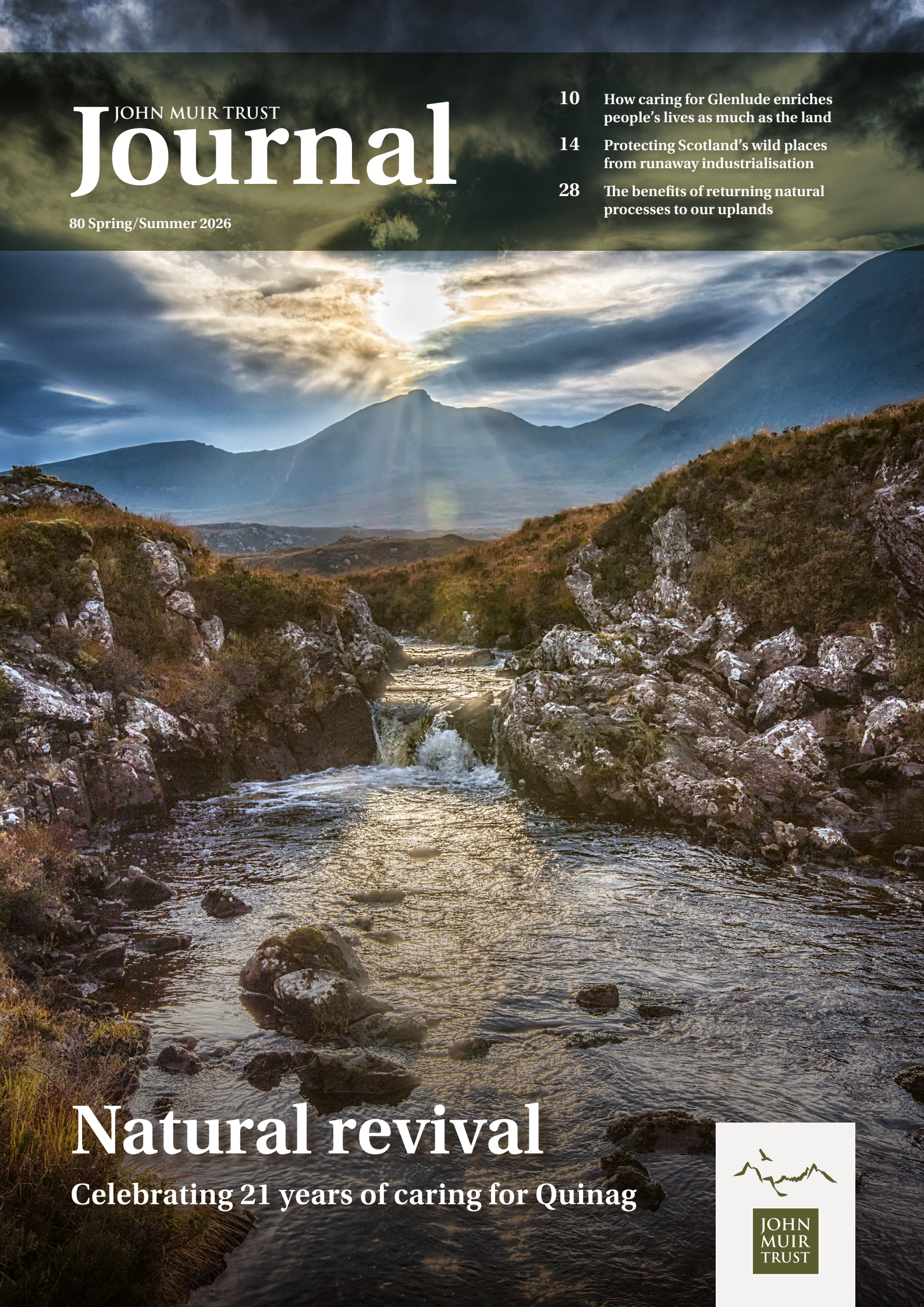
JOHN MUIR TRUST
Journal
80 Spring/Summer 2026



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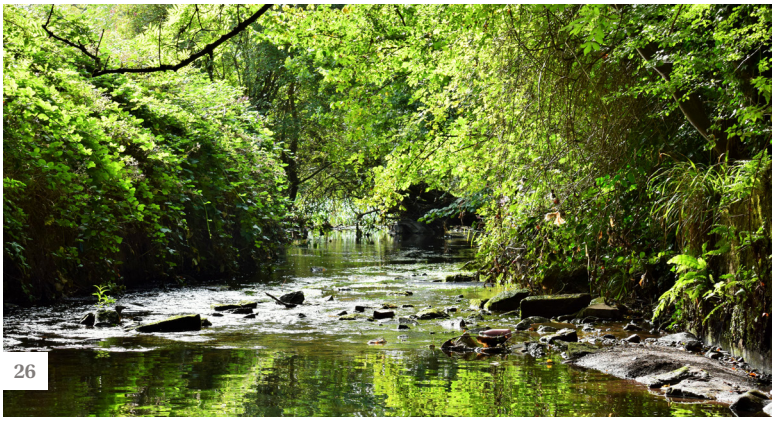

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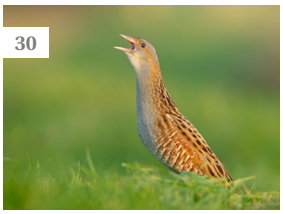

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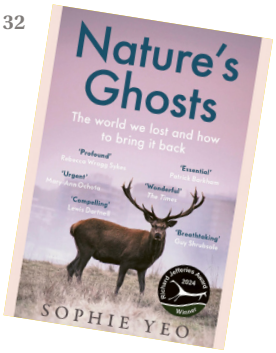

PHOTOGRAPHY (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP): LES WARD; ADOBESTOCK; SARAH WATTS
COVER: TOWARDS QUINAG, NORTHWEST HIGHLANDS. PHOTOGRAPH: CHRIS PUDDEPHATT

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A group of major donors helping protect and restore the UK's wild places, now and for generations to come.

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Standing up for the wild

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

WELCOME to the 80th issue of the *Journal*. This milestone feels like an appropriate time to reflect on our history and the fact that as a charity we have often felt the weight of opposition to our purpose. The Trust gives primacy to the protection of natural processes and natural landscapes – and our credibility and integrity rests on clarity and consistency rather than compromise.

It is notable that the UK lacks any effective legal mechanism to define and protect wild places to internationally recognised standards, laid out by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. The absence of a celebrated, defined and recovering network of wild places across the UK is what we are determined to change.

Since the moment our ancestors began to till the soil, humanity has regarded the taming of the 'wild' as both challenge and destiny. Wild places provided resources to be extracted or to be claimed in the service of progress.

As a species, we are motivated to take from the natural world for our own advantage. Slowly we are encroaching on every part of the planet – beer bottles in the deepest ocean trenches, microplastics in living organisms across the globe and orbiting satellites visible in the night skies.

John Muir transformed society's perception of wild landscapes and helped with the creation of the world's first national park (Yellowstone in 1872). More than 150 years on, the UK still has no formal protection for wild places, and destruction through slow and steady attrition continues.

You can read on page 6 how this steady attrition is playing out close to Sandwood in the North-West Highlands. One of the Trust's most iconic properties, Sandwood is home to a glorious stretch of beach, alongside extensive hill and blanket bog held in common grazing. This special place is facing the possibility of being overshadowed by a proposed wind farm as part of what is fast becoming industrialisation of the Scottish Highlands.

Elsewhere, our interview with plant ecologist Sarah Watts (see page 34) explores how her research at the University of Stirling is developing practical management techniques to restore healthy, self-sustaining upland tree populations. This resonates strongly with our own work on Knoydart and at Quinag, Skye and East Schiehallion.

Across these properties we are now seeing significant regeneration and future issues of the *Journal* will shine a spotlight on these exciting changes. On page 18, we begin that process by sharing personal thoughts, data and findings from Quinag, which has been in our care for 21 years.

The challenge of our age is no longer how to conquer the wild, it is how to protect what little remains and to restore a viable, living network for the future.

I hope you find this issue of the *Journal* to be inspiring and thought-provoking. Thank you as always for supporting us and for being part of our journey.

David Balharry
CEO, John Muir Trust

Want to help us Protect the Wild?
See page 14 for more information on our campaign work and how to get involved.

PHOTOGRAPH: IAIN BROWNLEE ROY

Sandwood is home to one of the UK's most remote and beautiful beaches

Sandwood Bay under threat

The Trust plans to fight proposals for a large-scale wind farm development close to Sandwood in the North-West Highlands

Energy development company Galileo Empower is preparing to submit an application to the Scottish Government's Energy Consent Unit for a 15-turbine onshore renewable energy project in Kinlochbervie. The proposed site would be located just north of the North-West Sutherland National Scenic Area and to the south of the Cape Wrath Wild Land Area, next to the Trust's Sandwood property.

Both areas are known for their strong sense of isolation and remoteness which contribute to a feeling of sanctuary. Human activity in these regions is minimal, allowing the surrounding mountains and complex landscape to dominate the environment.

However, this tranquil experience is set to change dramatically with the construction of wind turbines that could reach heights of up to 200m.

According to the developer's analysis, these turbines would be visible from Sandwood Bay, one of Scotland's most remote and beautiful beaches, and viewpoints such as Cranstackie and Oldshoremore.

The Trust is currently evaluating options to challenge this proposal and will continue to advocate for renewable energy developments to be located in more suitable areas.

Members and supporters are encouraged to sign up to our Protect the Wild campaign (see page 16) and share their views at **tinyurl.com/2skys2ub**

Convention on industrialisation of wild places

A convention of community leaders from around Scotland, along with the Trust's CEO David Balharry, met with Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy, Gillian Martin, and other MSPs at Holyrood in late February.

Their aim was to ask for a pause on major energy infrastructure planning applications in a bid to avoid a chaotic energy rollout.

The meeting was organised by Highland councillor Helen Crawford, who reported afterwards that Gillian Martin made a pledge to establish a forum to involve communities directly in discussions around the development of the Strategic Spatial Energy Plan.

"Special thanks to the John Muir Trust and Action to Protect Rural Scotland for their excellent supporting contributions and to all of the community council representatives who spoke," she added. "The depth of feeling, and indeed expert knowledge in that Committee Room, was outstanding."

Addressing the convention, David Balharry stated: "I respect and agree with all the concerns from communities across Scotland that are questioning the costs and benefits of this industrialisation.

"I also accept that officials are working within a decision-making framework that has been given to them. However, that decision-making framework is deeply flawed as a result of the National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4), which opened the door for development on what we call Wild Land Areas.

"The problem is that with the rate of industrialisation and NPF4, any consideration for the iconic part of Scotland's landscape is no longer there. Officials are making decisions within the framework and that means they are no longer considering what's happening to Scotland's landscape at a strategic scale.

"One thing that absolutely astonished me is that there are probably now only two Munros left in Scotland from which you can't see a wind turbine. That isn't a decision that Scotland consented to – and we urgently need to protect what is left."

PHOTOGRAPH: ALEX GILLESPIE/JAHAMA HIGHLAND ESTATES

Regenerating native woodland, Glen Nevis

Boost for Nevis Nature Network

Since 2023, the Trust has been part of an ambitious nature restoration project at Nevis, with the aim of realising four key priority actions: restoring native woodland, removing invasive species, securing montane scrub and supporting nature connections.

The Nevis Nature Network was launched by the Nevis Landscape Partnership, bringing the Trust together with local landowners Jahama Highland Estates, Glen Nevis Estate and Forestry and Land Scotland.

In February, Jahama Highland Estates made a significant commitment to expand native woodland across its 32,500ha Lochaber landholdings – effectively quadrupling the size of the area covered by the nature restoration project.

The overall aim is to help new woodlands develop by reducing herbivore browsing pressure across the landscape in the glens and lower corries of Ben Nevis, the Grey Corries, the Mamores and in the remote moorland landscape between Kinlochleven and Inverlair.

Jahama also plans to quadruple semi-natural native woodland cover from 1,425ha to 5,700ha over a ten-year period through natural regeneration in and around existing stands of mature seed trees.

David Balharry, CEO of the Trust, said: "The Trust's land at Nevis is surrounded by Jahama's landholding and the consequential benefits this will bring to our land as well as to all adjoining land cannot be overstated.

"Regenerating trees on this scale will require deer control over a massive area, and that alone will bring exponential benefits to biodiversity."

Rainforest takes centre stage

As long-term partners in the event, Trust staff played a major role at the Fort William Mountain Festival in February.

Nevis Manager Ali Austin presented the John Muir Trust Wild Places Film Award to *Find Mor*, a film that followed a group of canyoners over the span of two years as they explored the Scottish Highlands.

Ali and Conservation Officer Julia Robertson were on hand at the Trust's stall over the weekend, sharing the work we're doing to restore the local rainforest at Glen Nevis and hosting a lichen quiz with the chance to win one of two Ben Lomond Gin Schiehallion gift sets.

Festival goers were given the opportunity to see our work for themselves by joining Julia and ecologist Ellie Corsie from Nevis Landscape Partnership for a guided walk. The duo led a group off the path into the depths of one of our most pristine rainforest fragments to highlight some of the species that call it home.

The weekend ended with volunteers joining the Trust team and partners from the Nevis Nature Network project to tackle one of the biggest threats to Scotland's rainforest – the invasive *rhododendron ponticum* (see story on page 8).

Julia thanked festival goers, visitors and volunteers for stopping by at our stall and helping to remove the rhododendron: "Great progress was made and we had fun getting wet and muddy while mattocking away!"

Ali Austin (left) with the winning filmmakers

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

AGM 2026

The Trust's in-person AGM will take place on Saturday 26 September at Innerleithen Memorial Hall in the Scottish Borders. To register (deadline: 13 September), visit **johnmuirtrust.org/agm-events**

Readers' survey

We'd like to extend our thanks to everyone who has already completed our *Journal* readers' survey. If you haven't yet, please go to **johnmuirtrust.org/readers-survey**

Some survey participants have told us that they'd prefer to have a printed copy rather than an online link. If you are a Member and would like a printed copy of the *Journal*, please email **membership@johnmuirtrust.org**

If not yet a Member but you would like to receive a printed copy, please consider joining us. At just £3.83 per month, a membership includes two print copies of the *Journal* per year.

For more, visit **johnmuirtrust.org/support-us/join**

Rhododendron ponticum in Steall Gorge, Nevis

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

Invasive species removal training

In February, the Trust's Skye Manager John Macrae joined members of the Jahama Highland Estates team for a day of invasive species removal training at Nevis.

Led by the National Trust for Scotland Invasive Species Project Officer, the training focused on the highly invasive *rhododendron ponticum* that is present at Nevis.

"We started the day by discussing where ponticum came from and various methods used for removal in the past, and then we were taught the removal by stem injection method," explained John.

The technique involves using a battery drill to make a series of holes around the plant stem. These cavities are then filled with a spray solution of 20% Glyphosate which is translocated down to the root, killing the plant.

"This method is safer and less labour intensive compared to traditional methods, which sometimes involve carrying heavy bags of dead invasives on your back over long distances", added John.

"Everything we need for this form of invasive removal by stem injection can hang off a tool belt and it can be carried out in all weather conditions."

We've shared parts of our journey to tackle invasive non-natives on our land in earlier editions of the *Journal* (prickly heath on Skye in Autumn 2024, gunnera at Knoydart in Autumn 2025), and we're hoping this training session will inform practice going forward.

Connect Outdoors returns

With 2026 marking the third year of our inclusive educational programme Connect Outdoors, five new organisations have lined up to provide outdoor opportunities to communities who have little or no access to the outdoors in Scotland.

The 2026 partners for Connect Outdoors are Edinburgh Recovery Activities, Stoneyburn and Bents Future Vision group, Coldingham Brave Bayers, Sam's Saunters in Inverness and Edinburgh and Lothians Regional Equality Council.

Sam of Sam's Saunters is a Connect Outdoors alumni who participated in 2024 and then joined the Connect Outdoors Leadership Programme in 2025. With support from the programme, including his mentor, a Trust volunteer, he has set up his own walking group for LGBTQIA+ peers who have applied successfully to the programme.

We launched Connect Outdoors in 2023 in partnership with Tiso and Mhor Outdoor, with the goal of introducing people from under-represented communities to nature and wild places through sustainable, educational and empowering outdoor activity.

Each Connect Outdoors session partners with a different community organisation whose beneficiaries face barriers to accessing the outdoors, taking them on weekly hill walks over a period of eight weeks.

PHOTOGRAPH: EMILY BOWIE

A Connect Outdoors group enjoying the hills

Members' Gathering

This year our half-day Members' Gathering will take place on Friday 25 September at the Trust's Glenlude site in the Scottish Borders. Glenlude is five miles south of Innerleithen where our AGM will take place the following day.

Join fellow Members, Trust staff and Trustees to hear about the latest work at this award-winning site. Members can choose to join either in the morning (9.30am to 12.30pm) or the afternoon (1.30pm to 4.30pm).

Nature has always led the work at Glenlude and a goal of the site is for the creation of a space where all can be involved in this important restoration process.

Members will learn how Glenlude's future plans build on the inspiring work which won the team the Nature of Scotland Award for Health and Wellbeing in 2025, in partnership with Phoenix Futures.

To book your place, visit **johnmuirtrust.org/agm-events**

Supporting adventures

The Trust-administered Des Rubens and Bill Wallace Grant, which commemorates two former presidents of the Scottish Mountaineering Club, is helping even more people seek life-changing experiences in wild places in 2026.

PHOTOGRAPH: SAM POULTNEY

River restoration officer Sam Poultney

This year the grant will fund seven adventures with a scientific or education focus that will lead to practical action to conserve wild places.

GP Ian Cameron and his 15-year-old son Alfie are planning an epic walk from Cape Wrath to Cheltenham through some of Britian's wild places to raise funds for a cancer charity.

Edinburgh-based George King is in training to be a Summer Mountain Leader and plans to investigate how huts, bothies and simple shelters can help create more sustainable and equitable access to wild areas – comparing North-West Scotland to northern Sweden.

Having recently completed a round of Munros, Michelle Mackay has joined her local mountain rescue team and is keen to gain her Mountain Leader qualification to further boost her confidence in the outdoors.

River restoration officer Sam Poultney has a particular interest in rare freshwater fish. He plans to map previously uncharted hill lochs in the Cairngorms National Park for Arctic charr habitat suitability.

Will Rowland, who volunteers with the Lochaber Mountain Rescue team, is preparing for a self-led exploratory (alpine style) climbing trip to the Himalayas, where he plans to scale the south ridge of Tengkangpoche (6,487m).

Art therapist Suzannah Scott-Moncrieff plans to travel to Poland's primeval Białowieza Forest to listen to and record this densely alive ecosystem, placing its unruly wildness in conversation with the quietly homogenous experience of a Sitka spruce plantation in Scotland.

Finally, educator and nature conservationist Mandy Wright plans to hone her wildlife tracking and trailing skills and then use her newfound knowledge to build a tracking community among young people in East Lothian.

For much more on the grant, visit **tinyurl.com/3ux3p73r**

Call for Trustees

Please consider nominating yourself to become a Trustee. This year the Board of Trustees has four vacancies for three-year terms. We are looking for Trustees who will bring fresh ideas and experience to help guide our strategic approaches and deliver our charitable purpose.

Applications from diverse backgrounds are encouraged and we would like to hear from potential Trustees who bring experience and a desire to help with strategic oversight in the following areas:

- Ecological restoration
- Campaigning to increase public support
- Governance and compliance in the charity sector
- Engagement and communication
- Project Management
- Crofting
- Community engagement

This year, to facilitate wider participation in the Trustee election, we are introducing a new online process to make it easier for Members to act as proposers for candidates.

If there are more than four candidates, the election will be by ballot of Members, and the result will be announced at our AGM on Saturday 26 September.

For more and to submit your nomination, visit **johnmuirtrust.org/trusteecall**

The lodges have views to Quinag

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

Stay at Kylesku Lodges

Our lodges at Kylesku are located on Scotland's beautiful north-west coast overlooking the Quinag mountain range. They are perfectly placed for visitors to enjoy wild places, with incredible beaches, hidden waterfalls and wildlife right at the doorstep.

As well as stunning views, all lodges have excellent WiFi and have been newly refurbished.

Enjoy one night for free when you stay for four nights or more between 1 June and 31 August. Visit **kyleskulodges.co.uk** and book during April or May.

Making a difference

Fresh from recognition in the recent Nature of Scotland Awards, the Trust's Glenlude team are looking ahead to another busy year of bringing people and nature together, writes Rich Rowe

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

WARMING themselves beside the giant, pot-bellied stove in the volunteer hut at Glenlude, the flames dancing in the late-winter gloom, Karen Purvis and Ellie Oakley are clearly itching to get started on a new season. They will do so on the back of industry recognition that has raised the profile of this understated but hugely impressive site in the Scottish Borders like never before.

Much like the fire before them, both Glenlude Manager Karen and Conservation Officer Ellie are still glowing from memories of a special night in Edinburgh last November when they collected the 2025 Nature of Scotland Health and Wellbeing Award for their long-running partnership work with the drug and alcohol rehabilitation charity, Phoenix Futures.

Glasgow-based but operational UK-wide, Phoenix Futures uses Glenlude as a key site for its Recovery through Nature (RtN) programme: a therapeutic intervention that sees groups engage in practical conservation and outdoor tasks and which has yielded a dramatic improvement in successful treatment completion rates for those regularly involved.

Karen (left) and Ellie look out towards the Phoenix Forest

PHOTOGRAPH: BENJAMIN STATHAM

While the outdoors is an alien place for many of the participants, the value of being outside doing this kind of work has proved immensely powerful. "Therapy by stealth" is how Phoenix Futures' Jon Hall, who has been involved with the programme from the start, refers to it.

"We were at the awards ceremony with Jon and a cross section of the Phoenix team, including people who have been through the programme, and sat in stunned silence when our names were read out," says Karen. "Hearing about all the other incredible projects in the same room made us realise that we are doing something really good here."

EARLY BEGINNINGS

Phoenix Futures approached the Trust in 2012 when first searching for a suitable site to create a celebratory woodland in Scotland – one that would play host to what has become an annual tree-planting event to mark participants' successful completion of the RtN programme.

Karen, who has overseen Glenlude since the same year, remembers those initial conversations well. "We offered them two areas, one up on the hill out of sight and

The entrance to Glenlude

"One of the people involved in those plantings went on to become a ranger. There are so many individual stories, many of them genuinely life-changing"

another right by the roadside that was overgrown with bracken at the time," she recalls.

They chose to be seen – with what has now become the well-established 'Phoenix Forest' beginning with the building of a simple brash hedge with native trees planted inside. "One of the people involved in those plantings went on to become a ranger, which really set the tone," says Karen. "There are so many individual stories, many of them genuinely life-changing."

While the annual tree-planting event continues, Phoenix Futures bring groups to Glenlude throughout the year. Last year alone saw teams come from Derbyshire, North Ayrshire, North Lanarkshire, Glasgow, Fife and Aberdeenshire.

Over time, the expansion of this forest has transformed the hillside into a fully functioning woodland where a vibrant mix of lichen-encrusted birch, hazel, rowan, hawthorn and oak stand as proud as the participants who planted them. And, as intended, it is visible to all who travel over Paddy Slacks, the local name given to the road that climbs past Glenlude linking the Tweed and Yarrow valleys.

SLOW AND STEADY

The work with Phoenix Futures speaks to the very heart of what Glenlude is about: a safe place where people can build a deeper connection with nature – and especially those who may not otherwise have access to such areas.

This burgeoning expanse of forest has also contributed greatly to a wider effort to turn a former sheep farm and conifer plantation into a rich mosaic of native habitats. When the Trust first inherited Glenlude with its stands of single-age Sitka spruce and larch back in 2004, the temptation might have been to fell the whole lot in one go, but that would have just created a native plantation rather than a natural, layered woodland structure.

Instead, Karen and the Glenlude team have taken a deliberately gradual approach that has allowed nature to grow in tune with the fledgling forest. With staggered planting over time, Glenlude is now home to a multi-age set up, with mature alder, birch and more producing seed – a positive sign that the woodland is beginning to regenerate by itself.

"Throughout the site, we are kickstarting natural processes with areas of younger woodland coming through," explains Karen. "This gentler approach takes longer but fits with our goal of including volunteers and groups in every aspect of what we do."

Today, the Phoenix Forest connects with mature woodland planted in 1995 and Jamie's Wood – another specially dedicated area at Glenlude – to create around 22ha of continuous native woodland. Crucially, there now exists the mosaic of ages, densities, open glades and deadwood that are such essential components of a healthy woodland ecosystem.

ALL IN THE MIX

In addition to group visits from core partners such as Phoenix Futures, the Trust works with many other community, volunteer and school groups – with a total of 315 volunteer workdays at Glenlude in 2025.

"It's important to recognise the input of all these people because, without them, we just wouldn't achieve so much," notes Ellie, who joined the Trust in February 2025 and now oversees the engagement side of work at Glenlude.

Last year saw the Green Team – a charity dedicated to connecting young people with nature – celebrate its 30th anniversary on site, with participants planting more than 200 trees. The regular Thursday conservation volunteers also got through a mountain of work, tackling tree maintenance, processing firewood, brash hedging and assisting with ecological survey work.

"You've got to pick your groups and allocate the tasks accordingly but when you've got a squad of enthusiastic people, it's amazing how much timber can be moved, how much hedge can be created and how much ground can be cleared," says Ellie.

Volunteers also flexed their creative muscles,

→ continued

PHOTOGRAPH: ADOBESTOCK

Black grouse numbers are increasing at Glenlude

renovating a section of wooden steps leading to the volunteer hut and also building a sturdy stretch of boardwalk that protects an area of wetland habitat and makes access to the Phoenix Forest easier.

While many volunteers are retired and have been Trust members for decades, there is also a younger demographic coming through. "Often they are people looking for hands-on experiences as they explore a career change," notes Karen.

Younger still are the school groups that come to Glenlude and are now returning following a post-Covid lull. This spring sees the start of the second programme of visits for students from Portobello High School in Edinburgh.

"Last year, the school put together an educational treasure hunt followed by a night at our campsite," explains Ellie. "For many, it was a first experience of being around a campfire. This year, the school has created a similar experience for the entire S2 year group."

PHOTOGRAPH: MIKE WILKINSON WWW.MIKE-WILKINSON.COM

Karen (centre) collects the Nature of Scotland Award alongside (from left to right) BBC Scotland Landward presenter Arlene Stuart, Sean Burgess, Mark Bolton, Jon Hall (all Phoenix Futures), award sponsor and BBC Springwatch presenter Iolo Williams

But perhaps most exciting of all is the planned launch of a Junior Rangers programme at Glenlude that will mirror the excellent work done together with pupils from high schools close to the Trust's properties at Nevis and Quinag further north.

With a structured approach guided by the Scottish Countryside Ranger Association's Junior Ranger Award, the initiative sees young people develop skills that will prepare them for working in the outdoors or as a ranger in the future. "We are speaking with several high schools close to Glenlude and will run a pilot, eight-week programme starting after the summer holidays," explains Ellie.

ECOLOGICAL HEALTH

All of this work on the ground has translated into a growing picture of ecological health at Glenlude – a far cry from the days of dreary, light-starved conifer stands and heavily-grazed open ground.

Since 2012, an annual programme of monitoring has included comprehensive breeding bird surveys that provide detailed insight into population trends and the impact of habitat management work. Early morning surveys are conducted along set transects twice a year – one in spring, one in summer – with sightings of mammals and other key observations recorded to build a broader picture of what's happening in different areas.

The breeding bird survey results have been especially encouraging, with significant increases in the number of individual birds and variety of species – with 42 different species recorded in 2025, up from 29 in 2014.

The findings include some real standouts. Numbers of lesser redpolls, a red-listed species due to habitat loss,

have leapt from a single individual in 2014 to more than 219 in 2024. This is thought to be, in part, due to the availability of seeds from regenerating birch and alder.

Other species showing marked increases include blackcaps, goldcrests, willow warblers, siskins, skylarks and crossbills, while jays have been spotted stashing acorns. There has also been an exciting growth in numbers of black grouse, a bird that has really struggled in the Scottish Borders. Until recently, numbers had held steady at around four lekking males but in 2025 that number doubled to eight.

"We work closely with the RSPB who have noted how pleased they are with the available habitat for black grouse," notes Ellie. "They were especially impressed with how the site supports the birds through every life stage, from a hatch of insects when young to good cover when older."

And it seems that it's not just birds that are thriving at Glenlude. Adder numbers are strong and stable, while butterfly monitoring in 2025 revealed the presence of several species – brimstone, large skipper and green hairstreak – not previously recorded on the site.

As part of a Borders-wide project, the Trust has partnered with the charity Butterfly Conservation to monitor and support a variety of butterflies and moths. This work has already seen volunteers plant rock rose plug plants, the larval food of northern brown argus, into existing patches at Glenlude. "We're hoping this will benefit not only northern brown argus, but a whole variety of other species," says Ellie.

CONTINUED MOMENTUM

With such a positive 2025 behind them, capped by a prestigious award, Karen and Ellie know the importance of momentum. With Ellie managing the engagement side of their work, Karen is now reviewing not just the management plan for this year but also the Long-Term Forest Plan for the next 30 years – a period in which the site will continue its transformation.

In the short to medium term, this will involve the continued felling of the site's remaining 35ha or so of spruce. "As more spruce comes down and more open areas are created, we'll pull back from planting trees and just let the natural seed source do its work," explains Karen.

The ambition is also to construct what Karen calls a Gathering Shelter – an accessible, open-air classroom that will help supercharge the Trust's engagement and educational offer at Glenlude.

"Not everyone can go up the hill and plant trees or make brash hedges," she explains. "This facility will help expand what we are able to do with an even wider range of people, including doing even more on the therapy side."

It will be one more valuable addition to a site that may have flown a little under the radar in the past but which has now gained national recognition for its thoughtful, nurturing treatment of people and nature.

Further information

Glenlude is located just south of Innerleithen in the Scottish Borders, on the edge of the Southern Uplands. Easily accessible, it is within two hours travel distance from Glasgow, Edinburgh and much of the north of England. For more, visit ***johnmuirtrust.org/about-us/where-we-work/glenlude***

About the author

Rich Rowe is the Journal's contributing editor

PHOTOGRAPH: BENJAMIN STATHAM

A Phoenix Futures group hard at work planting trees

Protecting the wild

Thomas Widrow speaks with communities affected by industrial developments in wild places – and outlines the Trust's plan to help take up the fight

IT WAS one of those unsettled Highland autumn days that seemed to suggest both staying indoors and heading out into the elements. I chose the latter and set off north for Sandwood Bay, the Trust's most northerly property.

As I crossed the dunes, the Atlantic made itself known before it came fully into view – the smell of salt on the wind, the steady crash of waves on the shore. Sandwood is framed by sea cliffs and sits a few hours' walk from the nearest road. Places like this have a particular quality: a sense of openness and distance that draws the attention completely.

Sitting in the shelter of a dune, I found myself thinking about time. The fine sand beneath my hands began as rock and mountain long before any of us arrived. Natural forces shaped the beach over millennia.

But the future of places like Sandwood can change far more quickly. Recently, we learned that proposals are being developed for a wind farm at Kinlochbervie, on land bordering the Trust's Sandwood estate. The turbines would be visible across a wide area, from the summit of Quinag to Sandwood Bay itself. Much of the long walk back to the car park would take place within sight of turbine blades.

The proposal is one of many across Scotland, with a surge of large-scale energy developments moving through the planning system as part of the drive toward net zero. These projects are often located in remote areas valued for their wild landscapes.

Before going further, it is important to clarify one thing. The Trust fully recognises the climate crisis and the urgency of addressing it. Indeed, the climate crisis is already affecting landscapes and communities across Scotland and the wider UK.

It is also closely tied to the nature crisis. Damage to ecosystems weakens nature's ability to store carbon and regulate the climate, creating a cycle in which both problems reinforce each other in a downward spiral.

COMMON VIEWS

Many of the people I meet in communities facing large-scale developments recognise this. Their concern is not about whether Scotland should move to renewable energy. It is about how that transition happens, and where.

Recently, I invited several community representatives to talk about their experiences. Strathnairn Community Councillors have been dealing with a surge of wind farm proposals in the glens on the edge of the Monadhliath. Julie, who has been involved in the Trust's Protect the Wild campaign, came with fellow community representatives Maria, Rob, Beth and Tim. Gary joined us from Stratherrick and Foyers, where further energy developments are being proposed around Loch Ness.

All spoke passionately about the landscapes on their doorsteps – places where people walk, cycle and explore, and where their children grew up with easy access to wild landscapes and big horizons. They were visibly distraught that these areas are now threatened by development.

They also described the pressure communities face when multiple large developments are proposed at the same time. Many have spent months reading planning documents, organising responses and preparing detailed objections, even in the face of incredibly poor odds.

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

The broad expanse of Sandwood Bay

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

One of the areas that will be overshadowed by wind turbines if the Kinlochbervie development plans are approved

"The reason I joined the battle to protect the environment is simple – doing nothing is just not an option"

"The reason I joined the battle to protect the environment is simple – doing nothing is just not an option," noted Rob from Strathnairn Community Council. "I couldn't live with myself if I did nothing. You never give up."

Developers sometimes argue that communities should accept these projects in return for limited local benefits. Yet many residents feel they are being asked to trade long-term landscape change for relatively small compensation.

Maria summed up the concern clearly: "It's not just about the here and now. It's about a legacy we need to protect – because once it's gone, it's gone."

DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

Despite the challenges, these communities remain engaged in the democratic process. Their experience highlights a broader issue. Scotland's planning system currently places significant weight on large-scale energy developments, while communities and environmental groups struggle to ensure that landscape and ecological impacts receive equal attention.

That imbalance undermines public confidence in the transition to renewable energy. The solution is not to abandon climate action. Scotland needs renewable energy, but the way it is delivered matters.

→ continued

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

Community leaders joined Thomas to share their thoughts on industrial developments

A clearer national energy strategy would help. That strategy should look not only at where energy is generated but also at how demand can be reduced – through better home insulation, improved public transport and other efficiency measures.

There is also a legitimate question about who benefits from renewable energy generation. Many communities hosting major developments face some of the highest energy costs in the UK, with fuel poverty a persistent problem in parts of rural Scotland.

Community benefit payments remain optional and relatively modest compared with the revenues generated by private developers. Nature and wild places, of course, receive no benefits at all. All of which suggests the current planning system is not delivering as intended and requires adjustment.

ADDING WEIGHT

The Trust is supporting communities by looking to reform the planning system to ensure protections for the country's wildest landscapes. The aim would not be delay for its own sake, but for time to ensure that Scotland's climate response protects nature as well as the climate.

With careful planning, Scotland can achieve both. Renewable energy can be developed in ways that respect landscapes and ecosystems, while communities play a meaningful role in shaping decisions that affect their surroundings.

"Renewable energy can be developed in ways that respect landscapes and ecosystems, while communities play a meaningful role in shaping decisions that affect their surroundings"

We want to help create a Scotland where communities are driving development, not fighting them; where we all use less energy and have access to what we need for less, eliminating fuel poverty in a country that is incredibly energy rich; and where each wind turbine contributes to fighting the nature crisis and delivering climate justice.

The alternative – allowing the transition to unfold without that balance – risks the destruction of Scotland's wild landscapes.

Communities across the country are asking for a better approach. The Trust will add its weight to help make that case because those communities and wild places deserve better.

About the author

Thomas Widrow is the Trust's Head of Policy

Join our Protect the Wild campaign

Scotland's wild places are under increasing pressure from the rapid expansion of energy infrastructure. While renewable energy is essential for tackling the climate crisis, the current planning system does not ensure that development happens in a way that protects our most valued wild places which contribute to tackling the nature crisis as well.

Our Protect the Wild campaign calls for a better balance – one that delivers clean energy while safeguarding the wild places that define us.

The campaign focuses on raising awareness of how industrial developments are transforming wild places such as Sandwood Bay and Quinag, which could be affected by proposals for a wind farm at Kinlochbervie.

This year the campaign is:

- Commissioning national polling to understand public views
- Planning to object to the Kinlochbervie proposal
- Growing a nationwide supporter base

Looking ahead, the campaign will advocate for reforms to Scotland's planning framework, ensuring wild landscapes are properly considered in future decisions.

Scotland can and should lead on climate action without sacrificing its wild places. Protect the Wild aims to make sure both priorities go hand in hand.

Please join the fight by:

- Signing up to support the campaign at **bit.ly/3NvNZn0**
- Donating to our Fighting Fund at **bit.ly/3Nk1W87**

Next generation rangers

Natalia Barbour details how the Trust is helping student rangers learn key career skills as part of a national qualification

UHI students practise their path maintenance skills at Steall Gorge, Nevis

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

THE University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) launched its NQ (national qualification) Countryside Skills with Ranger Training programme in 2019, establishing a pathway for individuals seeking practical, land based experience and a future career in countryside management.

Since its inception, the Trust has played an active and supportive role in shaping the delivery of the course. This includes hosting hands on habitat monitoring sessions at Nevis, offering students the chance to work directly with professional path contractors on our land, and helping the team integrate the John Muir Award into the curriculum.

Now in its sixth year, the programme has already demonstrated its effectiveness, with many graduates securing seasonal and full time ranger positions across Scotland. Their successes highlight both the demand for skilled rangers and the strength of the training offered through UHI and its partner organisations.

The course itself runs for six months, from January to June, and is delivered through a combination of classroom learning, fieldwork and practical instruction.

Teaching is led by a UHI lecturer alongside a staff member from the Nevis Landscape Partnership, ensuring students benefit from both academic guidance and real-world expertise.

Modules cover a range of skills essential for modern countryside work, including habitat monitoring, rural estate maintenance, path construction and maintenance, interpretation techniques and visitor management.

Students also work towards gaining key industry certifications such as chainsaw handling, first aid, brush cutter operation and drystone walling qualifications – accreditations that significantly strengthen their employability within the sector.

PRACTICAL SKILLS

In April, Nevis Conservation Officer Julia Robertson led a series of path building sessions at Steall Gorge, allowing students to apply the practical skills they had been developing since the start of the course.

"It's great to share the work that we're doing at Nevis with the students and help them put their practical skills to the test in the outdoors," says Julia. "The UHI NQ course is a great opportunity for a new generation of rangers to develop skills that will help them in the future."

Julia's enthusiasm underscores the close collaboration between Nevis staff and the students, and the mutual benefits gained through these shared training opportunities.

The students are scheduled to return in May to continue assisting with habitat monitoring at Nevis, during which they will explore advanced monitoring techniques and deepen their understanding of local land management practices.

Alongside this work, they will progress through each stage of their John Muir Award, completing it prior to graduation in June – a meaningful achievement that reflects their commitment to learning, conservation and responsible engagement with the natural environment.

About the author
Natalia Barbour is the Trust's Digital Communications Officer

When woodland returns

As the Trust celebrates 21 years of caring for Quinag, Matthew Coathup reflects on the progress made and what the future may hold for this special place

IT'S EARLY April as I drive north through Assynt. Spring comes late here, but clear blue skies and vibrant green leaves, just starting to unfurl, reassure me that winter has passed. I'm almost at Quinag, a mountain at the heart of a 3,700ha estate that the Trust has cared for since 2005.

Quinag is a broad, imposing fortress in the landscape. It is bound to the south by the lonely expanse of Loch Assynt, where the crumbling outpost of Ardvreck Castle perches on a small promontory overlooking its dark waters.

Unable to resist a quick detour, I park in a roadside layby, pull on a jacket and walk towards the castle along a narrow, sandy causeway. Built in the 15th century by the Macleods of Assynt, the castle is a commanding sight even in its ruined state. Drawing the eye, it fills the imagination with thoughts of the people who set foot within its once robust walls. Standing between its now roofless walls, the weight of history feels almost overwhelming.

This rich human story – of lives lived, of struggle, kinship and belonging – is deeply woven into this landscape, shaping the names on the map. And yet, it rests within an unfathomably vast and ancient land that has been reforged time and again in fire, rock and ice.

Looming all around, the Quinag complex is made primarily of Torridonian sandstone sitting atop a platform of Lewisian gneiss and cut by younger dykes of igneous rock. At up to three billion years old, Lewisian gneiss is considered one of the oldest rocks in the world, while the sedimentary Torridonian sandstone is a mere one billion years old.

Assynt's landscape is very different from elsewhere in Scotland, in large part thanks to its position on the Moine Thrust – a fault line along which tectonic forces smashed huge strata of rock over one another.

PHOTOGRAPH: ADOBE STOCK

An area of regenerating birch at Quinag

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

The ruins of Ardvreck Castle overlooking Loch Assynt

Ice ages and millennia of erosion then scraped away the softer rock at the surface, leaving steep towers of sandstone topped by Cambrian quartzite. The thrusting, isolated peaks of Assynt are what remain today.

FINDING WOODLAND

Back in the car now, the road splits shortly after Ardvreck and I head due north. Here, the fortress really comes into view. Like many of Assynt's great mountains – Suilven, Stac Pollaidh, Canisp and others – towering walls of rock erupt from the surrounding, lochan-filled landscape, giving rise to imperious cliffs, jagged turrets and airy ridges.

Quinag is broader and more complex than some of its neighbours. A range of three Corbetts rising to 808m at its highest point and linked by an undulating Y-shaped ridge, its name is an anglicisation of *Cuinneag*, meaning milk pail, reflecting its broad, steep shape and uneven, rounded tops.

Each point on the Y – *Spidean Coinich* (Mossy Peak) to the south and the two to the north, *Sàil Ghorm* (Blue Heel) and *Sàil Gharbh* (Rough Heel) – forms a formidable buttress in its own right.

There is an inescapable feeling of wildness here, and I find that walking into the heart of the massif feels like stepping into another world. But that's not where I'm heading today. Instead, I drive along Quinag's eastern flank, past the Trust's car park, and turn just south of Unapool onto a smaller road that tracks the north side of Quinag.

I pull over after a couple of kilometres, just before a small bridge. Unlike the exposed rock, heath and bog found elsewhere at Quinag, here there is a patchy covering of remnant woodland, now successfully regenerating under the Trust's stewardship.

This is part of the Ardvar Woodlands, a Site of Special Scientific Interest and European Special Area of Conservation which forms some of the most northerly fragments of Scotland's temperate rainforest. The woodland here is dominated by birch but is also home to hazel, holly, aspen, alder, willow and rowan.

Today, Ardvar and the land extending north from here to the Trust's lodges at Kylesku is the most densely wooded area at Quinag. But it isn't the only place where trees can be found. Gnarled remnants hang onto crags and on the banks of steep burns and ravines throughout much of the Trust's estate.

These woodlands are of enormous biodiversity value. High humidity, a coastal climate and the geology and topography of the land produce a special environment. In total, 431 species of higher plants have been recorded at Quinag, as well as nationally significant assemblages of bryophytes (mosses and liverworts) and lichens.

DWINDLING COVER

However, many of the habitats, especially woodland, on and around Quinag have declined or disappeared.

→ continued

Ecological records show evidence of species now rare or absent, including oak, aspen, juniper and wych elm.

Gaelic place names also point to a more wooded history – *Alttan na Salàch*, Wee Burn of the Willow; *Bad na Fearaig*, Place of the Alder; and *Doire Cuillin*, Holly Grove.

John Home's *Survey of Assynt* maps, 1774, show more widespread tree cover than is found today. A century later, first edition Ordnance Survey maps show less tree cover, but still more than exists today. This is the case across much of Scotland, with the latest National Woodland Survey of Scotland estimating that native woodland now covers just 4% of the country's land area.

While climatic factors may have played a role in this dwindling native tree cover, the decline has been primarily human driven, from large-scale woodland clearances and agricultural expansion, burning to maintain open ground and intensifying grazing pressure from livestock and deer.

Over recent centuries, deer numbers have increased dramatically in Scotland. Initially, this was driven by the loss of apex predators such as wolves, which were hunted to extinction here in the 18th century.

But over the last 150 years this population rise has been inflated by land management practices, especially on sporting estates which often actively encourage high deer numbers. The population in Scotland continues to grow and is estimated to have doubled from 500,000 in 1990 to around one million animals today.

At sustainable densities, deer are a crucial component of Scotland's environment. But in such numbers, their heavy browsing suppresses regeneration and now represents the single greatest threat to native woodland recovery.

SIGNS OF LIFE

I locate a faint track heading south and set off, climbing gradually along the *Allt a' Ghamhna* right on the boundary of Trust ground. Quickly, I reach one of my favourite places at Quinag: an area of flat ground before a sparkling waterfall that emerges from the hillside, bathed in hazy, golden rays. The only sounds are the gush of water, the rhythmic hum of insects and the piercing cry of a golden eagle as it flies overhead.

I'm surrounded by trees, their delicate leaves just emerging. Although still close to the road, this place feels wild, hidden and alive. Looking more closely, there are signs that it isn't just a feeling – this place *really* is coming back to life. At my feet, there is lush heather while, all around, young birch trees, some now a metre high, reach for the sky.

I walk slowly south-east, following the edges of existing birch woodland, hunched low to the ground, looking for more signs. It's not long before I spot them: tiny seedlings, just a few centimetres high, not just birch but rowan and holly too.

In recent years, the Trust has doubled its annual deer cull at Quinag. In the absence of natural predators, it is the only humane way to manage deer populations, and the most important means of helping restore conditions to a state which gives natural processes a chance to thrive.

Across much of the Quinag estate, where remnant trees once held onto only inaccessible crags and ravines away from hungry mouths, young trees are now beginning to grow, especially along the south side of the range.

The data backs this up. The Trust conducts annual monitoring of around 100 tagged young trees at Quinag, distributed around the woodlands to the north as well as the south of the estate. Deer culls have been increased in the three years from 2022 to 2025 and, in that time, average marked seedling height, which had previously remained static, increased from around 49cm to 64cm.

The percentage of marked trees with their leader shoot browsed (at point of measurement in late spring each year) has dropped from around 60% to 32%. There are similar trends when the data is analysed across different monitoring zones,

demonstrating steady and widespread regeneration. After centuries of decline and slumber, nature really is beginning to wake up.

NATURAL REGENERATION

The Trust advocates for the restoration of natural processes and giving nature the freedom to shape landscapes. For this reason, we typically promote natural regeneration in our wildest places, rather than using measures such as tree planting.

Nature is dynamic, and natural processes are complex, so rather than trying to say exactly where there should be trees and how many, we aim as far as possible to restore

Quinag rises high above a section of the Ardvar Woodlands

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

The Trust monitors browsing of lead shoots on marked trees such as this tagged rowan

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

A Trust interpretation board at Quinag

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

conditions that allow nature to decide. But this is a slow process and management of deer densities will need to be maintained for years to come.

Pausing for a moment, I allow myself to imagine returning in 20 years from now and seeing a wild place flourishing as it grows into a thriving natural landscape. There will be greater tree cover as part of a balanced natural system. Open, rocky ground will remain but with thicker and more diverse heath, where heather is not supressed and cropped by overgrazing. At higher altitudes, perhaps there will even be healthy montane scrub, with dwarf birch, willows and juniper.

In this scenario, deer will remain an important part of the ecosystem, and the Trust is also interested in other important, but currently missing, native species that would scarify the land, creating a seedbed for tree seeds to germinate. For instance, we are looking to explore native cattle with no-fence collars to fulfil that role in the future.

Heading back to the car, I reflect on how as a charity for wild places our responsibility is to advocate for, protect and restore corners of the world where nature can lead the way. This is especially important now given the scale of threats facing nature, wild places and humanity.

I also think about the countless human stories that have seen names given to maps. The challenge is to find ways to strike a balance between the two; humanity needs wild places, both for their intrinsic value and also for the vital services that thriving natural processes and landscapes provide us.

The Trust has a vital role to play and the ongoing regeneration here is a sign of the positive impact that we can continue to have. I leave Quinag as I began the day – a little overwhelmed by the weight of history but also full of hope for its future.

About the author
Matthew Coathup is the Trust's Head of Wild Places Index.

Learning from the land

A year on from the launch of the redesigned John Muir Award, Emily Sutton reflects on undertaking the John Muir Award as an individual throughout 2025

FIVE experiences trace my journey through the John Muir Award, and along the way I've walked remote peninsulas, busy hills and recovering estates and learned how human decisions as well as natural processes impact wild places.

Taken together, these experiences reflect a simple idea at the heart of the John Muir Award: that connecting people with wild places helps build understanding, care and long-term commitment. That connection matters and it begins wherever you are.

HOME DISCOVERIES

When I began my John Muir Award, I imagined my first wild place might be somewhere expansive and remote. Instead, my first five hours were spent in my back garden – a modest, overgrown urban space.

This first session was about discovery. I wanted to understand whether it could become a wilder place with value for nature. As I spent more time in the garden, the life that already existed there became easier to notice. I listened for birdsong, watched insects moving through the space and noticed how light and shade shaped different corners of the garden throughout the day.

I also became more aware of the human imprint: compacted soil, well-worn paths, areas shaped by years of cultivation. Paying attention to what was already growing helped me understand how natural processes were still quietly at work.

The John Muir Trust speaks about the importance of connecting people with wild places. This first session showed me that the experience of wildness can begin at home.

THRILL OF THE WILD

Travelling to Knoydart in June 2025 marked a shift in scale. The journey itself set the tone. Skimming across the water from Arnisdale to the Barrisdale Estate was exhilarating. I was accessing a part of Scotland that many people never get the chance to see, a reminder that geography and access shape who experiences wild places.

I walked with Trust staff, Trustees and guests into the regenerating woodland on the Trust's Li and Coire Dhorrcail property. We stopped to observe the visible impacts of regeneration across the landscape. We paused repeatedly to look closely at plants, discussing which species were early or late this year and what that might tell us about weather patterns, land management and ecological response.

PHOTOGRAPHY: EMILY SUTTON

Li and Coire Dhorrcail, Knoydart

The Trust's approach to land management puts natural processes first. In Knoydart, that ethos was evident not only in the land itself, but in the conversations taking place – between land managers, conservationists and communities – about what works, what doesn't and what needs time.

Wildlife encounters threaded through the trip. Binoculars were raised as a dramatic scene unfolded: a huge white-tailed eagle mobbed by smaller birds. Watching that display play out against sea and mountains felt like a fleeting glimpse of ecological complexity in action.

Before the day ended, I swam in the freezing water. The cold was bracing and clarifying, leaving me awed by the rugged landscape all around.

FAIRY HILL

Schiehallion is known in Gaelic as *Sìth Chailleann*, often translated as the Fairy Hill of the Caledonians. Rising

“Again, wildlife encounters enhanced the experience ... evidence that we were moving through an active, living landscape rather than a managed backdrop”

above Loch Rannoch, it sits within a landscape shaped by people, conservation and constant use.

I walked Schiehallion in early August with Eelco de Jong, a former Trustee and an experienced forester. This felt like another important shift in perspective. Here, the focus was on how different land uses sit alongside one another in a place that is ecologically important, culturally meaningful and heavily visited.

Eelco set a brisk pace. Keeping up with a six-foot-plus trail runner was a challenge, but a welcome one (great for my Strava stats!). Schiehallion is busy by Scottish hill standards and, as we climbed, we passed a steady stream of other walkers.

Much of our discussion focused on how different land uses intersect here. Woodland expansion can support biodiversity, soil health and climate resilience, but only if it is carefully planned and sensitive to landscape character and access. On Schiehallion, those choices are visible, debated and felt by the many people who walk the hill.

Increased engagement with wild places brings benefits, but also pressures, and there are no simple answers.

WOOD ANTS

In early October, my John Muir Award brought me to Mar Lodge Estate in the Cairngorms for a two-day volunteering residential – a session that was all about getting involved directly in a wild place.

The residential was ably organised by James Brownhill, one of the Trust’s most experienced volunteers, and delivered with support from rangers at the National Trust for Scotland. Volunteers arrived with a range of backgrounds and experience, and quickly formed a cohesive group, brought together by curiosity, good humour and a shared interest.

Our first day focused on bud-capping young Scots pines, a simple but effective technique for protecting new growth from browsing. Later that day, we turned our attention to one of the estate’s more elusive residents: the rare narrow-headed wood ant. Searching for nests required patience and close observation. When I found a newly built nest, I was genuinely thrilled!

We noticed adaptations for wildlife throughout the grounds, including ‘hare runs’ built into fences and hedges to allow animals to move freely. The second day centred on hedge work: weeding, checking and planting cherry, hawthorn, blackthorn and hazel. We discussed how 2025 was a mast year, with trees and plants producing an abundance of fruit and seed. It reinforced how conservation is tied to seasonal rhythms.

Again, wildlife encounters enhanced the experience: hen harriers overhead, a golden eagle in the distance and fungi in many remarkable varieties – evidence that we were moving through an active, living landscape rather than a managed backdrop.

Emily on the summit of Schiehallion; regenerating woodland at the base of the mountain’s broad flanks (right)

TO GLENLUDE

My final John Muir Award session also took place in October, but this time at Glenlude in the Scottish Borders. This visit felt like a deliberate finale. Together with Trust staff and volunteers, I walked the land, reflecting on what the Award itself is designed to do.

Glenlude sits in a steep-sided valley to the south of Innerleithen and has been shaped by long-term woodland restoration. The property was gifted to the Trust by Sheila Bell, whose life was defined by independence, conviction and a practical commitment to wildness.

Over time, the former Forestry Commission land dominated by spruce and larch is being replaced with native species including oak, pine, birch and rowan, gradually transforming the site into a more diverse woodland. This is not a finished landscape, but one still recovering, shaped by patience rather than prescription.

During our visit, Glenlude was busy. Corporate volunteering groups were working alongside long-standing, highly experienced Trust volunteers. The mix felt important. The Award aims to build a broad community of people who care about wild places, and Glenlude shows how that can work in practice.

This final location brought my John Muir Award journey to a close. Throughout these five experiences, the Award gave structure to my time in wild places, supported my conservation journey and encouraged me to reflect on why wild places matter.

About the author

Emily Sutton is a former Trustee of the John Muir Trust

Native trees festooned in lichen, Glenlude

One year on

It is a year since the launch of the redesigned John Muir Award and in that time we have seen change and opportunity for the scheme.

While the redesigned Wild Places Guardian level feels relatively familiar for returning Award leaders, behind the scenes our Award team have implemented new systems that enable significant efficiencies along with improved data collection and reporting.

For Award provider organisations, Group Membership of the Trust is now a requirement. This connects them to the Trust and our wider work while also providing financial support for the management and ongoing development of the Award.

Young people enjoying their outdoor learning experience

New online training sessions for leaders have proved popular, with more than 500 individuals participating in online workshops offering an introduction to the Wild Places Guardian Award, plus opportunities to connect and share ideas with leaders from a range of other organisations.

Building on the success of the workshops, we are developing further training to continue the upskilling of leaders in engaging with wild places.

"The information on your webpages and newsletters is already comprehensive, but I still found it really helpful for you to go through the different components with us," commented one workshop participant from Lochwinnoch Force for Nature. "I also enjoyed hearing from people who have experience of being Award providers, as I have not yet been involved."

Last year, a total of 2,919 Awards were achieved, with every participant taking practical steps to care for and protect wild places. Together, more than 32,399 hours were spent on conservation actions to protect and restore natural processes across the UK.

The collective impact is significant. As one participant commented: "We are all connected to each other, to the land, and to the creatures we share it with. And if we each do our part, no matter how small, we can make a difference".

John Muir Award team

PHOTOGRAPHY: ISTOCK ISTOCK.COM/MONKEYBUSINESSIMAGES

Delicate cushions of moss in woodland

PHOTOGRAPH: ALEXANDER M WEIR

Giving circles

Liv Adams details the Trust's major donor partnership scheme and the importance of philanthropic support to our work

HIGH above the imposing landscape of Assynt, a golden eagle soars over ancient peaks, while a ring ouzel calls from the scree slopes of *Sàil Gharbh* on Quinag. Meanwhile, almost 300kms to the south in Knoydart, an otter hunts along the narrowing shores of Loch Hourn, while oystercatchers and other wading birds patrol the tideline.

These dramatic landscapes may feel wild and self-sustaining, but their protection and recovery depend on careful stewardship and on people who choose to defend their future.

A single major gift can alter the course of a landscape. It can restore peatland, regenerate woodland or give a young person their first experience of a wild place. For the John Muir Trust, philanthropy is not an add-on; it enables bold conservation projects to happen.

Behind every restored hillside, every hard-won decision that protects wild land and every person achieving their John Muir Award lies something less visible but equally vital: the agency to act when it matters most, and the care and conviction to see that work through.

Philanthropic partnerships allow us to plan with clarity and purpose. A recent six-figure commitment over three years is now supporting native woodland regeneration and the continued return of wildlife at Li and Coire Dhorrcail in Knoydart.

In this remote landscape, sustained major giving has enabled a considered approach, combining habitat monitoring, woodland expansion and targeted deer management to support recovery. This kind of investment provides not just funding, but the stability that effective land stewardship requires.

Elsewhere, a major gift supported significant aspects of our restoration work and community engagement at Glenlude (see page 10), where woodland regeneration projects are thriving and local volunteers are helping return wildness to the landscape. Alongside ecological recovery, this work offers opportunities for connection, physical activity and the quiet satisfaction of helping nature thrive.

To help secure this work, the Trust has revived its former Partners scheme into two new Giving Circles – the Corbett Club and the Munro Club – offering a meaningful and straightforward way to contribute at a major level, either annually or through regular gifts.

Members of the Corbett Club provide dependable, flexible support that allows the Trust to respond where the need is greatest: restoring habitats, strengthening our voice in policy and advocacy or bringing people closer to nature through community engagement. Supporters receive regular updates, invitations to events and opportunities to connect more deeply with our work.

Those whose lifetime giving exceeds £30,000 are invited to join the Munro Club, recognising an exceptional, enduring commitment to the protection of wild places.

As one supporter reflects: "My support for the John Muir Trust began in recognition of the importance of protecting these landscapes for their own sake – places where wildness still truly exists. I feel privileged to help safeguard them for future generations."

About the author

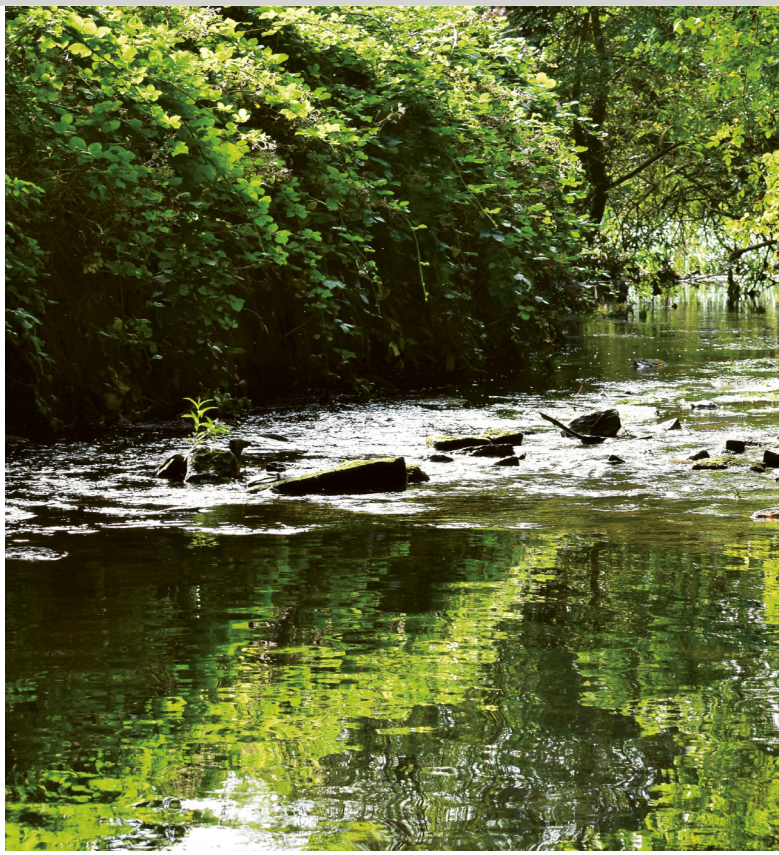
Liv Adams is a member of the Trust's fundraising team

Further information

Philanthropy at the Trust is rooted in a shared belief and a commitment to stand behind the careful work of restoration and advocacy. Join the Corbett or Munro Club and help ensure the UK's wild places continue to inspire, sustain and endure long into the future. For more information, visit **johnmuirtrust.org/philanthropy**

Wild at heart

Alison Bucknall provides an update on the Trust's role in the Charterhouse Heritage Park project in Coventry – a site often described as a green lung in the heart of the city



PHOTOGRAPH: LES WARD

ALTHOUGH rather different in terms of location, the John Muir Trust's work as part of the Charterhouse Heritage Park project in Coventry is every bit as exciting and meaningful as our work in more rugged upland locations around Scotland and in the Lake District. As our first urban initiative, it offers a valuable opportunity to advance our purpose of protecting wild places for all.

An 18ha urban green space, where natural and built heritage sit side by side, Charterhouse Heritage Park is home to a mosaic of woodland and grassland, with a medieval monastic house at its centre. Although undermanaged in recent decades, the park is greatly valued by the local community – and will be even more so as work progresses.

Part of a broad partnership that includes Coventry City Council, the National Trust, Historic Coventry Trust and the Warwickshire Wildlife Trust, the John Muir Trust is helping to ensure that the site's natural processes thrive and that residents can access and feel even more connected to this important place.

With each partner bringing specific areas of expertise, our involvement focuses on the wider heritage park area. The aim, while retaining its wildness, is to make improvements to access and signage, tackle invasive non-native plants and create new opportunities for outdoor learning and volunteering.

RICH HISTORY

At the heart of the heritage park is the Grade I listed Charterhouse building. Founded in 1381 as a Carthusian monastery, this magnificent building was once home to a silent order of monks and housed some of the finest examples of medieval and Renaissance art in England.

The building was in a terrible state of decay before members of the community came together and worked with Historic Coventry Trust to save it from sale and possible demolition. By 2022, Charterhouse had undergone major renovation and was removed from the Heritage at Risk register. Both the Charterhouse building and immediate grounds, including a walled garden, are now in the care of the National Trust.

The wider grounds, where our work is focused, are equally impressive – with many stories to tell. The River Sherbourne, which flows through the heritage park, features one of several sluice gates that were installed in 1942 to dam water for firefighting during war-time bombing raids.

A little further along the river is an impressive viaduct built by Robert Stephenson in the 1830s as part of the world's first long-distance inter-city railway. The viaduct remains in use today, carrying trains on the main line between London and Birmingham.

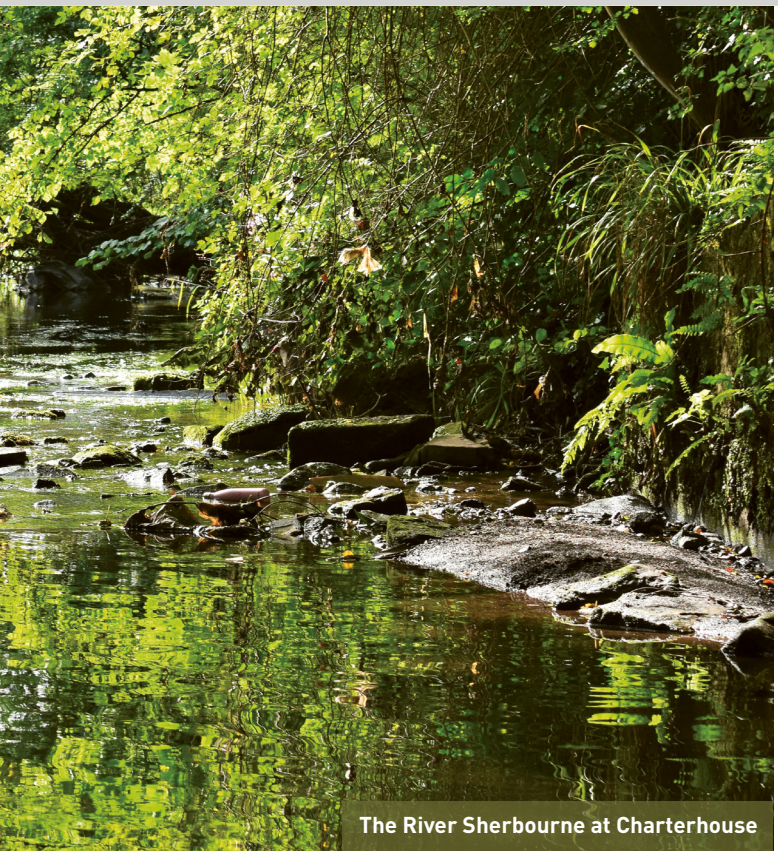
Elsewhere, there is a Grade II listed Victorian railway tunnel with ornately decorated portals, plus an area of allotments built more than 80 years ago but which have been unused since the 1980s. Here, there are old brick foundations and paths, abandoned gardening equipment and even a couple of old sheds, their rusted metal frames now providing habitat for birds and other wildlife that have claimed the space.

RAMPING UP

Work at Charterhouse is now gaining momentum, with the recent launch of Nature Towns and Cities – Green for All. Led by Coventry City Council, this three-year project sees a partnership of conservation and community focused charities and academic bodies working across the city, including the John Muir Trust (although our involvement extends far beyond the project's initial three years).

This broad project will boost nature recovery and enhance the city's climate resilience with local communities at its heart, empowering them to help shape the future of Coventry's natural environment.

The need for this work is clear, with Coventry ranking a lowly 52nd out of England's 55 primary urban areas in the 2024 Green Cities Index. Produced by ENDS Report – a valued source of intelligence for environmental professionals – the index is the result of analysis of a range of environmental data and measures, including access to green space, tree cover, air quality, climate resilience and nature recovery. Coventry's poor ranking highlights both challenge and opportunity. It underlines



The River Sherbourne at Charterhouse

Dave (left) and Les on site at Charterhouse

PHOTOGRAPH: ALISON BUCKNALL

why sites such as Charterhouse Heritage Park are important not just as pockets of green in the city, but as living, breathing landscapes that support biodiversity, improve wellbeing and help reconnect people with nature on their doorstep.

A key aim of the Green For All project is to support the nature restoration of 30% of land by 2030, which was part of a UK Government commitment agreed at the UN Biodiversity Summit (COP15) in 2022. Currently this stands at around 11% for Coventry, so it's encouraging to see this level of ambition and commitment.

CHARTERHOUSE CHAMPIONS

Ultimately, the work at Charterhouse and elsewhere in the city is about people and how they come together. At Charterhouse, they include two locals, Dave and Les, who can be found enjoying the heritage park on most days – with Dave spending time feeding the birds and helping to keep paths clear and Les capturing fantastic images with his camera.

Together, they know more than most about the geography, flora and fauna of the heritage park and have played an invaluable role in sharing that knowledge. Dave's straight-talking means that he's not afraid to voice concerns and challenge where needed, standing up for his wild place.

"I moved into the Charterhouse area 38 years ago because my young daughter and I saw that the fields and old building were close by," says Dave. "Fortunately, access to the area has been maintained and we have spent the years enjoying the open space and discovering so many different plants and animals that, often, life doesn't give you time to think about or see."

Another long-time resident of the area, Les shares his love of the heritage park through photography, creating an annual yearbook for friends and family, as well as leading walks and supporting events.

"I volunteer unofficially with the John Muir Trust and others conducting walks and talks, and sharing my experiences," he explains. "I just love being outdoors and, during the course of the year, I usually spot around 40 different species of birds along with muntjac and roe deer, badgers and foxes.

"My hopes are that the John Muir Trust will transform what are often muddy paths for more people to enjoy and educate our visitors on the benefits of the great outdoors, although I wish our more remote areas to remain wild so that the wildlife can thrive going forward."

NEXT STEPS

Over the coming months, we will continue to engage with the community by offering free events including photography and dawn chorus walks, plus outdoor yoga once it gets a little warmer. We'll also be conducting door-to-door surveys and consultation events with local groups.

Importantly, as part of our work in Coventry, we will be supporting groups to complete the John Muir Award, offering training and information to help people get started.

Further info

*For more on our work at Charterhouse Heritage Park, visit **johnmuirtrust.org/charterhouse-heritage-park**, or get in touch at **Charterhouse@johnmuirtrust.org***

About the author

Alison Bucknall is the Trust's Training and Engagement Officer

Making wild

Dominick Spracklen reflects on the many benefits of returning nature and natural processes to our uplands

PHOTOGRAPHY: DOMINICK SPRACKLEN

I'M HIGH up in a valley surrounded by hills. I can't see anything man-made and I haven't met anyone for hours. It's quiet, except for the wind whistling around the rocks and the tumbling gurgle of a mountain stream. I'm miles from the nearest road and even further from the closest village. It feels very remote.

But is it really wild? The grassy slopes are almost bereft of flowers. Even heather and bilberry – which should be everywhere – cling only to the steepest, craggy ledges. There are no trees or shrubs to be seen. The last ones I passed – far down in the valley below – were a plantation of Sitka spruce and Lodgepole pine. I haven't seen many birds either, just the occasional meadow pipit.

I'm in England's Lake District but it could be many different corries in Scotland. Swap corrie for cwm and I could be in many places in Wales.

This loss of nature from our hills is well documented and makes our mountain experiences much poorer. I feel that loss deeply. To me, a place cannot truly be wild if many of the plants, flowers, trees, birds and animals that should be there are missing.

From water voles to black grouse, and dwarf birch to golden eagles, the list of species missing from the Lake District is depressingly long. But beyond our own experience of the hills, does it matter that so many species are gone?

John Muir believed it did, writing: "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe".

As a researcher at the University of Leeds, much of my career has been spent trying to understand these connections and the wide range of benefits that nature provides. In recent years we have been studying how native woodlands change the way water flows across the land, and whether this alters downstream flood risk.

Felicity Monger, a PhD student at Leeds, measured soil properties in surviving fragments of native woodland at Haweswater in the Lake District. She found that woodland soils soaked up water ten times faster than nearby grassland soils. The diverse ground vegetation in these woodlands also slowed the movement of water across the slope.

Together, these effects meant that flood peaks in woodland streams were up to 60% lower than in comparable grassland streams. Restoring more native woodlands to our hills could therefore play an important role in reducing flooding downstream.

Woodland restoration can also help tackle climate change. Research assistant Tasmin Flecher found that restoring native woodlands more widely across Scotland could store seven million tonnes of carbon dioxide every year.

"To me, a place cannot truly be wild if many of the plants, flowers, trees, birds and animals that should be there are missing"

STEPPING BACK

So how can we restore nature to our hills? In some places, just giving nature space is enough. One example I am particularly proud of is the university's Restoring Hardknott Forest project in the Lake District, where we are working with Forestry England to restore a 630ha plantation to native woodland. With poor access for timber lorries, it is not a good place for commercial forestry. But it is a perfect place to let nature return.

After the plantation was felled, volunteers – including many from the John Muir Trust – worked hard to weed out the resprouting non-native conifers. Then we stepped back and let nature take over. Willow, birch and rowan were the first trees to appear, and the most numerous. Our monitoring found more than 3,000 naturally regenerating trees per hectare – similar to the densities

Natural regeneration at Hardknott Forest, Lake District

that would normally be planted when creating a new woodland.

This new cover was also remarkably diverse. In total we recorded 13 native tree species, including oak, alder, holly and juniper. The woodland soon attracted other wildlife. Matthew Webb, a summer research assistant, placed sound sensors in areas of regenerating woodland and nearby areas of grassland. He recorded twice as many bird calls in the new woodland.

Naturally regenerating woodlands are often beautifully varied. In some places, trees grow thickly; in others they are scattered and open. And in some places, no trees grow at all, leaving glades and open spaces. We wanted to understand what drives this diversity.

Research by Cesca Darvill, another PhD student at Leeds, suggests the answer lies in the soil. Working amongst the amazing natural regeneration at the National Trust of Scotland's Mar Lodge estate in the Cairngorms, she analysed soil properties at varying distances from naturally regenerating Scots pine trees. Trees established readily on drier soils, but were much less common on wet, peaty soils.

Crucially, she found that trees tended to colonise low-carbon soils, while avoiding wetter soils rich in stored carbon. This is important as it means the new trees are likely to store more carbon without damaging existing carbon stored in the soil.

HELPING HAND

In many places, however, we find that we will need to do more than simply step back – we may need to give nature a helping hand. In parts of the uplands, so few trees remain that natural regeneration is no longer possible. In such places, planting trees may be necessary to restore woodland.

Our work at the University of Leeds shows that with careful planning – such as the Woodland Trust's Snaizeholme project in North Yorkshire – we can emulate natural processes by planting trees on lower-carbon soils while leaving carbon-rich soils unplanted.

Working with farmers who manage the land will also be essential. In some places this may mean reducing the intensity of farming and finding the right balance of grazing to help vegetation recover. In other places it could involve moving to more mixed grazing systems, including hardy native cattle breeds.

In the Yorkshire Dales, our research found that where farmers had switched from sheep to cattle grazing, plant diversity increased by 40%. The response from butterflies was even more dramatic: we counted five times as many butterflies on cattle-grazed grasslands compared with sheep-grazed ones. Farming in a slightly gentler way can lead to big gains for nature.

Encouragingly, more and more farmers are working to restore nature alongside producing food. And across Scotland, a growing number of estates are managing the land in ways that help nature recover.

Bringing back nature will bring a host of benefits, from reduced flooding to storing more carbon. And I think it will make our hills feel wilder too.

About the author
Dominick Spracklen is a Trustee of the John Muir Trust

The ever-elusive corncrake

PHOTOGRAPHY: ADOBESTOCK

Corncrake

An emblematic bird of the wondrous machair grassland found in the North-West Highlands and islands, the corncrake is an idiosyncratic species that is far more often heard than seen.

ARRIVING on these shores from Sub-Saharan wintering grounds in late April, the corncrake is an extremely shy bird that craves the cover of dense vegetation, where it feeds on insects and seeds.

Although closely related to coots and moorhens, corncrakes favour dry land, including areas of machair – a wildflower-rich coastal grassland unique to north and west Scotland and western Ireland.

But while corncrakes may be difficult to spot, they are not hard to hear, with males possessing a rasping, repetitive call – a little like a credit card being dragged along a comb – that often continues long into the night.

The male corncrake makes such a racket with its repetitive call that the bird has gained many names in Gaelic, including one that translates as 'nutty noisemaker'.

Long necked and only slightly larger than a blackbird, adult corncrakes have flecked, chestnut wings and a grey-blue head. Chicks are completely jet black but are seldom seen. They often have a tough start to life: although chicks are unable to fly until close to 35 days old, the female leaves them to fend for themselves after around 12 days so that she can busy herself starting another nest.

A red-listed species of high conservation concern, corncrakes were once widespread across much of the UK but were badly impacted by changes to farming practices in the 20th century, especially more intensive management of their favoured meadow habitats.

Inherently vulnerable due to a short lifespan – three years at best – corncrake populations plummeted in just a few decades, although the species managed to retain a presence on Scotland's western and northern edges.

However, great progress has been made in recent years, especially in the bird's Hebridean island strongholds, thanks to a range of agri-environment schemes that see farmers, crofters and communities create areas of corncrake-friendly habitat.

Practices include the planting and leaving of tall vegetation for cover in spring and adopting later mowing schedules that give young birds the very best chance of fledging.

Such efforts mean that more and more corncrakes are now being heard across their old haunts – with the birds best spotted early in the season when vegetation is still relatively short and males are busy establishing territories.

Further information
Corncrakes have been recorded at the Trust's properties at Sandwood and Skye.

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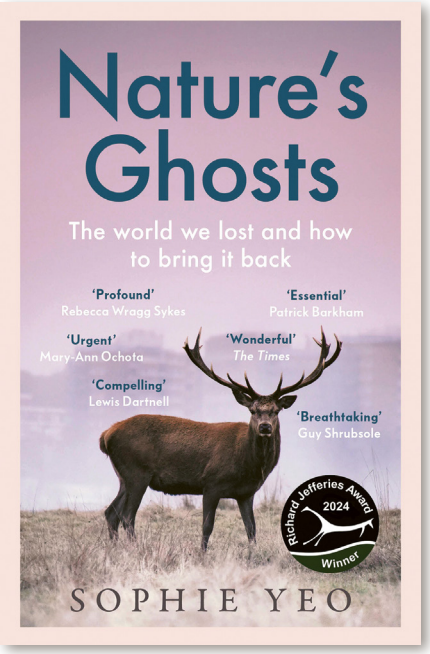


Nature's Ghosts by Sophie Yeo

Rob Buckman enjoys a book that challenges the notion of unspoiled nature

BEFORE diving into this review, I should warn that I am not one of the Trust's impressive ecologists. I am, somewhat unhelpfully, an accountant – the spreadsheet-dwelling, balance-sheet-balancing kind – and I have been with the Trust for just over a year.

In that time, I have been involved in myriad conversations about what a wild place is, what restoring wild land truly demands of us and where the line lies between nature left to its own rhythms and nature carefully tended.

I picked up Sophie Yeo's *Nature's Ghosts* hoping it might help me to better understand the subject. It absolutely did, though not by providing neat answers. What Yeo offers instead is perspective: a way of understanding the shape of the questions. And that shape, it turns out, is vast and humbling: a landscape that reaches far back into the murky depths of time.

At the heart of this book lies a simple but unsettling provocation: there is no pristine baseline to which we can return. The natural world has never stood still long enough for us to create an accurate painting.

Long before the building of Skara Brae in Orkney, humans were already driving megafauna towards extinction. By the dawn of agriculture, humans were reshaping ecosystems on a continental scale. In essence, we have been participants, both destructive and creative, for millennia.

Yeo takes readers on a journey through some of modern conservation's fault lines. She questions our instinct to freeze ecosystems in time, whether through conservation designations or romantic visions of rewilding.

At Knepp, a celebrated nature recovery project in Sussex, Yeo asks whether "wild" can ever truly mean "unmanaged". At Carrifran Wildwood in the Scottish Borders, the author admires the ecological revival while acknowledging the immense human effort required to bring it about.

In Finland, the Snowchange Project offers a different perspective again: conservation interwoven with traditional, cultural practices where people are not distinct from the land so much as part of its fabric.

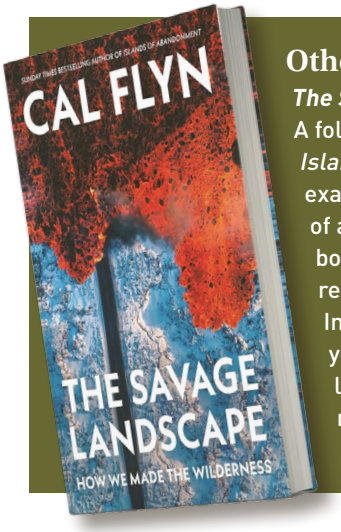
With evident relish, she also challenges cherished myths. Perhaps most pertinent for this audience is the story of a vast Caledonian wildwood blanketing the country until relatively recently. The ecological record, she notes, reveals something far more complicated.

Throughout, Yeo writes with compelling clarity. I found her ability to distil dense ecological arguments into beautifully articulated ideas rather wonderful. If I have one reservation, it is that the book occasionally constructs a position only to dismantle it again a few pages later, which can make the thread hard to follow. Yet that may be the point; certainty is something that she invites us to distrust.

Every debate that we have at the Trust – from deer management to the role of people in wild places – echoes through these pages. *Nature's Ghosts* will not resolve those debates, but it does enrich them and make them more honest.

£10.99
harpercollins.co.uk

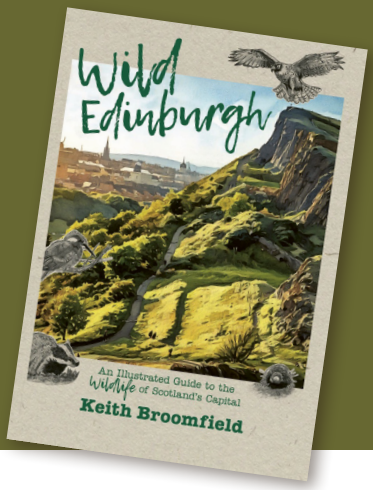
About the reviewer
Rob Buckman is the Trust's Director of Finance and Resources



Others we like

***The Savage Landscape*, by Cal Flyn**
A follow-up to the author's bestselling *Islands of Abandonment* – which examined the ecology and psychology of abandoned places – Cal Flyn's new book takes a different look at our relationship with the natural world. In it, she examines our deep-rooted yearnings to be awed by epic landscapes that are beyond our reach and reveals what nature gets up to in the absence of humans. In doing so, the book asks important questions about the nature of wilderness and how wild places might best be appreciated or preserved.
£20. harpercollins.co.uk

***Wild Edinburgh*, by Keith Broomfield**
Scottish nature writer Keith Broomfield explores the wildlife of Scotland's capital – his childhood city and



The Story of Conservation: a first book about protecting nature by Catherine Barr and Steve Williams. Illustrated by Amy Husband

We asked a young reader, Magnus Fleetwood, to explore an engaging first book aimed at introducing children to the importance of protecting the natural world

THIS is the sixth in a series of *Story of* titles from co-authors Catherine Barr and Steve Williams, with the pair having previously explored the equally broad topics of evolution, space, people, inventions and climate change.

Aimed at primary school age children, this book covers a huge amount of ground as it combines history with science to explore every possible aspect of nature conservation.

Taking young readers on a journey through human history, it charts the changes in our understanding and relationship with the natural world, from when humans didn't consider the impact of their actions to modern day efforts to reverse the harm done and protect Earth's key natural resources (air, minerals, plants, soil, water and wildlife).

In addition to revealing the positive impacts that conservation can have in various parts of the world, the book delves into examples of specific problems faced, such as the displacement of indigenous people and the consumption of 'wild caught' meat in some parts of Africa.

It's an accessible introduction to one of the most pressing issues facing the planet and a great aid in helping children understand the impacts of nature loss and climate change.

We asked Magnus Fleetwood, aged 10, to write a short review of the book. Here's what he thought about it:

'This is a story about the history of conservation, from prehistoric times to the modern day. It is a book with a couple of short paragraphs on each page and some coloured illustrations.

I found this book very interesting because it explains how conservation has changed and the impact we're having on nature.

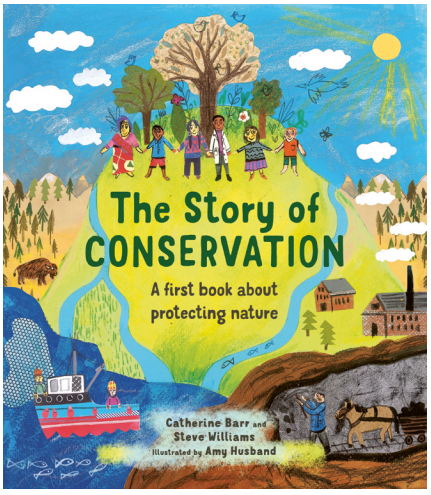
The illustrations are big and take up the full page. They are detailed and show the wide range of countries around the world with some funny captions on each page.

It would be best and most interesting for ages 6 to 10 as the story would be too detailed for younger children.

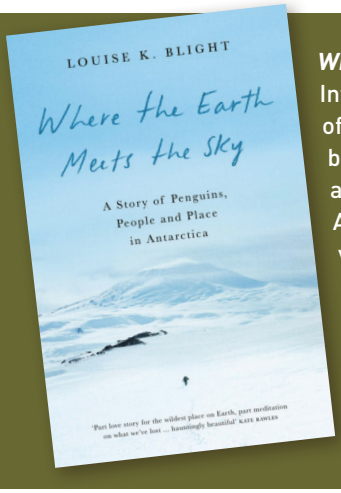
It is encouraging for children to act with nature and stand up to those who don't and I would recommend it.'

Thank you, Magnus!

£12.99
Quarto.com



a place full of wild corners and inhabitants. It's a city like no other in the UK, with the wide range of habitat – from coastline to upland crags – home to nesting seabirds, eels, foxes, otters, badgers and weird and wonderful plant life. With people and wildlife living side by side, and animals often quite habituated to humans, close encounters are a common theme of the author's wanderings around the city. **£11.99. tippermuirbooks.co.uk**



***Where the Earth Meets the Sky,* by Louise K Blight**
Intriguing and insightful, this is an account of a summer spent by the author, a wildlife biologist, on Antarctica's Ross Island, working alongside pioneering Antarctic scientist David Ainley. A deep dive into the workings of this vast continent, it documents how the planet's largest iceberg is changing the lives of Antarctica's penguins. Given the physical and emotional challenges of this kind of extreme remote working, the book also serves as a powerful meditation on solitude, resilience and renewal. **£20. saqibooks.com**

Sarah Watts

Wendy Grindle speaks with Sarah Watts, a plant ecologist and Chair of the Mountain Woodland Action Group

PHOTOGRAPH: SARAH WATTS

How and why did you become a plant ecologist?

My love of the mountains actually came first. As a teenager, I went hillwalking with my mum and sister, and those early experiences sparked a strong connection to upland landscapes. When I studied ecology at The University of Edinburgh, I initially thought I would focus on animals. However, volunteering at Ben Lawers National Nature Reserve gave me the opportunity to work with some of Britain's rarest and most exciting Arctic-alpine and montane plants. It converted me to a plant ecologist almost overnight!

What is the aim of your current research?

My PhD research aims to develop practical management techniques to restore healthy, self-sustaining upland tree populations. I focus on how natural regeneration and grazing management together with tree planting can work to revive a more connected and resilient montane treeline. The goal is to support nature recovery by generating evidence that informs on-the-ground action at scale.

What is montane woodland and why does it matter?

Montane woodland is the transition zone where trees and shrubs grow towards their upper altitudinal limits. It forms between the timberline, where trees have an upright growth form, and higher altitude grasslands and heaths. These woodlands form part of a mosaic which supports biodiverse communities of insects and upland birds that are scarce or declining elsewhere in Britain. Trees and shrubs also stabilise steep slopes, mitigating risks such as landslides and rockfalls, and slow water movement through upland soils, helping to reduce flooding downstream.

What are the barriers to natural regeneration?

In Britain, montane woodland has declined over centuries, mainly due to overgrazing by large herbivores. Surviving trees persist primarily as small, isolated populations, often literally clinging on to inaccessible cliff ledges. This fragmentation limits seed sources and reduces genetic diversity, making natural recovery more difficult without active intervention.

What are the solutions?

Montane woodland restoration requires addressing the original causes of habitat loss, particularly overgrazing. While fencing can offer short-term protection, it is not a solution that delivers over large areas. Excluding large herbivores completely is also unnatural. Instead, a balanced, landscape-scale approach that promotes sustainable, lower density, large herbivore populations while enabling regeneration is needed, alongside supplementary planting and genetic reinforcement for habitat connectivity where seed sources are lacking.

What's your aspiration for the future of montane woodland?

I hope to see the revival of a natural altitudinal sequence of vegetation stretching from species-rich montane woodland up towards the climatic limits of trees, shaped by natural regeneration. This requires moving beyond simply recreating tiny fragments by planting behind fences to nurturing resilient upland ecosystems across the full range of opportunities available. We also need to put people at the heart of this recovery, creating rural jobs and valuing the role of deer stalkers and land managers in delivering lasting change for our uplands.

Further information
For more on Sarah's current research, visit **tinyurl.com/dmsayyu5**

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

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