

Journal

JOHN MUIR TRUST

81 · AUTUMN/WINTER 2026

Natural views

In this issue: the overlooked aspen, meeting the challenges of land management in climate change and a call to support natural woodland regeneration



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of the bay and
the surrounding
mountains."*



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Welcome to the Autumn/Winter 2026 issue of the Journal

The Trust was established more than four decades ago, as the first charity in the UK to make the case for the conservation of wild places for their intrinsic value. Over that time, we have faced many challenges, most recently Covid, a financial crisis and redundancies, all against the growing cost of living.

Perhaps our most significant change in recent times is the need to define our terminology. In September 2024, we defined the three key elements of a 'wild place', and we are now developing a way to measure wild place quality and guide management of them.

Alongside increasing clarity around purpose and language, we have modernised our capacity to become an organisation with the systems and capabilities required to deliver at scale and ensure efficient use of charitable funds.

The Trust's definition of a wild place has two pillars: land where 'natural processes' and 'natural landscapes' take primacy through management; with a connector between the two, recognising that the land should be protected as a wild place in perpetuity.

By defining wild places, we provide a clear distinction from the broader world of nature conservation and landscape management, where outcomes are determined by human choices and compromise. Our ambition is to help create and protect land where nature has freedom to determine its own path, and where we can all celebrate and benefit from its existence.

We often refer to the UK as a human-made landscape and many

areas that could qualify as wild places will have been compromised by past human activity. How we manage land is a choice, and we can choose to restore it through management that helps repair natural processes and natural landscapes and reconnect people with the intrinsic value of wild places. This might involve managing grazing pressures to natural levels, removing invasive non-native species or human artefacts and helping people to enjoy these places while leaving no trace.

Many of the management challenges facing our wild places are reflected throughout this issue. On Schiehallion, we are installing fencing to protect rare mountain woodland from sheep grazing (pages 14-16), while on pages 18-19, Dr Peter Cosgrove unpacks the challenge of stewarding wild places in a climate crisis. At Sandwood (pages 20-22), we are grappling with the pressures created by increasing visitor numbers.

I am delighted to welcome author and broadcaster Cameron McNeish to this issue (pages 24-25), exploring how Schiehallion's cultural heritage reminds us that these landscapes have long been places of human connection as well as ecological importance.

Beyond our own properties, our strategy requires the ambition of others to identify land that meets the criteria for wild places, their commitment to improve and protect those qualities over time, and a willingness to work with us to create scale and connectivity in a way that is ecologically meaningful.

Helping to create a network of wild places offers a legacy for generations to come. It shows that we recognise the 'rights' of nature and that we can protect nature from the compromise that humans so often make.

We need your help to deliver that aspiration, and I hope our actions inspire you to find out more. 🌿

David Balharry, CEO, John Muir Trust

Want to help us support wild places?
Help us raise £75,000 to repair the Steall Gorge path and to protect this special wild place. Please donate to our appeal by scanning the QR code (right) or visiting johnmuirtrust.org/steall-appeal





↑ Volunteering at Strathaird



↑ Volunteers in action at Nevis



↑ Some of the Skye volunteering team

Volunteers in action

This year, our volunteer conservation days on Skye and Nevis brought supporters together to help with the long-term care and restoration of these wild places. Working alongside Trust staff, volunteers got involved in practical conservation work, including path maintenance, litter picking and the removal of invasive non-native species.

On Skye, volunteers joined Skye Property Manager John Macrae, Trust Communications Officer Natalia Barbour, Major Donors Fundraiser Liv Adams and Conservation Officer Julia Robertson to support conservation work across Strathaird. Activities included removing invasive Sitka spruce saplings, mapping invasive non-native species and joining our partners in the annual beach clean at Camasunary Beach. These tasks support the Trust's wider programme of habitat restoration,

helping to protect peatland, encourage native woodland regeneration and improve the condition of the landscape.

Together, the team removed 158 trees during one day. Throughout the week, an entire skip was filled with approximately 1.2 tonnes of plastic marine waste, while 321 metres of redundant fencing was removed from the landscape.

John said: "Volunteers are such a vital part of the work we do at the Trust. It was great to see so many people getting involved and making such a practical contribution to the landscape. Thank you very much to all who came along and got their hands dirty!"

At Nevis, seven volunteers joined Nevis Property Manager Steph McKenna and Conservation Officer Julia Robertson for a full day of conservation work in July. Working in small teams, they carried out

essential maintenance tasks on the Steall Gorge path, clearing drains and ditches, replacing chicken wire on the wooden bridge to prevent the surface becoming slippery, pruning trees, revegetating trampled areas and litter picking. Thanks to their efforts, all cross drains on the path were cleared, many ditches were re-dug and two bags of rubbish collected.

Steph said: "Working with volunteers is so rewarding. Not only does it enable us to complete essential work, it also gives them the opportunity to learn new skills, learn about Nevis and be a part of its stewardship."

A massive thank you to all the volunteers who joined us. 🙌

To volunteer in the future, visit johnmuirtrust.org/whats-new/events

Des Rubens and Bill Wallace Grant

Since its launch in 2017, the Des Rubens and Bill Wallace Grant has sent more than 70 lucky recipients on life-changing adventures to wild places. The grant was founded in commemoration of two former presidents of the Scottish Mountaineering Club – Des Rubens and Bill Wallace – to facilitate experiences in wild places of benefit to both the person and the wild places themselves.

Two recipients of our 2025 grant were Yvonne Reddick and Aleks Domanski. They travelled to the Sierra Nevada in California last summer to shoot a documentary about the effects of recent wildfires on wildlife.

"We spent one fortnight in Sequoia National Park and one in Sierra National Forest. A real highlight was finding the black-backed woodpecker, which was the key character in our story," Aleks said.

"It was fantastic to have the Trust's support on this project, especially given John Muir's deep passion for that part of the world, which led him to help establish America's National Park system."

"I'm a keen member of the British Mountaineering Council and the chance to experience the Sierra Nevada range was life-changing. I have longed to go there since I first read



↑ Aleks and Yvonne

John Muir's essays," said Yvonne. "I think it's wonderful that people can access adventure and wild places through the grant. It's a fantastic legacy for two wonderful mountaineers."

Aleks and Yvonne's documentary *Forest Fires and Snowshoe Hares* is planned for release next year. Their previous film, *Searching for Snow Hares*, was released last year and is currently streaming on Ecoflix. 📺



↑ Taking in the view on John Muir Day

Taking extra time to explore

John Muir Day falls on 21 April every year, celebrating the birthday of the conservationist, author and 'Father of National Parks'. For John Muir's 188th birthday this year, we decided to commemorate the day by inviting our supporters and members to take an extra 21 minutes in

a wild place. The time could be used in any way they saw fit – walking, hiking or simply sitting in silence and taking in the sights, sounds and smells of their wild place.

Trust supporter and travel influencer Johnny MacAuley took part in the day and spent his 21 minutes at Cul Beag in Assynt: "It was such a wonderful experience

just slowing down and taking everything in at the summit. The views are absolutely breathtaking and make the steep, boggy climb totally worthwhile."

Trust staff across the country joined in, using their extra 21 minutes to appreciate the natural surroundings wherever they were.

Director of Finance Rob Buckman took in the

views from his local peak in the West Midlands, while in Coventry, our Engagement and Training Officer Alison Bucknall had a stroll around her local park.

Liv Adams, our Major Donors Fundraiser, found some quiet in the middle of the day, spending 21 minutes at St Andrew Square in Edinburgh: "The spring daffodils created a really nice juxtaposition between the natural elements and the looming skyscrapers behind," said Liv. "It was lovely just to have a bit of extra time to take in my surroundings and I really tried to notice all the different textures, smells, sounds and noises." 📺



The path ahead for the John Muir Way

The John Muir Trust took on administrative management of the John Muir Way in 2025, strengthening our role in supporting the 134-mile coast-to-coast route that reverses John Muir's steps from Helensburgh on the west coast to his birthplace in Dunbar, East Lothian. The route was established in 2014 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Muir's death.

The John Muir Way attracts around 5,500 end-to-end walkers every year and many thousands more local visitors. Alongside offering opportunities for learning, participation in the John Muir Award and volunteering, this route is one of Scotland's Great Trails and serves as a valuable engagement tool, helping to raise awareness of the Trust's work.

As part of its role in the management of the route, the Trust invited tenders from suitably qualified and experienced parties to undertake a comprehensive signage and access audit of the John Muir Way. This audit is part of our ongoing commitment to protect, restore and champion the UK's wild places, ensuring that the John Muir Way remains accessible, safe and engaging for everyone.

The Trust works closely with ten access authorities, NatureScot and other partners to support the ongoing management of the John Muir Way. These

include the John Muir Birthplace Trust, Green Action Trust, Sustrans, Scottish Canals, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, Historic Environment Scotland, VisitScotland, The Conservation Volunteers and Scotways.

The upcoming audit will evaluate the condition, visibility and effectiveness of signage and related infrastructure along the route.

One recent visitor who experienced the diversity of the route first-hand was travel specialist Anna Lamb, from Absolute Escapes, who walked the John Muir Way in May.

"I think the main thing that I was surprised by was that every day was different," said Anna. "In just one day, you can cross through open countryside, follow a historic canal, wander through woodland and finish in a lively town for the evening. Another thing I think is great about the route is that it's a really gentle and easy walk, and definitely a good first long-distance trail to try if you're interested."

Testimonies such as Anna's help inform the ongoing management of the John Muir Way, providing valuable insight into how the route is experienced by those who walk it. We hope the findings from the audit will help inform future management of the route, ensuring the John Muir Way remains a welcoming and rewarding experience for everyone who uses it. 🌿



PHOTOGRAPH: GREEN ACTION TRUST

↑ Section one, Helensburgh to Balloch



↑ Northern Brown Argus

Indicator species for natural processes

Glenlude is now part of a Borders-wide effort to monitor, manage and support butterfly populations. Led by the charity Butterfly Conservation, the project has a particular focus on the Northern Brown Argus, a butterfly with a stronghold in the Borders. The project aims to use survey data collected

by volunteers to increase awareness and understanding among landowners about the impact of the loss of species-rich grasslands and the crucial role these habitats play in supporting butterfly populations.

Rock rose – the foodplant of the Northern Brown Argus – is already found at Glenlude, making the site a natural fit for the project. The Glenlude team has been propagating additional plants in the tree nursery and, with the support of volunteers, planting them across the site to expand existing patches and create more habitat for this specialist butterfly.

The Northern Brown Argus and other butterfly species are important in their own right while also acting as valuable indicators of how the land at Glenlude is being managed for natural processes. Butterflies are a fantastic indicator species due to their fragile nature, with their numbers being a clear sign of the health of an ecosystem. Our aim is to turn Glenlude, our engagement hub, into a mosaic of native habitats and increase biodiversity on the land.

Glenlude Conservation Officer Ellie Oakley said: “Glenlude’s involvement in this project guarantees that we will protect and increase numbers of Northern Brown Argus, as well as supporting many other species including plants and animals. When landowners work together to provide habitats and food sources, that is when real change happens.”

Stop press: The first-ever documented Common Blue butterfly has recently been recorded at Glenlude. 🦋

Water voles at Nevis

In August, Nevis Manager Steph McKenna joined colleagues from the neighbouring Jahama Highland Estates and a wildlife specialist to survey the area between our two peatland restoration sites for signs of water voles. Water voles have been present across the Nevis estate since 2007, creating burrows and latrines along the Water of Nevis.

The survey revealed clear evidence that the population is expanding. New burrows and latrines were recorded along the length of the Water of Nevis and further into surrounding habitat, where grassy tussocks provide valuable cover. The team also found signs of feeding activity, with grass stems cut at the species’ characteristic 45-degree angle and small, neatly cropped patches marking feeding areas.

Water voles are a protected and rare species in the UK, with one of their biggest threats being habitat loss and degradation. The rodents tend to confine themselves to streams, preferring habitats that allow easy escape into waterways if threatened by predators. The presence of burrows further from the waterway is particularly positive news from a land management perspective, suggesting that the Trust’s work to give primacy to natural processes is having a significant impact.

Steph said: “Through working closely with our neighbours, we were able to identify the expansion of the water vole population at Nevis.

“Our water vole colonies have expanded and understanding where they are living and how they are using the landscape helps us continue to support these populations through our ongoing restoration and management work.” 🦫

PHOTOGRAPH: SAMIB123/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM



↑ Water vole (*Arvicola amphibius*)



Natural blueprint for partnerships



Across the Nevis landscape, a growing network of partnerships between landowners, communities and conservation organisations is helping reconnect habitats, support local communities and turn a shared vision for nature recovery into meaningful action on the ground



↑ Protecting our landscapes is a top priority

In wild places, everything is connected. The actions of one species ripple through an ecosystem, influencing everything from lichens and mosses to deer and eagles. Successful landscape restoration relies on that same principle of connection. No single organisation can restore a landscape alone. By working together across boundaries, landowners, communities and organisations can achieve far more than any one of them could in isolation.

In many ways, partnership working seeks to mirror the collaboration found in the natural world. By coming together to work towards landscape-scale restoration, we mimic the interconnected relationships that sustain healthy ecosystems. For example, wild boar contribute by disturbing the ground, creating the conditions for other species to flourish, and spread seed in their fur across the forest. Other members of the community such as mycelial fungi contribute by connecting species to one another and facilitating the exchange of nutrients. In partnerships we also contribute our different skills and resources. Some play a role similar to mycelial fungi, connecting different landowners and organisations together, facilitating the flow of information and communication. Others are more like the boar, delivering practical action on the ground to restore and enhance habitats, kickstarting regeneration.

In a landscape where mountains are split in half by property boundary lines, partnerships are integral to our work at Nevis. Working with our neighbours enables us to effect meaningful change at a landscape-scale by tackling the pressures and threats to wild places that don't recognise man-made boundaries. Like the countless interactions that sustain a forest, the small acts of collaboration between partners accumulate into meaningful change across the wider landscape.

NEVIS NATURE NETWORK

One of the most ambitious examples of this collaborative approach is the Nevis Nature Network (NNN), a project led by the Nevis Landscape Partnership, our mycelium. The partners of the NNN are the landowners: the John Muir Trust, JAHAMA Highland Estates, Glen Nevis Estate and Forestry and Land Scotland. Together, we have been exploring how a more connected, resilient and biodiverse landscape can be restored across the 22,000-acre project area.

The NNN functions much like a healthy woodland ecosystem: diverse, interconnected and strengthened by the contributions of many different partners working towards a common purpose.

“The Nevis Nature Network functions much like a healthy woodland ecosystem: diverse, interconnected and strengthened by the contributions of many different partners working towards a common purpose”

Through the NNN, individual efforts become part of something larger, just as individual species contribute to the health and resilience of an entire ecosystem. The NNN enables partners to address the biggest ecological threats at Nevis collaboratively and work together towards the shared goals of restoring native woodland, removing invasive species, securing montane scrub and supporting nature connections.

The development phase of the NNN has now concluded, providing partners with a wealth of ecological evidence, habitat mapping and practical recommendations for future action.

Ellie Corsie, NNN Project Manager, explained: “We discovered that the native woodland here is currently in poor condition and has a highly fragmented distribution. If landscape-scale tree regeneration was enabled through collaborative deer and sheep management, these fragments could expand and connect to form a network with a footprint up to four times its current size. Furthermore, much of this woodland could be part of Scotland's Rainforest if managed appropriately for rainforest species.”

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY

Restoring wild places is not simply about repairing habitats. It is about strengthening connections: between woodlands and rivers, between scrub and heathland, and between people and the wild places that inspire them. Just as every species plays a role in an ecosystem, local communities play a vital role in the restoration of wild places. People are not separate from the landscape, but part of it, shaped by the landscape over generations. The effective protection of natural processes and natural landscapes depends on people feeling connected to the landscape, understanding its value and playing an active role in its stewardship.

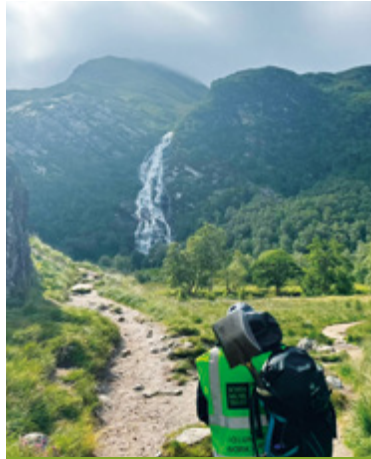
The John Muir Trust has worked with the Nevis Landscape Partnership to connect the Fort William community to Scotland's Rainforest via the Creative Rainforest Project. Through this project local people created music, poetry, art, stories, tapestries, sculptures and more, themed around Scotland's Rainforest. It was a resounding success, with more than 60 art submissions from people of all ages and walks of life, and more than 200 people attending the public showcase event.

The showcase was filled with curiosity and enthusiasm as people discovered the beauty of rainforest lichens, mosses and ferns. Particularly memorable was a stirring Gaelic poem shared by Trees for Life's Eilidh Cameron-Sykes. It described the species that once flourished in the

continued overleaf ►



↑ Volunteers in action



↑ Heading up Steall Gorge



↑ Steall meadows



↑ Peatland restoration

continued ►

landscape. Many of the plants described in the poem have no translation, bringing home the sobering reality of what has been lost while also shining a light on the richness that can be brought back by restoring Scotland's Rainforest.

By creating opportunities for people to experience, interpret and celebrate the rainforest in their own way, the Nevis Landscape Partnership has demonstrated how cultural restoration can be interwoven with ecological restoration to deliver the most enduring results. If local people are invested in a wild place, then it is much more likely to be protected and restored in the centuries to come.

The Nevis Landscape Partnership's work reminds us that the most successful conservation projects are those that people feel part of. Just as thriving ecosystems depend on connections between species, long-term landscape restoration depends on connections between people and place.

ACTION ON THE GROUND

While the NNN project has gathered valuable evidence and recommendations, its success will ultimately be measured by results on the ground. Encouragingly, we are already seeing this happen. Effective woodland recovery depends on coordinated herbivore management across neighbouring estates. Deer do not recognise ownership boundaries, and neither do the ecological impacts of overgrazing. In winter 2025, the project partners committed to and began a collaborative deer reduction cull. This has been accompanied by a plan to alter open hill sheep farming in the area, moving towards stock-fenced sheep farming only, by 2027. If this goes to plan it will enable landscape-scale natural tree regeneration within the next five to ten years, leading to up to 3,000 hectares of new woodland establishment.

JAHAMA Highland Estates are the largest landowning partner in the project and have delivered the largest

change to land management. They announced plans in February 2026 to expand native woodland across its 32,500-hectare estate, significantly increasing the scale of habitat recovery across the Nevis landscape. In an approach that aligns closely with the NNN recommendations, JAHAMA Highland Estates' project focuses on natural regeneration, allowing woodland to spread outward from existing seed sources and remnant native woodlands.

Ellie said: "The first season of collaborative deer management went very well with the Nevis Nature Network partners' stalkers going above and beyond to exceed the collective cull target. This dramatic landscape makes deer management extremely challenging. The community is very impressed with what the stalkers achieved, and this makes us hopeful that our ancient woodland fragments will be saved.

"In addition to the deer stalking effort, a working squad employed by Glen Nevis Holidays took on the task of controlling *Rhododendron ponticum* last winter. They did a phenomenal job, working through sub-zero temperatures and persistent rain to complete the first treatment of the biggest stands of *Rhododendron ponticum* within Nevis. This invasive species poses a big threat to our ancient woodland habitats. By proactively controlling *Rhododendron* we are halting the encroachment of this species towards our most precious rainforest fragments and minimising the future cost of control."

At the Nevis Estate, we are fortunate not to have *Rhododendron ponticum* on Trust land. However, without the vital work achieved through the NNN to control them on neighbouring land, invasives would likely be a threat in the future at Nevis.

RIPPLING PARTNERSHIPS

The Loch Abar Mòr partnership is taking the next step by expanding this collaborative approach to nature restoration across the wider Lochaber landscape.

Convened by SCOTLAND: The Big Picture, Loch Abar Mòr brings together land managers, communities and organisations with a shared vision of restoring ecological connectivity and resilience at a regional scale.

At Nevis, we are collaborating on the Wee Trees Project, which focuses on the recovery of Lochaber's fragmented montane scrub habitats. These scattered populations of montane willows, juniper, dwarf birch and other upland shrubs are among the rarest woodland communities in Scotland, often surviving as isolated remnants on steep crags and inaccessible mountain slopes safe from the mouths of hungry herbivores. Yet despite their modest size, these 'wee trees' play an important role in mountain ecosystems, providing habitat for wildlife, stabilising soils and helping to regulate the flow of water through the landscape.

Building on the foundations laid by the NNN, the Wee Trees Project has helped strengthen our understanding of montane scrub across the Nevis landscape. Three priority areas on Trust land at Nevis were surveyed to complement the Nevis Nature Network data and provide a more complete picture of the condition and distribution of montane scrub on the estate. Two of these challenging locations were surveyed by ecologist Ellie Corsie and supported by mountain guide Mike Pescod who provided rope access to steep and otherwise inaccessible terrain. The third survey area was covered by John Muir Trust staff.

Julia Robertson, Nevis Conservation Officer, and Steph McKenna, Nevis Property Manager, spent two days surveying the plot, identifying previously unrecorded populations of downy willow and tea-leaved willow, as well as a new population of juniper. The wider survey also delivered encouraging results. On Meall Cumhann, thriving juniper populations were recorded laden with berries, offering welcome evidence that some of these rare montane scrub communities remain healthy and capable of regeneration. Together, the survey findings provide a stronger evidence base for future restoration

work and help guide efforts to expand and reconnect these fragmented habitats. The restoration work that flows from the survey will also only be successful if it is done in partnership.

It is a reminder that nature recovery does not stop at project boundaries. Just as wildlife and water move freely through the landscape, ideas, partnerships and shared ambition can spread beyond boundary lines and connect people in pursuit of a common goal. Through initiatives such as the Wee Trees Project, the collaborative spirit fostered by the NNN continues to grow, helping to shape a more connected and resilient future for wild places.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

If the Nevis Landscape Partnership is the mycelium connecting and caring for the landscape, then the John Muir Trust is perhaps best compared to juniper. As explored earlier, healthy ecosystems and partnerships rely on many different species playing different roles. A small and often overlooked species, juniper persists in some of the most challenging environments, holding on in scattered pockets across the mountains. Yet, it provides shelter, food and structure for a wide range of wildlife, while acting as a seed source for future recovery. In much the same way, the Trust works patiently and persistently on the ground at Nevis, caring for existing habitats, reducing grazing pressure, restoring peatland and woodland, maintaining access, and engaging volunteers and communities. While our landholding is relatively small, through practical conservation, collaborative land management and meaningful opportunities for people to connect with wild places, we contribute to a shared vision of landscape-scale recovery across Nevis. 🌿

About the authors: Steph McKenna is the Trust's Property Manager at Nevis and Ellie Corsie is the Nevis Nature Network Project Manager



↑ Dirty camping at Steall



↑ Creative rainforest event



↑ Walking through the rainforest



↑ Montane scrub survey



↑ Montane scrub



Beyond the boundary

In autumn 2025, members and supporters responded generously to our Mountain Woodland Appeal. Here, **Wendy Grindle** explains how those donations will help the recovery of a rare mountain habitat, as part of a bigger ecological story

Every landscape is shaped by forces of nature and humans, and the question for land managers is which forces should be allowed to prevail.

On East Schiehallion, centuries of land management choices

have had a profound impact on the mountain's ecology. Through overgrazing from sheep and red deer, woodland has retreated, montane scrub clings on in only a few areas, and the natural progression of woodland from the lower slopes of the hill to its summit hasn't been seen for generations.

The Trust believes that natural processes should be given primacy and grazing pressures reduced to allow natural regeneration of montane woodland in the areas where it seeks to grow. Overgrazing is one of the most important challenges facing our wild places.

Over the coming months, the Trust will begin the repair and installation of boundary fencing across part of East Schiehallion. The construction of stock fences to keep wandering sheep off the ground has generated some public

discussion and, working with Scottish Woodlands, the Trust has considered those conversations throughout the planning stages.

The fence is the latest progress in a long-term programme of ecological recovery at East Schiehallion. In 2017, the Trust launched the Heart of Scotland Forest Partnership to connect woodlands across more than 3,000 hectares. Part of that work with our partners and neighbours at Dùn Coilich – owned by Highland Perthshire Communities Land Trust – has transformed the lower slopes by allowing ecological succession with young Scots pine, birch and rowan. The Trust is now seeking to prioritise natural processes at a larger scale.

While stock fences are a familiar feature on Schiehallion, and fences are used by many landowners in Scotland to protect regenerating young trees, installing fences is a last resort for the Trust.

David Balharry, the John Muir Trust's CEO, said: "Putting in a fence for us is sub-optimal given one of our strategic pillars is to protect natural landscapes. Having fences inside our properties is even less ideal. Our gain here is losing an internal fence, while installing

a boundary fence and perhaps most importantly allowing natural processes to function freely and montane woodland to recover."

This acknowledgment is important. The Trust is not presenting the fence as an ideal outcome, nor is it suggesting there are no trade-offs. Rather, it reflects the practical challenges of restoring ecological integrity to a natural landscape over the longer term.

David said: "The grazing pressures that we have, both from domestic livestock and high deer numbers, mean our habitats aren't recovering. So, by reducing or being able to manage the grazing pressure, we can create an extraordinary benefit for ecology."

A DIFFERENT VIEW

For most people, East Schiehallion is defined by its cone-shaped summit which makes the mountain one of Scotland's most recognisable and popular Munros.

The area lies within the Loch Rannoch and Glen Lyon National Scenic Area and is a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) for its geology and limestone-influenced habitats. The walk from Braes of Foss car park to the summit passes through a sequence of habitats.

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVE TARVIT





↑ Schiehallion summit

Lower slopes capable of supporting native woodland give way to scattered montane scrub.

Few places in the UK contain such a continuous ecological transition. However, today those habitats no longer connect as they should. Rare montane willow survives mainly in steep gullies and rocky crags beyond the reach of herbivores, which means the transition between woodland and open mountain cannot establish. Understanding that fragmentation and the impact of grazing on the development of the montane woodland explains why the Trust believes intervention is necessary.

OVER THE FENCE

The Trust's long-term vision is to protect natural landscapes and natural processes rather than using species-specific conservation measures.

David explained: "What the Trust is trying to achieve is a network of places where the landscapes and the ecological processes are as natural and wild as they can be, given the geographic and social context."

That distinction matters. Where those processes are functioning, woodland regenerates and montane

scrub ecosystems recover with minimal human direction.

Scotland's landscapes have been influenced by people for centuries and they contain human-made features of rich cultural significance (see Cameron McNeish's article on page 24). Sheep farming at scale arrived in the Highlands following the clearances. East Schiehallion currently has open borders to the west and large numbers of sheep often enjoy access to Trust land. It is the access of these livestock that the Trust seeks to restrict.

Deer populations on surrounding land also exist at densities that prevent woodland recovery and the stock fence being constructed to exclude sheep will have an electrified offset wire to restrict

deer access without the visual intrusion of a deer fence.

Phase one of the fencing project is focused along the northern boundary. Much of that work replaces an ageing stock fence with an additional 200 metres of new fencing being added to close a gap between the termination of the old fence and the boulder scree that runs up to the ridge line.

Some sections, particularly where the fence climbs the open hillside, will be more apparent than others and the impact will be mitigated by following existing landforms and boundaries wherever possible.

EVIDENCE-LED

Neil White, Regional Manager Central-East with Scottish Woodlands, who is managing the fencing installation project with the Trust, said: "One of the encouraging things is that we've already seen what happens when grazing pressure is reduced. The woodland responds. That's given us confidence that extending those conditions across a much larger area can deliver much greater ecological benefits."

continued overleaf ►

“Scotland's landscapes have been influenced by people for centuries and they contain human-made features of rich cultural significance”



continued ►

David describes the existing fenced areas where willow is regenerating as only the beginning. "What we've got currently is a postage stamp. It's too small to provide ecological functionality for a lot of the species that might depend on it. What we're doing now increases the scale of the existing area by at least tenfold."

One of the most distinctive characteristics of East Schiehallion is sequential habitat change with altitude. People who walk to the top of Schiehallion can experience 'alpine' conditions that more closely mirror the 'Arctic' tundra.

Many of the key elements remain in the mountain and indicate that in the right conditions they will prosper. Rare willows, including the downy and whortle-leaved willow, represent remnants of a habitat that was once far more extensive.

David explained: "We're trying to allow the natural transition from trees to montane scrub and into Arctic alpine habitats. The fence won't simply contour around the mountain because that would create hard edges for habitats, leaving straight lines in natural landscapes."

PLANNING WITH THE LANDSCAPE

By the time the first fencing materials arrive on site, more than a year of planning will already have taken place. Neil joined the project after a good deal of the initial design work had been completed. He and David walked the proposed fence line, reviewing the route on the ground and checking that it would work in practice.

A competitive tender process invited 18 contractors, with an emphasis on giving local suppliers the opportunity to tender. A specialist local contractor from Dunkeld was appointed, bringing extensive experience of complex upland fencing projects.

As a section of the proposed fence line lies within the SSSI, the Trust needed to obtain formal consent from NatureScot, which included a series of ecological assessments.

Neil explained: "We'd already committed to carrying out pre-operational wildlife checks. NatureScot wanted those to be given greater emphasis as part of the consent process, particularly in relation to European Protected Species."



Specialist surveys for water vole and otters were commissioned and the findings helped shape the final approach. Botanical surveys were commissioned to map sensitive plant communities along the proposed fence line and ecologists walked the route to identify areas where small changes might avoid important vegetation or geological features protected by the SSSI designation.

Perhaps one of the most exciting outcomes of the survey work came completely unexpectedly. The European Protected Species survey confirmed the presence of Eurasian beaver, the first time the species has been recorded on this part of the site. Photographs of lodges and dam-building show that beavers have established within the wider catchment.

For Neil, that discovery says something important. "I think the beaver story is a good indication of how the previous work on the site has been successful," he said. "You're getting species coming into the site and setting up home there that weren't there

before. That gives us confidence that this next phase of work can build on what's already been achieved."

It is a powerful reminder that when landscapes begin to recover, wildlife responds, sometimes in ways that were never anticipated.

DESIGN FOR LIFE

Construction will take place in three phases from late summer 2026 into 2027. Where materials need to be

transported into more remote locations, helicopters will be used to reduce repeated vehicle movements across fragile ground.

Potential impacts on wildlife have also informed the design. Highly visible flight markers will be attached to sections where black grouse and other birds are considered at risk of collision.

Public access has been considered with equal

care. Gates will ensure walkers can pass with ease, with their locations informed by existing paths as well as an understanding of how people move across the landscape. Neil sees this as an important part of the project's design. "The objective is to manage grazing in a way that allows the ecology to recover while ensuring people can continue to experience the mountain."

In the future, visitors will come to notice something different about East Schiehallion. A mountainside where woodland reaches naturally towards the open hill and where the landscape reflects the interplay of climate, geology and ecology rather than the legacy of sustained grazing pressure.

Rather than recreating an imagined past, the Trust is allowing the conditions in which natural processes can once again shape the future. 🌱

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



A day in the life of
Sandwood warden

Sonya

PHOTOGRAPH: SONYA BARNES

↑ Sonya Barnes

Since joining the Trust in 2023, Sonya Barnes has been our guardian in the north, caring for and keeping a watchful eye on Sandwood Bay and the surrounding area. After moving to the north-west coast in 2023 from Somerset, Sonya became warden for the car park and toilets at Blairmore, the start point for the four-mile walk out to Sandwood Bay.

Natalia Barbour, the Trust's Digital Communications Officer, asked Sonya some questions about her role and what she enjoys most about working in such an idyllic setting.

"We moved up here as my husband was looking for somewhere to retire to after spending his life as a tenant farmer. We've always loved the Highlands of Scotland and wanted to be able to explore the mountains and local area while we still could. As well as my role at the Trust, I am a member of Assynt Mountain Rescue Team, a volunteer at the Kylesku Old Ferry Craft Shop and am working on completing a round of all the Munros.

"I am motivated to be active in the community because being involved in the local area is a great way to meet like-minded people and to contribute to a community that has been so welcoming to us. The mountain rescue is also an opportunity to learn new skills and be part of another well-respected team of professional people.

"My work for the Trust involves checking the toilets at Blairmore twice a week and topping up the consumables there (soap, paper and hand towels), picking up any

“One of the best parts of the job is the privilege of being able to live and work in such a beautiful area and play some small part in caring for this wild location”

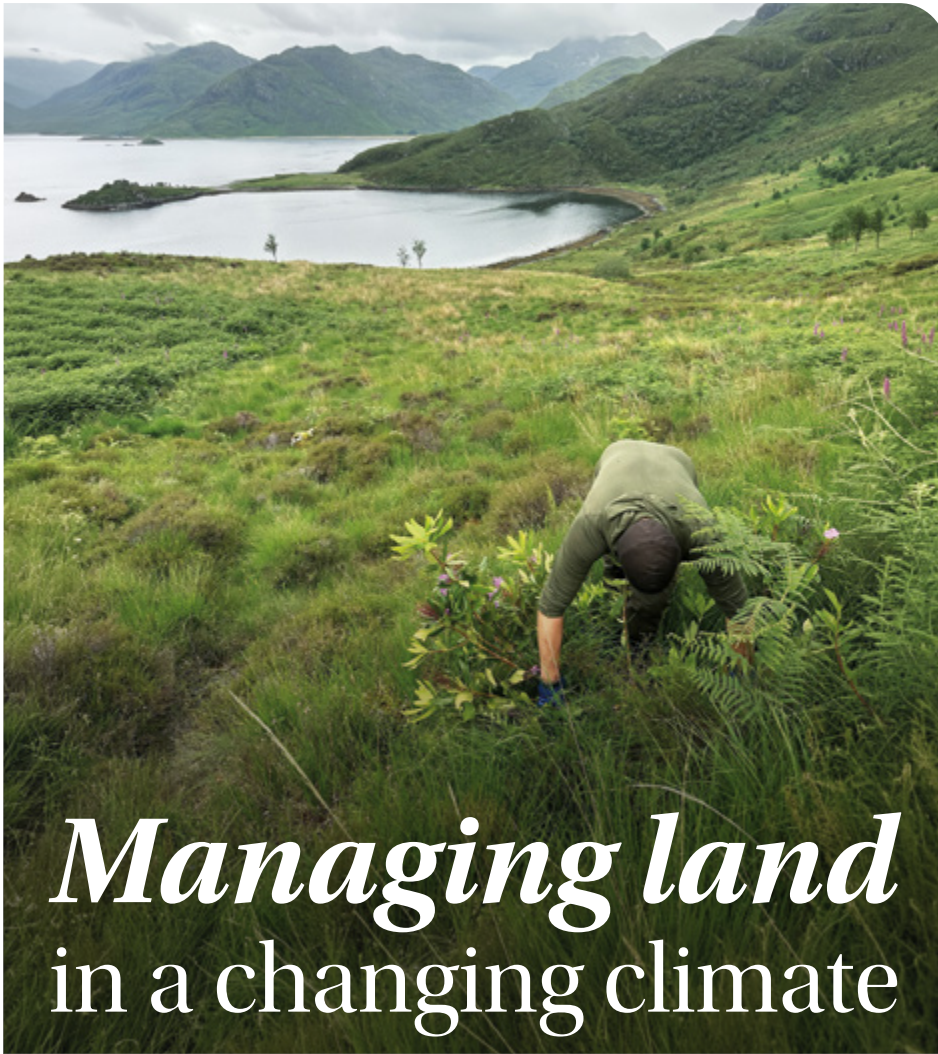
litter I see and engaging with the public. I also carry out minor repairs and liaise closely with my manager about any larger repairs I identify. Collecting beach litter at other popular Trust beaches in the area is another part of my job; it's important to keep the area looking its best!

"I find a wide range of items that have been left behind by visitors. These range from the usual –

walking poles, sunglasses and caps – to the more unusual: a gas bottle with mask, mobile phones and, oddly, more than one left-handed glove!

"I am so lucky to have seen the amazing machair flowers at Sheigra, lizards on the Sandwood Bay track and golden and sea eagles flying overhead. I've yet to spot any cetaceans, but I know they have been sighted in the area, so I am hopeful!

"One of the best parts of the job is the privilege of being able to live and work in such a beautiful area and play some small part in caring for this wild location. I also really like the sense of achievement that keeping an appreciated local facility in good order brings. I strongly believe in the Trust's vision to protect and repair wild places for wildlife, people and the future, and it's great to be part of that mission." 🌿



Managing land in a changing climate

Dr Peter Cosgrove explores the challenges climate change poses when managing land for natural processes and natural landscapes

The John Muir Trust exists to create a lasting future for wild places. Its strategic ambition is to create a network of wild places – areas of natural processes and natural landscapes – throughout the UK.

If we had assessed the main land management challenges on Trust properties at around the turn of the Millennium, we might have identified: gaps in our knowledge of important species and habitats; habitat and species loss and fragmentation; overgrazing; invasive non-native species; pollution; emerging climate change threats; managing designated

sites; and access to appropriate policies and funding.

A quarter of a century later, all these pressures remain, with one in particular coming to the fore and influencing all others: climate change. The solutions are complex and for some of the challenges, there are no easy answers. In many cases, we are having to ask new questions about how best to work with nature rather than trying to manage it according to a fixed prescription.

CHANGING LANDSCAPES

There is widespread scientific and public recognition that our climate is already changing. One of the clearest signs is the rapid northwards shift in the distribution of many UK species.

Some of these changes may appear positive. Nuthatches, for example, are relatively recent colonists to Scotland. They were first recorded breeding in the Scottish Borders in 1989, before moving rapidly into large areas of southern Scotland in the late 1990s. Despite being regarded as a sedentary broadleaved specialist, they now breed well to the north of Inverness and may reach the north coast of Scotland – and possibly even Orkney – within the next decade.

However, not all changes are positive. Climate change also brings some less obvious and adverse variations. River temperatures across many of Scotland's rivers are now reaching, and in some cases exceeding, thermal tolerances for trout and salmon. Warmer rivers hold less dissolved oxygen and favour harmful algal blooms which can smother their spawning beds and nursery areas. Rivers flowing south to north may be at particular risk – owing to water being heated for longer in the summer than those that flow east to west. The role of healthy riverbanks, with trees and other vegetation providing shade and cover on our rivers, has never been more urgent.

The consequences can be dramatic. Climate-driven violent rainfall has caused fundamental changes to the fabric of many of Scotland's rivers, even in the remotest of places.

Scotland is home to internationally important freshwater pearl mussel populations, including on Trust land at Quinag and Sandwood.

Monitoring has shown catastrophic losses of this species from watercourses without large headwater lochs and wetlands compared to those with these features. The population on the Cairngorms' River Dee, for example, collapsed following Storm Frank from an estimated 1.3 million individuals to around just 18,500.

Natural features such as headwater lochs and wetlands can provide a vital natural buffer, slowing the extreme flows and reducing their impact. They also hold water during droughts – which are predicted to become more frequent as climate changes – releasing it gradually over longer time periods. Not every river

has these natural features, however, leaving some much more vulnerable to storm-driven losses and decline of species and habitats.

ALLOWING NATURAL PROCESSES

Allowing natural processes to flourish on Trust properties through a period of rapid climate change is therefore no longer an abstract principle. It is an increasingly practical and everyday consideration.

Essentially, this means allowing nature to show us the way, rather than trying to manage landscapes according to a prescription that we assume will always be right. That shift raises some important questions for the Trust and others too.

1. How do we manage a landscape that is changing faster than our knowledge?

The speed of change means that our understanding of where particular species and habitats occur can quickly become out of date.

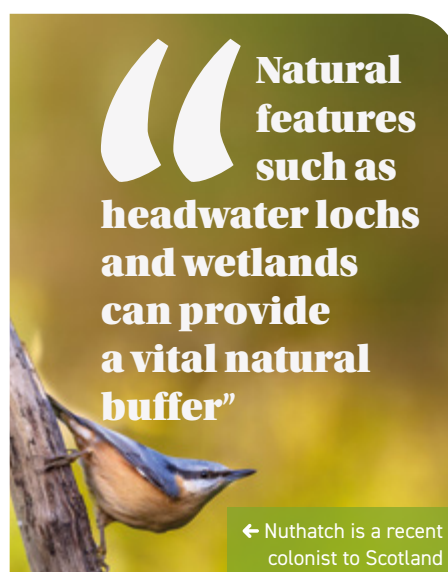
This creates greater uncertainty and questions arise as to whether the Trust should spend resources on monitoring change, or towards removing the human-induced obstacles that prevent nature from responding to change itself.

2. How do we plan for species that are on the move?

Species and habitat loss and fragmentation are now taking place more rapidly than before. Some species have lost the climatic conditions they previously occupied, while others are moving into areas where they had not previously been found.

How do we plan and manage for species that are moving through the landscape? How should we respond to new species that are arriving as their range expands?

It is increasingly difficult to manage land successfully for individual species in a period of such rapid change. As a result, land managers are moving away from single-species management towards approaches that support natural ecosystem processes. It is a radical departure from much of the species-based conservation focus



of the last 50 years and it is at the core of the Trust's strategy.

3. How do we respond to invasive non-native species (INNS)?

Climate change is also likely to bring new and problematic INNS. Research into the characteristics of INNS, based largely on their previous behaviour in similar climates, suggests that aquatic non-native invasive species could be particularly troublesome, both for ecosystems and economic impacts.

Controlling and managing INNS is often costly and requires careful prioritisation of limited resources. Key questions include where interventions will have the greatest impact and whether efforts should be focused on prevention. In situations where long-term control is unlikely to be effective or practical, we may also need to consider whether a degree of naturalisation should be accepted, while continuing to manage risks to important habitats and native species.

4. What happens when pollution changes the balance?

Some forms of pollution are relatively straightforward to identify. A pipe discharging into a river, for example, can potentially be traced and dealt with. Atmospheric pollution is much more problematic. Nitrogen deposition is increasing and continues to be deposited across landscapes, and its effects may be particularly significant

on thin, nutrient-poor upland soils.

In the Cairngorms for example, specialist species have evolved to thrive in cold environments with nutrient poor soils. Accumulating nutrients from the atmosphere can subtly change soil chemistry, potentially favouring more common, less specialist species that are better adapted to live in a less cold environment. As common and widespread species move 'up the hill', specialist montane species, already at their altitudinal limit, have nowhere else to go.

5. How do you manage designated sites when the climate is changing?

Designated sites are a legal obligation and important consideration for land managers, such as the Trust. What happens, though, when the qualifying features have gone or are disappearing rapidly due to climate change effects? The designated site system was largely developed in the 1980s and is not designed for the rapid climate derived changes we have in the UK today.

There is therefore a strong case for reviewing the system to ensure that it is fit for purpose.

Protecting wild places is not simply about what happens on individual properties. It is also about creating the wider conditions in which nature can recover and adapt.

While the challenges may seem daunting, they reinforce why protecting wild places matters. Healthy ecosystems, connected habitats and natural processes can all help landscapes respond to a changing climate – and the Trust is already responding to these challenges wherever it can make a meaningful difference. 🌿

About the author: Dr Peter Cosgrove is Managing Director of Alba Ecology. Much of his work has sought to demonstrate and communicate that climate change threatens important biodiversity. He was awarded the RSPB's 2014 Nature of Scotland Species Champion Award for his conservation and research work on endangered freshwater pearl mussels.



Addressing visitor pressure at *Sandwood*

Few places in Scotland capture the imagination quite like Sandwood Bay. A quick online search reveals countless glowing reviews, dramatic photographs and enthusiastic recommendations from walkers who have made the journey to this remarkable stretch of coastline. Frequently described as one of the most beautiful beaches in the UK, Sandwood Bay is a place that leaves a lasting impression on all who visit.

Its growing reputation has brought increasing numbers of visitors to the area in recent years. While this rise in popularity reflects a growing appreciation of Scotland's natural heritage, it has also placed greater pressure on the infrastructure needed to support visitors and protect the landscape. Now, thanks to funding from the Scottish Government's Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund (RTIF), the John Muir Trust is developing plans to ensure Sandwood remains both accessible and protected for future generations.

A LANDSCAPE OF INTERNATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

Sandwood Bay is the jewel in the crown of the John Muir Trust's 4,703-hectare Sandwood estate, located just a few miles from Cape Wrath on Scotland's north-west coast. Widely regarded as one of the country's most remote beaches, it combines dramatic scenery with a sense of isolation that has become increasingly rare.

As one recent visitor described it: "Sandwood Bay is the most magnificent beach in the UK. It offers nearly a mile and a half of wide pinkish sand backed by huge sand dunes and a loch, and is flanked by cliffs and an impressive sea stack.

It faces north-west, straight into the teeth of the worst the North Atlantic can throw at it. For sheer majesty and grandeur, there is simply nowhere that can beat Sandwood Bay."

The wider estate is equally important. Alongside the bay itself, the landscape includes eight offshore islands, a saltwater lagoon and a freshwater loch. Much of the area lies within a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), a designation that recognises its exceptional environmental value and affords it the highest level of protection under European legislation. The site is also designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), reflecting the importance of its dune grasslands, shifting dune systems and machair habitats.

These designations underline both the environmental significance of Sandwood and the responsibility to ensure it is carefully managed.

PROTECTING A SPECIAL PLACE

The John Muir Trust plays a central role in caring for the estate, including the maintenance of a four-mile path that leads from Blairmore to Sandwood Bay. The route crosses exposed moorland and is highly vulnerable to erosion. Harsh weather, soft ground conditions and increasing footfall all contribute to the wear and tear experienced by the path. In some locations, sections can be washed away entirely during periods of heavy rain.

Conservation work extends well beyond path maintenance. Much of the estate remains under crofting tenure, and local crofters continue to manage large parts of the landscape. The Trust works closely with them, alongside other members of the local community, to ensure the area remains healthy and resilient.

This collaborative approach includes wildlife monitoring, deer management and habitat conservation projects. Together,



PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK / NICOL NICOLSON

these efforts help safeguard the special wild place qualities that make Sandwood unique, while ensuring the landscape can continue to support both wildlife and visitors.

A DESTINATION WORTH THE EFFORT

Part of Sandwood Bay's appeal lies in the fact that reaching it requires commitment.

Unlike many popular visitor attractions, there are no roads leading directly to the beach. The only way to reach it is on foot, via the four-mile path from Blairmore. The journey itself has become part of the experience.

One visitor described the route as: "A gruelling four-mile moorland path that keeps casual tourists entirely away, preserving a pristine natural sanctuary where colossal, wind-sculpted pink sand dunes tower over a wide crescent of gleaming white shore."

The effort required naturally limits visitor numbers and helps preserve the sense of wildness for which the bay is renowned. Most walkers allow around five hours for the return journey, giving them time to enjoy the beach before heading back. Others continue beyond the bay to stay in nearby bothies or camp overnight, meaning vehicles often remain parked for extended periods.

The location has also become increasingly well-known because of its position near the end of the Cape Wrath Trail, one of Britain's most challenging long-distance routes. Many walkers finishing the trail stop at Sandwood's car park and use the facilities.

At the same time, the rise in popularity of the North Coast 500 has introduced Sandwood to a much wider audience. Since its launch in 2015, the now-famous driving route has generated significant economic benefits across northern Scotland, bringing visitors from around the world to the

Highlands and encouraging exploration of some of the country's most remote landscapes.

RESPONSIBLE VISITORS, GROWING PRESSURE

Despite the increase in visitor numbers, Sandwood has largely avoided many of the issues associated with overtourism. According to Trust staff, visitors to the site are generally respectful and environmentally conscious. The absence of large numbers of signs, barriers and enforcement measures reflects an approach based on education, engagement and fostering a personal connection with the landscape.

John Macrae, a Trust property manager, explained: "We inspire different, responsible and more respectful visitors. They don't tend to leave litter or light fires. What we're doing works, because visitors are looking after the site, without us having to post lots of signs."

However, good visitor behaviour does not eliminate the practical challenges associated with rising visitor numbers.

Even responsible visitors place demands on car parking, toilets, waste management systems and other facilities. As more people choose to experience Sandwood, the existing infrastructure has come under increasing strain. The challenge is not one of managing poor behaviour but of ensuring facilities can accommodate demand while maintaining the character and environmental integrity of this special place.

TOURISM GROWTH ACROSS SCOTLAND

Sandwood's experience reflects wider trends across Scotland's tourism sector. In recent years, Scotland has experienced strong growth in visitor numbers, particularly from overseas markets. International tourism has recovered strongly following the pandemic, supported by improved transport connections, favourable exchange rates and renewed enthusiasm for travel.

The country's combination of dramatic scenery, rich cultural heritage and world-class events continues to attract visitors from around the globe.

Tourism is one of Scotland's most significant economic sectors, generating billions of pounds for the economy and supporting hundreds of thousands of jobs. In the Highlands, destinations such as the North Coast 500, whisky distilleries and wildlife tourism experiences have played an increasingly important role in economic growth. But with growth comes responsibility.

Recognising both the opportunities and challenges created by tourism, the Scottish Government's *Scotland Outlook 2030: Responsible Tourism for a Sustainable Future* strategy emphasises the need to balance economic benefits with environmental protection and community wellbeing. The strategy highlights how tourism should enrich the lives of both residents and visitors while protecting the landscapes and cultural assets that attract people in the first place.

continued overleaf ►



↑ Visitor facilities at Blairmore car park

continued ►

THE RISE OF RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Changing visitor expectations are also influencing how destinations are managed.

Increasingly, travellers are seeking experiences that provide a deeper connection with nature, local communities and authentic cultural experiences. There has been growing interest in what is often described as transformational tourism, where travel is seen as an opportunity for personal enrichment rather than simply a leisure activity.

This trend aligns closely with places such as Sandwood Bay. Visitors are drawn not by commercial attractions but by opportunities to experience solitude, natural beauty and a meaningful connection with the landscape.

Wellness tourism is another growing trend, driven by interest in mental wellbeing, outdoor recreation and reconnection with nature. Scotland's coastline, mountains and remote rural environments provide ideal settings for these experiences.

Alongside this, visitors are placing increasing importance on sustainability. Many now actively seek destinations and organisations that demonstrate genuine environmental responsibility through conservation, community engagement and low-carbon infrastructure.

These changing travel patterns reinforce the need for sensitive investment in visitor facilities that support both people and nature.

RURAL TOURISM INFRASTRUCTURE FUND SUPPORT

To address visitor management challenges in rural areas, the Scottish Government established the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund (RTIF) in 2018.

The fund supports projects that improve visitor experiences while reducing pressures on local communities and sensitive environments. Since its launch, more than £24 million has been awarded to projects across rural Scotland, helping attract additional investment and supporting responsible tourism initiatives.

Funded projects include improvements to visitor information, low-carbon transport infrastructure, multi-use paths, public toilets and motorhome facilities. The project is designed not only to improve infrastructure but also to promote collaboration, sustainability and climate resilience in rural destinations.

PLANS FOR SANDWOOD

The John Muir Trust has now secured RTIF design funding to examine options for upgrading facilities at Sandwood's car park. The funding will enable the Trust to develop detailed proposals that respond to increasing demand while maintaining the area's environmental integrity.

Initial concepts include expanding the existing car park, installing five electric vehicle charging points and creating five hardstanding campervan pitches. The project will also explore improvements to wastewater and sewage treatment systems to ensure facilities remain fit for purpose as visitor numbers continue to grow.

Importantly, the proposals aim to retain the strong community connections already embedded within the site. Seven years ago, local schoolchildren created artwork that was incorporated into seating installed at the car park. The Trust hopes to continue celebrating that local contribution by incorporating the artwork into future designs.

The objective is straightforward: develop a practical, sustainable and fully designed solution that can attract further investment and address infrastructure pressures before they become more significant.

This is not a response to irresponsible tourism. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of Sandwood's growing popularity and the need to ensure facilities keep pace.

Once the design phase is complete, the Trust will be well-positioned to seek additional funding opportunities to deliver the improvements on the ground.

LOOKING AHEAD

Sandwood Bay remains one of Scotland's most extraordinary natural places. Its dramatic scenery, ecological importance and sense of remoteness continue to inspire thousands of visitors each year. The challenge now is to manage that success responsibly.

By investing in carefully considered infrastructure improvements, the Trust is working to ensure that visitors can continue to enjoy Sandwood while protecting the landscape that makes it so special. The RTIF funding marks an important step towards achieving that balance, helping to secure the future of one of Scotland's most treasured coastal destinations. 🌿



↑ Walkers welcome at Sandwood

About the author: Julie Gough is the Trust's Communications Editor

Leading the *way*

Walking group leader **Sam Stevenson-Jones** speaks to Digital Communications Officer **Natalia Barbour** about finding inspiration through the **Connect Outdoors** programme

In 2024, Sam Stevenson-Jones joined the Tiso educational hiking programme Connect Outdoors as a participant through LEAP Sports, an LGBTQI+ sports charity.

"Connect Outdoors seemed to come at the perfect time for me. I was looking to start exploring the outdoors but felt that I didn't quite have the confidence to go by myself," Sam said.

"I wasn't a stranger to the outdoors growing up, but Connect Outdoors was my first real experience of hiking outdoors in all kinds of weather and in a mountainous environment, which is a completely different experience."

Connect Outdoors was launched by Tiso in 2023 to help under-represented communities build the skills and confidence they need to enjoy wild places. The Trust is one of the original delivery partners.

Through the programme, Sam undertook seven weeks of walking education covering navigation, outdoor equipment, orientation and safety, including sessions on conservation and ecology from the Trust's Community



↑ Sam and the group

Outreach Manager Laura Curtis-Moss.

"Apart from the core hiking skills we learned, learning about the land around us and how to slow down to appreciate our surroundings was very valuable," added Sam. "I naturally keep my head down when walking, but on one session at Glen Feshie we stopped and looked at the mushrooms and plants around us. I've taken that into my walking now; I like to slow down and appreciate the wild place I'm in."

Last year, Sam joined the Connect Outdoors leadership programme, taking part in two sessions between May and November at Glenmore Lodge.

"The leadership programme was great for my confidence. I'd wanted to start my own walking group ever since I began this journey, but the sessions really helped me to develop the skills I'd built in my first Connect Outdoors experience – managing diverse weather, having the right kit, pacing yourself – also helped by conversations about

creating the right walk, how to handle different abilities and how to manage group expectations."

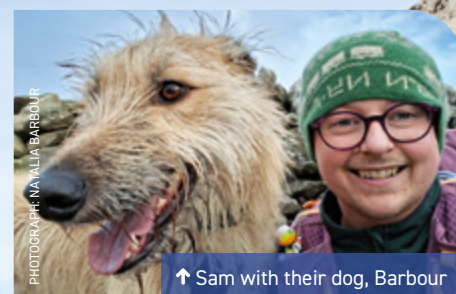
Inspired by the Connect Outdoors experience, Sam wanted to create another space where members of their community could experience the Scottish outdoors. In January of this year, Sam founded Sam's Saunters, an inclusive walking group for members of the LGBTQI+ community and their allies.

"There are still barriers to queer people taking part in hiking and walking groups. For some people it's concerns about safety, for others it's not having a community to go with, or simply not seeing themselves represented in the outdoors. I wanted to create a friendly environment where queer people can safely and confidently explore the outdoors."

Sam's journey into outdoor leadership continues to grow. In September, they began Mountain Leader training and, later in the year, Sam will bring Sam's Saunters back to where their own journey first began, with six members of the group signed up for a Connect Outdoors programme.

"Connect Outdoors was such a positive and fulfilling experience for me and I hope my group find the same joy in it. I'm really looking forward to going back with my own group, and to my participants taking as much joy and inspiration from it as I did."

You can find Sam's Saunters on Instagram at @samssaunters or on the LEAP Sports website. [f](#)



↑ Sam with their dog, Barbour

About the author

Natalia Barbour is the Trust's Digital Communications Officer



Schiehallion, the mystical mountain



Special thanks to writer and television presenter, **Cameron McNeish**, for allowing us to use an extract from his blog for this article. See the original article at: cameronmcneish.wixsite.com/cameronmcneish

It was a dour day for the high tops, but it wasn't windy and it wasn't wet. The stillness and silence of the day was exacerbated by the low clouds that shrouded the hill, mists that could well have been the frozen breath of the Cailleach Bheur, the blue hag who according to Rannoch legend rides the wings of the storms to deal out her icy death to the unfortunate traveller.

The mist didn't perturb me too much. I've lost count of how many times I've climbed Perthshire's Schiehallion – including in 2025 with my granddaughter Charlotte on her 19th birthday – and I knew there was a good footpath which would carry me up to the hill's long eastern ridge.

That navigational confidence was important today because I was 'guiding' a guest up the mountain, a man whose interest in Schiehallion lay in the hill's legends rather than her status as a Munro.

Although its name has the cut and thrust of a battle-cry and its conical shape was once used to help calculate the weight of the Earth, Schiehallion translates into something much less macho – Sidh Chailleann, the Faery Hill of the Caledonians. Other scholars have suggested the name might mean 'the maiden's pap', or 'constant storm' and that latter interpretation certainly fits with the legend of the Cailleach Bheur.

According to AD Cunningham's excellent book *Tales of Rannoch*, this old witch was once a familiar sight on Schiehallion: "Her face was blue with cold, her hair white

**“ Schiehallion
has always
been known
as a mystical mountain
by Gaelic-speaking
highlanders – a source
of inspiration and
revelation to prophets
and saints”**

with frost and the plaid that wrapped her bony shoulders was grey as the winter fields.”

He goes on to leave a tantalising message: “The adventurer who lingers in the secret places of the mountains senses that the cailleach and the spirit life are still there, and he is aware that enchantment has not vanished from the world.” I was hoping to discover this more mystical nature of the mountain today.

The old hag’s presence was clearly evident as my companion and I climbed onto the mountain’s long whaleback ridge. The air was still, visibility down to a few metres and ice crystals decorated every boulder. There was little temptation to linger in the Cailleach Bheur’s cold grasp. You don’t have to believe in faeries to experience the chilling fingers of winter reach out to you.

Enchantment has certainly not vanished from Schiehallion. Climb her slopes on a sunny summer’s evening and you will most certainly be enchanted by views across the rolling hills of Highland Perthshire to where Loch Rannoch stretches out towards the pocked mattress of the Rannoch Moor. Descend the hill at nightfall and hear the curious summer sounds of drumming snipe and roding woodcock or listen to the roars of rutting stags during the chilled days of late autumn.

The mountain and its immediate area are rich in superstition and legend and it’s at Uamh Tom a’Mhor-fhir, a cave in the upper reaches of Gleann Mor on the south side of the mountain, that Schiehallion’s faeries are supposed to dwell. I’ve never come across much evidence of faeries in the glen but years ago I did climb the hill with an old friend who pointed out to me a rock with ancient cup-and-saucer ring markings, evidence of old hut circles and the remains of shielings, reminders of an earlier way of life when glens like this were used for grazing cattle.

Another old pal of the hills, the late Irvine Butterfield, once scolded me for making fun of the faery stories. “There are things on Schiehallion that shouldn’t be mocked,” he warned. And he was serious.

In his book, *A Highland Parish*, published in 1928, Alexander Stewart suggests the Uamh Tom a’Mhor-fhir cave is in fact part of a huge cave system: “It has a fairly wide opening which extends for three or four yards.

It then contracts and slants into total darkness in the bowels of the earth. Some miles to the east of this there is another opening, which tradition holds to be the other end of the cave. According to the traditional accounts, this cave was regarded as an abode of fairies and other supernatural beings, rather than a hiding place of mortals.”

My companion today is Lawrence Main, a druid who writes walking guides for a living, and lectures on Earth Mysteries. He was in the second week of a length-of-Britain pilgrimage visiting ancient, sacred sites. He had started his mammoth walk at the Callanish Standing Stones on Lewis and had worked his way south via Culloden’s Clava Cairns and Aberdeenshire’s Bennachie. I had collected him from his lonely camp at the head of Glen Lyon where he had been visiting the old yew tree at Fortingall and the Praying Hands of Mary, a curious set of split standing stones in the upper reaches of the glen.

As we crossed the exposed summit ridge, Lawrence told me between deep gulps of frigid air: “This is one of the world’s Holy hills. Druids believe there are three primary Holy Mountains – Mount Moriah in Palestine, Mount Sinai in Egypt, and Mount Heredom, although there is no hard evidence to show where that is.

“Schiehallion has always been known as a mystical mountain by Gaelic-speaking highlanders – a source of inspiration and revelation to prophets and saints. Other hills in the UK with similar associations are Uisneach, situated at the geographical centre of Celtic Ireland, and Plinlimmon, close to the centre of Celtic Wales. Here Schiehallion lies at the centre of Celtic Scotland. Could that be mere coincidence?”

I listened to Lawrence with a degree of scepticism but it’s also been suggested that after the disastrous Battle of Methven, Robert the Bruce took refuge in a small castle on the north slopes of Schiehallion where he established the masonic ‘Sublime and Royal Chapter of Heredom,’ a chapter of the freemasons that had originally been constituted on the Holy Top of Mount Moriah in the Kingdom of Judea. But why did the Bruce choose Schiehallion? Apparently because like Mount Moriah, Schiehallion was thought to be a Holy Mountain, the ‘Mount Zion in the far north’ as recorded in Psalm 48 in the Hebrew Old Testament.

We had to forsake the delights of Gleann Mor, the cup-and-saucer ring markings, the old shielings and the faery cave at Uamh Tom a’Mhor-fhir on this trip, for a more direct descent back to the warmth of the car. We parted on the promise that he would return and enjoy the spiritual aspects of Schiehallion when the Cailleach Bheur had departed for the summer. 🍀



Growing *guardians*

214,000 hours for wild places. Thousands of people across the UK are discovering, caring for and standing up for wild places through the relaunched **John Muir Award**

What does 214,000 hours for wild places really look like?

It looks like muddy boots, full litter bags and newly

planted native trees. It looks like pupils in the Outer Hebrides transforming an overlooked corner of their school grounds into a thriving wild space.

It looks like young people testing the health of the River Itchen in Southampton and sharing their findings with decision-makers. It looks like future countryside rangers learning habitat management on Ben Nevis.

Most importantly, it looks like thousands of people discovering the wildlife on their doorstep for the first time and realising they can make a real difference to the places they care about.

At its heart, the John Muir Award exists to help people build lasting relationships with wild places. Through a simple framework of discovering, exploring, conserving and sharing, participants do more than simply spend time outdoors – they develop the knowledge, confidence and

motivation to care for wild places long after their Award journey has ended.

Since relaunching in spring 2025, more than 6,800 people across the UK have been inspired to complete their Award.

Together they have contributed more than 214,000 hours of Award activity, including almost 75,000 hours of practical conservation work.

That collective effort has seen participants plant 5,196 native trees, collect 2,799 bags of litter, maintain more than 12 kilometres of footpaths, and remove almost 20,000 square metres of invasive non-native species – an area approaching the size of three football pitches.



↑ Young people are making a difference



EVERY HOUR TELLS A STORY

The John Muir Award, delivered by the John Muir Trust, encourages people of all ages and backgrounds to connect with wild places through four simple challenges: Discover, Explore, Conserve and Share.

From schools and youth groups to health and wellbeing programmes and community organisations, the Award is helping people develop confidence, practical skills and a lifelong connection with the natural world.

A MOVEMENT FOR WILD PLACES

The figures might be impressive, but for Gareth Morgan, Head of Engagement at the John Muir Trust, they only tell part of the story.

"The real success of the Award isn't measured by the number of certificates awarded," he says. "It's measured by the lasting relationships people build with wild places."

"Wild places need people who understand, value and stand up for them," he continues.

"The John Muir Award helps create those connections by giving people practical opportunities to



↑ Eco committee takes part in a demonstration

Since relaunching in spring 2025, more than 6,800 people have completed the Award. Together they have contributed:

214,492 hours

discovering, exploring, conserving and sharing wild places



74,695

hours of practical conservation



5,196

native trees planted



2,799

bags of litter collected



12

km of footpaths maintained



19,663

square metres of invasive non-native species removed

discover, explore and care for wild places in meaningful ways.

“What we’re seeing across the UK is incredibly encouraging – thousands of people taking action for nature, spending time outdoors and developing a stronger sense of responsibility for the places they care about. These experiences help build not only environmental understanding, but also confidence, practical skills and lasting connections with wild places.”

Across the UK, those connections are inspiring action in many different ways.

On Benbecula, pupils from Sgoil Bhaile a' Mhanaich transformed an overlooked area of their school grounds into a thriving wild space before successfully campaigning to protect a pond and surrounding habitat they had come to value.

In Southampton, a home education group used the Award to explore one of England's most important chalk streams. By carrying out water quality monitoring, conservation work and community engagement, they became passionate advocates for the future of the River Itchen.

At Nevis, the Award is also helping shape the next generation of countryside

professionals. Engagement Ranger Ellie Moore, who completed the John Muir Award herself in 2022, now supports students on the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) North, West and Hebrides Countryside Skills Ranger Training course, helping them develop practical conservation skills while gaining a deeper understanding of Scotland's landscapes and communities.

Today, 438 organisations across the UK and the Channel Islands are helping

deliver the John Muir Award, with more than 2,200 participants identifying as facing barriers to accessing nature.

Together, they are creating a growing movement of people who don't simply enjoy wild places – they help protect them. 🌿

About the author: Rachel Flynn
Charters is the Trust's Head
of Communications



The real success of the Award isn't measured by the number of certificates awarded; it's measured by the lasting relationships people build with wild places"

– Gareth Morgan



PHOTOGRAPH: ZEEMON ERHARDT

↑ Ellie Moore, Engagement Ranger

Deer management *matters*

Douglas MacMillan argues that restoring Scotland's native woodlands requires greater support for natural regeneration through deer management and reduced reliance on fencing

Less than two hours after disembarking from the overnight sleeper from Euston, I found myself high on the hill above Rannoch Moor, rifle in hand and Thermos in pocket. It was a dreich day, low mist and a light drizzle from the west – the kind of day I would not have chosen if I was out walking with friends, but I was working. My work was to shoot a deer, a hind to be exact (a female

red deer) at close quarters. It was late autumn and the hind cull is always challenging for land managers as clients are few and far between, tips are scarce and the weather can be – well shall we say, quite Scottish – wind, hail and sunshine all in one day!

But the hind cull is crucial to nature recovery in wild places, such as the Trust's estates on Knoydart and on Skye. Hind numbers are key to reducing deer densities to below two per km² – the density needed to enable woodland to regenerate – though it is often a part of deer management that traditional estates ignore with the focus on stags. While stags do most damage to regenerating woodland in the winter, hind reduction is essential to reduce overall deer population pressure.

NATURAL REGENERATION

Although nature recovery through deer management results in woodlands rich in biodiversity and is far superior to the 'plant and fence' model preferred by investors in 'natural capital', the work of the Trust and

other like-minded landowners who put natural processes first is not as well supported by the Government grant system for woodland expansion – The Forestry Grant Scheme (FGS). Grant payments per hectare are much lower for natural regeneration than for the more intensive 'plant and fence' approach that involves ground cultivation, planting of nursery transplants and installation of two-metre-high metal fencing. As a consequence, over 95% of all woodland created in Scotland is by planting and it is almost always fenced.

There are various reasons for this, many of them quite anachronistic dating back to the time when timber production was the sole objective of woodland expansion. Landowners manage their land for different purposes, which has seen opposition from traditional sporting estates to more intensive culling regimes. These landowners tend to prefer fencing as a solution. The Trust has used and continues to use fencing as a last resort to protect natural regeneration of young trees. Over recent years, the reduction in deer densities on Knoydart means that fencing installed by the Trust some decades ago, is planned to be removed in the next couple of years. This will significantly improve the wild place quality of this land. Meanwhile, at East Schiehallion, the Trust is embarking on the installation of a stock fence with an electric offset wire, as the only way to protect rare montane trees from wandering sheep and deer.

I believe the Government should be doing more to support the Trust and other landowners to achieve woodland expansion through natural processes by

significantly increasing the FGS payments for natural regeneration and better coordination of existing policies that support venison production and community stalking. At this stage it may not be practical to implement this new approach across the entire deer range, so I suggest the Government focus on those areas where science-led deer control can be deployed to benefit existing woodland owners and would generate least opposition from sporting neighbours.

FENCE-FREE ZONES

In a paper I co-authored with Euan Stevenson, published recently in the summer issue of *Scottish Forestry*, we call on the Scottish Government to establish Woodland Restoration Zones (WRZs), across selected landscape areas in the red deer range, that will encourage woodland expansion through 'fence-free' deer culling. These zones would not require any new legislation, but would seek, through modest increases in grant support for landowners to create new woodlands using deer culling, not fencing. To be cost-effective, WRZs would need to be in areas with already relatively low deer densities and significant forestry landholdings (and therefore lower potential acrimony with sporting interests).

WRZs represent an opportunity to promote and develop sustainable deer management to the benefit of all woodland owners. A long-term commitment to support deer culling, as opposed to fencing, would not only effectively deal with the problem of deer infiltration and population replenishment that undermines current efforts within WRZs, it would also encourage investment in local venison processing and create opportunities for local communities to participate in culling for venison.

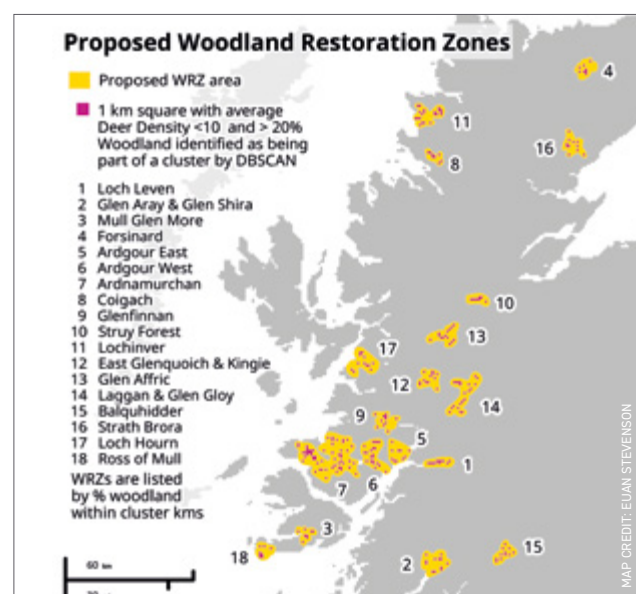
To identify potential candidate locations for WRZs across the red deer range, we used two primary data sources: deer density statistics collected by NatureScot and its predecessors, and forest cover data from the National Forest Inventory produced by the Forestry Commission to locate potential pilot areas for this approach. In total, we identified 18 clusters incorporating 267 km², and indicative WRZ boundaries were drawn around these clusters (illustrated right).

In many ways this approach mirrors what is happening on the ground in a few places, including Trust land, through innovative landscape collaborations such as the Nevis Landscape Partnership in Lochaber. However, the introduction of WRZs across the country based on reform of the FGS would create wider landscape opportunities and crucially, be financially supported by increased grant payments.

These higher rates of grant are justified by the higher public benefits generated by natural regeneration compared to planting and by the initial high costs of deer culling and management across the landscape. It is also

imperative that the current strict conditions on eligibility for FGS payments for natural colonisation, (for example, restricting the area eligible for grants to be 50m or less from a seed source and a stocking density of at least 400 stems/ha within five years), should be significantly relaxed. Fencing would not be totally banned in WRZs, but there would be a presumption against fencing, with only small fenced enclosures not exceeding 10% of the total area allowed to support the reintroduction of tree species especially vulnerable to deer.

Woodland landscapes without fences within WRZs would, I believe, transform access and biodiversity quickly and is exactly what our wild places require to recover their wildness. Woodland edges would become more natural, especially montane woodland, benefiting recreation, tourism and biodiversity in equal measure. And it would recognise the work being carried out by the Trust as leaders of change and champions of wild places. 🌿



About the author: Douglas MacMillan is a Trustee of the John Muir Trust and Emeritus Professor. He has worked on deer management and ecological restoration for more than 30 years and has a special interest in deer and forestry policies that promote nature. Prior to becoming a university academic, he worked at James Hutton Institute, Aberdeen and had a brief spell as forest manager at Tilhill Forestry, Stirling.

This article is adapted from the original by MacMillan, D.C. and Stevenson, E.G 2026. *Fence-free forestry: a proposal for Woodland Restoration Zones as a new approach to supporting deer management in Scottish forests. Scottish Forestry* – Volume 80 No 2 Summer 2026: 32-34



PHOTOGRAPH: CHRIS RUDDERHATT



↑ The aspen supports a wide variety of wildlife

Aspen

This magnificent, but often overlooked tree, is not only a beautiful sight in our depleted woodlands, it also supports an abundance of wildlife, while quietly helping to store carbon and combat climate change.

Its Gaelic name, *crann critheach*, refers to its trembling leaves, renowned for their quaking, whispering quality. Aspen (*Populus tremula*) supports a remarkable range of life. Its leaves feed more than 60 species of insect, while rare fungi, lichens and mosses thrive on its bark. Its Highland groves

host specialist species such as the aspen hoverfly and the dark-bordered beauty moth, neither of which can be found anywhere else in the UK. Beavers like to eat aspen stems, while birds such as crested tits and capercaillie benefit from the connected woodland habitats that aspen trees help create.

Aspen is widely distributed across the northern temperate zone, ranging from Britain and North Africa to Japan. It does occur throughout Britain, but is most abundant in northern Scotland, particularly in the north-west Highlands, including areas around the Cairngorm massif and Glen Affric National Nature Reserve. It is also found in fragmented stands across north-east and central

Scotland, the Hebrides, and as far north as Orkney, although often in very small numbers. Despite its wide distribution, aspen in Scotland typically occurs as small, isolated and fragmented populations, many consisting of only a few trees.

Aspen flowers infrequently, and seed production is therefore only occasional and sporadic. Its main method of reproduction is vegetative, with young suckers, or ramets, growing off the roots of a parent tree. These young trees remain connected to the parent by their roots: they are in fact the same organism and each group of such interconnected trees is known as a clone.

As aspen is dioecious – meaning that individual trees are either male or female – all the constituent stems of a clone are the same sex, and a stand of aspen trees may consist of just one or a few clones. This restricts the possibilities for pollination and is a contributing factor to aspen's restricted distribution.

Aspen is highly palatable to deer and other herbivores, so it has struggled to regenerate in many areas. Alongside the historic loss of much of Scotland's native forest and woodland, management practices removed species considered non-useful, which has left many surviving aspen stands restricted



↑ Young trees grow quickly

to remote and inaccessible sites, such as rocky outcrops and steep-sided gullies. The low rate of seed production means that it is also unlikely to recolonise naturally where it is absent.

Aspen grows remarkably quickly – up to two metres a year – and has a relatively short lifespan, which makes it highly effective at capturing and storing carbon, providing an important natural defence against climate change, particularly when grown as part of a diverse woodland ecosystem.

With thanks to Peter Cosgrove, information has been drawn from *Aspen: Britain's missing link with the boreal forest*, first published in *British Wildlife*, December 2005. 🌐

Further information

Aspen can be found on Trust properties at Li and Coire Dhorrcail, Knoydart; a few stands in the woodland in Steall Gorge at Nevis; and two locations of mature aspen at Glenlude that were planted in 1995.



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Books we love

Peatlands: a journey between land and water

by Alys Fowler

Peatlands are often overlooked. For many of us, they're places we walk through on the way to somewhere else rather than destinations in their own right. In *Peatlands*, Alys Fowler challenges that perception, revealing these landscapes as places of extraordinary ecological importance, rich biodiversity and deep cultural history.

Blending natural history, memoir and environmental science, Fowler takes the reader across peatlands in Britain and Ireland, exploring not only what makes them unique, but why they matter. They are home to remarkable species, hold thousands of years of environmental history beneath our feet and, perhaps most importantly in the context of a changing climate, store vast amounts of carbon. Yet despite their value, peatlands remain among our most damaged and misunderstood habitats.

What I enjoyed most about this book was Fowler's ability to combine scientific understanding with personal experience. Her writing encourages you to slow down and notice the detail: the sphagnum mosses building these landscapes millimetre by millimetre, the birds and insects that depend on them, and the subtle beauty that can so easily be missed. Rather than simply presenting facts, she reminds us that our relationship with nature begins through observation and curiosity.

Throughout the book, there is an underlying message that resonated with me: we are more likely to protect the places we understand and value. That feels particularly relevant at a time when peatlands are receiving greater recognition for the role they play in addressing the

twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate change. Restoration is becoming more widespread, but Fowler reminds us that these landscapes are far more than carbon stores. They are living ecosystems that deserve protection in their own right.

Like the mountains, peatlands reward those who take the time to look beyond first impressions. They may appear quiet or empty, but they are full of life, complexity and resilience.

This book captures this beautifully and invites us to appreciate landscapes that have often been dismissed as bleak or ordinary.

Working in the uplands, I've come to appreciate that peatlands are just as important to healthy mountain ecosystems as the more dramatic ridges and summits that capture our attention. I've been lucky (!) enough to have wandered across many bogs

in Scotland, both for work and pleasure, and find them to be incredibly healing places, which give me time and space to reflect.

Reading Fowler's book made me think more deeply about the peatlands I come across in the Highlands. They are not just part of the journey, but destinations worthy of my attention and our protection in their own right.

Peatlands is not just a book about bogs. It's a call to rethink one of our most misunderstood habitats, and perhaps even to walk a little more slowly through the wild places we thought we already knew.

£20.00

hachette.co.uk



About the reviewer: Julia Robertson is the Trust's Nevis Conservation Officer

Others we like

No Two Trees, by Allie R Cooper

Written in playful rhyme and illustrated with striking collage artwork, this charming picture book celebrates diversity through the wonders of nature. Inspired by real forest habitats, it offers young readers



a captivating look at how different plants and animals live together in balance and harmony. Ideal for children aged three to five, yet resonant for readers of all ages, the story thoughtfully explores themes of difference and disability. With warmth and sensitivity, it shows that, just as every part of the forest has an important role, our individual strengths and characteristics enrich the world around us.

£10.99 @alliercooper

I Heart Hedgehogs, by Pesala Bandara

This is a beautifully crafted tribute to one of Britain's favourite garden visitors. Filled with fascinating facts, folklore, inspiring quotations and lovely illustrations, it is as informative as it is charming. The book also provides plenty of practical advice, including



Unwilded: finding our way back to nature by Alastair Humphreys

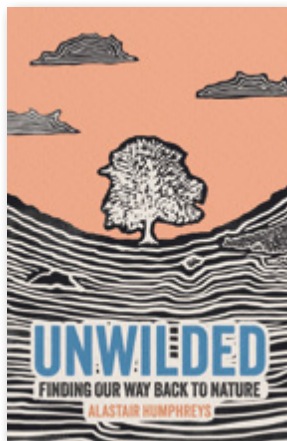
Alison Bucknall considers our disconnect from nature, and what we can do about it

The book opens with the story of the felling of the Sycamore Gap tree and the public outrage that followed. Humphreys makes the thought-provoking point that the tree itself "wasn't even native, ancient or wild". Yet its iconic setting and the memories people created there gave it a significance that transcended its ecological value. Many felt a genuine sense of loss.

This leads into a discussion of shifting baselines – the idea that each generation accepts the natural world it inherits as 'normal' even as wildlife declines, rivers become more polluted and trees disappear. Is there a 'correct' baseline? It's a question that has arisen with colleagues when thinking about John Muir Trust's work to protect wild places and one that the book inspires readers to ponder.

Another central theme is our disconnection from nature with the author pointing out "how rare the feeling of wonder has become in our lives." As our lives become more insulated from the natural world, we can easily find ourselves glued to our phones rather than noticing what's in front of our noses. Here, you might feel, as I did, that the author was preaching to the converted. The fact that I work in the environmental sector and that you are reading this as members of the John Muir Trust, it seems safe to assume that we are all more likely to actively look for, notice and appreciate the nature that – if we are lucky enough – is all around us. Looking out of my home office window as I write this, I can see four mature trees blowing in the breeze – two silver birches, a sycamore and a holly.

However, access to nature isn't equal. I'm fortunate to live on a lane with a tree equity score of 90%, where street and garden trees are plentiful. Even so, I sometimes need a reminder to pause and notice what's around me.



(Find your tree equity score at uk.treeequityscore.org)

Despite the challenges the author describes, this book is far from a depressing read. Instead, it is full of hope and practical encouragement. He invites us to spend just 15 minutes noticing the nature around us, arguing that "once we start noticing what is close at hand, it becomes harder to ignore, and harder to do nothing when it is threatened".

As a John Muir Award officer, I regularly read inspiring stories from Award leaders across the UK who are helping people to discover, enjoy and care for wild places. Their work demonstrates exactly what Humphreys advocates: that meaningful conservation begins with connection. Once people connect with nature for themselves, they are far more likely to value and protect it.

The final chapters move on to a call to action, providing readers with practical steps to identify ways in which we can make a difference by asking "what can I do today, with what I have, where I am?" It's a fitting conclusion to a book that doesn't overwhelm us with the scale of the challenges, but instead reminds us that small, consistent actions matter.

Unwilded is an accessible, thought-provoking and ultimately optimistic read – be sure to read the epilogue!

£12.99

eye-books.com

About the reviewer: Alison Bucknall is the Trust's Training and Engagement Officer

simple ways to make gardens more hedgehog-friendly, reduce everyday dangers, and create welcoming habitats with shelters and feeding areas.

£10.99 *harpercollins.co.uk*

Winter, by Val McDermid

Winter invites us to slow down and enjoy the comfort of home, settle into the sofa with a favourite book or a binge-worthy series and a warming drink. In *Winter*, Val McDermid celebrates the season's beauty, from icy Edinburgh streets to Scotland's

rugged coastline, and from Bonfire Night to Hogmanay traditions. Drawing on childhood memories of skating on frozen lakes, carving Halloween neeps and admiring Christmas lights, she captures winter's magic and nostalgia. Above all, she portrays it as a season for reflection, creativity and cosiness in this heartfelt tribute to Scotland's colder months.

£16.99 *hodder.co.uk*



Support the Trust by shopping at johnmuirtrust.org/shop/books or from Wild Space in Pitlochry



Professor *Ria Dunkley*

Rachel Flynn Charters speaks with **Ria Dunkley**,
Professor of Environmental Pedagogy in the School
of Education at the University of Glasgow

1. What inspired your recent research?

I've always been fascinated by how people come to care about the natural world. While working at the Eden Project, for example, I became interested in how young people develop meaningful relationships with the natural world and how those experiences shape environmental action. I think the experiences we have outdoors shape how we understand our place within it, and ultimately how we respond to the environmental challenges we face. I wanted to understand how those relationships are actually formed.

2. Why isn't knowledge alone enough?

We know more than ever about climate change and biodiversity loss, and knowledge is essential, but information on its own rarely changes how we live. My research suggests that the challenge isn't simply helping people connect with nature. It's understanding how those connections develop in the first place.

3. What do you think sparks a lasting interest in nature?

Some children live close to extraordinary landscapes but still have relatively few opportunities to experience them. A memorable day outdoors can spark curiosity, but it's repeated experiences that build confidence, deepen understanding and create a genuine sense of belonging.

4. Why is repeated access to the outdoors so important?

I found that lasting ecological relationships are rarely accidental. They are cultivated through repeated experiences, shared practices and supportive relationships. The people I interviewed often described

the same pattern. They remembered a parent, grandparent, teacher or outdoor educator who had patiently introduced them to the natural world, helping them feel confident outdoors, notice things they might otherwise have missed or simply experience a sense of wonder.

5. Did you find any differences between people's experiences in the UK and US?

In the United States, many volunteers spoke about contributing to the public good, while participants



↑ Professor Ria Dunkley

in the UK often described wanting to care for places because they had seen them damaged or neglected. Despite those differences, the process of introducing people to nature was remarkably similar.

6. Why do you specifically reference the John Muir Award?

The Award provided a wonderful opportunity to explore so many related questions because it creates repeated opportunities for us to discover, experience and care for wild places alongside other people.

The Award isn't simply about taking people outdoors. It values discovery, repeated engagement, reflection and sharing experiences with others. What also stood out was the quiet work of the many teachers, volunteers and practitioners who make those experiences possible. They don't always get recognised, but they're central to helping people develop lasting relationships with nature.

7. Do you think wild places matter more now?

Wild places have always mattered, but I do think they're becoming increasingly precious.

As genuinely wild places become rarer, opportunities to experience wonder, discovery and the unexpected become rarer, too. 🌿



↑ Children exploring wild places

An invitation to join the Corbett Club



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Explore membership of the Corbett Club at johnmuirtrust.org/philanthropy
Or email liv.adams@johnmuirtrust.org



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