JOHN MUIR TRUST
JOURNAL

74 SPRING 2023

10 Dispelling the myths about our increased deer cull in Assynt

22 Calling time on managed grouse moors in Britain's uplands

28 Fresh perspectives from a moose hunt in Norway

New horizons

Joining the dots at Quinag

JOHN MUIR TRUST

EST. 1983

Matt Glenn and Seana Forbes
South Ridge of the Diablon des Dames
Zinal, Switzerland

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34

16

22

32

PHOTOGRAPHY (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP): RICHARD ELSE; ADOBE STOCK; DAVID BALHARRY

COVER: EXPLORING QUINAG, CHRIS PUDDEPHATT

REGULARS

05 **Chief Executive's welcome**

06 **News**

32 **Books**
Wild Fell, by Lee Schofield; *A Scotsman Returns*, by Paul A Lynn

34 **Interview**
We chat with filmmaker Libby Penman who fronts a new Trust documentary about deer management

FEATURES

10 **Fact vs fiction**
We dispel some of the myths surrounding our deer cull in Assynt

14 **Joining the dots**
Catherine Evans shares details of an exciting new acquisition in the northwest Highlands

16 **A changing landscape**
Rosie Simpson and **Fiona Baillie** on wild places and renewable energy

20 **Lasting impact**
Jenny Seaman learns about one supporter's legacy gift to the Trust

22 **Calling time**
Max Wiszniewski on moving away from intensively managed grouse moors

25 **Helping hand**
Freddie Ryan outlines an online tool that can inform better land use choices

26 **Where we wander**
Tim Hoogwerf reveals what wild places mean to him

28 **On the hunt**
Kevin Lelland reflects on his first moose hunt on a recent visit to Norway

30 **Natural health service**
Ross Brannigan explores the growing practice of Green Prescriptions

JOURNAL 74, SPRING 2023

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JOHN MUIR TRUST

High ambition

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

WELCOME to the Spring 2023 issue of the Journal, which coincides with the 40th anniversary of the founding of the John Muir Trust. We've come a long way over that time. From a group of four, the Trust has grown into an influential organisation that is helping to drive change at national level while carrying out practical work on the ground across the extensive areas of land that we manage.

In this special year, we are delighted to announce an exciting new land acquisition. We have just signed the title deeds for an 18-hectare site near the Kylesku Bridge with dramatic views across the coastline to the north side of Quinag (see page 14). The property, which includes ten holiday lodges and other buildings, has outstanding potential to become a local enterprise hub for visitors and nature conservation in this part of northwest Scotland. At the same time, we are at an advanced stage in discussions with a view to taking over the management of a larger stretch of land that connects our new property at Kylesku directly with Quinag.

The Trust has been strongly involved in, and indeed helped initiate, the pioneering NorthWest 2045 project – now an officially recognised Scottish Government Regional Land Use Partnership that has brought together a diverse group of local organisations to help shape a thriving social, economic, cultural and environmental future for this part of Scotland.

Some members will be aware that there is conflict between environmental and sport shooting interests and our objectives for the land we manage in this area. In our lead feature on page ten, we answer some of the main criticisms that have been levelled against us in recent months.

I would also add a few observations. First, Quinag has been in our ownership for almost two decades, and our assessment of the condition of the land convinced us that we needed to accelerate our efforts to restore vulnerable habitats and allow seedlings to grow. Our actions are set within a wider context in which the maintenance of damagingly high deer numbers to benefit a few is under scrutiny as never before. Tensions often arise when sporting interests pile pressure on neighbours to effectively turn their land into feeding grounds for sporting quarry.

Second, we have conducted this debate with a combination of calm and resolve. We respect the right of others to disagree, but we will stand our ground when it comes to managing wild places to the highest ecological standards.

Third, perhaps the most effective way of gaining local trust and respect is through face-to-face conversations. We may end up agreeing to disagree, but the personal touch can go a long way to helping defuse conflict. That can be time consuming, but we are working on ways of stepping up this approach.

Finally, and crucially, actions always speak louder than words. The more we can do to demonstrate the tangible benefits that thriving nature can bring to local communities, the easier it will be to protect and transform our wild places. There is now widespread recognition of the intrinsic value of wildness. But one of our challenges is to show how wild places can drive the economic and social regeneration of some of our most sparsely populated areas.

Which returns me to the land at Kylesku. It may be small but this strip of land nestled in a hidden corner of coastline adjacent to the North Coast 500 route has outstanding potential to integrate our ecological restoration work with an initiative that can create local jobs and support the area's fragile economy.

It is just a taste of bigger things to come, hopefully in the near future. We are unable to reveal details at this stage, but can say that we are involved in exploratory discussions over several other potential land acquisitions, including some of the most ecologically important landscapes in the Scottish Highlands.

These are times of change and turmoil, but also of opportunity. More than ever, the Trust's mission to protect and restore wild places for the benefit of present and future generations is in tune with wider public opinion. Whatever upheaval may lie ahead, we can look to the future with confidence. ◻

David Balharry
Chief Executive, John Muir Trust

UK completes first Wild Places Survey

Our survey results contribute to the creation of a first ever UK-wide register of wild places

In the depths of winter, we asked people across the UK to take part in our Wild Places Survey by nominating their favourite wild place and telling us why it is special to them. We were delighted when thousands enthusiastically responded before the survey closed in mid-February.

Supporting the project behind the scenes was Nick Homer, who is studying for a doctorate with the University of Edinburgh. Nick has been with the Trust on a six-month internship in partnership with the Alan Turing Institute and he designed the survey with support from colleagues at the Trust last year.

When the survey closed, Nick coordinated a multi-disciplinary team of PhD students tasked with analysing the data. He said: "Findings are being compiled into a report for the Trust to help inform the next phase of the UK wild places register project. A huge thank you to all Members and supporters who participated."

The register will list the UK's most important remaining wild places for the first time – creating a resource for the future monitoring and protection of those places. Once we have a register set up, we can start to build collaborative approaches to protecting them better, by working with local and national governments and local communities and visitors.

Everyone who took part in the Wild Places Survey had the chance to win £1,000 worth of clothing and gear courtesy of Mountain Equipment. The lucky winner was Will Moran from London.

"Visiting wild places allows you to appreciate the unique biodiversity found in the UK," said Will. "These areas should be protected so that we can continue to enjoy them, and so that future generations can grow up with the same access."

Will also shared his own special wild place – Chorleywood, just north of London. "Chorleywood provides an opportunity for me to escape the city and enjoy fresh air, while walking the dog," he commented. "The public footpaths through and around Chorleywood offer me the chance to explore nature and interact with local wildlife."

Survey winner Will Moran in Chorleywood (main); the handwritten letter from Sir David Attenborough (inset)

A special wild place

Hot on the heels of the BBC's *Wild Isles* series, our policy team contacted Sir David Attenborough to ask where his favourite wild place was in the UK. We were delighted to receive a handwritten reply, which mentioned one of the areas he visited in the nature series. Sir David wrote back: "To be truthful I don't really have a single place in the UK to call my favourite, but I have a great affection for Skomer Island in Pembrokeshire, where you can see not only shearwater but puffins, and geologically it is fascinating."

Trustee call

Five Trustee places have become vacant on our Board in 2023. We're looking for new Trustees who share our values and will bring fresh ideas to keep us relevant and influential as we work towards our new strategic plan through to 2026.

We'd like Members to nominate and vote for candidates from diverse backgrounds. Specifically, we welcome those with experience in:

- Natural heritage, ecology and land management
- Community engagement
- Finance and fundraising
- Wellbeing, nature connection and outdoor education

Anyone who has been a Member of the Trust for more than 12 months is welcome to stand. The nomination process will close at noon on Monday 3 July 2023. The results will be announced at our 2023 AGM to be held online on Saturday 4 November. Find out more at **johmuirtrust.org/trusteecall**

40-year milestone

A year of celebrations for the Trust's 40th anniversary

PHOTOGRAPH: DEREK SIME

Exploring Li and Coire Dhorcaill

Our founding Members formed the John Muir Trust to secure the future of Li and Coire Dhorrcail in Knoydart 40 years ago (outlined in our 40th anniversary logo, above). They were determined to protect this special wild place, so that nature could restore itself and people could continue to enjoy it.

Four decades later, the Trust is just as committed to protecting and enhancing wild places around the UK for nature, people and communities. Gratefully, we are now supported by thousands of equally enthusiastic people who show their love for wild places by raising money, donating, volunteering and joining the Trust.

To celebrate this landmark, we are planning a variety of exciting activities. This summer, readers can look forward to a souvenir edition of the *Journal*, curated by Members and volunteers. Between them, they have identified key issues that have been relevant to the Trust over the years and analysed them from a modern perspective.

In July and August, the Trust's Wild Space centre in Pitlochry will take visitors on an immersive journey through our past, with a chance to win prizes and make pledges for wild places.

Towards the end of the year, we will also invite all to take part in our Creative Freedom competition – an opportunity to flex those creative muscles and tell us what your vision for the future of wild places is.

Throughout the year, we will be sharing stories on our website and social media. We encourage you to get in touch and send us your own stories, either from the early days of the Trust or special memories from visiting our properties.

Find out more and get involved at **johmuirtrust.org/celebrate40**

Knoydart hill track refused

In early 2023, the Trust objected to an application for a new hill track between Barrisdale Estate and Loch Quoich in Glen Barrisdale. The Barrisdale Estate borders Li and Coire Dhorrcail, the site we care for in Knoydart.

Despite wanting to maintain good working relations with our neighbours, we objected to the application. We were concerned that the new track would harm the wild character of the glen, which sits within the Kinlochhourn-Knoydart-Morar Wild Land Area and Knoydart National Scenic Area. On 6 March we learned that Highland Council had refused planning permission after considering the application.

Policy round-up

• A community group based in Dalmally, Argyll and Bute are planning to participate in a Public Local Inquiry (PLI) about an overhead power line (Creag Dhubh to Dalmally OHL project) which they believe will encircle their community in power infrastructure. In December 2022, Trust staff spoke to members of the Glenorchy & Innishail Community Council about how they might approach participating in a PLI and what is involved.

• Gilkes Energy, a hydro engineering company based in Cumbria, has published proposals for what would be the UK's largest pumped hydro scheme at Lochan na h-Earba near Newtonmore in the Scottish Highlands. As a major engineering and construction undertaking in a wild area that is enjoyed by many, the Trust has reviewed all available documentation and plans to meet with a representative from the developer on site. Members are invited to get in touch with their views to help inform our position on this.

• Following the publication of Scotland's revised draft National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4), the Trust was invited by the Energy Consents Unit during December 2022 and January 2023 to submit additional comments on applications for several developments that we had previously responded to. We took the opportunity to provide feedback on the new policies in NPF4 and how they might be interpreted for the protection of wild places (see feature on page 16).

Local children collect native tree seeds at Dun Coillich

PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES ROBERTSON

Seed to Tree pilot gathers pace

A new project working with local primary schools and members of the local community to grow trees for planting out at Schiehallion has enjoyed a hugely encouraging start.

Launched in autumn 2022, the Trust's Seed to Tree project involves collecting local tree seed to grow on and eventually plant out at Schiehallion. The aim is to supplement the small amount of existing woodland at Schiehallion with trees sourced from as local a provenance as possible.

Growing on local trees for Schiehallion in this way is just one aspect of the Trust's plans to restore a mountain woodland on the site.

Working with a fellow member of the Heart of Scotland Forest Partnership – Highland Perthshire Communities Land Trust – we delivered pilot workshop sessions that saw children in years P5 to P7 at Blair Atholl and Logierait primary schools collect native tree seed from neighbouring Dun Coillich.

A few months later, the Trust delivered a workshop in both primary schools where pupils were able to process and sow the variety of seeds collected, including hazel, alder, birch and rowan.

Both schools are now caring for the seedlings in their polytunnels until they are ready to be planted out at Schiehallion later this year.

Following this successful pilot, two other local primary schools are now keen to be involved in the Seed to Tree project this year. We're also looking to enlist the help of more local people who are interested in joining a community growing project later in 2023.

The Trust is grateful for generous support from J & L Gibbons Landscape Architects which has made this project possible.

Planting on a snowy, blowy day

PHOTOGRAPH: ROSS BRANNIGAN

Tree planting at Thirlmere

A mid-March blast of wintery weather didn't deter our hardy volunteers from joining the Trust's Glenridding Common team on the other side of Helvellyn. They were there to help kick off this year's tree planting season at Wythburn, in the heart of the Lake District National Park.

Planting trees as part of creating a self-sustaining mixed woodland is an important component of the Thirlmere Resilience Project – a partnership between United Utilities, Cumbria Wildlife Trust, John Muir Trust, Natural England, West Cumbria Rivers Trust and the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology at Lancaster University.

A 5.6km-long reservoir located between Grasmere and Keswick, Thirlmere and its wider catchment area has recently experienced both drought and flooding.

This large-scale land management project aims to restore ecosystems and develop a catchment capable of both supporting environmental targets and guaranteeing water supplies for West Cumbria.

Glenridding Common Manager Pete Barron thanked everyone for their hard work in tough weather conditions: "It was a great effort, especially as three inches of snow appeared from nowhere!"

Joe Douglas directed the Dundee Rep's remake of *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*

PHOTOGRAPH: TOMMY GA-KEN WAN

Land takes centre stage in new theatre show

Those of a certain vintage will remember *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, a polemic piece of Scottish theatre written in the 1970s by John McGrath. Telling the story of the exploitation of Scotland's land and its people over the centuries, it was performed in a touring production in community centres across Scotland.

More recently, the play was given a makeover when Joe Douglas directed the Dundee Rep's acclaimed remake of the play in 2015 (pictured).

Now, together with theatre maker and author Jenna Watt, Joe is working on a new piece of touring theatre that has *The Cheviot* as a cultural reference point.

Commissioned jointly by the Trust and Community Land Scotland, with funding from Creative Scotland, the play will explore different views around the future of Scotland's land through a mix of drama, comedy and original music.

As part of their research for the work, both Joe and Jenna have spent the past few months meeting with communities around Scotland to better understand the issues affecting them today – with a trip planned to Assynt in August.

"We're getting a strong sense of peoples' connection to land, whether practical, physical, emotional or just part of their heritage," explained Joe. "The piece of theatre that we create will be a response to that."

Look out for an in-depth feature on the project in the Autumn issue of the *Journal*.

Junior rangers learn hill skills

Twelve young people from Ullapool High School and a further dozen from Lochaber High School make up our latest intake of Quinag and Nevis Junior Rangers.

The Junior Rangers are now more than half way through the programme, which spans the academic year and aims to equip young people with practical skills for employment focusing on environmental work in their local areas.

Alongside first aid, they have learned navigation and orienteering skills; brash hedge building; and woodland ecology and deer management through 'Hill to Grill' sessions.

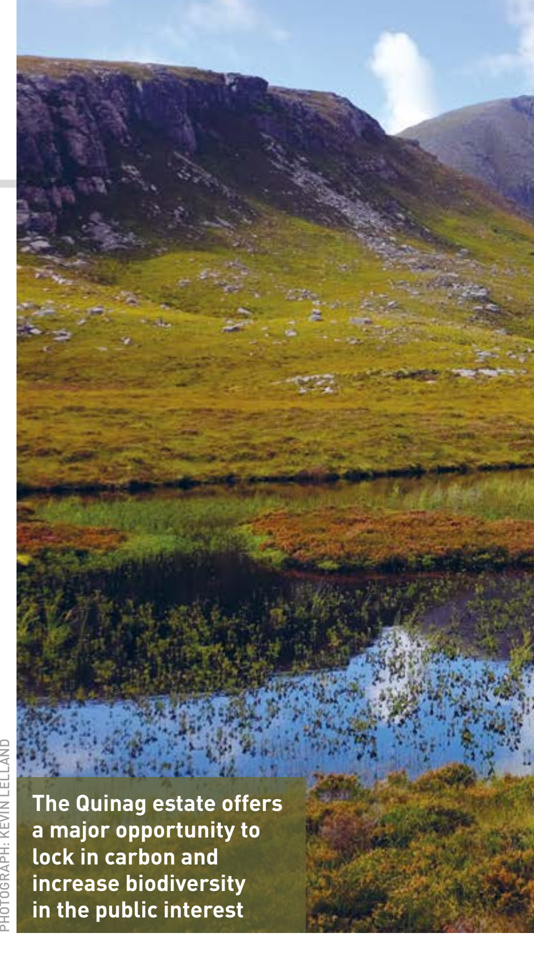
Ullapool High School's deputy head teacher Jo Stewart was full of praise for their achievements: "It's a fantastic programme that offers a hands-on approach and includes sustainability, interdisciplinary and outdoor learning, while also developing skills for life and work."

Junior Rangers at a Hill to Grill session, Quinag

PHOTOGRAPH: CHRIS PUDDEPHATT

Fact vs. fiction

Following fierce opposition from a vocal minority demanding the status quo for sports shooting estates, the Trust published a paper dispelling some of the myths surrounding our decision to increase deer culls in Assynt in the northwest Highlands. Here, we carry an abridged version



PHOTOGRAPH: KEVIN LELLAND

The Quinag estate offers a major opportunity to lock in carbon and increase biodiversity in the public interest

SINCE the start of this year, the Trust has come under fierce criticism in northwest Scotland following a successful application for an out-of-season and night licence to assist in increasing our deer cull on the Quinag estate to meet our ecological objectives.

This decision was not taken lightly. It has to be seen, firstly, in a national and international context. Few people other than extreme conspiracy theorists would doubt the gravity of the climate emergency. The red needle is approaching danger point, with potentially catastrophic health, social, economic and environmental consequences. Simultaneously, we are descending into a grave ecological crisis, which threatens the life support systems upon which we all depend.

The Scottish Government is taking action on a number of fronts to ensure that, as a developed nation, we play our part in standing up to this twin crisis. Its draft biodiversity strategy published in late 2022 specifically expresses a national objective to "drive down and deliver substantially reduced deer densities across our landscapes".

By European standards, Scotland has a very large landmass proportionate to its population – six and a half times greater than that of its nearest neighbour, England. Most of that land is classified as severely disadvantaged. It is of extremely low agricultural productivity, but has immense potential for carbon sequestration and biodiversity recovery.

It is a staggering fact that Scotland's uplands – those vast areas where the main economic activity is deer and grouse shooting – have the potential to remove more greenhouse gases from the atmosphere each year than the equivalent of removing every one of Scotland's petrol and diesel cars from our roads.

Yet as things stand, native tree cover is a mere four per cent of the landmass, while around 80 per cent of peatlands are degraded and act like giant power stations, pumping destructive gases into the atmosphere every second of every day. One of the major obstacles to turning this around is the high deer densities across rural land. They prevent the restoration of healthy habitats by devouring burgeoning new habitats, from tree saplings to heather. They trample peatlands and destroy the surface vegetation, leaving the soils exposed and vulnerable to further deterioration.

Many landowners accept their responsibility and are seeking to rectify the damage inflicted in the past. Others are intent on perpetuating a status quo inherited from the Victorian era – where land is managed for the single purpose of sport shooting on behalf of a powerful minority interest group.

Some landowners are caught in the middle: they seek to manage their land in the public interest but are inhibited by the pressure that bears down from surrounding sporting estates. This is the position in which the Trust finds itself in Assynt.

DAMAGE LIMITATION

As the leading charity that seeks to protect and restore wild places for the benefit of people, climate and nature, the Trust has a responsibility to steward the land we manage to the highest environmental standards. We recently commissioned a baseline survey of net CO_2 emissions on the properties we look after. The results in some areas were sobering. The Quinag estate, we discovered, is currently emitting almost 5,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent per year.

For the Trust that is unacceptable. Quinag has the potential to go beyond net zero and become a carbon sink, removing and storing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. And that is before we start on the depleted biodiversity in a landscape that once would have been full of life: woodland, grassland, wetland, heathland and scrub that in turn provide habitat for many other plant and animal species.

We take no pride in that. Since taking ownership of Quinag almost 20 years ago, we have been constrained from taking the action needed to reverse a century of damage. We have no control over deer numbers on neighbouring estates and have been pressurised into bowing to the demands of others to minimise culling on Quinag itself.

Consequently, we have been forced into a long-term damage limitation exercise. We now intend to move forward to take proactive measures to restore habitats, slash carbon emissions and reconstruct damaged ecosystems.

We understand that may have some knock-on consequences for neighbouring estates, just as the activities of neighbouring estates have consequences for the land that

“Bare hillsides with isolated fragments of dying woodland were transformed into vibrant, inspiring landscapes that are universally acknowledged today as resounding ecological success stories”

we manage. We have never tried to dictate our solutions to neighbouring landowners, even when we consider their activities to be causing environmental damage. And we do not expect to be dictated to by others with private interests.

We are happy to be accountable for our land management to agencies whose role is to represent the public interest, whether that be NatureScot, the Scottish Land Commission or the Scottish Government.

The Trust is among the strongest supporters of land reform in rural Scotland, and believes that all landowners should have responsibilities to the wider national interest rather than to their own private ambitions.

RURAL ECONOMIES

This is no time for scaremongering – such as the notion, for example, that by reducing deer numbers on Quinag, the Trust is jeopardising jobs in neighbouring estates. There is no evidence to suggest that variations in the number of stags shot in a season impacts on the number of stalkers employed.

It is a verified fact that deer numbers have risen relentlessly across Assynt over the past decade. In 2011, the deer count figures across the Assynt Peninsula Subgroup stood at 1,383. There was no deer count the following year, but in 2013, the figure had increased to 1,418. Based on a NatureScot helicopter count in spring 2022, it is now 1,921 – an almost 40 per cent increase.

There is no evidence that these increased deer numbers have created any new jobs or brought in additional income to the area. Neither is there evidence that reducing deer numbers will lead to job losses.

The economic arguments against reform of deer management are especially hollow. A report commissioned by the Scottish Government (*Socio-economic Impacts of Moorland Activities in Scotland,* October 2020) carried out several case studies measuring the economic balance sheet of different forms of land management. It included an analysis of a large deer stalking estate covering 38,500ha in the Scottish Highlands. It found that its deer stalking operation ran at a £116,950 annual loss and employed five ‘deer-specific’ full-time equivalent (FTE) staff – or one full-time job per 77 square kilometres. In northwest Scotland, the Trust supports almost four times as many FTE jobs per square kilometre over the land we manage.

It should be added that annual losses from deer stalking are par for the course rather than an aberration. In 2017, the Scottish Government reintroduced local business rates for sporting estates, with the expectation the revenues would then be ringfenced to support the Scottish Land Fund, which assists community buyouts. To our knowledge not a penny was paid into the fund. The reason: most sport shooting estates were able to demonstrate that their business was run either at a loss or below the £35,000 annual profit threshold that would make them liable.

There is another side to the story, however. According to commercial land agents, every stag shot on a private estate will add between £25,000 and £50,000 to the value of that estate, depending on the number of points on the antlers.

For big private estates, the value of sport shooting does not derive from weekly, monthly or even annual revenues from the activity itself. Instead, it is captured indirectly in rising land values, which have negative side effects for the rural economy as a whole and reinforce the unequal concentration of landownership across rural Scotland.

A LOST CAUSE?

In a recent lengthy paper under the provocative title *John Muir Trust: At it Again*, one of the chief opponents of our decision to increase the deer cull at Quinag essentially argues that most of the land, apart from a few fragments, is a lost cause for nature and climate, with no potential for restoration due to geography and climate.

There is material in the paper that

→ continued

we would not disagree with. We do not dispute, for example, the contention that there is improvement in the condition of the Ardvar woodland outside our boundaries at Quinag. We are encouraged by the assurance that fencing has played at best only a minor part in that progress.

However, none of the information documented in relation to Ardvar negates the fact that deer are continuing to inflict severe damage on the part of the woodland that extends into our land and across the wider habitat of Quinag.

There are also suggestions that, other than a fragment, woodland does not exist on Quinag beyond the designated Site of Special Scientific Interest at Ardvar. From this, it is concluded that the deer cull proposed on Quinag is 'malicious' because there is little possibility of environmental gain. Other experts dispute that, as do our own staff on the ground who have an extensive knowledge of Quinag.

We know from place names, maps and other sources that even in relatively recent history, native woodlands were a significant part of Scotland's landscapes. On Quinag itself, place names include Alltan na Salach, wee burn of the willow; Bad na Fearaig, place of the alder; and Doire Cuillin, holly grove. Ecological records also show evidence of downy birch, wych elm, hazel, rowan, willow, aspen, juniper, holly and oak on the site, which indicates that the landscape is capable of supporting recovery of many woodland species.

Every year since 2016, we have monitored around 150 tagged seedlings of hazel, holly, willow, birch, rowan and aspen scattered across nine separate areas of Quinag. Since 2008, we have also monitored dwarf shrub heath. The monitoring demonstrates beyond all reasonable doubt that grazing pressures from deer is preventing woodland recovery on Quinag.

Moreover, a woodland habitat is more than just trees. No one would claim that Quinag could ever be swathed entirely in native woodland. Instead, when we talk about woodland restoration on Quinag, we mean in the broad sense of a diverse ecosystem that includes scattered trees, grassland, heather, wet heath, peatland and scrub.

The baseline carbon study carried out at Quinag found that the biggest single source of carbon emissions is from overgrazed and trampled wet heath. Another survey, by the University of Leeds Earth Sciences Department, estimates that across the Quinag Wild Land Area, ecological restoration could potentially sequester almost 880,000 tonnes of CO_2 equivalent over the course of the next century. That works out at 8,800 tonnes of CO_2 annually, which is close to the total carbon footprint of the entire population of Assynt.

WHY NOT FENCING?

As an alternative to reducing deer numbers, we have been told to erect fencing around our property. But deer fences present major ecological disadvantages. First, they create an artificial environment within the perimeter area. Wet heath, for example, which is the major source of carbon emissions on Quinag, is damaged by overgrazing. But it can also be damaged by undergrazing – as can a number of other habitats. Grazing abandonment creates an unbalanced ecosystem. Seeds thrive where there is a low and sporadic level of grazing that creates disturbance and prevents a dense sward from taking over.

Deer are naturally woodland animals which benefit from the food and shelter those trees and vegetation provide. In Scotland, where red deer have adapted to bare hillsides, they are undernourished compared with their bigger, stronger and healthier woodland counterparts elsewhere in Europe. Winter mortality figures are high. Erecting deer fences around ecological restoration sites will compound the harm to deer. And it would multiply grazing impacts outside the fences by forcing deer out of fenced habitats, so storing up even bigger problems for the future.

Fencing at scale would mean erecting rings of steel across our countryside at a cost of countless millions of public and private money. Do we really want to go down that route just so that sport shooting visitors can return home with a fine pair of antlers? If the sporting estates are so eager to see deer fences erected, then why don't they fence the boundaries of their estates to keep deer contained so they can shoot them at their convenience?

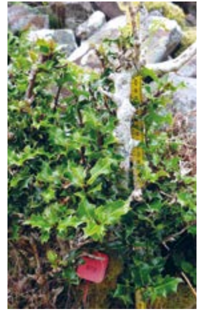
PHOTOGRAPH: FRAN LOCKHART

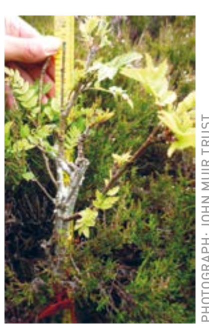
Red deer at too high densities prevent the restoration of healthy habitats

Of course, this debate over deer culls is not new or unique. Organisations and individuals representing private sport shooting estates have a long history of intemperate outrage whenever serious efforts have been undertaken by public and charity organisations to reduce deer densities for ecological restoration.

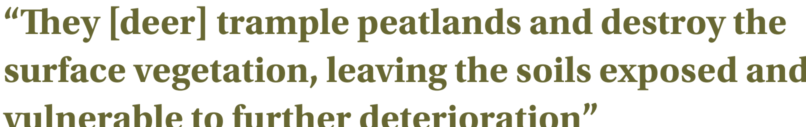
Emotive headlines replete with terms such as 'carnage', 'killing fields' and 'bloodbath' have been frequently bandied about, with no sense of irony, by those whose business is trophy hunting. At Creag Meagaidh, Glenfeshie, Mar Lodge, Abernethy and other estates across Scotland, there were dire warnings of wholesale job losses along with sweeping assertions that the deer culls were gratuitous because they would have no environmental benefits.

Marked seedling damage caused by browsing at Quinag (evident from bare stems and multi-shooted growth)





PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST



“They [deer] trample peatlands and destroy the surface vegetation, leaving the soils exposed and vulnerable to further deterioration”

The sceptics were wrong on both counts. Without exception, bare hillsides with isolated fragments of dying woodland were transformed into vibrant landscapes that are universally acknowledged as resounding ecological success stories. They support more jobs and economic activity than ever before. And no one today is calling for them to be turned back into ‘traditional’ sport shooting estates.

CHANGING TIMES

We should make it clear that the Trust has never opposed deer stalking. In Assynt we recently funded and constructed a community deer larder at Glencanisp. We work with Ullapool High School on an annual ‘Hill to Grill’ programme to educate school students in the entire process of producing venison from the hillside to the dinner plate. We initiated a local women’s stalking group. In addition, we are clear that our environmental objectives on Quinag can co-exist side-by side with sport shooting on other estates with no threat to other people’s livelihoods.

We understand that change can be difficult – and we have done more than most other landowners in advocating at national level a just transition towards net zero in our most sparsely populated areas. See, for example, our recent booklet *Just Transition and Wild Places*, which sets out more than 30 specific policy recommendations aimed at reviving, economically, socially, culturally and environmentally – our most fragile rural communities.

We also practise what we preach. In 2020, the Trust initiated the NorthWest 2045 project, a community-led venture covering 3,000 square kilometres of the northwest Highlands with ambitions that include repopulation, modern infrastructure and services, quality education, a flourishing natural environment, community renewables, affordable housing and reinvigorated local democracy. The project has now been adopted as one of the Scottish Government’s five pilot Regional Land Use Partnerships.

The Trust is proud of its record in Assynt and across Scotland. We have five staff living and working in the northwest who are highly respected within their communities and make a major contribution to the social and economic fabric of the area. We have invested £350,000 in Assynt in the past five years, with more to follow in the near future.

Those who have been voluble in their criticism are employed by private sporting estates whose owners prefer to remain in the shadows. The Trust in contrast is open, transparent, democratic and accountable. We are a public charity, with an elected board of Trustees and answerable to the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator. Our charitable objectives are clear. We have no fear of robust debate. We simply ask that communications are respectful and based on facts and evidence. ◻

Further information
*This article appears in full at **johnmuirtrust.org/clearondeer***

Joining the dots

The Trust recently purchased a site at Kylesku which overlooks land already in our care at Quinag in Assynt. Although modest in size, it has outstanding potential to benefit the wider community in Assynt and beyond, explains Catherine Evans

THE Trust's first major new land acquisition for 13 years, the 18-hectare site at Kylesku sits on the shoreline of Loch a' Chàirn Bhàin, next to – and with extensive views of – Quinag, land that we have looked after since 2005.

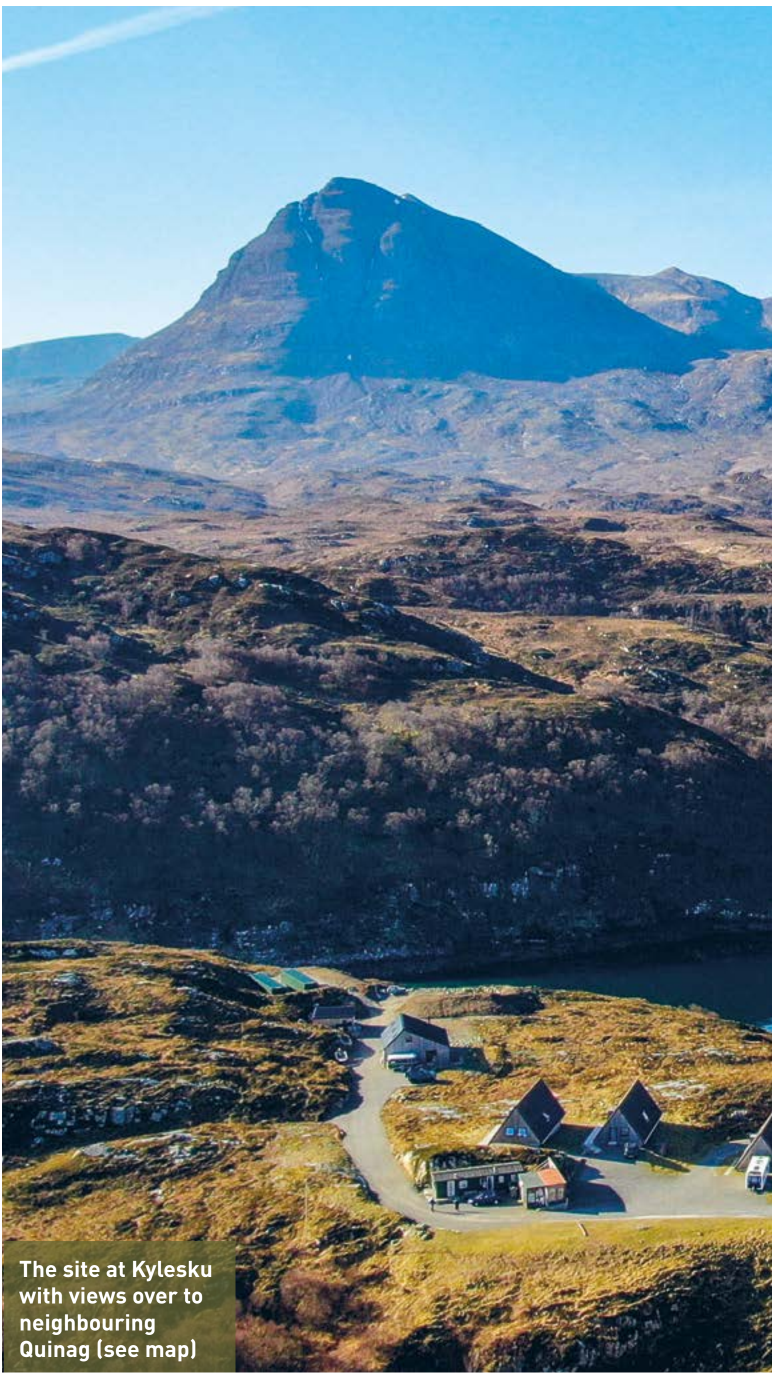
Adding Kylesku to this existing ownership increases the strategic importance of the area and our twin goals of conservation alongside community economic development. It also creates a unique opportunity for a major investment in the long-term future of the ecological health of the landscape, people's experience of that landscape and opportunities to bring new jobs and facilities into this dramatic but underpopulated part of Scotland.

Our ambition is to work in partnership with local people to establish an exemplary model of good practice in land management, ecological restoration and economic development.

One of the exciting elements of the site is that it includes ten A-frame lodges with planning consent for further infrastructure in keeping with the surrounding landscape – a great fit for the Trust's model of sympathetic, sustainable development.

A key development goal will be to create opportunities that are attractive to younger generations and encourage people from all walks of life to engage with nature by visiting wild places in our care.

The previous owners have agreed to remain as managers of the site and operate the current business for at least a year while a robust plan for the future is developed.



PHOTOGRAPH: SEAN MACKAY

The site at Kylesku with views over to neighbouring Quinag (see map)

ASPIRATIONS

We are motivated by three key freedoms for wild places: the freedom of nature to restore; the freedom of people to enjoy them; and the freedom of communities to thrive. We recognise that all three are interconnected, as each cannot operate in isolation from the others.

Currently, the work on our neighbouring property at Quinag is increasingly focused on creating the conditions where nature has the ability to regenerate. We'd also like to create a space at Kylesku to showcase that conservation work to the public, and in turn give them opportunities to participate and contribute.

It will be important to create a new experience for volunteers and visitors to the area in a considered and appropriate manner that fits with the local environment, culture and community and utilises approaches such as slow tourism to benefit the local economy. All these steps, and our investment, will contribute to a fully sustainable future for the area.

OPPORTUNITIES

With Kylesku's proximity to the hugely-popular North Coast 500 route and its fantastic views of Quinag, we see huge potential in the site. The serious investment planned can bring new dimensions to the local economy through conservation projects, well-managed tourism and opportunities for facilities and services that would benefit local people, such as workspaces, a hub for community enterprise, a visitor centre and wild place experience.

About Kylesku

The village of Kylesku (An Caolas Cumhang) is a fishing hamlet in Sutherland in the Scottish Highlands. It is located where Loch Glencoul and Loch Gleann Dubh join to form a sea passage, Loch a' Chàirn Bhàin. It sits at the centre of a 2,000 km^2 area which is Scotland's first Global Geopark.

"The Trust wants to hear from all sections of the community, because everybody in Assynt has a stake in shaping its future"

However, any such plans are only preliminary. Before embarking on any changes, the first priority will be to engage in a wide-ranging consultation with all parts of the local community – residents, organisations and businesses.

Strong community involvement will not only generate ideas and inform plans but also ensure that the social, economic, cultural and environmental benefits created are real and lasting. The Trust wants to hear from all sections of the community, because everybody in Assynt has a stake in shaping its future.

The consultation process will begin this summer and run for at least a year to help ensure that any future opportunities and plans are informed by the views and aspirations of local communities.

As those who live there and countless others who have visited will know, Assynt is blessed with both an incredible landscape and a rich cultural heritage. Our ambition is to work as part of the local community to remember the past and bring the future to life.

About the author

Catherine Evans is the Trust's Director of Operations

PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVID BALHARRY

A changing landscape

As the Trust responds to revised national planning policies, published energy strategies and the UK's nature protection targets, Rosie Simpson and Fiona Baillie outline ongoing work to ensure that wild places remain part of a renewable energy future

ON 13 February 2023, Scotland's Fourth National Planning Framework (NPF4) was enacted having been approved by the Scottish Parliament the month before. Members who followed our consultation responses in 2020, 2021 and 2022 will recognise the abbreviation NPF4 and will know that the Trust's position throughout consultation, in discussion with the Scottish Government, MSPs and the Planning Minister, was that Scotland's Fourth National Planning Framework could continue to protect Scotland's Wild Land Areas without undermining the Scottish Government's commitment to its renewable energy targets.

However, during the consultation process it became clear that renewable energy companies were of the opposite view. Between the first draft (published November 2021) and revised draft (published November 2022) the policy wording on Wild Land Areas was overturned in its meaning. While the first draft expected these areas to be protected except in some circumstances, the revised draft demonstrates an explicit policy position in support of renewable energy developments which will only be overridden in some circumstances.

The revised draft also states that the effects of development outside Wild Land Areas will no longer be a consideration. In evidence to the Parliamentary Committee reviewing the revised draft, Scottish Renewables (the voice of Scotland's renewable energy

industry) expressed its strong support for the revisions.

The policy U-turn troubled us and we asked the Scottish Government why there had been no further opportunity to comment on such a significant change. We weren't the only ones to think the change merited an explanation. During the Parliamentary debate prior to approving the document, Richard Leonard MSP put it to the Planning Minister: "... does he accept that there has been a substantial change between the first draft and the revised draft of the NPF in the way that wild land areas are treated, which moves away from a presumption against development in wild land areas? Can he tell us who has been lobbying him to make that U-turn, and can he give us clarity now on what that means?"

To which the Minister replied: "What we have seen is a strengthening of the policy that is absolutely consistent with our ambition to put climate and nature at the centre of Scotland's planning system. The delivery programme that we published alongside our revised NPF4 in November is, so to speak, a first edition. It is very much intended as a live document, to be constantly actioned, reviewed and updated."

The Minister's response recognised that reviewing and updating the document in the future was a possibility, but he failed to disclose an assessment of how the change had been justified. Undoubtedly, this policy U-turn is a blow for wild places in Scotland and we are anticipating an influx of development proposals within the Wild Land Areas.

ONSHORE WIND

The policies in NPF4 are intended to deliver the Scottish Government's commitment to an additional 12GW of onshore wind capacity by 2030 but with little direction as to how that will be achieved.

This commitment will take Scotland's total expected onshore wind capacity to over 20GW by 2030. We have argued that the additional 12GW could be achieved if all development in Scotland's 'planning pipeline' (i.e. development proposals that are at application stage, are consented but not yet constructed or are in construction) was to be built before 2030, without the need to build on undeveloped Wild Land Areas.

However, Scotland's draft *Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan* is clear that the 12GW additional capacity is a minimum aspiration: 'The significant increase in installed capacity of renewable generation over the coming decade could mean Scotland's annual electricity generation is more than double Scotland's demand by 2030, and more than treble by 2045. This will enable Scotland to meet a large proportion of our demand through renewables alone, while still creating an export opportunity for our surplus.'

Scotland's ability to produce and transmit renewable electricity to other countries of the UK is very much part of the wider picture. The UK's *Energy Security Strategy*, published in April 2022, recognises the 'pipeline' of projects in Scotland and the role for a reinforced grid in England and Wales to transmit electricity from renewables in Scotland to other nations of the UK.

It also signals the important contribution of offshore as a source of renewable electricity (a target of 50GW by 2030). Scotland's contribution to this target will be significant – the ScotWind leasing round in 2022 resulted in the capacity of combined lease options signed by developers totalling 27.6GW.

In England, where onshore wind has not accelerated at the pace it has in Scotland, changes to planning policy intended to support renewables were published in December 2022. In the *Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill: reforms to national planning policy* paper the UK Government proposed changes to 'planning policy for onshore wind to deliver a more localist approach that provides local authorities more flexibility to respond to the views of their local communities' in addition to changes that would support repowering onshore wind.

The consultation on these changes is underway at the time of writing, but it seems probable that in England, as well as Wales, we can expect onshore wind expansion. It also seems inevitable that there will need to be investment in new transmission lines.

Meanwhile, plans for new and reinforced transmission lines are already under way in Scotland with SSEN Transmission (responsible for maintaining and operating the grid in the north of Scotland) currently predicting

→ continued

over £7 billion of investment in onshore electricity transmission infrastructure to deliver 2030 targets needed and 12 major grid infrastructure projects planned as part of its 2030 programme.

Local communities are now asking about the impacts on their landscapes, while charities such as the Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales report concern about extensive pylon networks linking up energy developments across landscapes.

All of this leads us to wonder how to protect the UK's wild places in a renewable energy future. Setting targets for renewable electricity is one aspect of supporting a transition to net zero but it deals only in matching future renewable energy demand with supply. We can't afford, at the same time, to lose sight of the importance of reducing emissions in every way possible, for example through the restoration of peatlands.

UNDERSTANDING TARGETS

In December 2022, the United Nation's Biodiversity Conference resulted in an international commitment from nearly 200 participating countries to protect 30 per cent of land and 30 per cent of the seas by 2030. This was a welcome headline but there is work to be done to understand how the target will be reached and what level of governance will apply.

Countries that signed up to the commitment (which include the UK) are expected to contribute towards the goal. '30 by 30' was already in use in UK policy making in 2020 when the then Prime Minster announced it as a commitment. The Scottish Government's *Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Post-2020: A Statement of Intent* published in 2020 also included this target and its biodiversity strategy is expected to reflect the UN commitments.

Following these announcements, Scottish Environment LINK, Wildlife and Countryside LINK and Wales Environment LINK each produced policy papers detailing how the targets could be achieved in Scotland, England and Wales. They share the position that only land specifically protected for nature in the UK should count. This means that although National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, National Scenic Areas and Wild Land Areas all have the potential to contribute significantly to the 30 per cent target, they do not necessarily meet the requirements of inclusion i.e. landscape managed for long-term protection of nature and in a good condition.

A good start towards this challenge would be to increase investment of private and public carbon finance into employing and upskilling the people needed to restore the UK's peatlands – a globally rare habitat covering just three per cent of the earth's land surface, and the largest natural carbon store in the UK.

However, this takes us back to planning policies, as peatlands without a designation are not protected from development and are considered suitable sites by onshore wind energy companies. Whilst developers are being asked under NPF4 to enhance biodiversity, it seems unlikely, once developed, that these areas would be of sufficiently good condition to count for the '30 by 30' protection status.

TRUST CASEWORK

The Trust closely monitors and reviews planning applications for developments which threaten wild land. By their nature, in terms of their size and the best locations for wind resource, onshore wind farms often pose the most significant threat.

The Trust recognises the UK requires more renewables, including onshore wind farms, to meet our greenhouse gas emission reduction targets and as such only objects to a very small number of developments. However, where the Trust believes that a development will have an unacceptable impact on wild land we will formally object.

As a general rule, we believe that the adverse impacts of siting a development within a Wild Land Area cannot be mitigated against and so will object to these proposals. Where developments are not within Wild Land Areas we will consider a number of factors to assess the wildness of an area, including whether the site is within the top 10 per cent of wildest areas (as detailed in the Wild Land Areas map produced by NatureScot), if there are any protected areas in or near the site such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, and whether the site contains any high conservation value peatland.

Protecting peatlands is essential for reducing the UK's carbon emissions. The Scottish Government uses a carbon calculator to assess the carbon impact of wind farm developments. In theory the calculator should ensure that only developments which stand to make a significant contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions are consented and constructed.

However, since its creation, our understanding of peatland ecosystems has developed, and it is now believed

Part of the Stronelairg wind farm, near Loch Ness

that the carbon calculations underestimate the carbon impact of developments. The Scottish Government committed to reviewing and updating the tool in the *Draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan*. Until the calculator is updated, we believe that the carbon calculations included as part of Environmental Impact Assessments should be cautiously considered.

"We can't afford to lose sight of the importance of reducing emissions in every way possible, for example through the restoration of peatlands"

COMMUNITY VIEWPOINTS

Another key consideration for the Trust when reviewing applications is the often complex and varied view of the communities who will be affected – as demonstrated by a recent community meeting in Portree, Skye.

Skye is at a crossroads. There are already onshore wind farms around Bracadale and Dunvegan which have largely been accepted by the community because of their relatively small scale and turbine height. However, with SSEN's proposal to reinforce the transmission line between Fort Augustus and Ardmore, the potential for large-scale wind farm developments in the northwest of Skye now looms on the horizon.

The recent meeting in Portree was arranged to give the community a chance to gather information and discuss the prospect of large-scale onshore wind farm development in a neutral environment (previous discussions had been led by developers). The variety of concerns and beliefs in the community were apparent. Some were concerned about the impact on tourism and there was a strong feeling that the island had 'done its fair share' to provide renewable energy.

However, there was also recognition that the community benefit schemes offered by developers could make a significant difference, particularly for the most vulnerable, and some people felt conflicted about turning down such large sums of money. Yet, many believed that the community benefit offered was insufficient, particularly when considered against the massive profits likely to be made by the developers.

Faye Macleod, a Partner at Campbell Stewart MacLennan in Skye, brought an interesting perspective as someone who has been involved in community owned wind farm developments in the Western Isles. She highlighted a report in 2021 by the Point and Sandwick Trust which identified that 'wholly community owned wind farms provide benefits payments that are, on average, 34 times more than the new private industry standard'.

In cash terms, this was a difference between an average payment from the community owned wind farms of £170,000 per installed MW per annum compared to the private industry standard of £5,000 per installed MW per annum. There was a lot of interest in the potential for a community ownership arrangement as a way of keeping profits on the island.

Unfortunately, many felt powerless and unable to resist the onslaught of large-scale privately owned developments in order to protect some of Scotland's most spectacular landscapes. The Trust will keep working to amplify the voices of those in rural communities concerned about the impact of development on our wild places.

FUTURE OF WILD PLACES

With expert help from Wild Land Research Ltd, which has produced a series of maps, we will be able to illustrate the Wild Land Areas that are being targeted by renewable energy companies, the degraded and functioning peatlands within these areas and the areas with potential to support the '30 by 30' commitment.

We plan to use these maps in conversation with MSPs, Ministers and Scottish Government civil servants to explain where government priorities for biodiversity recovery and peatland restoration can be targeted while explaining the lost opportunity if these places are developed.

We know renewable energy is changing our landscapes and putting pressure on the availability and ability of land to support habitats, biodiversity and store carbon but we also know that the UK needs more renewable electricity generation. The Trust will continue to argue that carbon emission reduction and biodiversity recovery in the UK requires the restoration and protection of its wild places. We will make this argument in different ways to different people, but we will continue to make it and we thank Members for their support in enabling us to do so.

About the authors
Rosie Simpson and Fiona Baillie are part of the Trust team focused on policy

Even the smallest legacy can help our work, such as peatland restoration seen here at Nevis

PHOTOGRAPH: ZEEMON ERHADT

Lasting impact

Jenny Seaman learns about one supporter's legacy gift to the Trust and what it has meant to his family

MOST of us can relate to the sense of 'something other' that can be found in wild places. We might appreciate a remarkable view, enjoy the feel of the sun on our cheeks or thrill at the sighting of a particular species. But there is also something indefinable at work, something greater than the sum of such parts.

It might not be possible to pinpoint the precise source of that something other, but we experience its varied effects; a sense of solace, excitement or joy, or maybe an easing of loneliness. It's one of the reasons we value our wild places so greatly (see Where we wander, page 26).

I was reminded of this indescribable feeling when speaking recently with Gideon Gent about his late father's legacy gift to the Trust. Gideon shared how he remembers his father, Alan Gent, as a keen mountaineer, scrambler and walker who delighted in entertaining his children with tales of mountain adventures.

He also explained how much his father's legacy to the Trust has meant to the family. "Dad would be very happy to have made an impact," says Gideon. "He always spoke of the John Muir Trust with high regard. I know my sister and I will continue to visit Scotland and make sure our families share in what our father found there and that the Trust nurtures and protects."

The Trust has cared for wild places since 1983. Such work takes time and patience, but this enduring commitment is making a lasting difference for future generations. In recent years, legacy income has made a huge impact on the scale and scope of our work to protect wild places, enabling us to plan for the long term. Having supporters who trust us to use their money wisely, and honour their generosity, is a rare privilege.

Maybe part of what can be found in wild places comes from the feeling of timelessness that can be experienced in such landscapes; the knowledge that they will, in some form, outlast us all can provide perspective and a sense of our place in the world.

And legacy gifts of all sizes can leave a positive lasting impact on these wild places. Even the smallest gift can make a real difference to our work by helping to regenerate native woodlands, repair footpaths or restore degraded peatland.

While most gifts in Wills received by the Trust are unrestricted – meaning we are able to use the funds across a variety of projects – we recognise that people have different reasons for supporting our work. As such, we are committed to respecting individual wishes around what we know are hugely personal decisions.

About the author

Jenny Seaman is a member of the Trust's fundraising team. For questions around supporting the Trust with a legacy, email ***jenny.seaman@johnmuirtrust.org***

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SATURDAY 2ND SEPTEMBER 2023

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Calling time

Max Wiszniewski from REVIVE argues the case for transitioning away from intensively managed grouse moors in Britain's upland areas

GROUSE moors are one of the most controversial land uses in upland Britain, not least in Scotland where they cover vast areas. This is land that is intensively managed, year-round, with the primary purpose of increasing the yield of red grouse for a four-month shooting season (12 August to 10 December).

It is controversial in part because the economics just don't stack up. Despite the fact that land managed for grouse shooting in Scotland encompasses an area around half the size of Wales, it contributes just £23 million a year, or 0.02 per cent of Scotland's economy. Wildlife tourism alone (shooting animals with a camera instead of a gun) contributes over five times more to Scotland's economy.

Meanwhile, forestry and its associated industries has over 15 times the economic impact per hectare compared to grouse shooting, yet we still import timber from Europe. New homes and opportunities for rural Scotland could come from a carefully considered expansion of native woodland and commercial forestry combined. Today, grouse moor management actively restricts the reforesting of Scotland.

The act of transitioning from grouse shooting to better alternative economic and biodiverse land uses, which is the Scottish Government's stated goal, gives Scotland a major opportunity to diversify rural economies and employment opportunities.

The paltry economic contribution of grouse shooting also stands in stark contrast to the negative impact it has on wildlife and the environment. Despite wildlife persecution being illegal, there are still dozens of incidents reported on, or associated with grouse moors every year.

It is hoped that the Scottish Government's upcoming grouse moor reform bill, which will implement the recommendations of the 'Werritty Report' (an independent Grouse Moor Management report published in 2019) and introduce a licensing scheme for grouse shooting, will help tackle the problem of wildlife crime once and for all. It will mean that if a shooting estate is found to be persecuting birds of prey (with a civil burden of proof rather than the less likely to prosecute legal burden of proof) then it could lose its licence.

WIDER IMPACT

But legislation also needs to tackle the heart of the issue: the unsustainable need for more grouse. In order to maximise numbers of grouse for sport shooting, hundreds of thousands of foxes, stoats, weasels, crows and even non-target species such as hedgehogs are snared, trapped, shot and killed on UK moorland.

This is 'killing to kill' – with all these animals dispatched merely so that another animal can be shot for sport. If grouse shooting cannot survive without such practices, then it says a lot about the unsustainability of the industry.

The red grouse is an iconic wild bird and yet grouse moors are more like quasi-domesticated, intensive farmed environments where the crop is the killed quarry shot in high numbers often using toxic lead ammunition.

And few people are aware of the potential

PHOTOGRAPH: ADOBE STOCK

Fire fighting: the burning of heather moorland is especially damaging on top of deep peat

environmental damage caused by an estimated 200,000 medicated grit stations in Scotland – or why they are used in the first place.

Grouse predominantly eat heather. It's tough and fibrous so the birds also ingest grit found naturally to help digest their food. However, as grouse also suffer from infestations of a parasitic worm that can cause cyclical population crashes, particularly when their densities are artificially high, grouse moorland managers medicate the grit stations with a pharmaceutical wormer – a toxic chemical called flubendazole – often at many times higher than the recommended (and legal) dosage. Grouse then access the medicated grit with no control over the dose received, while the chemical also persists in the environment, threatening the health of other species.

"The most serious environmental impact of the industry comes from the continued practice of 'muirburn', the burning of heather moorland"

Arguably, however, the most serious environmental impact of the industry comes from the continued practice of 'muirburn', the burning of heather moorland, which takes place across vast swathes of Scotland and in parts of northern England such as the Pennines.

This practice, which results in patches or strips of burnt heather across the landscape, takes place over a six-month period from 1 October to 15 April. The recently burnt patches allow new heather shoots to grow, offering young grouse more food, while the unburnt patches provide the birds with cover from predators. These burned areas are often described as monocultures compared to what should be far more biodiverse landscapes.

Recent estimates put the land regularly burned for grouse shooting at 2 per cent of Scotland's landmass, which equates to around 218,000 football pitches. What's worse is that about 40 per cent of the burned area is estimated to be on top of deep peat – an internationally significant carbon resource that is easily damaged by moorland burning.

The result is that, rather than serving as a carbon sink, damaged peatland instead emits its vast stores of carbon back into the atmosphere; it's a high environmental price to pay in the name of maximising grouse numbers for sport shooting.

Lobbyists for the industry argue otherwise but grouse moors, whether burned or unburned, are relatively low in rarer species compared to open, native conifer or more diverse woodland and shrub habitats.

As sustainable land management expert Dr Helen Armstrong writes in a recent report commissioned by REVIVE, entitled *A Better Way*: 'A mixed landscape of patches of open areas set within a matrix of woodland and shrubby vegetation provides a wide range of habitats that supports a diverse flora and fauna. Additionally,

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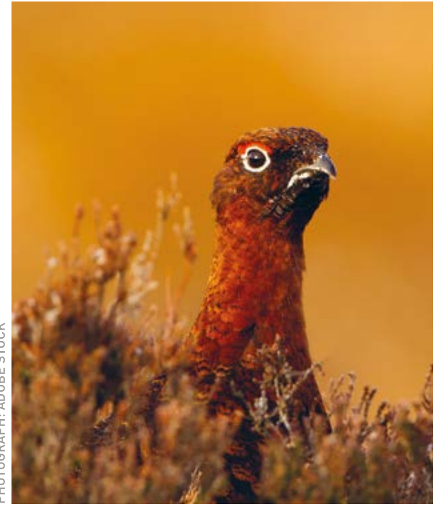
PHOTOGRAPH: PETER CAIRNS

PHOTOGRAPH: REVIVE

Heavy toll (clockwise from left): muirburn results in a mosaic of heather patches of different ages but very little else; medicated grit station; red grouse


PHOTOGRAPH: ADOBE STOCK

allowing trees and shrubs to colonise the uplands would create habitat types that have almost entirely disappeared from Scotland due to human impacts: montane shrub, treeline woodland and bog woodland.

'Rare species such as black grouse, capercaillie and wildcat would benefit. Taller vegetation would also provide more cover and food for small mammals and birds, supporting in turn more predatory species. Golden eagles, once thought to need large areas of open land over which to hunt, are now known to do well in landscapes composed of a mosaic of wooded and open habitats.'

In other words, while continued management as grouse moors keeps large areas of Scotland in an impoverished state, diversifying away from this monoculture would help the UK's contribution to tackling two of our biggest challenges: the climate emergency and the catastrophic loss of biodiversity.

> **"It is hoped that the Scottish Government will not approve licences to muirburn for the sole purpose of increasing grouse numbers for sport shooting"**

FURTHER LEGISLATION

The Scottish Government has now agreed to licence all muirburn which, alongside grouse moor licence legislation, should be implemented in the coming year – with a potential ban on most peatland burning. This means that land managers would have to apply for a licence to conduct muirburn anywhere in Scotland, not just on grouse moors. It is hoped that the Scottish Government will not approve licences to muirburn for the sole purpose of increasing grouse numbers for sport shooting.

The issue of carbon emissions on sporting estates is one of the key reasons why the REVIVE coalition is openly and enthusiastically supporting the John Muir Trust's plans for a Carbon Emissions Land Tax in Scotland. Our belief is that it is time for both a push and pull approach where large private landowners and sporting estates are incentivised by law to restore land for nature as opposed to being subsidised for doing what, we would argue, ought to be seen as their job in the first place.

REVIVE hopes that the Scottish Government will stand strong in the face of the shooting lobby and those representing the interests of large private landowners. The unsustainable practices that take place on grouse moors must end and we must transition towards a better future for wildlife and the environment. ◻

About the author
Max Wiszniewski is the Campaign Manager for REVIVE, a coalition of conservation bodies calling for grouse moor reform. For more, visit ***revive.scot***

The Rethink Carbon team, based in Aviemore

PHOTOGRAPH: RETHINK CARBON

Helping hand

Freddie Ryan from Rethink Carbon explains how a new online platform can help land managers make more informed and sustainable choices on land use options across Scotland

LAND management has rarely been more complex and challenging. With increasing land use pressures, emerging carbon and biodiversity markets, and shifting government policies, it can be difficult to navigate the many opportunities available.

But help is at hand. Rethink Carbon has partnered with the John Muir Trust and other stakeholders (Southern Uplands Partnership, The Langholm Initiative and South of Scotland Enterprise) as part of the Scottish Government's CivTech programme to develop an online platform that empowers land managers to make more informed decisions and increase carbon capture and storage.

It is designed to be user-friendly and accessible at any scale, making it easy for land managers to visualise and analyse their land use options.

The software can 'stack' opportunities and present the benefits of different land management decisions.

For example, suppose there is actively eroding deep peat on a land parcel. In that case, the platform runs a Peatland Code scenario automatically, calculating the tonnes of CO_2e that can be locked in by starting a peatland restoration project.

After drawing a land parcel on a map, the user is shown an analysis of their land, such as protected areas, soil type, biodiversity records, historic sites and deer counts where available. The platform also suggests grants that may be available for changes in land use that could improve outcomes for local communities and land managers alike.

The platform running Woodland Carbon Code scenarios

Rethink Carbon also integrates industry-standard carbon calculators such as the Woodland Carbon Code, making it easy to run multiple 'what-if' scenarios and analyse the potential impacts of different land use options. This enables land managers to make the best carbon capture and storage decisions, while generating significant benefits for biodiversity and the local community.

At the core of the platform is a commitment to fostering community engagement and collaboration. We understand that the perspectives and experiences of local communities are essential for informed and sustainable land management decisions. And by including the community in decision making, land managers can better understand the social and cultural values associated with the land and how those values may be impacted by different management options.

Communities can easily provide input, upload photos, videos or lidar scans – a form of laser imaging – and offer a unique local perspective on potential land use options. This ensures that the voices and perspectives of the community are heard and considered in the land management process.

By providing a central data source and collaborating with stakeholders, Rethink Carbon helps streamline the decision-making process and ensures that all options are considered. It's a powerful, highly visual and interactive tool that can help navigate the complexities of land management and enable land managers to make decisions that will leave a positive lasting legacy for future generations. ◘

About the author
Freddie Ryan is Head of Engagement at Rethink Carbon. For more, visit ***rethinkcarbon.co.uk***

Where we wander

As the Trust creates the UK's first register of wild places, Tim Hoogwerf reveals what wild places mean to him

EARLIER this year, the Trust ran a Favourite Wild Places campaign on social media, inviting people to nominate their most loved wild places as part of a UK-wide survey aimed at shaping future conservation and protection plans for nature. We were thrilled to receive nearly 10,000 responses, including Sir David Attenborough who wrote that he couldn't choose a single location, but shared a "great affection" for one of his favourite UK wild places: Skomer, off the coast of Pembrokeshire.

We are now compiling the UK's first register of the most important remaining wild places, creating a resource for their future monitoring and protection. The UK currently ranks as the twelfth worst country in the world for biodiversity. Our hope is that this far-reaching campaign will help to evidence the benefits of wild places of all shapes and sizes to both wildlife and society.

MY FAVOURITE WILD PLACE

What are wild places? I think about this a lot in my job with the John Muir Trust. I also talk to many people from other charities and government agencies across England and Wales who think the Trust is "that group from Scotland that delivers the John Muir Award". I have become very good at explaining everything else the Trust does in land management, engagement and advocacy.

When talking about the Trust I try and explain what wild places are and how they differ from wild land, green space and nature. I try to put that in the context of England or Wales and not draw a comparison with what exists in Scotland. And I try to do this as an Aussie who grew up in a country as big as western Europe with a population of only 26 million people, living mainly in the southeast along the coastal fringe and in cities. That leaves a lot of wild places to be explored!

So how have I explained wild places in the UK to other people and come to understand them myself? A prescriptive approach has not worked. After all, our sense of a wild place and what it means is highly personal. It depends so much on lived experience, expectations and even how we feel on a particular day.

It is also highly relative to geography and society – after all, a wild place in London will be very different from a wild place in northwest Scotland.

For me, explaining wild places has come down to how it *feels*. A wild place needs to provide me with renewed awareness and perspective; a sense of solitude, sanctuary and timelessness.

It does not necessarily need to be a vast and remote landscape. Just last weekend I walked through fields and along paths near my home in the West Midlands and stopped for a while at a stream crossing an old, well-used bridleway. There, the birdsong, the sound of moving water over rocks and dappled light playing on the water gave me a sense of connectedness and engagement with that place at that particular moment. It left me feeling awestruck and in wonder of the magic of nature.

Over 20 years I've had the good fortune to travel to some of the wildest places in the UK. It has been the highest peaks, the ancient woodlands and the hard-to-reach coasts and islands that have felt the wildest to me. It is these places, harder to tame, that have let me experience a sense of vastness, wildness and timelessness, providing that sense of my own insignificance that brings such clarity and perspective. This is why wild places are so important.

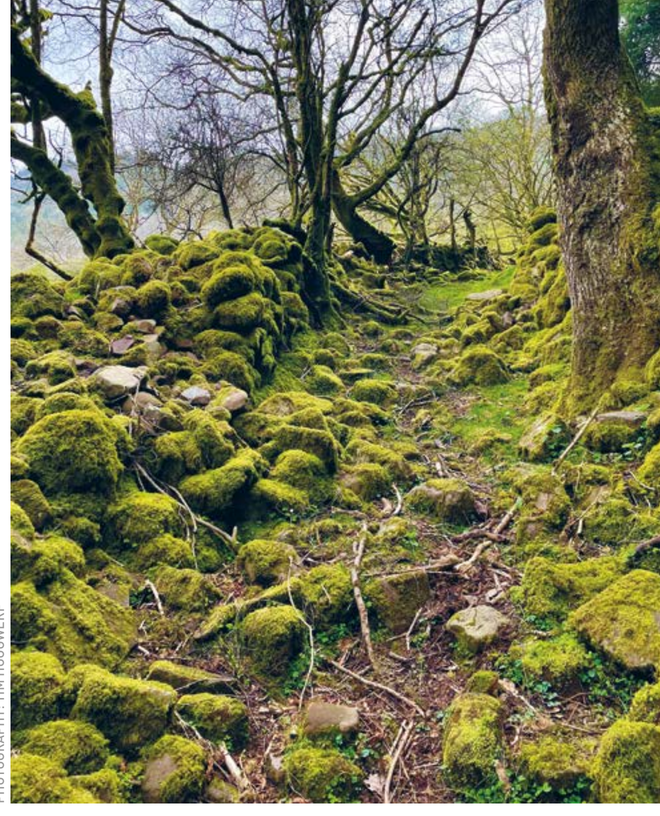
Do I have a favourite wild place in the UK? I can't say I do yet. I love to explore and savour that moment of discovering something new. For me, it is not so much a place as an experience. And whatever wild place these experiences can be found in must be nurtured and protected.

"I love to explore and savour that moment of discovering something new. For me, it is not so much a place as an experience"

As John Muir himself wrote 'I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in'.

About the author
Tim Hoogwerf is the Trust's Regional Delivery Manager (South)

Wild isles (clockwise from main): Tim Hoogwerf; a section of the South West Coast Path; River Avon in winter; Crawnon Valley, Breacon Beacons



PHOTOGRAPHY: TIM HOOGWERF

On the hunt

Kevin Lelland reflects on his first moose hunt, part of a week-long exchange visit to Norway to gather insight on its wildlife management

BEFORE we start walking, Jan Even Lomundal, a wildlife management student at the Inland University of Applied Sciences in Norway, tasked with guiding me on a moose hunt, confirms his gun is empty. "Very important everyone confirms an empty gun," he tells me. I am part of a client group of eight conservation professionals from Scotland on a visit to learn more about wildlife and visitor management in Norway.

Having had a pre-brief as a collective we're heading in pairs to one of 11 'stances', where shooters sit and wait in the hope that a trained dog drives a moose into their view. Despite altitudes of up to 680 metres, we are surrounded by native trees and the ground is covered in a thick blanket of moss. This at a latitude of 61 degrees north, compared to Scotland's 56.

The stances we are using today are within one part of a 3,000-hectare hunting area. A century ago moose had been hunted to the edge of extinction, so hunting quotas were established: one moose per 250 hectares. These days hunting moose is expensive and the students feel fortunate to be part of a university team granted quotas as part of their study. In contrast, other forms of hunting, especially for game birds, is cheap and accessible.

Within half a kilometre we see signs of moose: fresh tracks and scat on the ground. The temperature is around freezing as we arrive at our stance at the intersection of some telegraph poles. We have a clear view along two man-made alleys.

I am surprised at how much technology is at play. A mobile app called WeHunt, a Garmin Global Positioning System (GPS) device, a radio with earpieces and small microphones clipped to lapels are all being used congruently. Everything is done at low volume. While we can't see the other shooters, there's a real sense of team in what is happening.

Jan Even keeps me appraised: "The dog is here, if it goes too close to the road it'll need to be leashed and rereleased." Eventually, he moves to his gun and clips in a magazine of bullets. We know from radio chatter that the dog is tracking a moose cow and calf. They're now 500 metres away, coming in our direction.

Within a minute Jan Even is steadied against the telegraph post ready to shoot. After a short period he sits again and checks the GPS. The cow and calf came within 200 metres. The 'slop, slop' noise was feet padding in the marshy ground in the tree line just beyond.

A few minutes later we hear a single crack of gunfire. Christian, another of the student guides, has shot the young calf at a stance within a kilometre of ours. One of the Scottish team was with him.

As we trek back out, Jan Even explains that last year the student team didn't see a moose until the last day. They have now had three kills in four days this season.

PHOTOGRAPHY: KEVIN LELLAND

"A few minutes later we hear a single crack of gunfire. Christian, another of the student guides, has shot the young calf at a stance within a kilometre of ours"

Later that night I explain to one lecturer that I'm trying to get to grips with the hunting culture in Norway and its relationship to caring for the habitat; how people are trying to balance the global issues we are facing with local needs. What in the UK we might call in different shapes or forms conservation for climate crisis and biodiversity loss.

"I'm not sure most of our students understand what you mean by conservation," the lecturer surmises. It's a small epiphany to me. Moose. Lynx. Wolf. Wolverine. When you are staring into a wood (often through a rifle scope) and what looks back is a diverse range of species, it's difficult to believe you might be on the verge of a nature crisis.

Home to 41,000 multicellular species Norway is, on the face of it, a relatively diverse habitat. Of these, 21,000

Hunting culture (clockwise from main): one of the student guides; the quarry; waiting quietly at a stance

PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK

have been evaluated with 4,599 classified in a red list category. The science says biodiversity depletion is happening across all biomes in Norway.

And yet my experience of nature in Norway is in stark contrast to my lived experience in the Cairngorms. As someone who walks in Glen Gueshchan (glen of the little pine wood), I see few trees, never mind the animals that should shelter in them and look back at me.

Hunting has widespread support in Norway with 80 per cent of people believing it is acceptable. There are some 115,000 hunters in a population of five million, spread across a land mass five and a half times that of Scotland. The size is important, with the country divided into areas for priority species management: wild reindeer in the north, wolves in the southeast.

Every hunter has to report on wildlife sightings and the data goes into a national index, handing figures back down into local groups to then set cull targets. We hear different views on the success of this model. The criticism being that while monitoring of species is done as robustly as possible at a national level, there are clear political and cultural filters, including that the local committees tasked with adjusting cull quotas are often made up of those with private land management interests rather than wider public interests.

In visiting Norway I realise I'd like more people from Scotland to see the potential of our own landscape for repair, and to see the ways hunting can act as a community asset. At the same time, the Norwegian model isn't perfect. I'd also quite like to invite some of those I have met to see what can happen if you over manage a landscape for a single species across several generations.

Further information
Kevin was taking part in the Erasmus+ staff education course on Wildlife, Carnivore and Human Management, hosted by the Inland University of Applied Sciences at Evenstad.

About the author
Kevin Lelland is the Trust's Director of Communications

Natural health service

Ross Brannigan explores the growing practice of Green Prescriptions – a form of social prescribing that sees patients treated through interaction with nature rather than medication

THE value of exploring wild places for personal health and wellbeing is something that people are increasingly familiar with. Whether alone or with others, and be it physically, mentally, emotionally or spiritually, time spent outdoors in nature can be immensely powerful.

As part of Wild and Well, a Trust campaign that celebrates the connection between wild places and people's health, the real-terms value of engaging with nature has also become very clear. According to a joint report funded by the Forestry Commission, Scottish Forestry and the Welsh Government, exploring woodlands alone could help save £185 million in costs associated with mental health illnesses.

In recent years, this understanding has made its way into doctors' surgeries, with time in nature now being prescribed as part of treatment for physical and mental ill-health.

It's a simple enough concept. General Practitioners (GPs) assess patients as they normally would but rather than being prescribed medication, patients instead receive a referral to a local service, which guides them through opportunities to connect with nature and address their conditions.

Following a successful initial trial in Edinburgh and Shetland, Green Prescriptions have since started to be rolled out in a second trial in Derbyshire. Tom Miller, a GP in Buxton, cited growing evidence that enjoying time outdoors is good for our health in a recent interview with the BBC, describing Green Prescriptions as "an ingenious, simple and cost-effective way to support people to do just that".

TRUST EFFORTS

This year, the Trust has set aside funds to investigate the potential opportunities for Green Prescriptions near its properties. There is a particular focus on northwest Scotland, where mental health can be heavily impacted by shorter days and social isolation.

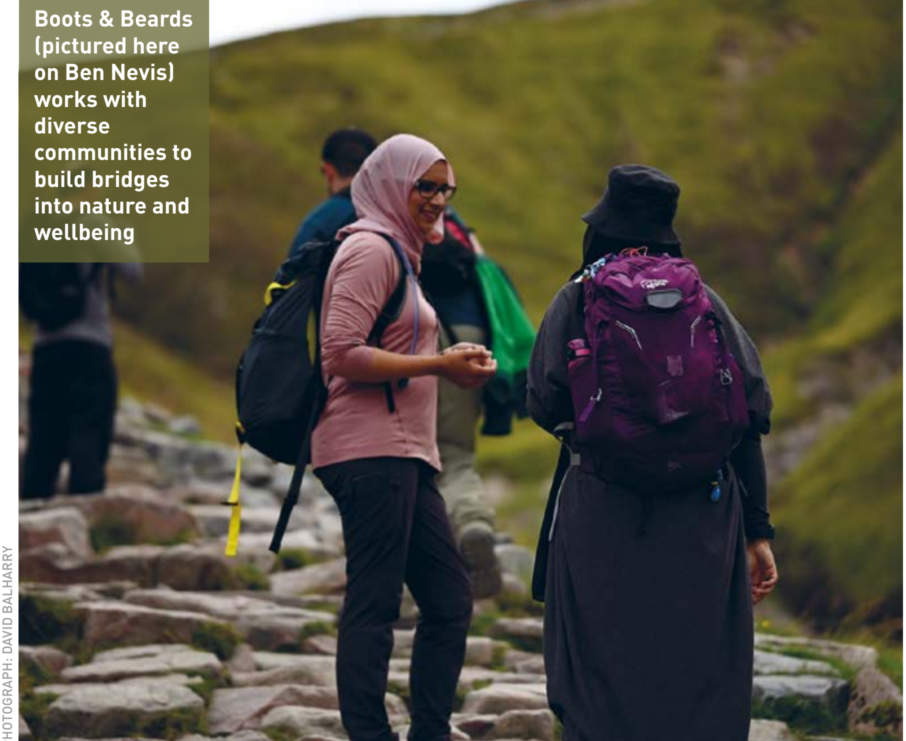
It's a problem that has been exacerbated by the pandemic and resulting lockdowns, explains Sarah Donald, a GP at the Assynt Medical Practice, Lochinver. "In recent years, people have become demotivated and many have lost confidence in accessing the outdoors in a way that we've never seen before," she says.

"People with physical health issues – such as long Covid, respiratory diseases and mobility issues – can become anxious about accessing the outdoors for their health, out of concern they cannot do it alone or just fear of being stranded somewhere."

Currently, there is no funding in areas like Assynt to implement what is termed "social prescribing" schemes, as it is allocated based on levels of deprivation. Using the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, the areas of greater deprivation are primarily cities, with more rural areas neglected.

Sarah hopes, however, that more funding can be made available to allow her practice and others like it to trial a Green Prescriptions system and demonstrate the benefits it can bring to the community.

"Green Prescriptions are just another way of giving people additional support," she says. "We need more of these opportunities to enable people to enjoy the benefits of wild places and, hopefully, gain the confidence to explore them themselves in the future."



Boots & Beards (pictured here on Ben Nevis) works with diverse communities to build bridges into nature and wellbeing

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID BALHARRY

Further information
Visit the Trust's Wild and Well repository at ***johnmuirtrust.org/wildandwell***

About the author
Ross Brannigan is the Trust's Membership Officer

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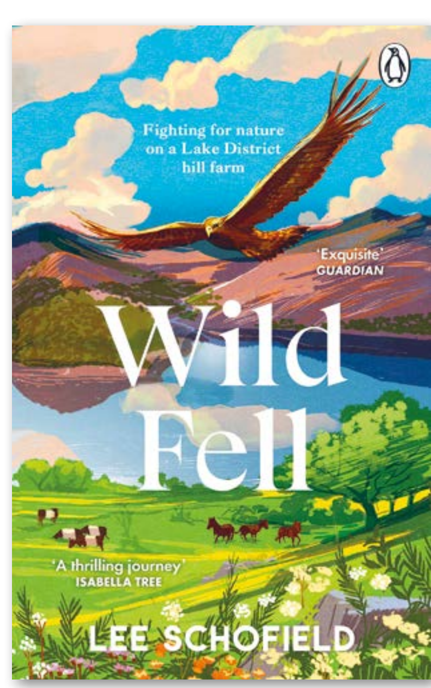


Wild Fell, by Lee Schofield

Graham Watson finds hope in a book that reveals a different vision for working the Cumbrian fells

"TONIGHT I sleep with the ghosts of eagles." With an opening line like that, how could I not read on? A hint of landscape that once was wild but also a hint of loss; and maybe even a dream to hope that it can be once more.

Wild Fell is a deeply personal story but is one shared by many who work on the Cumbrian fells and uplands across the UK. It recounts the author's experience of a decade working for the RSPB at Haweswater, arriving from out of county to manage a working upland farm for both nature and people.

It's a story of finding balance: no simple matter in an area where World Heritage status is sometimes, wrongly, held as synonymous with sheep farming. There's an undeniable stress in going against the grain in a close-knit farming community. He meets resistance, conflict, anger and ruthlessness, but also discovers hope in a growing network of like-minded farmers and conservationists.

The reader is taken on a journey of discovery to find the inaccessible places where willows, roseroot and ring ouzels hold on, yet are imprisoned in a system which denies the opportunity to thrive.

But exploring the Lake District takes the author only so far. In need of inspiration, he travels further afield to Fidjadalen in Norway and the Gran Paradiso National Park in Italy*. Wild places each but also farmed landscapes. How can that be? There is a palpable sense of delight as he starts to see what things could be like back home.

The reader also begins to get a picture of who Lee Schofield is. A Muir-like free range childhood, dens in the woods, hands grubbing in the earth, curiosity, adventure and connection – the floral and faunal names and knowledge coming later.

And today, a conservationist and farmer – trying to manage nature and livestock in a way that allows for both. It's a radical compromise, one that steers a course between 'us and them', neither blameless nor blaming.

The final chapter is a gem I won't spoil: it offers a thought-provoking vision of hope we should think hard about. Is this rewilding? Is it farming? You could answer yes or no to either of those but I'd describe it as pragmatism.

I also think the author would say it's a fully functioning landscape with thriving nature supporting people and community. Best of all it's a hopeful vision that I suspect many others will also believe in.

£10.99
penguin.co.uk

About the reviewer
Graham Watson is the Trust's John Muir Award Manager, Cumbria

** Some of the author's travel was aided by a Bill Wallace and Des Rubens Grant – a Trust grant that offers the opportunity to seek out life-changing experiences in wild places.*

Others we like

***The Outdoors Fix,* Liv Bolton**
Host of the popular podcast, *The Outdoors Fix*, Liv Bolton presents a collection of 30 stories about ordinary people who have made the outdoors a bigger part of their lives. Chapters include the stories of outdoor instructor Rehna Yaseen, mental health campaigner Alex Staniforth, Black Girls Hike regional leader Oge Ejizu and 'fell foodie' Harrison Ward. **£20.00. adventurebooks.com**

***SOLO,* Jenny Tough**
An endurance athlete with an appetite for self-discovery, this is an account of Jenny Tough's quest

A Scotsman Returns, Travels with Thomas Telford in the Highlands and Islands, by Paul A Lynn

Julie Gough marvels at this painstakingly detailed account of a true visionary of his time

THOMAS Telford is perhaps most famous for being the engineer-in-chief of the magnificent Caledonian Canal which was completed in 1822 and includes the flight of eight locks at Banavie known as 'Neptune's Staircase.'

This book offers a comprehensive account of Telford's remarkable career and is full of detailed descriptions of his life and accomplishments which cry out for a modicum of human sentiment and interpretation.

Reading Lynn's words and admiring the rich collection of photographs, I could only marvel at humankind's ability to first imagine and then create such magnificent structures with such modest tools at a time when there were two very different lifestyles in 18th-century Britain. The Industrial Revolution created enormous wealth for a tiny minority of the population, while the majority were suddenly out of work because machines were doing their jobs.

Meanwhile, the population was rocketing. Cities were dirty, noisy, and overcrowded: London was home to around 600,000 people in 1700 and almost a million by 1800. It rather makes a mockery of recent headlines about levelling up and 'the greatest social divide we have ever known.'

Born into a world with barely any prospects, Telford started his career as a stonemason and – via a stint at Langholm where, back in 1772, it was a village consisting chiefly of 'mud hovels' but was given a new lease of life by the young Duke of Buccleuch – went on to become Shropshire's county surveyor.

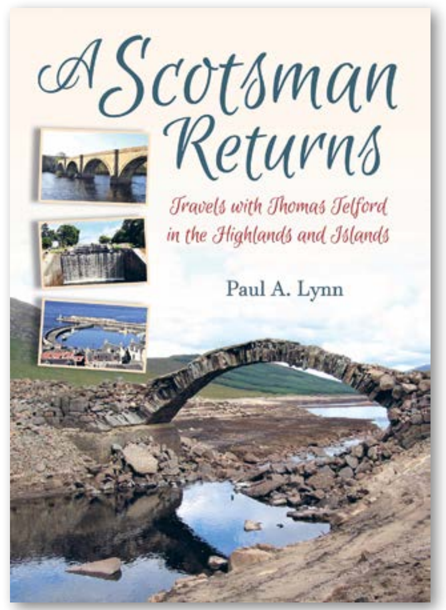
There, he managed the detailed design and construction of the Ellesmere Canal, including the spectacular Pontcysyllte Aqueduct over the River Dee, before helping to transform his homeland in Scotland with countless roads and bridges.

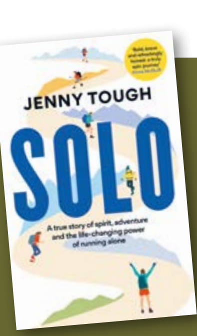
Telford's achievements are made more remarkable by his harsh start in life. He was born to a shepherd who died when he was just four months old, leaving his mother a widow, almost penniless, living in a tied cottage which she was no longer entitled to, nor could afford. But despite a total absence of state-funded social security and medical care, she and her son survived because the close-knit local community rallied to support her, and a local benefactor supported his education.

The descriptions of Telford studying the technicalities of engineering by the light of a candle at the end of a hard day of physical labour is testament to his vision, determination and intelligence. I feel humbled by his achievements which this book chronicles tirelessly, and by the author's commitment to making this record of them.

£18.99
whittlespublishing.com

About the reviewer
Julie Gough is the Trust's Marketing and Communications Manager





to run across high mountain ranges on six continents, solo and unsupported. It's full of adventures in some of the world's wildest places but it doesn't just cover physical ground. It's also a book that charts a powerful journey towards finding strength, confidence and self-belief. **£9.99, octopusbooks.co.uk**

The Lost Rainforests of Britain, Guy Shrubsole
Guy Shrubsole's exploration of a unique but desperately fragmented habitat leads him to a startling realisation: that Britain was once a rainforest nation. His is an entrancing story of a habitat now largely lost from the landscape and cultural memory but one that may yet make a return.
£10.99. williamcollinsbooks.co.uk

PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD ELSE

Libby filming at Mar Lodge

Libby Penman

The Trust catches up with wildlife filmmaker Libby Penman (right) about her work fronting a new Trust documentary exploring deer management in Scotland

What interested you about this project?

When I was first approached about the film, I thought, okay, filming deer – amazing, one of the most stunning animals in the country. And then as we unpacked the subject matter of the film, I began reading around it. Without that, I would easily have been one of those people outraged and upset by mass deer cull headlines but that's simply because I wasn't aware of the wider issues. It felt important to be part of a project that sought to raise awareness about the issue – for people exactly like me.

So, deer management was new territory for you?

Despite doing my master's degree in wildlife documentary filmmaking and spending a lot of time around wildlife in Scotland, I didn't know anything about the deer population challenge. I'd spent a year studying how to film deer – learning about their biology, their behaviour – but

didn't know about the ecological damage they cause.

Any ethical challenges for you to navigate on this journey?

Definitely. I've been vegan for at least five years and vegetarian almost my whole life. But truthfully, once I looked at the research, I started to realise there was a welfare issue here for the deer themselves, with a knock-on effect for other species. I hope one day we're at a point where we have a more balanced ecosystem which means this kind of deer management is not required. But for the foreseeable future, there will need to be targets and management.

What was the best part of making the film?

Meeting a range of different people – land managers, novelists, psychologists, politicians – and ensuring that there are different voices being heard.

How does it help raise awareness of the wider challenges facing nature?

We need to talk about the climate crisis. And the majority of people aren't going to educate themselves by reading research papers or books. Film can help pull all that information together in half an hour of sensory experience. There's a timing and reach advantage with film, too. You could be really passionate about a message, put it together in a video and wake up the next day to have millions of views online.

What's next for you as a filmmaker?

There's lots on the go! I'm about to start work on some shows for BBC Scotland about conservation and all sorts of different animals. I recently finished a piece for BBC Two's Winterwatch all about urban wildlife. My segment was in the same episode as Sir David Attenborough! I'm also working on a project about local wildlife with legendary camera operator Doug Allen that explores inter-generational viewpoints.

Further information
*The Trust film, Clear on deer, will be released in June. For more information, visit **johnmuirtrust.org/clearondeer***

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