

JOHN MUIR TRUST
JOURNAL

76 SPRING 2024

- 12 Celebrating 25 years of caring for Schiehallion
- 20 How changes in planning policy threaten Wild Land Areas
- 24 Helping nature (and people) recover in the urban landscape



Challenge accepted

Why we must protect our vital wild places



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Live for
the challenge
the connection
the freedom

Live
for the
line

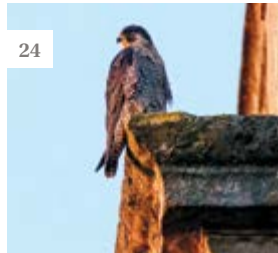




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PHOTOGRAPHY (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP): HSFP; CHRIS RABE; CHRIS PUDDEPHATT
COVER: BLACK GROUSE AT THE LEK, MARK HAMBLIN/SCOTLAND; THE BIG PICTURE

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Facing facts

WELCOME to the spring 2024 issue of the *Journal* – one that is packed full of news and in-depth features covering our work.

As many Members will now be aware, it is also an issue that arrives in a climate of significant financial challenge for the John Muir Trust.

Established 40 years ago, the Trust brought together people who cared deeply about wild places and was decades ahead of its time. Sadly, the UK is today ranked as one of the most nature-depleted countries on Earth.



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

This year, nearly 50 per cent of the world's population will take part in political elections. Will the changing of the guard reduce the current rates of climate change and biodiversity loss? It seems unlikely.

The charity sector is alert to the scale of the challenge ahead, and the need to do much more for the benefit of future generations. Some argue that environmental change is now happening faster than the charity sector can respond to. But you can help – your support as Members is critical in helping us drive public opinion and influence governments.

This issue highlights what positive change is possible. With 2024 marking 25 years of the Trust's management of Schiehallion, our lead feature on page 12 outlines how this special mountain has

the potential to showcase exemplary land management and the importance of partnerships in working towards that goal.

Elsewhere, we want to involve more people than ever before in the protection and restoration of wild places throughout the UK. However, we are conscious that there is an urgent need to raise awareness of the importance of wild places – including in urban areas – to gain support from wider society.

On page 18, you can read about how we are doing just that through the development of a Wild Places Register. Following last year's Wild Places Survey – a UK first – we are busy creating a register that will highlight the most important wild places in the country and a rating that will enable us to monitor their condition.

As an organisation established to protect wild places, we are redoubling our efforts to bring about the change that needs to happen. Along with many other charities, however, the Trust faces significant financial challenges. As we have outlined in individual Member communications, we've had to take the incredibly difficult decision to put 19 jobs at risk.

This year, we will focus our resources on delivering best value and achieving maximum impact as we look to tackle the climate crisis and reverse biodiversity loss. This means prioritising and protecting key areas of activity, such as woodland regeneration and peatland restoration.

For now, we will have to delay some projects until the required funds have been generated to ensure successful completion. These projects will appear in appeals, so please keep an eye out for them because we have many exciting initiatives that need funding.

Looking ahead, we want to continue to inspire and mobilise all those who care about wild places throughout the UK. The maxim that 'the land is not given by our parents but borrowed from our children' articulates the Trust's spirit and its purpose to protect and restore wild places for the benefit of present and future generations. It is a mission that is more urgent than ever before. □

David Balharry
Chief Executive, John Muir Trust

Connect Outdoors
participants on the
summit of Schiehallion



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

Opening up the outdoors

Trust involved in a hiking project that helps connect more people with the outdoors

The Trust is delighted to be working with Tiso and Mhòr Outdoor to pilot a new educational hiking project that helps more people connect with the outdoors, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual identity, physical ability or personal circumstances.

The project, called Connect Outdoors, aims to demonstrate to people who are new to the outdoors how they can interact with wild places and inspire a long-term commitment and engagement.

Last autumn, Trust staff led two of six introductory hiking sessions, including an educational walk along the John Muir Way between Dunbar and East Linton.

The session included discussions on nature and conservation, how wildlife and habitat are interconnected, the use of binoculars to spot wildlife and how to enjoy the outdoors responsibly. It was also a chance to talk about John Muir himself and the history of the John Muir Way.

The second session was at Schiehallion where participants experienced a challenging yet rewarding hike – bagging their first Munro and learning more about the land we look after along the way.

The 10 participants who joined us at Schiehallion were all individuals from The Welcoming, a charity dedicated to delivering a social and cultural integration programme to the most marginalised and isolated asylum seekers in Edinburgh.

Come to Kylesku!

With glorious views across Loch a' Chàirn Bhàin to the triple-peaked mountain of Quinag, our most recent acquisition at Kylesku includes ten lodges that provide visitors with a very special stay in the spectacular Northwest Highlands. Our new site managers, Robyn and Bex, would love to welcome you to this incredible location – with plenty of guidance available on how to make the very most of your stay. For more, visit kyleskulodges.co.uk



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

Adventure calls

The John Muir Trust administers the Des Rubens and Bill Wallace Grant to give people the opportunity to seek out life-changing experiences in wild places around the world, in ways which will benefit both the person and the wild places themselves. The grant commemorates two former presidents of the Scottish Mountaineering Club who each led inspiring and adventurous lives.

We are pleased to announce details of the six recipients of the 2024 Des Rubens and Bill Wallace Grant:

- Caroline Pakenaite will undertake ice climbing and other training courses to support her goal to be the first Deafblind person to summit Everest.
- Richard and Jenny Adams hope to make wild places bloom through a scholarly and artistic exploration of food sustainability on the Western Isles.
- Scott Pallett will join a human-powered ski expedition to northeast Greenland to test diagnostic disease kits in polar regions.
- Phoebe Sleath (pictured below) plans a sketching tour of the Alps to capture glaciers, plants and geology.
- Paul Bartlett plans an expedition to northern Mongolia to study native flora, habitat and companion species.
- Lizzie MacKenzie will produce a film which studies the ecology of Eriskay ponies that are endemic to the Western Isles.

See page 10 for more on previous grant recipient Ben Stainton's trip to Slovenia in summer 2023.



PHOTOGRAPH: PHOEBE SLEATH

Staking out: preparing the ground for tree planting



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

Full steam ahead at Thirlmere

Four years into an exciting collaboration, the Trust and partners are making excellent progress at Thirlmere

Formed in 2020, the Thirlmere Resilience Partnership is making great strides in its efforts to create a resilient catchment that is better equipped to withstand the impacts of climate change.

Focused on the Thirlmere side of the Helvellyn massif above Wythburn, the project involves a partnership between the John Muir Trust, Cumbria Wildlife Trust, United Utilities and Natural England.

Since spring 2023, the Trust has run almost 20 work parties involving more than 80 volunteers who have carried out tasks ranging from tree planting to removal of non-native plants. The project has also forged strong links with local colleges, universities and young ranger

groups, facilitating educational visits for more than 60 students.

"Delivering practical conservation work is a key part of our involvement at Thirlmere," explained Isaac Johnston, the Trust's Thirlmere Resilience Project Officer. "To date, with the help of volunteers, the project has planted more than 4,000 trees to increase native woodland cover, boost biodiversity and improve water quality.

"We intend to continue tree planting initiatives across the site, while the planned creation of a tree nursery at the south end of Thirlmere will serve both as an engagement tool and a source of locally propagated trees and flowers to be planted out."

Policy roundup

- Thank you to all Members who completed the survey and shared feedback on a Carbon Emissions Land Tax in Scotland. The Scottish Government has already committed to consult on our proposal, and we are hopeful that this will be followed by legislation before the end of the current parliamentary term.
- The Trust has helped the evolution of an online tool that was launched earlier this year and is designed to help land managers analyse the habitats, soil, carbon emissions and key species on any given area of land to allow them to make informed land management decisions.
- Following the Scottish Minister's decision to consent the Energy Isles wind farm on Yell, Shetland, the Trust has met with SEPA and NatureScot to discuss the decision and were pleased to hear from SEPA that they are reviewing their policies on peatland protection.
- Thank you to all Members who responded to the Scottish Government's Managing Deer for Climate and Conservation consultation, which is now closed. The Trust contributed to Scottish Environment LINK's deer working group response and have also submitted our own response.
- The Trust is leading a wide coalition that continues to call for the UK government to revise its planned rollout of a 4G mobile network that will see masts installed in some of Scotland's most remote wild places.

There is a push for pupils to have access to nature as part of daily school life



PHOTOGRAPH: JANET MACSWEEEN

Embedding nature in schools

In February, the Trust added its signature to a policy paper prepared by Wildlife and Countryside LINK which supports our position on outdoor learning and proposes a way for all children in England to access nature as part of school life.

The paper asks that schools and education providers be required to provide children with regular access to nature and learning outdoors.

It also includes detail around how this can be achieved, from provision of resources for outdoor learning to having all teachers equipped with a minimum standard of knowledge to support children in their exploration of the subject.

Park position

The Trust recently outlined an updated position statement on the creation of additional National Parks across the UK, including key criteria that are expected as part of any designation being made.

In Scotland, the nomination process for a new National Park closed on 29 February, with bids received from five areas: Scottish Borders, Galloway, Lochaber, Loch Awe and Tay Forest.

The Scottish Government has committed to designating at least one new park by 2026, to join Cairngorms National Park and Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park.

Each proposal will now be appraised by the Scottish Government against the published criteria and further consultation will be held once a preferred site is identified, expected to be in the summer.

In Wales, plans for a new National Park are also progressing, with the Trust joining events last year that explored a new park based on the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

In February, the Trust signed up to a joint statement coordinated by the Campaign for National Parks, which lists what members of Wales' environmental community thinks a new designation needs to achieve.

Policy casework

In February, the Trust submitted an objection to the eight-turbine Culachy wind farm proposal in the Braeroy-Glenshirra-Creag Meagaidh Wild Land Area.

In the introduction to our response, we pointed out that just a month previously the Scottish Government published a statement announcing, "renewable technologies generated the equivalent of 113 per cent of Scotland's overall electricity consumption in 2022".

This progress has largely been achieved while protecting Scotland's Wild Land Areas and, by our estimations, the government's onshore wind target can be achieved without any new onshore development in Wild Land Areas.

Our response raised concerns about cumulative and visual impacts of this development, and also expressed concern about the damage being caused to peatlands – a recurring issue for onshore wind development.

For more about onshore wind development and wild places, see the feature on page 20.

Vital Wild Places campaign

Wild places are vital for combating climate change and biodiversity collapse, and for everyone's health and wellbeing. The UK is ranked as one of the most nature depleted countries on Earth, with nearly one in six species threatened with extinction. There has been an 18 per cent decrease in pollinators such as bees, hoverflies and moths in the past 50 years and more than half of all our flowering plants lost.

We are trying to change this by protecting and restoring wild places – and ask for your help to make this happen more quickly and more extensively. Be part of the change – see the enclosed leaflet and please donate now to help us protect vital wild places for all. johnmuirtrust.org/vitalwildplaces

Drilling down on nature connection

While connections are increasingly seen between environmental sustainability, inequality and population health, accurately assessing the long-term impact of fixed-term interventions such as the John Muir Award is complicated by the many variables involved and a scarcity of research data.

To improve understanding, the Trust is now working with Christian Masters, a PhD Researcher at the University of Glasgow's School of Health and Wellbeing. Christian's research involves the use of Fuzzy Cognitive Mapping (FCM), a modelling technique which reflects our shared understanding of how young people connect with nature by using mathematical simulations to explore how small changes to parts of the model may ripple throughout the entire system.

"FCM is a *thinking* tool designed to express the John Muir Award as an active contributor among the many influential and interconnected variables that shape nature connectedness," explained Christian.

Although still early days, results to date suggest that the lasting impact of the John Muir Award on young people's nature connectedness comes more from boosting leaders' and practitioner confidence and building a pro-nature group identity than from the initial psychological impact of the actual Award experience.

The final findings report is expected in October 2024, and will inform the development of the redesigned John Muir Award.

2024 Annual General Meeting

Our 41st Annual General Meeting will take place online in autumn 2024. Details of how to join the meeting will be published on the events section of our website nearer the time – visit johnmuirtrust.org/agm-events

Become a Trustee

If you share our values and would like to help our work, then we'd love to hear from you. Any eligible Member is welcome to stand as a Trustee. We especially encourage nominations and votes for candidates from diverse backgrounds. Successful candidates will be announced at our AGM in the autumn. Nominations close at noon on Friday 10 May 2024. For more information on how to nominate a Trustee or be nominated, visit johnmuirtrust.org/trusteecall



PHOTOGRAPH: SOUTH OF SCOTLAND GOLDEN EAGLE PROJECT

The two Donalds



Last year, our partners in the South of Scotland Golden Eagle Project invited the Trust to name a young male golden eagle that was released into the Southern Uplands near Glenlude – a site that

has been transformed by volunteers into a flourishing mosaic of native habitats.

Among our earliest volunteers was Donald Macleod (pictured), a key member of our regular conservation work parties. Donald would turn out whatever the weather with a smile and his legendary banter to assist in all the crucial work that has made Glenlude the thriving place it is today.

Well known in Borders and international rugby circles as the 'Rugby Doctor' for his pioneering work in sports medicine, Donald also supported countless local committees and community events at a grass roots level.

To commemorate Donald's dedication to caring for nature, people and community, we felt it was fitting that a golden eagle – a symbol of wild places and the restorative power and freedom they offer – should bear his name.

Donald the eagle (pictured above) was released in July and is believed to be doing well.



The majesty of the Julian Alps (main); Ben Stainton (below)



PHOTOGRAPHY: BEN STANTON

Mountain lessons

Last year, supported by a Des Rubens and Bill Wallace Grant, Ben Stainton embarked on a solo trek through Slovenia's Julian Alps to study its ecology. **Julie Gough** learns more

THE annual Des Rubens and Bill Wallace Grant enables learning in so many different ways. For Ben Stainton, a 23-year-old landscape architecture student from Glasgow, grant support took him to Slovenia's Julian Alps and the country's highest peak – the revered Mount Triglav.

During his solo trek in the area, Ben observed land use and vegetation cover on the Triglav glacier and compared them to GIS satellite data in order to understand how accurate the technology is in representing the condition of wild places on the ground.

His expedition report highlights some of the similarities but also huge differences between the Slovenian wilderness and the mountains back home. Slovenia has a woodland cover of 58 per cent including many areas of primeval forest. By contrast, Scotland has forest cover of just 18 per cent, with many of its ancient woodlands in a state of decline.

First designated as an Alpine Conservation Park in 1924, the Triglav Lakes Valley area formed the basis of what in time became the Triglav National Park – an expanded area established as the country's first, and

still only, national park in 1961.

Today, it features a mountain ecosystem that has been largely untouched for a century, with the result that natural patterns of vegetation can be seen at a landscape scale.

On one descent through the valley, Ben describes walking through scattered dwarf mountain pine until it gave way to more dense forests of larch and spruce, the ground carpeted in alpenrose, alpine heath and bilberry. "I felt transported to the Caledonian pinewoods," he says, "but in Scotland it is rare to find native woodland that is so extensive and varied."

Triglav National Park itself is divided into three conservation areas, with the first and second of those areas forming the core of the park. The first conservation area is mainly dedicated to strict conservation of species and habitats, although traditional grazing in the high mountain pastures is allowed.

The landscape outside this first conservation area is quite different, however. Although the celebrated high mountain lake of Krnsko Jezero is well protected, the land around it falls

within the second conservation zone and is grazed by sheep and cattle.

Here, the flowers, so abundant elsewhere, are absent. The nutrients added to the soil by livestock mean that grasses and nettles crowd out the diverse alpine flora.

Although the exceptional diversity found in much of the Julian Alps is driven by steep topography, limestone geology and continental location, the intactness of its ecosystems is a product of careful conservation.

It's also perhaps due to a state of mind: as Ben discovered on his travels, Slovenians are proud of their country's biodiversity, with many of those he met believing that widespread engagement with nature is critical for its effective protection.

"In Slovenia, the thriving of wild places seems inevitable, with careful conservation and broad public enthusiasm," says Ben. "Perhaps Scotland could seek to imitate this – protecting and enhancing our mountain ecosystems so that they can fulfil their potential richness." □

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



Achieving key landscape restoration targets will not be possible without better deer management

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

Forward steps

Mike Daniels provides an update on the Scottish Government's deer management policy planning

THE Scottish Government launched a consultation on 5 January on proposals to be included in a forthcoming Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill, to "...modernise the legislation which governs deer management in Scotland and ensure it is fit for purpose in the context of the biodiversity and climate crises..."

The Trust, together with our Scottish Environment LINK Deer Group partners, broadly welcomed all of the proposals and encouraged as many members as possible to respond to the consultation.

In the foreword to the consultation Lorna Slater, the Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity, wrote: "Deer management has long been recognised as a vital contributor to land management, and how we manage deer has a fundamental impact on our ability to tackle climate change and biodiversity loss.

"The 2023 *State of Nature Scotland Report* found that since monitoring of 407 species began in 1994 the

abundance of those species has declined on average by 15 per cent and while there have been wins with some species increasing in abundance, in the last decade alone 43 per cent have declined. The report serves as a stark reminder that our efforts to ensure effective management of wild deer matters more now than ever before.

"Achieving our ambitious targets on tree planting, woodland regeneration and peatland restoration will have a profound impact on improving our natural environment in the years to come but we will not achieve those aims without effective deer management. That means we need to get the right balance of the right densities of wild deer in the right areas to maximise the environmental benefits they can bring as part of a healthy, functioning ecosystem."

The Trust has long argued that better deer management, and especially reduced densities, are essential to the effective management of our wild places. We are therefore pleased to see this progress, albeit recognising that the measures proposed (around enhancing the natural environment,

compulsory powers and compliance, deer welfare, changes to close seasons, venison and farmed deer) are just some of the steps needed.

We will continue pressing to ensure that these measures become law and that further legislation follows. We also recognise that regulation is only one of the drivers for change, and so also need to see financial incentives to do the right thing, and perhaps most importantly see a shift in culture.

The Trust's film, *Clear on Deer*, which recently toured the UK is, we hope, a contribution to a better understanding, debate and ultimately a cultural shift in how deer management is seen in Scotland. □

Further information

Clear on Deer, our 30-minute documentary following wildlife and nature filmmaker Libby Penman's exploration of the challenges and future of deer management in Scotland, is available to view for free. johnmuirtrust.org/clearondeer

About the author

Mike Daniels is the Trust's Head of Policy

High ambition

As the Trust celebrates 25 years of caring for Schiehallion, **Hannah Shaw** reflects on all that has been achieved on this special mountain – and what more is to come

IN MANY ways, Schiehallion can lay claim to being the most famous mountain in the UK. Admittedly, it may not have the highest peak kudos or mass appeal of Ben Nevis, Yr Wyddfa (Snowdon) or Scafell Pike but Schiehallion's curious mix of rare geology, recovering habitats, scientific history and cultural identity give it a depth of interest that few other mountains can match.

Anglicised from the Gaelic, *Sìth Chailleann*, meaning 'Fairy Hill of the Caledonians', Schiehallion's distinctive, cone-shaped summit rises high above the waters of Loch Rannoch in Highland Perthshire.

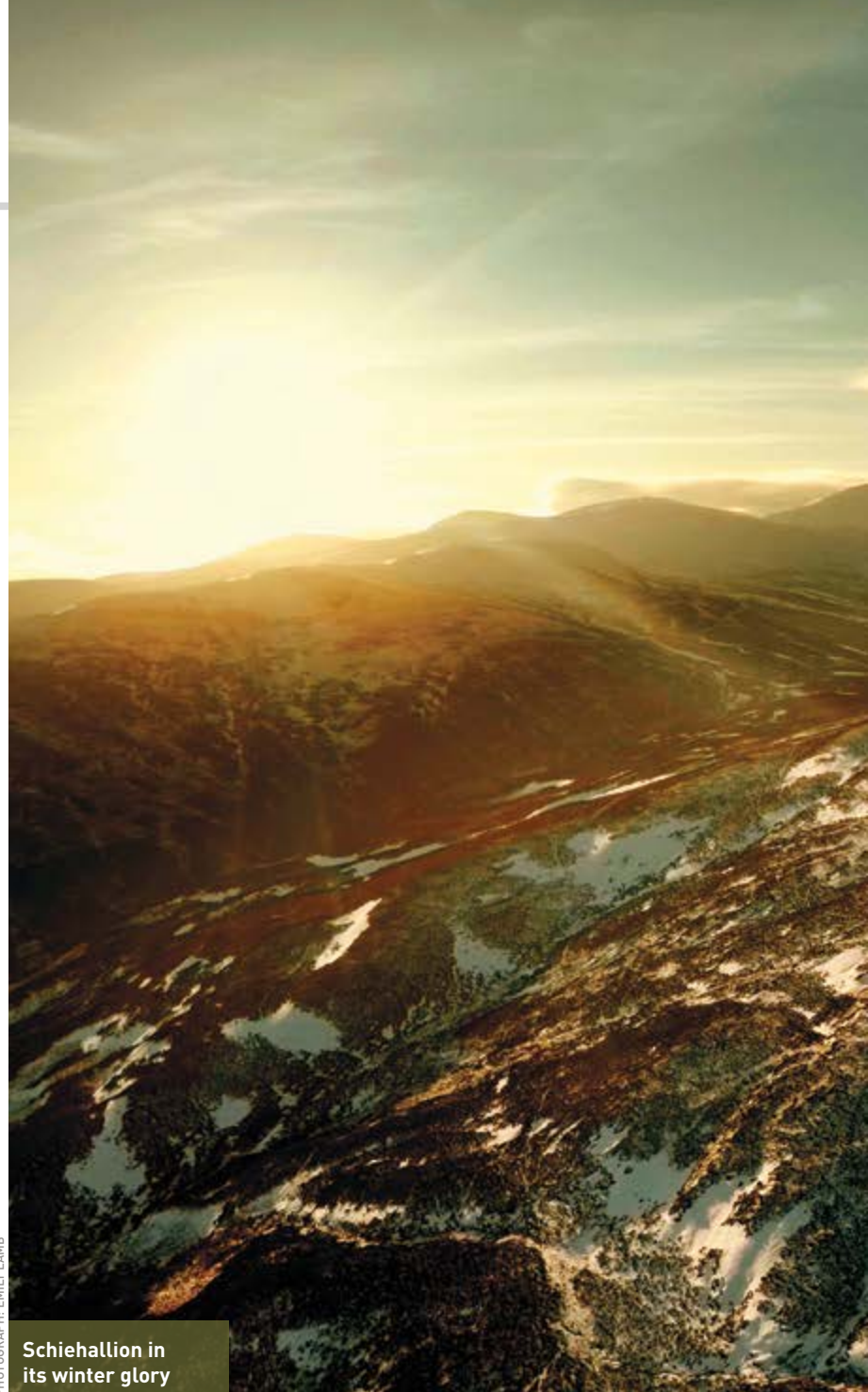
Since 1999, the Trust has cared for the 871ha East Schiehallion estate which extends across the eastern flanks of Schiehallion to the wilder Gleann Mòr to the south. A designated Site of Special Scientific Interest, the whole area holds an incredible diversity of habitat and species: calcareous grassland, upland heath, peatland and regenerating woodland that between them are home to ptarmigan, black grouse, ring ouzel, mountain hare, pine marten and golden eagle.

CHANGING LANDSCAPE

Over the past quarter of a century, Trust staff have got to know every rock, hump and hollow across the mountain. And the landscape has begun to respond to the care and attention it has received.

Perhaps most apparent to the thousands of walkers who reach Schiehallion's boulder strewn summit every year has been the realignment of the main mountain path onto a more sustainable and less intrusive line. The terrible scarring of the previous path has also been repaired. Today, this 'new' 4km section of path is carefully maintained to prevent erosion that could potentially damage surrounding habitats.

But Schiehallion is not just about high mountain ridges. The Trust has also established the Braes of Foss Loop, a 1km all-abilities path that enables those less



PHOTOGRAPH: EMILY LAMB

Schiehallion in its winter glory

physically able to immerse themselves in the surrounding landscape.

The path also offers visitors an opportunity to see how new native woodland can regenerate over time. In 2017, the Trust established the Heart of Scotland Forest Partnership, a coordinated and large-scale regeneration of the landscape together with neighbouring estate owners, community bodies and nature conservation partners. The aim is to restore and connect pockets of native woodland across 3,000ha of land between Schiehallion and Loch Tummel.

As part of this mountain woodland project, more than 12,000 native trees have been planted at Schiehallion, beginning the gradual regeneration of 40ha of native woodland. Many have been grown from seed collected locally, creating a tree stock that is perfectly suited to the environment.



Engagement with the local community and visitors is another key component of the work at Schiehallion. Working with volunteers, the Trust has hosted numerous tree planting schemes and created an educational nature club for students from Fairview School in Perth.

Most recently, Trust staff have been involved in Connect Outdoors, a pilot educational hiking programme in partnership with Tiso and Mhòr Outdoor (see news story on page 6). The aim of the programme is to introduce people from under-represented communities to the outdoors in a way that inspires long-term and meaningful engagement with the natural world.

WEIGHING THE WORLD

Of course, Schiehallion's appeal long precedes the Trust's current involvement.

Coincidentally, this year also marks the 250th anniversary of astronomer Nevil Maskelyne's experiment to determine the density of the Earth – which used Schiehallion as its muse.

In 1774, Maskelyne developed an idea, first proposed by Sir Isaac Newton, of observing how much the gravitational pull of a large mass, in this case a mountain, affects a pendulum. Following a lengthy search for candidate mountains, Schiehallion was chosen due to its unique symmetry. Of equal importance was its relative isolation as there would be no interference from the gravitational pull of other mountains.

At observation stations built on the north and south slopes of the mountain – of which stone ruins remain today – Maskelyne's team hung a pendulum to determine whether the gravitational pull from the mountain would draw it away from the vertical pull of the Earth

PHOTOGRAPHY: MARK HAMBLIN/SCOTLANDTHEBIG PICTURE, ALEX COOPER/ADOBE STOCK, JOHN MUIR TRUST, MARION MCKINNON, JAMES ROBERTSON



Schiehallion scenes (clockwise from left): mountain hare; ptarmigan; the Trust's Tom Corke; black grouse; Connect Outdoors participants on the summit path; the Braes of Foss loop; tree planting

below. As he predicted, Maskelyne observed a clear pull towards the mountain, deviating the pendulum away from true vertical.

But that wasn't the end of the experiment. It was then necessary to map the entire mountain – a task bestowed on mathematician Charles Hutton, who calculated the mountain's volume using thousands of precise longitudinal and elevation readings. To make this complex endeavour more manageable, Hutton connected readings at similar altitudes together by drawing lines to form rings. These rings were the very first contour lines – another claim to fame for Schiehallion!

Using Maskelyne's measurements of the angles of deviation of the pendulum, alongside knowledge of the mountain's volume from Hutton's calculations, the scientists were able to extrapolate the relative

“Schiehallion is a fascinating place and the Trust's work here has come a long way over the last 25 years”

density of the Earth – and all within 20 per cent accuracy of modern-day calculations.

NEXT STEPS

Over the next 25 years, the Trust will continue to work towards creating a natural tree line on the mountain, reducing browsing pressure so that native pine and oak woodlands can continue to re-establish on the lower slopes and species such as aspen, birch, rowan and willow can return and climb the mountain's broad flanks.

The ambition is for this natural tree line to gradually give way to areas of montane scrub,



with sparser coverage of dwarf birch, juniper and montane willows at higher altitudes – a low-density woodland that will provide outstanding habitat for a variety of species.

To help achieve this, the Trust will remain an integral member of the Heart of Scotland Forest Partnership and work with partners to deliver volunteering and training opportunities. Engagement work will also continue, with particular focus on supporting those who experience barriers to accessing the outdoors to connect with wild places.

These efforts will be aided considerably by the recent arrival of Kati Karki, the property's new Conservation Officer, who now works alongside the Trust's East Schiehallion Mountain Woodland Project Manager, Tom Corke. Kati's expertise in ecological monitoring and tree propagation will add further impetus to an exciting

mountain woodland project that will bring so much to the biodiversity of the landscape.

"Schiehallion is a fascinating place and the Trust's work here has come a long way over the last 25 years," says Tom. "In time, this woodland restoration work will create a seed source that will allow for natural regeneration of the landscape without the need for planting in the future. I can't wait to see that ambition become a reality." □

Further information

To find out more about how we are caring for Schiehallion, and how you can help, visit johnmuirtrust.org/about-us/where-we-work/east-schiehallion

About the author

Hannah Shaw is the Trust's Engagement Manager, Central Region



Cull of the wild

Wendy Grindle explains why the Trust sometimes leaves culled deer carcasses on the hillside

BASED on the most recent estimates, there are nearly one million wild deer in Scotland. That's around one animal for every five people – and, in most places, a far higher number than a healthy landscape can sustain. Consequently, the Trust has welcomed the recent Scottish Government consultation on deer legislation with its emphasis on reducing deer numbers as a nature restoration method (see page 11).

“As a nature conservation charity dedicated to protecting and restoring wild places, we have a responsibility to the nation as a whole to manage the land under our stewardship to the highest

environment standards,” says David Balharry, Chief Executive of the John Muir Trust.

Deer management is a critical part of this stewardship for the simple reason that high numbers of deer prevent the restoration of healthy habitats. It is why the Trust has increased the cull of deer on the land it manages to give habitats respite from the browsing pressure of so many hungry mouths.

All land managers in Scotland agree that, in the absence of natural predators, culling is the only effective method of controlling deer numbers. But where the Trust and all other environmentally focused land managers (be they public, private, environmental non-governmental organization (ENGO) or community) disagree with ‘traditional’ sporting estates is on the number of deer to cull.

“As with any wild animal that has died, its nutrients return to the soil and support a rich ecosystem”

The classic Highland sporting estate model has evolved into one where stags abound, particularly in the autumn, when clients shoot the animals for sport. Associated with these high deer numbers are a number of traditions that have become embedded in the culture, including ‘honouring’ the deer that has been killed by making full use of the carcass.

Typically, this involves removing it to an off-road vehicle, then driving, often for many miles, over rugged terrain to a larder, where the carcass is then passed to a game dealer and on into the human food chain. However, the real cost of this endeavour – in terms of labour, fuel and environmental damage – versus the relative low income from the sale of venison, often makes little economic sense.

Nor does it make ecological sense. In a natural system, large predators would, after killing and feeding on a deer, leave most of the carcass in situ. Such carcasses are important for supporting biodiversity as they attract and host a variety of essential scavengers, insects, bacteria and fungi. They also provide vital nutrition to predators when food is scarce.

“As with any wild animal that has died, its nutrients return to the soil and support a rich ecosystem,” comments Mike Daniels, the Trust’s Head of Policy.

It is in part for this reason that, as well as extracting whole carcasses, the Trust also either extracts some meat from the carcass in situ or sometimes leaves it completely to nature.

But there are other reasons, too. “Deer carcasses may be left on the hill where extraction is difficult or dangerous because of remoteness

or ruggedness,” adds Mike. “We do not use vehicles, which would carry a carbon impact as well as cause environmental damage, especially to peaty soils. In such situations, deer are butchered on the hill

and the best cuts are taken away on foot at the stalker’s discretion.”

Such an approach is common in Scandinavia, North America and New Zealand, where doing so is considered conservation best practice. Whole deer carcasses are also left in the environment where they are shot when animals show signs of disease and are not fit for human consumption, or when the carcass is simply too emaciated to enter the human food chain. □

About the author

Wendy Grindle is the Trust’s Head of Communications



PHOTOGRAPH: CHRIS PUDDPHATT



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST



Butchering in situ (main);
removal of culled deer by hand
(below); trail camera still
of a golden eagle feeding on
a deer carcass left on the hill



Wild work

Clara Montgomery provides an update on the Trust's work making wild places relevant to everyone, wherever they live in the UK

IN 2022, the Trust's policy team started work on developing data sets that could indicate what constitutes a wild place and the benefits to people, including air and water quality, inspiration, sense of place and wellbeing.

Alongside this, and as part of our vision to make wild places relevant for all, we continue to finetune how and where our work to engage people with wild places and deliver exemplary land management can best be carried out. The creation of a Wild Places Zones map, (see opposite) which divides the UK into 45 zones has helped guide this.

In each zone, the ambition is for at least one site to be managed to exemplary standards as a place where nature has the most freedom to restore itself, and/or where people are engaged with and inspired by nature.

In Scotland, 21 Natural Heritage zones were designated by Scottish Natural Heritage (now NatureScot) based on 'biogeographic regions' – areas that are defined by the species found in them and where the animal and plant distribution have similar or shared characteristics.

In England, there are 14 zones based on *Biogeographic Zones Living England*, published by Natural England. We have also created five zones based on geographical and demographic considerations in Wales, while in Northern Ireland the six zones are based on county boundaries.

SURVEY RESULTS

Following a campaign in 2023 that saw more than 10,000 respondents share details of their favourite wild places throughout the UK, we



Selecting favourite wild places around the UK

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

created a register of the UK's remaining wild places and their locations within the 45 zones. The results also revealed the top criteria for making a wild place special, with each of the following receiving more than 2,000 votes:

1. Scenery
2. Mental and physical benefits
3. Peace and solitude
4. Exposure to the elements
5. Sense of adventure
6. Clean air and water
7. Thriving biodiversity
8. Wildlife spotting
9. Lack of manmade structures

While the zones recognise that wild places are vital to people wherever they live, the register highlights the most important wild places to people in the UK.

The final piece of the puzzle is a Wild Places Rating which will enable us to monitor the condition of these wild places and ultimately produce a 'state of wild places' report. In terms

of rating wild places, this is an exciting challenge. On the one hand, wild places are by definition places least impacted by humans but, on the other hand, they are also defined by the human experience of them. We need a way of holding and assessing both these truths simultaneously.

Taken together, the zones, register and ratings will create a vital resource for the future monitoring and protection of these important wild places.

Over the coming years, we will start to see the Wild Places Zones being used as a focus for our work. This will help us ensure that wild places are recognised and valued throughout the UK, while also enabling us to build collaborative approaches to protecting them better, working with local and national governments, communities and visitors. □

About the author

Clara Montgomery is the Trust's Wild Places Data Officer

Wild Places Zones



Key

Scotland

- 1 Shetland
- 2 North Caithness and Orkney
- 3 Western Isles
- 4 North West seaboard
- 5 The peatlands of Caithness and Sutherland
- 6 Western seaboard
- 7 Northern Highlands
- 8 Western Highlands
- 9 North East coastal plain
- 10 Central Highlands
- 11 Cairngorm massif
- 12 North East glens
- 13 Lochaber
- 14 Argyll West and Islands
- 15 Breadalbane and East Argyll
- 16 Eastern lowlands
- 17 West central belt
- 18 Wigtown machairs and outer Solway
- 19 Western Southern Uplands and inner Solway
- 20 Border hills
- 21 Moray Firth

England

- 22 North
- 23 North East
- 24 North West
- 25 Dales and Pennines
- 26 West Midlands
- 27 Central Midlands
- 28 East Midlands
- 29 East Anglia
- 30 Central
- 31 South East
- 32 West Country
- 33 South
- 34 South West
- 35 Scilly Isles

Wales

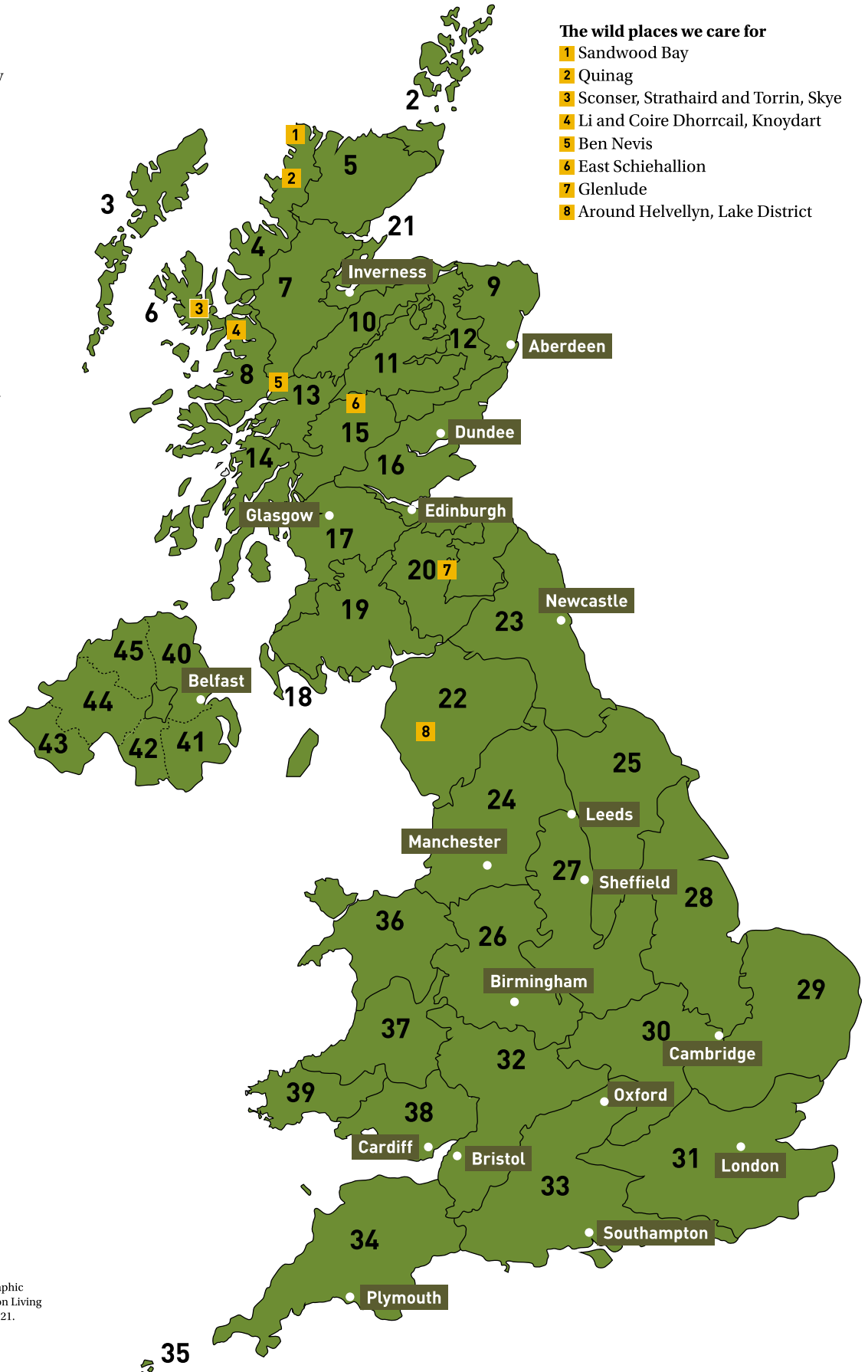
- 36 North Wales
- 37 Mid Wales
- 38 South East Wales
- 39 South West Wales

Northern Ireland

- 40 Antrim
- 41 Down
- 42 Armagh
- 43 Fermanagh
- 44 Tyrone
- 45 Derry / Londonderry

The wild places we care for

- 1 Sandwood Bay
- 2 Quinag
- 3 Sconser, Strathaird and Torrin, Skye
- 4 Li and Coire Dhorrcail, Knoydart
- 5 Ben Nevis
- 6 East Schiehallion
- 7 Glenlude
- 8 Around Helvellyn, Lake District



Scottish zones based on NatureScot's biogeographic zones developed in 1998. English zones based on Living England's biogeographic zones developed in 2021.



Blurred boundaries

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Or so it would seem with applications for wind farms in wild places, writes Fiona Baillie

IT WAS with a sense of déjà vu that the Trust recently objected to an application for a wind farm at Culachy near Fort Augustus – a near carbon copy of an application made almost a decade previously, and to which the Trust also raised an objection.

Back in 2015, the objection was to an application by RES Limited to construct a wind farm comprising of 13 turbines, each up to 149.5m high, and associated infrastructure on the Culachy Estate, near Loch Ness.

The Trust's objection was based on the cumulative impact of what would be another large-scale wind farm in a landscape already subjected to a high level of development. At the time, our view was that visitors and local people alike would be exposed to significant visual intrusion by the wind farms on either side of the glen – a landscape once known for its scenic qualities.

In particular, the objection emphasised the detrimental visual impact on the perceived wildness of Wild Land Area 19 Braeroy – Glenshirra – Creag Meagaidh, within which a portion of the development was sited.

Scotland's wild land, noted the objection, is an asset of national significance and a finite resource. It plays a vital role for carbon storage in peatland, provides clean air, water, habitat for vulnerable wildlife, and supports tourism and a range of other economically important activities.

The Trust also objected on the grounds of the development's potential to cause considerable damage to the extensive areas of deep peat found throughout the proposed site, with all the associated carbon and habitat losses.

Highland Council refused the application, as did the Appeals Division of the Scottish Government when the initial refusal was subsequently appealed by the developer. In its appeals decision notice, the Scottish Government's report cited four key reasons for rejecting the appeal: the landscape and visual effect of the proposed development on a Wild Land Area; the effect on the setting of the historic Wade Road running through the site; the effect on tourism; and its effect on areas of deep peat on the site.

And that, it might have been reasonable to expect, should



Offshore wind is advancing at scale and presents a far more efficient solution to decarbonising energy generation

have been that. But almost a decade on, the Trust recently filed an objection to an application, this time by Fred Olsen Renewables Limited, for an eight-turbine development at almost the exact same location. Once again, the objection to the application is principally due to the proposal's adverse effect on nationally important wild land.

It should be stated that our position on renewable energy development is very clear. While the Trust supports a just transition to net zero and believes that renewable energy is fundamental to decarbonising the UK's electricity generation, we also believe that the UK's renewable energy targets can be met without destroying the finite resource of our precious wild places.

PLANNING FRAMEWORK

So, how can it be that past, failed applications are now being revisited by developers? Scotland's Fourth National Planning Framework (NPF4), which came into force in January 2023, details the national spatial strategy for Scotland. The framework made some welcome

changes by giving equal weight to both the climate and nature emergency – with the tackling of both a core requirement.

It makes clear that future proposed development approved in Scotland must contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and support biodiversity recovery with a policy objective of biodiversity net gain.

However, despite the right intentions, we are concerned that the policies may fail to achieve the government's ambitions, as NPF4 dramatically changed planning policy in relation to Wild Land Areas. Prior to the new framework, there was a presumption against development within Wild Land Areas in Scottish planning policy. The protection didn't go as far as those enjoyed by designated areas, but it recognised that Wild Land Areas have little or no capacity to accept new development.

In contrast, NPF4 expresses clear support for renewable energy developments even within Wild Land Areas in Policy 4 (g). This support is caveated later in the policy in that any proposal for development within a Wild Land Area must be accompanied by a Wild Land Area Impact Assessment which sets out how the significant impacts on the qualities of the wild land have been minimised by "design, siting or other mitigation measures".

The implication is that only developments which have been designed so that there are no resulting significant impacts will be supported within Wild Land Areas. Although no indication is provided as to what level of significant effect is considered unacceptable, there are worrying signs that even very significant impacts could be deemed acceptable under NPF4, as demonstrated by the consent of the Achany Wind Farm Extension (formerly known as Glencassley) in Sutherland last May.

As was outlined in the objection to the latest wind farm development proposal at Culachy, the Trust believes that the Energy Consents Unit – the Government department responsible for processing large scale development applications on behalf of Scottish Ministers – can continue to make responsible choices about whether siting onshore renewables on wild land is appropriate. We will continue to argue that any impact on these nationally important areas of high wildness is unacceptable.

It was interesting to note that in January of this year, the Scottish Government published a statement announcing: "Renewable technologies generated the equivalent of 113 per cent of Scotland's overall electricity consumption in 2022". Such progress has largely been achieved while protecting Scotland's Wild Land Areas.

It is our belief that the Scottish Government's target of generating 20GW of onshore wind by 2030 can be achieved without any new onshore wind development in Scotland's Wild Land Areas.

From the latest government information, there is approximately 17.4GW of onshore wind development in the pipeline and 8.95GW which is already operational. Not all of the developments in the pipeline will become operational, but we don't need to sacrifice our wild lands to meet the target as we are already well on our way towards meeting the 20GW target.



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MUIR TRUST

Sense of scale: wind turbines stacked and ready for installation

“We know that constructing wind farms on undeveloped peatland diminishes the development’s contribution to decarbonising the electricity grid”

CULACHY REVISITED

Having reviewed the most recent proposed development at Culachy, the Trust remains unconvinced that the significant impacts on the qualities of the wild land have been minimised. In our view, and as per previous guidance from NatureScot, it is very difficult to mitigate the impact of a wind farm on wild land “even if good design principles are adhered to, as it is often the presence of the turbines as a highly visual element that will result in a significant effect”.

As with the earlier proposed development, this new proposal at Culachy is almost entirely sited on Class 1 peatland and appears to lack any meaningful attempt to avoid disturbance of undeveloped peat in compliance with the mitigation hierarchy stated within a key policy section of NPF4.

We know that constructing wind farms on undeveloped peatland diminishes the development’s contribution to decarbonising the electricity grid. Academics have warned that these developments will have a minimal net carbon benefit beyond 2040 as the proportion of renewable energy in the UK energy mix continues to increase, particularly from larger and more efficient turbines offshore.

The applicant has also placed considerable weight on the impact of existing infrastructure, such as the Beaulay-Denny Overhead Line, on the wildness of the area to justify the impact of its proposed development. But we couldn’t disagree more: existing development is not a justification for the increased industrialisation of wild places. Instead, the presence of existing infrastructure should induce increased protection against further development and the creeping, incremental degradation of wild places.

As it stands, the proposed development would have a cumulative impact when considered alongside the numerous other wind farm developments which are already operational or in the pipeline locally. These include Stronelairg, Cloiche, Millennium, Beinneun (and extension), Bhlairaidh (and extension), Bunloinn, Dell and Tomchrasky.

Some of these developments, such as Cloiche and Dell, are also re-runs of previously refused developments. Both proposed turbines where they had previously been refused by Scottish Ministers to safeguard wild land qualities as part of the Stronelairg development. Yet both have been consented, with the Cloiche development considered in light of NPF4.

Elsewhere, since NPF4, a number of wind farms and other large-scale developments have been proposed within Wild Land Areas such as the Carn Fearna wind farm near Ben Wyvis, Heastabhal wind farm on the Western Isles and the Earba storage project near Loch Laggan.

The Highland Council’s previous refusal of the Culachy wind farm proposal cited the harm it would have on an historic pass through the hills, noting “unacceptable significant adverse impact on the setting of the Corrieyairack Pass, a Scheduled Monument, and on the experience and appreciation of the users of this Pass”. It is extremely difficult to understand why this latest proposed development would be considered any differently.

What is most clear is that our work to ensure that areas of wild land are safeguarded from industrial development is as important now as ever before. To our mind, it is a false choice between protecting our precious wild places and sacrificing them for renewable energy.

Wild places offer a valuable, long-term solution to the climate and nature emergencies and so it is essential that we protect them to achieve the objectives of NPF4 – not least with offshore wind advancing at scale and presenting a far more efficient solution to decarbonising energy generation. □

About the author

Fiona Baillie is the Trust’s Wild Places Protection Officer

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EST. 1983

Exploring EcoPark,
a secret wildlife oasis in
Small Heath, Birmingham



Life in the city

Gareth Morgan explores the growing importance of urban wild places – and why the Trust wants to help local communities experience and value them

WHAT is a ‘wild place’ in the urban context? Our city landscapes have been shaped by a complex history of rural, industrial and commercial land use, driven by evolving cycles of development, decay and renewal. Though at first glance they may seem to be the antithesis of what many might consider to be wild places, a surprisingly resilient natural heritage does co-exist among the built environment of our urban landscapes.

Of course, cities can be challenging places for wildlife. Animals must cope with traffic, degraded and fragmented habitats, plus air, noise and light pollution. But there are also

advantages. Some wild animals and plants are synanthropic – they are associated with humans and benefit from living close to us – while others have simply learned to adapt.

For example, feral pigeons find the ledges of buildings to be a more than adequate substitute for sea cliffs, as do peregrine falcons – which also happen to find the pigeons a convenient source of food.

The wildlife of our urban landscapes can be incredibly diverse, harbouring the rare and the special amid more familiar species. Charterhouse Heritage Park in Coventry, for example, is home to

badgers, muntjac deer, kingfishers, egrets and otters – all less than a mile from the city centre.

SENSE OF PLACE

From Moss Side in Manchester to Balsall Heath in Birmingham, place names often pay tribute to a more natural past, even where little remains today. But look closely and cities do often contain pockets of surviving historic countryside, such as the ancient woodland of Epping Forest on the northeastern edge of Greater London. This, of course, is not a typical urban woodland; more common is the ‘secondary

woodland' that grows through natural colonisation of abandoned land or, often, through planting.

Although such areas lack the diversity and ecological value of old-growth woodlands, they nonetheless contribute to the wider ecological network, providing habitat corridors for wildlife and welcome access to open spaces for city residents.

Elsewhere, fragments of heathland also persist in cities, with a significant example found in Birmingham's Sutton Park – one of the largest urban parks in Europe. Like Epping Forest and many of the Royal Parks in London, this wild place was formerly a hunting forest, later bequeathed to the city and then fiercely protected by its residents.

In hilly areas, steep slopes may also protect the landscape from development. In summer, the Black Country's Rowley Hills are carpeted in wildflowers, the air full of butterflies such as the locally rare marbled white. Such fragments are precious given that we have lost 97 per cent of Britain's wildflower meadows over the past century.

This loss is mirrored in our cities, where grassland is now dominated by regularly mown and species-poor 'amenity grassland' – though newly created and restored grasslands have begun to make a comeback in parks, gardens and even roadside verges.

A network of canals, rivers and streams reach through many of our urban areas, linking other habitats and often providing the best way for wildlife to enter and move around the urban landscape.

Alongside other corridors such as railway lines, these waterways are crucial parts of the 'nature network' within cities. While individual sites such as nature reserves remain important as biodiversity hotspots, urban conservationists increasingly recognise that the inter-connections of a wider living landscape are essential to allowing wildlife to move, adapt and thrive in an ever-changing environment.

Heavily polluted and largely ignored for so long, a number of urban waterways have begun to see



PHOTOGRAPH: ADOBE STOCK

“Peregrine falcons ... also happen to find the pigeons a convenient source of food”

significant improvements over recent years. As a working river in its industrial heyday, the Wandle in South London was considered to be biologically dead as late as the 1960s. But, thanks to decades of regeneration and volunteer action, it has become a vibrant wildlife corridor, home to grey wagtail, water vole and brown trout.

Elsewhere, the sinuous Wyrley and Essington Canal in Walsall – known locally as the 'Curly Wyrley' – includes a largely undisturbed branch designated as a site of special scientific interest (SSSI), which today has excellent water quality and hosts a nationally scarce population of floating water-plantain.

Our recolonised canals, like other post-industrial urban sites such as railways, quarries and gravel pits, are among the finest wild spaces in our cities today.

Even brownfield sites – previously developed land that is often disregarded as 'wasteland' – can sometimes provide short-lived but wildlife-rich habitat. Populations of black redstart famously boomed after the Second World War, with buildings damaged by the Blitz providing perfect nesting sites – earning it the nickname of the 'bomb-site bird'. An iconic urban species, they spread throughout

London and have since established populations in other urban centres.

Wetland areas of standing water, including lakes, reservoirs, pools and ponds, vary in scale and the wildlife they support. Larger man-made waterbodies can be important for waterfowl and wading birds, while smaller pools and ponds support populations of uncommon wildflowers, amphibians and invertebrates. One good example is the London Wetland Centre in Barnes, which grew out of a series of former Victorian reservoirs tucked into a loop of the Thames.

But while such high-profile urban nature reserves have a vital role, it's important to remember that most residents experience nature in the built environment of their gardens, allotments, parks and other public open spaces like cemeteries. Not only do such places act as stepping stones to allow animals to move through city environments, some make them their permanent home – as those who have seen urban foxes take up residence beneath garden sheds will testify.

TRUST ROLE

The Trust wants more people to enjoy the benefit of wild places but we can't just wait for under-represented groups to find us. Instead, we must be proactive and engage new and diverse audiences where they are, which includes urban centres. Cities, fundamentally, are where most of us live. The urban population in the UK is currently 84 per cent and growing.

Over a period of 10 years, a Natural England survey of engagement with the natural environment has produced several key findings: most people's experience of nature is close to home, in green spaces in towns and cities; engagement is unequal, with low income, ethnic minority and older age groups less likely to visit such places with any frequency; children's experience with nature is varied, with almost 25 per cent spending time outside less than once a month; and that simply spending time in nature is fundamentally good for our health and wellbeing.

Engagement with wild places



PHOTOGRAPH: LES WARD

needs to start young. If properly nurtured, an early connection with nature will inspire people to have a lifetime of caring and taking action for nature. However, I would argue that in our technologically driven world, it's now harder than ever to have a 'natural childhood' – the current generation of children are more disconnected from nature than any other in history.

Education is an important way to foster this connection. Primary schools remain keen to get hands-on experience in their local wild places, including through the John Muir Award, and more possibilities are emerging for secondary schools in England and Wales with the development of a Natural History GCSE.

But key questions remain. Who will look after our wild places in the future and how will they acquire the skills to do so? The environmental sector is the second least diverse area of employment in the UK (after farming). Investing in training programmes that are accessible for young people from a wider range of backgrounds will help to forge pathways into employment and ensure the next generation of environmentalists is more representative of our diverse communities.

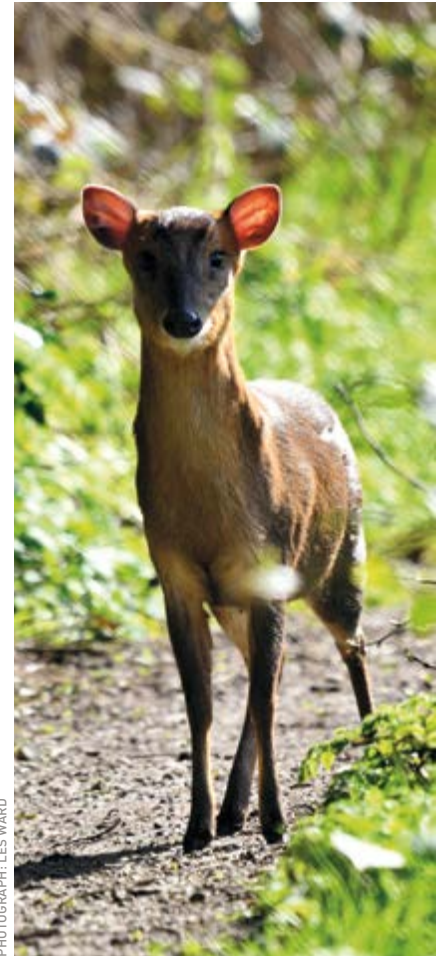
City dwellers in the UK are, on average, six years younger than in rural communities. There is a huge tide of energy and passion for environmental issues amongst young people in our cities. Working together to amplify their voices and channel that energy, the Trust can support the emergence of the next

generation of advocates and defenders of our vital wild places.

There are so many ways to help nature recover in the urban landscape – from citizen science to volunteer action. Urban nature can be found on the doorstep of millions of people and provides a wonderful gateway into our shared wild places. It's up to the Trust to help make experiencing that nature a reality for many more people. □

About the author

Gareth Morgan is the Trust's Regional Delivery Manager (South)



PHOTOGRAPH: LES WARD



PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES BENWELL

Urban dwellers (clockwise from top): white egret; Muntjac deer; Portway Hill, part of the Rowley Hills, Birmingham



Libby enjoying Maryculter Woods in Aberdeenshire

“By embracing every shade of connection to the natural world... we create a more vibrant picture of what it means to be a nature enthusiast”

activities, with geared-up individuals at the peak of physical fitness. Such stereotypes inadvertently reinforce the notion that connection with nature is reserved only for those who engage in such activities.

For someone like me, whose mobility is limited by crutches, this notion led to a solemn sense of being ‘othered’ when I envisioned myself enjoying natural spaces. In reality, there are myriad ways to connect with the natural world, each as valid and significant as the rest.

True accessibility should be about fostering a mindset which acknowledges that nature can be experienced in ways that cater to an individual’s unique abilities, preferences and pace. Relaxed, mindful walks, where each step is an opportunity to absorb the surroundings, can be just as rewarding as scaling a mountain. Birdwatching, where the act of observation serves as a gateway to the natural world, is an equally valid expression of appreciation. And simply sitting still beneath the shade of a tree can bring a great feeling of serenity.

As we challenge convention, we begin to recognise that diverse experiences enrich the collective tapestry of outdoor engagement. By embracing every shade of connection to the natural world, we create a more vibrant picture of what it means to be a nature enthusiast.

Simply being present in nature – that is enough. □

About the author

Libby Hanson is a Trust communications volunteer and Biological Sciences student at the University of Aberdeen

Accessing nature

Drawing on her own experience, Libby Hanson believes it is time to rethink what accessibility to nature means for those with limited physical mobility

I AM a disabled nature lover. This wasn’t always the case: growing up in rural Scotland, I was blessed with acres of trees to climb and winding paths with rocks and rivers to skip over.

As a child, I took this for granted, wishing for the life in towns and cities that my friends had with their shops and leisure centres. Then, as years passed and my ability to engage in these outdoor excursions faded with the onset of physical disability, I found myself wondering why I had not made the most of these outdoor opportunities while I had the chance.

As an adult living in the suburbs, I would often poke my head out of the door and listen to the roar of passing cars and realise how much I missed the sound of birdsong, the sight of clear skies at night and the smell of countryside air.

For years, I fought with this sense of defeat – a feeling that I had missed my chance and would never again

experience the natural world. But in a time when awareness of the issues faced by people with disabilities in society is greater than ever, why should I feel this way?

Despite the documented mental and physical benefits that time in nature provides, it is noticeable that those with disabilities are underrepresented in these settings. It feels like there is a need to redefine what accessibility in nature means.

When we think of making nature more accessible to all, we often imagine level footpaths, benches and ramps. But while such physical accommodations are crucial to facilitating mobility, accessibility should go beyond the visible. It requires challenging the mindset about what being in nature actually entails.

Experiencing nature is not confined to arduous hikes in the mountains, yet the conventional image of outdoor engagement often conjures scenes of high-impact

Tree of hope

In this first of a new series of articles exploring individual species and habitats, **Mandy Haggith** reveals the wonders of wych elm – a native ‘rainforest’ tree with a unique mythology

ELMS grew, the story goes, in response to the tragically beautiful music of the Greek hero Orpheus, the wondrous harper. He had followed his wife Eurydice down into the depths of the Earth after her death, where he enchanted Hades and Persephone, the god and goddess of the underworld, to allow him to return her to the land of the living.

But he failed to follow their instruction not to look back at her as they made their way up into the light and she was lost forever. Heartbroken, and destined to live the rest of his life without her, Orpheus played a grieving love song and a grove of elms sprang up to soothe him.

This legend of Orpheus is one of many folk tales featuring elms offering solace to mourners. The elm, deeply rooted into the subsoil, has long stood as a symbol of the ambivalence and mystery of the end of our lives, wherever we go afterwards, and the ability of love and art to enable even someone who has passed from this world to live on in our hearts and in nature.

Elms grow throughout the northern hemisphere. We may think of them as temperate woodland trees, but the diversity of the elm family (*Ulmaceae*) is actually greatest in the subtropics. The family consists of 56 species – 13 of which are tropical – and while they show great variation around the world, one thing they have in common is a dislike of dry conditions. Elms are rainforest trees, with our native wych elm (*Ulmus glabra*) often found in moist hollows, ravines and beside rivers or lochs.

One of my favourite wych elms grows in the Traligill, a Norse name meaning ‘glen of the trolls’, in Assynt. It is found by following the impressively steep gorge up from Loch Assynt to a place where the water bubbles up out of the ground from a spring.

Beyond this point, the river valley is dry, the rocks exposed. Here, a huge elm, its magnificent trunk festooned with mosses, lichens, polypody ferns and fungi, grows horizontally out of the rock, many metres up the sheer wall of the ravine in perfect defiance of the laws of physics.

Beneath the tree’s stretched canopy, it’s possible to imagine hearing trolls grumbling and hammering, hissing and muttering, all busy and bad-tempered. Those who don’t believe in trolls can simply marvel at how the tree’s roots plunge into an underworld riddled with limestone caverns, where the tree takes advantage of the dark network of cracks and crannies to supply it with all the moisture and support that it needs. Out in the light, the result is a lush green profusion of its living community: a grand gathering of epiphytes.



PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRIS PUDEPHANT

HOLDING ON

Despite its apparently dry, rocky context, everything about this elm declares it to be a rainforest tree – and one mythically linked to the need to find hope after loss. What better symbol could there possibly be for the lost rainforests of western Britain?

Yet, inexplicably, in all of the texts produced by the Rainforest Alliance and the otherwise wonderful book by Guy Shrubsole, *The Lost Rainforests of Britain*, elms are mentioned only in throwaway references to their demise from Dutch elm disease. One authority, Colin Tudge, in his *Secret Life of Trees*, even writes about their ‘extinction’.

But hold on, elms are not extinct. Yes, they have suffered immensely (in some places up to 99 per cent fatality) from *Ophiostoma novo-ulmi*, a fungal disease spread by elm bark beetles, but Dutch elm disease has not taken them all. In fact, in Assynt, they are largely untouched by the disease, with many trees still thriving



An elm in its element (main); inside the new elm tree nursery at Little Assynt (right)



remaining fragments of rainforest. Yet elms have been largely given up on and have rarely been included in native woodland planting schemes. If they'll just die of Dutch elm disease, why bother planting them, seems to be the thinking.

The counter to that is that we need hope and elm embodies this. Here in Assynt, with the support of the John Muir Trust and Scottish Forestry, Culag Community Woodland Trust is running a project involving the community in events to celebrate existing elms and to plant new ones.

We've been growing elms from local provenance seed in the community tree nursery at Little Assynt and are one of the sites for an exciting project at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh which involves breeding potentially resilient seedlings from elms that have survived multiple waves of Dutch elm disease.

The trees that grow on and survive the disease will spread resistance among the wider population. Growing and spreading wych elm, and encouraging natural regeneration around existing seed sources, helps to maintain and increase its genetic diversity.

Living elms are hosts to a whole community of other species – bryophytes, fungi, insects and birds – and those that die of natural causes contribute invaluable deadwood to the ecosystem. For these reasons and more, it's important not to give up on elm. □

About the author

A writer and environmental activist, Mandy Haggith is involved in the Assynt Elm Project, recently launched by the Culag Community Woodland Trust. culagwoods.org.uk

on crags, shading rivers and gracing areas of woodland.

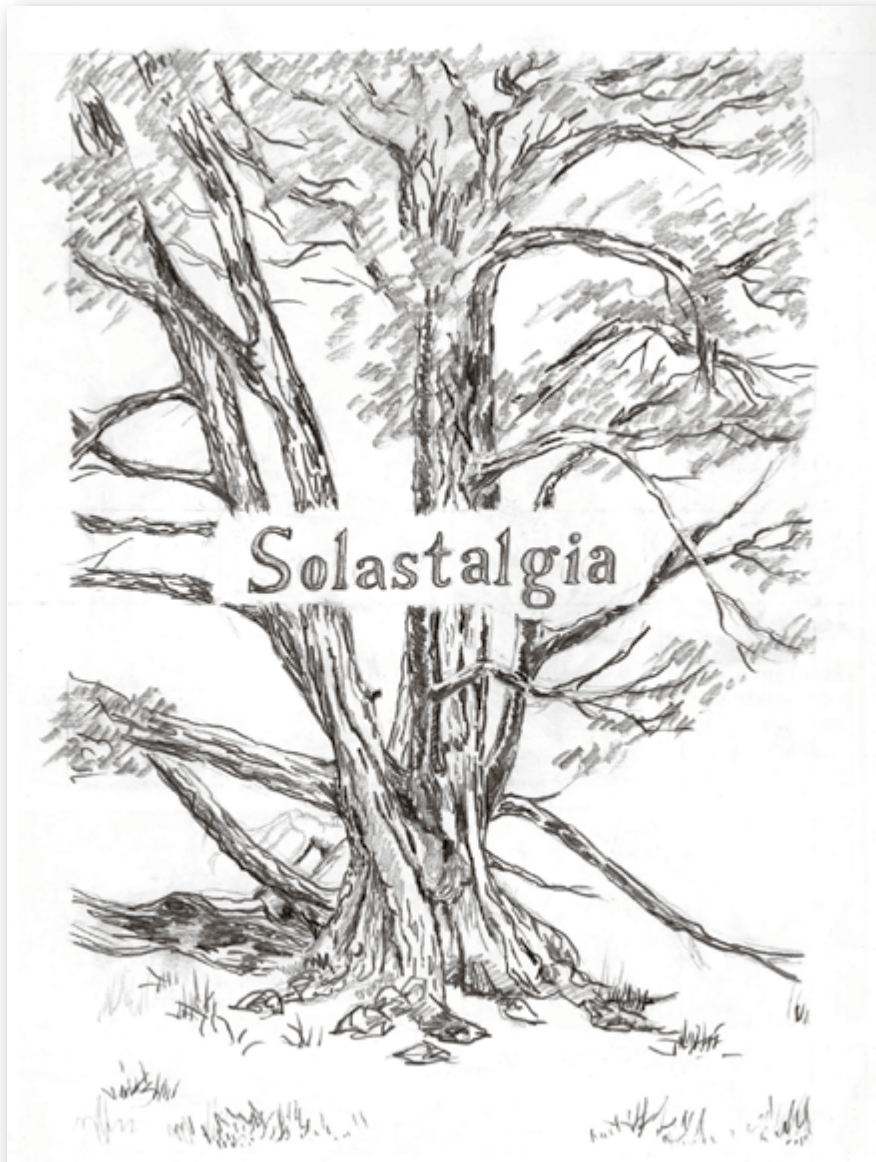
In spring, their flowers emerge almost as early as hazel catkins and they are already busy fruiting by the time rowans get around to thinking about flowering. They then spend the summer swathed in a great green gown of lush foliage. They are early to bed in autumn to make up for their early rise, with their leaves starting to golden by August; when they drop, they rot away rapidly.

In fact, everything about elms is quick – their seeds germinate immediately in June and their seedlings are ready for planting out the following spring. They grow fast as saplings and can be mature enough to reproduce in their teens. Elms are also a favoured Bonsai species because they respond to the constrained-roots, heavy-pruning regime by appearing ancient and contorted much faster than any other species.

It is this speed that lends them to woodland restoration: a key species as lost woods are replanted and linked with

And the winners are...

As we celebrated 40 years of caring for wild places in 2023, we invited artists from all disciplines to submit work based on what 'freedom for wild places' meant to them. Here is a snapshot of the category winners, with their work now on show in our Wild Space visitor centre



WRITING CATEGORY AND OVERALL WINNER

Solastalgia, a hand drawn comic book by Lizzie Wood

Lizzie is a self-taught painter and comic maker based in Inverness. *Solastalgia* was provoked by a solo trip to Glen Feshie which undid much of her preconceived ideas about landscape, wilderness and culpability. Her work documents this journey of understanding.

Artist statement: "I have the freedom to go into the hills, to find joy, peace, solace, sadness. Wild places are a backdrop for my choices and my actions, but when I avoid a muddy hollow in a path and erode the peat beside it, when I scratch my crampon over exposed rock; who speaks up? Freedom for wild places is freedom from destruction and degradation. When our freedoms negate those freedoms, there are no freedoms to be found at all."



2D CATEGORY WINNER

Allt nan Uamh, a print of copper plate etching by Brian D Hodgson

The strange and beautiful mountains and coastlines in Coigach and Assynt, North-West Scotland are central to Brian's work.

Artist statement: "Drawn on a grounded copper plate entirely on location over many years ... the erosive processes I use consider the meaning of an individual's actions and their finite time and space, within the vastness of existence."



3D CATEGORY WINNER

Ice Watch, a glass watch face etched with glacier flour by Sarah Casey

Based in Dumfries and Galloway, Sarah is a visual artist making drawings that explore ideas of preservation.

Artist statement: "Wild is a relative term. The environment is changing, and my recent work has sought to amplify the human entanglement in these 'wild' places."



PHOTOGRAPHY CATEGORY WINNER

*Stormshield, Metal print
photograph by Alistair Young*

Alistair is a photographer, writer and mountaineer based on the Isle of Skye.

Artist statement: "On a wild winter's day of gale and heavy rain, I was wondering what it would be like on the tops, when Blaven briefly cleared and called across the storm clouds. A fleeting moment of wild joy."



MULTIMEDIA CATEGORY WINNER

My Wilderness, MP4 video by Ana Norrie-Toch

Ana is a movement director, artist and choreographer based in Edinburgh.

Artist statement: "The catalyst for my creativity is in the exposure to our wild Scottish landscapes. It is in these wild spaces that I connect to my true Creative Freedom."



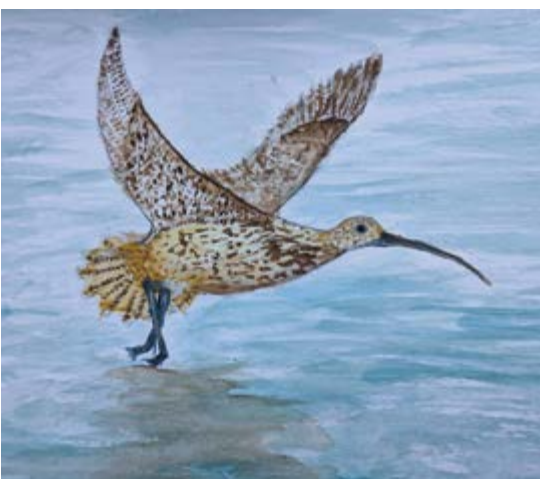
GROUP CATEGORY WINNER

*Stream of Freedom, a VR video by
Young Somerset*

A group of young people from West Somerset aged 11-14 created a vision of wilderness in 2050, using a 3D camera to photograph various locations in Exmoor National Park. Combining this photography with their own creative writing, this piece highlights the importance of taking action now to protect wild places in the future.

Further information

The Creative Freedom Exhibition is on display at the Trust's Pitlochry Visitor Centre, Wild Space until 25 May 2024. Entry is free. Open Mon-Sat, 10am-4.30pm

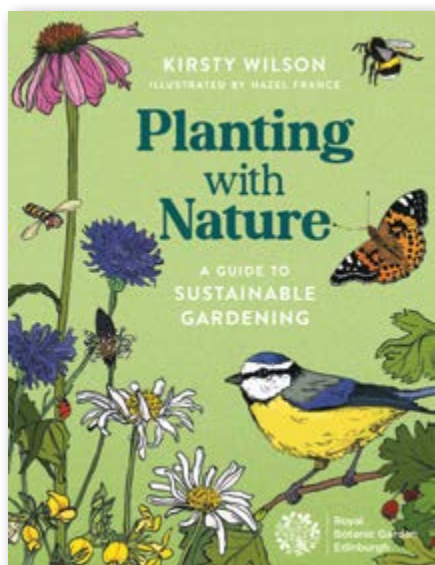


UNDER 17s CATEGORY WINNER

*Curlew, a watercolour painting
by Samuel Heath*

12-year-old Samuel is passionate about the outdoors. He loves hiking, watching birds and insects, observing mosses, lichen and fungi or just getting muddy for the sake of it.

Artist statement: "I don't want the curlew to be another dodo. I want people to know that a curlew is an incredible bird that helps the ecosystem to stay in balance."



Planting with Nature – a guide to sustainable gardening
by Kirsty Wilson

Julie Gough is inspired into action by a book that demonstrates how we can all make more of our garden spaces, whatever their size

KIRSTY Wilson sets out her aim for this book in the first pages “... no matter the size of your garden, you can make a positive difference to support nature and biodiversity”.

If you buy into this premise (and why wouldn't you?) and you have a garden to nurture, this book is a real treat. Without being preachy, it conveys the importance of each small change you can make that will improve the health and beauty of your garden, and enhance the life that it can support.

If you're a newbie gardener or a 'suck it and see' type (like me), the author provides interesting insights and clever ideas to try, with sound advice as to how to give each project the best chance of success. From planning layout, what to do when and how to control (and welcome!) weeds and pests without chemicals to which plants will thrive where and which insects they're good for, this book is a mine of information.

For seasoned gardeners, it might feel like it covers too many of the basics but there are so many useful

tips and advice which are good to be reminded of now and again. One interesting suggestion was to choose a wide range of plants in order to prolong the flowering season thus making nectar available throughout the year by planting a mixture of native and non-native plants. As the climate warms, this controversial idea is becoming much more feasible and beneficial to our wildlife.

Reading this book on a snowy February day in the north of England, looking out at the relentlessly cheery crocuses (croccii?) poking through the cold earth in my back garden, I feel inspired to head outside and get started.

I'm not sure I can manage planting a hedgerow or creating a water bog garden but I'm up for a mini wildflower meadow and a tree or two. Oh, and a woodland glade and a bug house of course. And I really should dig out at least some of the bricked-over front yard to let the rain seep away, while the garden shed would benefit from a green roof. And I've been meaning to create a wildlife pond since I moved here eight years ago ...

See, that's what this book does to you. Now, where's my spade?

£14.99
birlinn.co.uk

About the reviewer
Julie Gough is the Trust's Communications Editor

Others we like

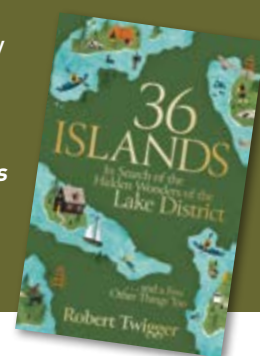
Great Scottish Walks, Helen and Paul Webster

Written by the founders of Walkhighlands, this comprehensive guide to 26 long-distance hiking trails in Scotland serves as a tantalising bucket list for those with a love of multi-day hikes. From long-distance classics (West Highland Way) and more accessible trails (Forth & Clyde Union Canal Towpath) to some truly wild adventures (Skye Trail, Cape Wrath Trail) there is



something here for all experience levels. Many of the trails can also be enjoyed as day walks or in shorter sections.
£20. adventurebooks.com

36 Islands, In Search of the Hidden Wonders of the Lake District, Robert Twigger
Fun, irreverent and imbued with a hybrid spirit of Ransome, Wainwright, Wordsworth



The Outrun, by Amy Liptrot

Naomi Dixon is entranced by an often uncompromising account of addiction and recovery set in two very different worlds

THE Outrun is not a new title – it was first published in 2016 and has most recently been made into a film – but it is no less powerful for the years that have passed since it first reached bookshelves.

Exploring Liptrot's struggles with addiction and what proved a transformative escape to Orkney, this beautifully written memoir centres on self-discovery, recovery and the connection between human life and the natural world.

It opens with a raw and vulnerable account of Liptrot's battle with alcoholism and her hedonistic, self-destructive lifestyle in London where she ends up admitting herself to rehab.

At the age of 30 and sober, but still struggling to find a sense of peace, Liptrot decides to retreat to her Orkney roots, seeking recovery in the wild, weather-beaten landscapes of her childhood.

Initially, she works on her father's sheep farm and then gets a job surveying endangered corncrake, living on the tiny island of Papa Westray. There, Liptrot finds comfort in the simplicity of small island life, far from the distractions of modern society.

She continues to pursue a life lived on the edge, but instead of seeking the

adrenaline rush that she used to get from alcohol, she instead chases her highs by joining a wild swimming club and hunting for thrilling glimpses of the Northern Lights, having "swapped disco lights for celestial lights".

It is clear that the digital world is still important to Liptrot even when living on one of the most remote islands in Orkney. She describes how technology is used to embrace aspects of nature and how it keeps her connected. An online app tracks her walking routes as she explores the island, with her rambles, over time, becoming slower and ever more meditative.

Similarly, she relies on email notifications to alert her to when she is most likely to see the Northern Lights, while online message forums and text groups tip-off the latest sightings of Orca pods.

For me, one of the joys of reading *The Outrun* is the way in which the author seamlessly blends her personal and often painful story with the sheer physical beauty of Orkney. Her lyrical writing provides an evocative account of the rugged landscape, ever-changing weather and diverse wildlife that inhabit this isolated archipelago.

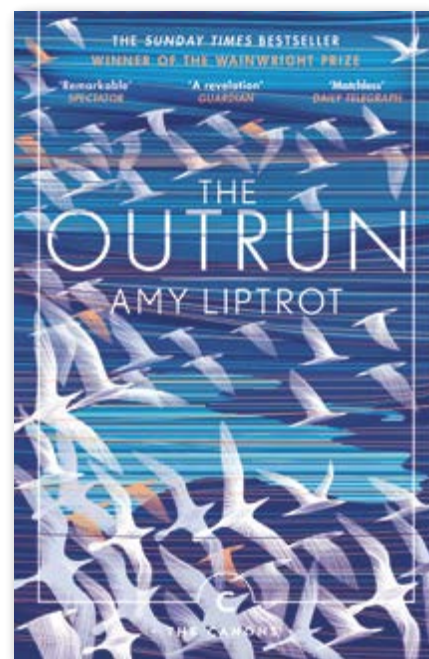
The power of nature to heal bodies and minds, and provide renewed hope, is here for all to see.

£10.99

canongate.co.uk

About the reviewer

Naomi Dixon is a Trust
Project Manager



and a few others along the way, this delightfully curious and, at times, renegade exploration of 36 micro-islands provides a glimpse into a Lake District that few get to see. It's both a grand adventure and an utter joy to read. £9.99. weidenfeldandnicolson.co.uk

Au cœur des solitudes, Lomig (in French)
This one's a little different. A beautiful graphic novel, *Au cœur des solitudes* (In the heart of solitude)



offers a loose biography of the first half of the life of John Muir. It starts with Muir's recovery in an Indiana hospital following an accident at a sawmill which nearly cost him his vision and continues to his arrival in Yosemite Valley in 1869 – a journey interspersed with memories of his childhood in Scotland and Wisconsin, and of his talent for inventing novel machines. €29.00. editions-sarbacane.com (see johnmuirtrust.org for a full review)

Dr Deborah Long

Kevin Lelland catches up with Dr Deborah Long, Chief Officer of Scottish Environment LINK and a Commissioner for the Scottish Government on a just transition



PHOTOGRAPH: WILLIAM GRANT FOUNDATION

Why are you passionate about working in the area of climate, community and the environment?

As a palaeoecologist I am used to looking at how and why landscapes change over time. Scotland has changed dramatically since early prehistory and the direction and pace of change now is leading towards irreversible damage. My passion is in turning that around so that future generations can enjoy Scotland's nature in its full glory.

What changes in land use will be needed as Scotland transitions to net zero?

It's not just about achieving net zero; it's about being nature positive too. That means tackling Scotland's chronic overgrazing so that native woodland can regenerate and grow. It means farming with soil biodiversity in mind because a healthy soil holds more carbon, supports better crops and more biodiversity. It means returning natural river courses, where we can, to maximise natural flood defence. And it means giving nature a chance to survive and thrive everywhere.

What does a just transition mean in terms of wild places?

Wild places in Scotland are unique

because the landscape has evolved since Neolithic times through extensive land management where nature and humans live side by side. A just transition is about rural communities being part of thriving and healthy ecosystems that support high levels of biodiversity and support farming and rural businesses.

How can communities be included in conversations that achieve change with respect?

It's about being involved from the start and in a way that works for the community. The current avalanche of consultations is hard to engage with, even with expert staff. For local communities, it's about making it easy for them to define their own vision of what their future looks like and then working out how to get there in a way that is equitable for them, for wider society and for future generations.

How can communities and businesses be helped to adapt?

The sad fact is that unless we all do more to limit our carbon and ecological footprints, none of our ways of life or business are sustainable. Part of this is government being clear with

regulation, with taxation and with support to help communities and businesses move towards activities that protect and restore our environment. The other part of it is through us all using our power as consumers and as civic society to demand better and more sustainable products and services.

What opportunities exist for sustainable business models in and near wild places?

I think there is huge appetite for innovative ways to tread more lightly on the planet. Showing by doing is immensely powerful and being amongst the vanguard of sustainable businesses, whose carbon and ecological footprints are not just invisible but actively giving back to the environment is immensely inspiring and can lead to an irresistible momentum. In Scotland, there are multiple examples of croft-based businesses which are showing the way to low impact, low mileage food production, restored ecosystems and a healthier lifestyle and who are totally inspiring.

What new skills and approaches are needed for this to happen?

There are two key aspects to this that I see. First, government needs to equip itself with the skills to be able to work with and communicate with local communities. This will take resources and a level of humility that would usher in a more collaborative and productive way of working together. Second, we all need to work together: debates today are highly polarised and confrontational. This approach isn't getting us anywhere. But by walking in each other's shoes, being willing to talk and listen, there is a chance Scotland could really show the way to a sustainable future for us all. □

Further information

For more on Scottish Environment LINK, visit [scotlink.org](https://www.scotlink.org)

About the interviewer

Kevin Lelland is the Trust's Director of Development and Communications

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