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Helicopters, hoverflies, pigs and woodland restoration



Left: Discussing silvicultural options for salvaging timber and future management of a Scots pine stand following the dramatic wind throw, visible here, of 2023's Storm Gerrit. © Edward Wilson

Bottom right: Glenmore Forest above Ryvoan Pass, with successful natural regeneration and structural development of Scots pine woodland as part of the Caledonian pinewood restoration project. © Edward Wilson

FLS Inshriach and Glenmore

19 June 2024

Glorious sunshine, unusual for Spring 2024, greeted the 28 RSFS members who gathered at Inshriach, Glen Feshie, for a fascinating day led by Brian Duff, Strathspey Forester with Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS). Our first stop was at the edge of the dramatic windblow caused by Storm Gerrit in December 2023, when gales devastated trees in a swathe stretching west to Fort Augustus.

Nicola Tallach and David Clarke, FLS planners, explained how the effects of the storm had had a knock-on impact on their plans for felling throughout the region. Helicopters were used to survey the area, and some emergency felling on tracks had taken place. The approach over the next three years will be to clear-fell some areas, leaving seed trees, and other blocks will be subject to 'extreme thinning', with only windblown trees removed. There is a local FLS moratorium on Scots pine planting due to fears of *Dothistroma*, so restocking will be through regeneration.

Removal of fallen trees here is hampered by environmental constraints, especially as this is a capercaillie area. Only 10 loads of timber are allowed on the narrow roads each day, and neighbouring Wildland in Glen Feshie, which was subject to fewer restrictions, had already tested the patience of local villages by removing considerable volumes straight after the storm.

The group then moved on to the riverside

area known as the Feshie Plug. Here Steve Blow, Delivery Manager for Cairngorms Connect (CC), described this management and planning collaboration between FLS, RSPB, NatureScot and Wildland, covering 600km². The River Feshie is notably mobile, regularly shifting its course, and an area of 14ha of Scots pine, larch and Norway spruce, next to and at times in the river, had been clearfelled and will be left unplanted as part of the CC Rivers Restoration project.

The next stop was in the Glenmore Forest, overlooking Loch Morlich. We drove about a mile up a track to a site above the Ryvoan pass, where Carl Allott from the Royal Scottish Zoological Society took us to view a pine hoverfly restoration site. His enthusiasm for the subject means a whole new cohort of people will now be looking more closely at waterlogged pine stumps near rowan trees.

We then walked a little further to a stunning viewpoint looking out across the route to the Green Lochan, with Cairngorm beyond, which showcased very successful restoration of Scots pine woods. This had involved felling all Sitka spruce in the 1990s, followed by excellent Scots pine regeneration. There were, no doubt, a number of factors behind this success, but one may be the high levels of ground disturbance during the felling, which would not be acceptable today.

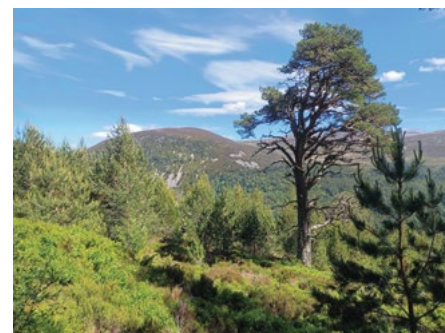
Tom Cameron, FLS North Region Wildlife Manager, explained the FLS deer culling policy, which has set annual targets for contractors at national, regional and local level.

In 2022/23, 8,900 deer were shot in North region, against a target of 8,360. The majority were red deer, followed by roe and then sika, but the last are predicted to become the major species within a few years. Feral pigs (not wild boar!) are also becoming an increasing problem. Full use is made of recent legislative changes to closed seasons and night shooting, and most culling takes place at night due to the high visitor pressure. The policy is to direct as much meat as possible to the food chain.

Finally, we moved further west towards Badaguish, where we viewed a more challenging site. Here a large area of Sitka spruce and lodgepole pine had been felled with a view to pinewood restoration, but given the FLS ban on Scots pine planting mentioned above, and the likelihood of Sitka spruce regeneration, it was impossible to see how the desired outcome could be achieved. There was considerable discussion about a way forward, and other than agreeing that some planting of broadleaves would be beneficial, the pragmatic solution may be to allow another generation of Sitka to establish.

Brian Duff and his colleagues were warmly thanked for providing such an excellent, varied day in perfect weather and, with the group reluctant to disperse, discussions continued.

Val Hamilton



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Magical wood pasture, and investment come to fruition

Capenoch

28 June 2024

We were kindly welcomed by Robert Gladstone, owner of Capenoch, and given a brief history of the estate, which consists of c.1,000ha, of which 495ha are forest and woodland. Significant planting was carried out in the 1980s, and more recently, with Robert himself having overseen planting, thinning and – increasingly now – felling.

Robert explained the historic Wood of Keyr, which was once an expansive broadleaved woodland stretching across the parish, but since greatly receded. In 2022 a project was launched to restore many of the field trees across a range of land ownership boundaries, with support from the Woodland Trust and the

local authority's Nature Restoration Fund.

We saw examples of recently planted oaks in purpose-built stock shelters to provide expansion of and succession for the existing mature oaks in the wood pasture. McNabb Laurie from D&G Woodlands explained the current funding on offer for such works, and gave Robert much credit for being instrumental in the Wood of Keyr restoration project.

The existing mature wood pasture in Horse Wood had a magical feel, with grand old oaks interspersed with lush grassland, and we heard from Beth Bridge, whose PhD fieldwork on the estate is looking at bats' and other species' use of the area. Fascinatingly, she had found bat abundance to be higher in the wood pasture than in either pure woodland or open pasture, indicating the huge value of this unique habitat.

After lunch at Penfillan Farm, we headed off to see the beautiful house at Capenoch and were treated to a spectacular view of the policy woodlands and adjacent pasture – but with little integration of either, contrasting with what we saw in the morning. We also saw the legacy of some very successful *Rhododendron ponticum* clearance in broadleaved woodland at Long Bank. A healthy understorey of seedlings and native vegetation were now abundant, and it was difficult to imagine it ever having been choked with rhododendron – a testament to how successful and lasting effective removal can be.

We then headed up the valley to see the commercial forestry blocks at Johns Wood, which had live harvesting ongoing. James Jones & Sons were just finishing one coupe and beginning a second. The p1987 crops had grown well, with good form, and consequently received healthy prices, validating a job well done by Robert and a fine investment come to fruition. Robert was keen to highlight some of the broadleaves which had been retained, and which had formed slightly awkward, unstable-looking clumps which he felt had been a mistake. He had since planted broadleaves as larger, stand-alone blocks benefiting from better economy of scale, a good example of which we could conveniently view immediately opposite us.

We ended by visiting a recent restock site of primarily Sitka spruce, which was growing away well on mounds. Willowherb was also growing fairly fiercely amongst the trees, although Robert, having dealt with it before, felt this didn't trouble the trees. Across the road we saw Douglas fir and Norway spruce in mixture, growing well together both on restock and woodland creation next to one another. From our vantage we had a great view back towards the main forestry blocks and the current harvesting sites. We thanked Robert for a superb visit covering so many aspects of forestry and land management, and closed by gifting him the book, *Oak: fine timber in 100 years* by Jean Lemaire (reviewed in this edition – see page 48), with a memento of our visit inscribed in the inside cover.

Andrew Macqueen



Upper left: The group considers thinning options in oak/ash woodland. © George Moore

Lower left: Mature wood pasture with successor trees in stock shelters. ©Andrew Macqueen

REGIONAL NEWS CENTRAL

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Montane woodland restoration and new conifer plantations

Ben Lawers and Cambusurich

16 July 2024

It was a day of contrasting and informative visits to Ben Lawers National Nature Reserve (NNR) and Cambusurich on Loch Tay.

Helen Cole and Andrew Warwick of NTS hosted us on the 4,250ha Ben Lawers site. Bequeathed to National Trust for Scotland (NTS) in 1950 with the remit to conserve flora, the NNR is also a botanical Special Area of Conservation (SAC), with montane scrub a qualifying feature.

With few examples of montane woodland and scrub management available, it was a good opportunity to learn. Since the 1990s, NTS has reduced grazing, particularly by sheep. This has come from purchases of farms and associated grazing rights, allowing NTS to remove sheep and associated fences. Some fences are electric, and these are effective against red deer but not roe. Roe deer migrating from low ground are now a bigger problem.

A native tree planting programme began in the 1990s, the results of which are very visible. This required fencing and, by 2000, there were three exclosures. In 2011 these were joined up, and there are now 1,100ha within fences. Within these are remnant birch trees but no regeneration. In summer 2023, NTS introduced cattle grazing using GPS collars, with the intention of breaking up vegetation to create seed beds for birch regeneration.

Above 600m on Ben Lawers is the montane scrub zone where various species of montane willow can be found, including downy, mountain, tea-leaved, woolly and creeping. Their number and range have been expanded through planting, using trees grown at NTS's nursery from seed collected on site – necessitated by a lack of commercially grown stock. NTS is looking to supply other sites with their own planting stock, too. Planting at high density means less chance of hybridisation. For now, it is not known if montane willow is provenance-specific, but it is thought that altitudinal range is more important than locale.

In contrast, Cambusurich, on the south side of Loch Tay, presented an opportunity for Charles Bushby and Weronika Rapa of Scottish Woodlands to lead us around a young, diverse conifer and productive broadleaf planting. Created using four different planting models, 13km of fencing, eight conifer species and productive oak and birch, this site, like Ben



Lawers, gave us plenty to talk about.

Purchased in 2016, the site was bare hillside used for grazing. The German owners wanted to create a woodland that was resilient and future climate-ready, using a wide range of conifer species in single-species blocks and in mixture. With advice sought from Bill Mason, grand, silver and Douglas firs were planted lower down, with noble fir at higher altitudes.

Establishment was slow, with high inputs of management and labour required. Noble fir struggled, and required high levels of beating up. Eventually the firs took, and are all growing well. There was a lot of discussion on the comparatively high cost, extended maintenance period and risks of establishing diverse conifers over Sitka spruce. Future markets for firs were also considered.

We then looked at the productive broadleaf crops. Some felt planting at 3,100/ha was too low, evidenced by the early formative pruning that had already taken place in the oak. Tubes protected against hares, and initial growth rates were high. This, though, had led to problems of instability. The tubes were a substantial additional cost, and their removal will be, too. Timing for this was debated, along with the merits of plastic vs biodegradable tubes.

The last stop got everyone talking. Norway spruce or Scots pine had been planted in two rows, with a single row of birch. The birch had

Above: A pause on the tour to discuss juniper, including establishment difficulties and managing the risk of *Phytophthora*. © Fenning Welstead

taken much more quickly than the conifers, but in places the pine was catching up. The concept here was to thin out the birch at year 15 for biomass, but the loss of a local market might force a rethink.

The one thing that both our visits had in common was the variety of talking points, proving again what a diverse industry we have.

Mike Thomson

SAVE THE DATES

We are pleased to announce a busy events schedule for 2025. Outline details so far are:

18 March – Elsoms Trees

29 May – Argaty

4 June – Integration of trees on farms - Fife

16 July – Queen Elizabeth Forest Park

All regional events will be listed and bookable in due course at bit.ly/rsfs-events. Check your fortnightly RSFS Members' Newsletter to be alerted to new event listings going live.

REGIONAL NEWS

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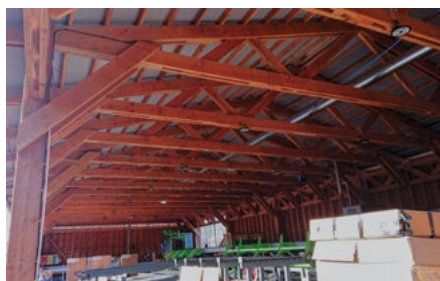
Innovating digital tools to help every harvested tree find a home

My membership of the RSFS was instigated back in 2018 by James Hepburne Scott at the ICF's Innovation for Change conference. I'd been busy minding my own business when he struck up a conversation and recruited me on the spot. Little did he know that he was simultaneously recruiting RSFS's youngest member. The following summer we attended many memorable field trips and, in between baby-admin, I began to gain an appreciation of the nuanced business that is growing trees.

A lot has happened since then for forestry, with huge growth in recognition of its significance, and also growing awareness of the pressures our forests are facing. There is much to be done, but there is nothing like a good field trip to a forest or sawmill to give you hope! Further down the supply chain, the other thing giving me hope is the people who are reinventing construction: timber-first, offsite manufacturing companies who are designing healthy homes to use the timber we have, and who have social and environmental considerations baked into their models from the beginning.

Manufacture of homes in a factory setting does, however, bring a tension: on the one hand, forestry is being pushed to diversify, whilst on the other, the requirements of offsite manufacture push material standardisation and productisation – although not necessarily one-size-fits-all, particularly given the wave of exciting products being developed under the Forestry Commission's Timber in Construction Innovation Fund. Matching of supply with demand, and demand with supply, may become more complex, and yet is of vital importance.

Initially catalysed by funding from Scottish Forestry, I started developing an online timber marketplace called Cloud Forest, to help every tree find a good home. Further funding from the Forestry Commission's Woods into Management Forestry Innovation Fund



Left: An impressive beam-span at Logie sawmill.
© Simon Stuart



Below left: Hester in a timber yard in 2019 with that year's youngest attendee of the RSFS Annual Study Tour. © Hester Robertson

Sawmills and harvesting contractors would like a visible pipeline of timber parcels, but timber parcels are like buses: you wait an age, and then three come at once.

'Well, you can have a period of three months when nothing's offered to you, and then for some reason... three or four parcels, all around £100,000, will be offered. Well, you can't afford to buy them all, you can't afford to not get one of them, and so it's very difficult to do the pricing.'
(Sawmill)

In response, we have developed two features that can help overcome these information gaps, and I'd love to hear what RSFS members think.

Timber alerts - Sawmills and others looking for logs or standing trees can save a search and receive timber alerts straight to their inbox when something matching their requirements is listed. Sign up for timber alerts at www.cloudforest.market/sawmill/signup.

Planned timber parcels - woodland managers can list timber parcels with planned operation dates. This enables woodland managers to gauge people's interest and plan ahead to find good homes for all their trees. As one person from a large sawmill put it: 'Longer term planning would benefit everyone.' Head to www.cloudforest.market to learn more.

'We're sat there going, oh bloody hell, I wish you didn't [...] chop that for firewood. We've got a market for that. There's a lot more money in that.' (Sawmill)

Hester Robertson

has enabled us to take this much further. Alongside my colleague Pietro Fareri, we spent last year interviewing people along the timber supply chain, from forest owners right through to those working in construction, to understand the challenges they are facing and how digital tools might help.

We found that individuals and businesses are struggling to find the information they need to plan in both the short and longer term. As a result, timber is being wasted. What I found most surprising was that sawmills large and small do not have confidence in their ability to secure logs. In the words of one sawmill:

'I'm thinking [...] yes, invest, but don't get carried away, because I've got no confidence the raw material is going to be there. And [...] we're not talking here 20 to 30 years ahead. We're talking two or three years down the line, five years down the line.'

Aside from the few who have access to guaranteed-volumes contracts, the main information on which a lot of sawmills are anticipating future timber supply is what they see on the market today. Searching for timber can waste time and energy.

'The biggest pain in the ass is trying to find certain timbers at certain times because the liaisons between everybody are – they're just awful.'
(Sawmill)

You can read our report, *Homewood bound? Challenges along the UK's small-scale timber supply chain from forest to construction*, at cloud-forest.co.uk/resources/homewoodbound.html. Get in touch with Hester at hello@cloudforest.market.