

CALEDONIA DREAMING

Report by James Fair



The management of huge swathes of Scottish moorland and forest has been making headlines, with passions running high in support of the varying approaches to land stewardship. Now there's a bold new vision for the future of the Cairngorms – and it is most definitely *not* rewilding.

Golden eagles are among a host of raptor species breeding within the area covered by the 200-year Cairngorms Connect project.

Henrik Karlsson/Nature in Stock/FLPA



Cairngorms Connect offers new opportunities around tourism and sustainable forestry and farming.



Left: Loch Morlich is surrounded by Glenmore Forest Park's spectacular Caledonian forest, home to pine martens, crested tits and red squirrels.

Above: the wild floodplains of the Insh Marshes shelter waders in spring and whooper swans in winter. Right: culling red deer will promote forest regrowth.



Alternate visions

Cairngorms Connect combines Highland sports activities and 21st century-style wildlife watching.



RIVERS AND LOCHS

A day's tuition in fly-fishing costs up to £360, or £10 for two hours 'catch-and-release' trout fishing. But if you prefer to watch a naturally talented fisherman (above), a morning's photography session at the Rothiemurchus osprey hide is up to £140, or £30 without a guide.



FORESTS AND GLENS

Glen Feshie offers the chance to go deer-stalking (for £600), but the prospect of spotting an alternative monarch of the glen, the capercaillie (above), may be more alluring. A day with a wildlife tour company is about £200-£300 for up to six, though caper sightings are not guaranteed.



MOUNTAIN AND MOORLAND

In local sporting pursuits, grouse shooting has the highest price tag – up to £2,700 for two days in some cases. In contrast, a 90-minute guided walk to see the red grouse's cousin, the ptarmigan, is just £21.60.

Next time you're lucky enough to find yourself in the Cairngorms, follow the road through the spectacular Caledonian pine forest at Glenmore Forest Park – listening out for the cheery trill of crested tits if you're on foot – and then head up the ever-steep gradient until you emerge from the trees and arrive at Coire na Ciste.

Before climbing further to where the funicular railway takes you up Cairn Gorm in search of ptarmigan and mountain hares, pause to admire the thickly forested landscape below and the ridge that stretches from Craiggowrie to Meall a' Bhuaichaille. It's not just a fabulous view – you're overlooking Britain's largest wildlife restoration programme, Cairngorms Connect.

All told, the ambitious scheme covers 600km² of forest, moorland and subalpine plateau, rising 1,100m from the floodplain of the River Spey at 200m above sea level to the UK's second highest peak, 1,309m Ben Macdui.

At the Pass of Ryvoan you can see Scots pine, birch and willow creeping up the hillside. Beyond is the vast expanse of Abernethy Forest that's home to ospreys in summer and a small, though elusive, population of capercaillie, the increasingly rare and threatened woodland grouse. In the other direction is the Insh Marshes, where you'll find a different suite of wildlife: breeding curlews and dragonflies in spring and summer, and whooper swans and hen harriers in winter.

Active intervention

Cairngorms Connect is not rewilding. There are no plans to reintroduce long-lost predators such as the wolf and lynx, nor even that most fashionable of landscape engineers, the humble beaver. And unlike the work being done at Sussex's Knepp Castle Estate – featured in *BBC Wildlife* in August – it is not letting nature take its course, either. This is habitat intervention on a grand scale.

There are four partners in Cairngorms Connect: RSPB Scotland, which owns Abernethy (including Loch Garten) and the Insh Marshes; Scottish Natural Heritage, which manages Invereshie and Inshriach

NNR and part of Abernethy; Forestry Commission Scotland, which manages Glenmore and Rothiemurchus; and Wildland Limited, a private body owned by the Danish multi-billionaire and rewilding enthusiast Anders Povlsen. Povlsen's Glen Feshie estate is on the western side of the project area.

At the heart of the management plan is a target to reduce red deer numbers, and keep them low, in order to reduce browsing of young trees. Scotland's deer population has more than doubled since the early

1960s, leading to massively impaired forest regeneration across the country. Cairngorms Connect would like to see deer density reduced to about four animals per km². Currently, the density ranges from four to 20 per km² across the national park.

By way of contrast, the Inner Hebridean island of Islay has a deer density of nearly 28 per km². But, says Jeremy Roberts, who leads on Cairngorms Connect for the RSPB Scotland, deer density is not the key target. "The real measure is how our trees are responding," he says. "Our target is to maintain browsing of the leading stems of young pine trees at below five per cent, and to see broadleaved trees thriving, too."

Balancing act

Cairngorms Connect is not just about deer reduction, either. While Scots pine will bounce back on its own once the big herbivores have been thinned out, Caledonian pine forest also naturally contains broadleaved species such as birch, alder and willow, plus juniper, and in many areas these are poorly represented because they are more succulent and therefore more heavily browsed. So Cairngorms Connect is establishing seed

sources of these species to give the deciduous community a helping hand.

Roberts also says that willow and birch are able to thrive at much higher altitudes than previously believed. Dwarf versions of these species, twisted and deformed by high winds and extreme cold, can survive at up to 900m. "We've looked at [comparable] upland areas in Norway, and now know we should have a lot more montane woodland than we do," he adds. Stock is being grown in nurseries to be planted out to reinforce what is already there and establish a "seed source that will overwhelm grazing animals," says Roberts.

This doesn't meet with everyone's approval. "We have a serious issue with that as a general principle," says Tim Baynes of Scottish Land & Estates, which represents the traditional sporting estates. Heather moorland provides habitat for red grouse, waders and raptors, he argues. "We can see the point in letting the edges move a bit," he adds, "but there's a question mark over allowing woodland to just replace moorland." Baynes has no issue with other aspects of Cairngorms Connect, such as peat restoration, which he says many of his members are also engaged in. ▶



Trilling crested tits welcome visitors to native Caledonian pine forest.

Forest: SCOTLAND; The Big Picture/NFL; deer: Desmond Dugan/FLPA; ptarmigan: Dave Pressland/FLPA; bog & osprey: Peter Cairns/2020VISION/NPL; capercaillie & tit: Andrew Mason/FLPA



Within the forest of the Cairngorms Connect area, work is being carried out to create a more diverse structure. Trees are felled and left for invertebrates and to open up the canopy to encourage the growth of blaeberry (bilberry), the young shoots, leaves and fruits of which are food sources for capercaillies and black grouse, as well as hosting invertebrates that are vital for ‘caper’ chicks. Or teams go in with a mechanical harvester and cut the trees off at about 5–6m. “This gives us standing deadwood, which is great for woodpeckers and crested tits,” says Roberts.

For peat's sake

Higher up, blanket bogs – a habitat for breeding waders, specialised plants and rare dragonflies – are being restored by blocking drainage channels, and exposed areas of peat are being reprofiled to make them less vulnerable to erosion. Inoculation of the peat with moss, heather and cottongrass is also being carried out.

Though the partners in Cairngorms Connect are most definitely not referring to it as rewilding, this is as much to do with the connotations of the word, believes Pete Mayhew of the Cairngorms National Park Authority (NPA). The NPA has an advisory role without being a partner.

“People in the Highlands get a bit nervous about the term rewilding because there’s a lot of history with the Clearances,” Mayhew says. The Highland Clearances were the



Clockwise from top: the tree canopy is being opened up to boost blaeberry – a vital food for capercaillies; dwarf willow and birch thrive at higher altitudes than once thought possible; The Monarch of the Glen (1851); pine martens draw many wildlife-watchers.

forced removal of tenant farmers and other workers from Scottish estates in the 18th and 19th centuries, and rewilding can imply a similar depopulation of the landscape. But, adds Mayhew, quoting Frans Schepers of Rewilding Europe, “If you think of a car park in London as 1, and Alaska as 10, and everything in between as on the continuum, then some places are moving from 1 to 2 and some from 8 to 9 – but it’s all rewilding if you’re bringing nature back.”

Jeremy Roberts of RSPB Scotland is adamant they are not telling anyone else how they should manage their land. But he suggests that what one might call ‘ecological restoration’ does open up a different vision for the future of Scotland’s uplands than the traditional hunting, shooting and fishing model of recent decades.

Cairngorms Connect
What does it cover?



5,000
different species have been recorded in the Cairngorms Connect area.

11
species of raptor regularly breed in the area, and **50%** of Scotland’s capercaillies.

10%
Percentage of the national park that Cairngorms Connect covers.

47
km² of ancient Caledonian pinewood. **100**
km² of peat-rich bogs.

Graphic supplied by SCOTLAND: The Big Picture

Clockwise from left: SCOTLAND: The Big Picture/NPL; Laurie Campbell/NPL; Jan Holm/Loop/Alamy; Painters/Alamy

“It is asking people to relinquish control,” says wildlife photographer Pete Cairns, who has worked in the area for more than 20 years. “No Highland estate makes money out of deer stalking these days.” What Cairngorms Connect is creating offers new economic opportunities around tourism and sustainable forestry and farming.

“Go back a century, and who would have said that Yellowstone [the world’s most famous rewilding project] would be the hub of economic regeneration,” points out Cairns. In time, if exciting raptors such as golden eagles become more numerous, and with the East Coast potentially offering new opportunities to watch charismatic marine wildlife such as orcas and humpback whales, this part of Europe as a nature-tourism destination.

But there are cultural and psychological obstacles. “Rewilding is a philosophical process, and the challenge is to overcome the resistance to change,” says Cairns.

“A blessing or a burden?”

Change is coming. Edwin Landseer’s famous 1851 painting *The Monarch of the Glen* has long been used to sell Scotland, on everything from malt whisky and biscuits, to soup. “For many people,” states the website of National Galleries Scotland, “it encapsulates the grandeur and majesty of Scotland’s highlands and wildlife.” This view is no longer universally accepted, however. “Is *Monarch of the Glen*, symbol of Scotland, a blessing or a burden?” asked the *Sunday Herald* newspaper in a 2005 article pondering whether what it represents still benefits Scotland today.

The painting was reportedly done by Landseer in Glen Feshie, where – thanks to deer culling by Wildland – you may be as likely to see a golden eagle or black grouse as a red deer stag, today and in the future. Perhaps these and other Caledonian species will come to be the real icons of the Highlands in the 21st century, just as the monarch of the glen was in the two that preceded it. 🐾

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