

FRIENDS OF THE SCOTSMAN / ENVIRONMENT

Growing desire to bring back the wildness and wonder of forests

It's that time of year again, when swathes of our countryside turn into a blaze of fiery colours from vivid gold through to russet red and deep crimson. This annual spectacle reminds us not just of the importance of trees in our landscapes, but also of the onward march of time, marked by the cycle of seasons.

Woods and trees feature prominently in legend and folklore. We know of ancient woodlands and veteran trees that stand as memorials to times long gone. The bond between people and forests is deep rooted. Woods symbolise wildness and wonder, darkness and mystery.

Trees were of such cultural importance that generations of Scots and Gaels named places and landmarks after them. Many familiar local place names are connected with trees: Bourtreehill (hill of the elder); Aikenhead (area with oaks); Leiterfearn (alder slope); Beith (birch). Each letter of the traditional Gaelic alphabet was named after a tree or a shrub.

Yet Scotland is one of the most sparsely-wooded countries in Europe, with our woodland and forest cover consisting mainly of young non-native trees grown quickly for timber. Despite heroic efforts by many individuals and organisations, we could still lose the heart of our native forests and much of the wildlife that depends on the tree cover.

There is some debate about how



Andrew Bachell of the John Muir Trust reports on efforts to restore Scotland's ancient woodlands

much of Scotland was covered in trees in the distant past. Before agriculture and peatland began to spread across our uplands as the climate became wetter and cooler, we know there were huge pine and broadleaved forests across the Highlands and Lowlands. These would not have formed a single Great Wood of Caledon, but would have been part of a complex of habitats including fens, bogs, grasslands, dunes and screes. Nonetheless, trees would have dominated.

The processes which diminished the woodlands of the past were many and complex. They certainly included felling for firewood, construction and shipbuilding, and the clearing of forests to create space for farming.

There are historic records of these changes – and more ancient ecological records embedded in soils, sediments and peat. The keeping of grazing animals has since prevented natural regeneration and our woodland has become characterised by isolated blocks, often on poorer soils in areas less suitable for cultivation.

These beautiful but depleted

remnants are all we have left of one of the greatest natural resources the land can provide. The heart has been lost from our woods and with that we have lost an important reminder of our ultimate dependence on what nature provides.

There are schemes to restore our wild woods. This is not about turning the clock back but about creating new resources. One such scheme is the Heart of Scotland Forest Partnership, centred on the famous landmark of Schiehallion in Perthshire.

The east side of the mountain is owned and managed by the John Muir Trust, which together with neighbouring owners, the Highland Perthshire Communities Land Trust, Dalchonsie & Kynachan Estate, the Scottish Wildlife Trust and Forest Enterprise, is working to restore ancient woodlands, create new woodland and make sure that trees are re-established.

The project is also supported by Woodland Trust Scotland, which contributes funding, saplings and expertise. The project was recently cited in the Scottish Government's



Forest Enterprise Scotland, Highland Perthshire Communities Partnership,

Scottish Wildlife Trust, Kynachan Estate and Woodland Trust Scotland signed the Heart of Scotland Partnership agreement

Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement as an example of responsible and sustainable stewardship, with economic, social, cultural and environmental benefits.

There will be timber production and rural skills training for young people, and space for nature to thrive

and people to enjoy the experience of a wild woodland once again.

Funds come from several benefactors and public sources. Key is a holistic approach that includes people on the ground and limiting the impact of sheep and deer. There is no timescale for this work because it will never be

finished. There is no such thing as a final forest: nature is infinitely adaptable and constantly evolving. Once established it will be nature that sets the pace and outcome.

That might seem slow and faintly romantic, but none of us will live to see the youngest trees today reach

beyond early adulthood. Some may live for centuries and who can tell what new myths and pleasures may arise around the Heart of Scotland Forest, or what new names may be acquired in that future landscape. Andrew Bachell, chief executive, John Muir Trust.



Grouse moors can play a big part in saving the threatened curlew from extinction

Dr Adam Smith reports on a worrying decline in numbers

The curlew is now one of the most pressing bird conservation priorities in the UK. Its decline has been startling and swift – a 46 per cent drop nationally between 1994 and 2010, a 20 - 30 per cent reduction in breeding curlew numbers worldwide in the past 15 years, and a halving of our UK curlew population in the last 25 years.

We have a crucial role to play in curlew conservation because the UK accounts for around one fifth of the global population in the winter, and around one quarter of all breeding pairs in spring and summer, so what we do in the UK will have a major impact on the survival of this species.

It was added to the UK Red List at

the end of 2015, the list that basically flags up a significant risk of species extinction.

But many will be familiar with the cry of the curlew, and would regard it as a familiar bird both across our farmlands, uplands and estuaries and mudflats where it overwinters in flocks that can number into the thousands. So it's important that we wake up to this crisis.

It is also important to note that, in terms of UK numbers, the decline is more marked in lowland areas south of Birmingham.

For the southern curlew it is estimated that only around 250 - 300 breeding pairs remain, meaning that if nothing changes then these birds will be gone in eight years. But what is causing this decline across



the whole country? A great deal of research has been carried out to try to establish why this popular bird is in such dire straits, and the most important conclusion is that low breeding success is responsible.

While other factors such as loss and fragmentation of breeding habitat,

urbanisation, afforestation, human disturbance, changes to wetland habitat and nest destruction due to agricultural factors have also played a part, low breeding success, rather than reduced adult survival, is the main cause.

This, in addition to habitat pressures, stacks the odds against the curlew. Increased predation is the main threat to breeding success, and one study has shown that more than 70 per cent of curlew nests (between 1996 and 2006) did not result in the hatching of a single chick.

Of those that do survive only half make it to fledging – the ability to fly – foxes and crows being the main culprits in terms of taking a significant number of those chicks that did hatch. Adjusting farming

practices may still provide a lifeline to those curlew that use lowland nesting sites, but to conserve the species we must also protect the vast majority that breed in our uplands.

Research undertaken by the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) has established that curlew thrive on grouse moors.

We used this work to predict what might happen with and without gamekeepers killing foxes and crows over the next five years.

Our predictions show that with gamekeepers the curlew population increases by 93 per cent and without them it falls by 6 per cent.

So a clear strategy would seem to be evident. Whilst the national decline may have originally been driven by habitat loss, we know that active

keeping in places where curlew are known to breed successfully, including grouse moors, is a vital component in preserving remaining breeding habitat and protecting young curlew from foxes and crows.

GWCT is keen to track information about curlews from farmers and land managers, and we have an Action for Curlew campaign running on our website where we are gathering information about nest locations. In Scotland specifically, we are running a programme of wader count training days for land managers as the more information that we have then the better we can understand how to provide local solutions.

We also have a free Conserve the Curlew booklet available from our website here. www.gwct.org.uk/

action-for-curlew. If we act now, and act positively and decisively, we may just be in time – but the clock for the survival of the curlew in the UK is certainly ticking.

Dr Adam Smith, director, Scotland, Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust.



WHAT DO YOU THINK?
www.scotsman.com

Free exclusive David Fleck commissioned artwork celebrating 200 years of The Scotsman plus

50% off*



6 days
£4.98 per week

7 days
£5.98 per week

Subscription also includes free access to the tablet edition worth £7.99 per month, meaning you can still enjoy your copy of The Scotsman wherever you are.

To take up this offer visit localsubplus.co.uk/six and use the code 338PA-SIX for The Scotsman or include Scotland on Sunday for seven days of news by visiting localsubplus.co.uk/sco and using the code 338PA-SCO or call 0330 123 5950 and quote your chosen code above

Subscribe to The Scotsman and enjoy your quality daily read at 50%* OFF and receive an exclusive signed David Fleck artwork

THE SCOTSMAN
Scotland on Sunday

Offer available to new subscribers only when paying by monthly Direct Debit. * 50% discount available for the first three months, then 20% discount applies thereafter. Calls will be charged at your standard network rate.

HOW TO BECOME A FRIEND

On these pages we present articles written by our Friends, with them setting their own agenda, using their own words. Being a Friend of The Scotsman is open to institutions, trade associations, professional bodies, societies, interest groups, charities and others. Individuals are not eligible nor, generally, are individual companies or political parties. The Friends of The Scotsman pages are a forum for discussion and debate and for the transfer of information rather than a marketplace. In return, the Friends sign up to a subscription package that ensures a supply of The Scotsman at a discount rate to the people in the organisation who require it. For more information, e-mail mcgrory@scotsman.com or visit www.scotsman.com