

Ben Shieldaig News

Spring 2022

See inside
for the latest
progress at
Ben Shieldaig
and more

Connecting the dots

The purchase of the Couldoran Estate will allow Woodland Trust Scotland to expand its woodland creation schemes and connect important habitats.

The purchase of the Couldoran Estate last year has created many exciting opportunities for the Woodland Trust, even though their plans never included taking on the entire 4,500-acre estate.

"As part of our planning for Ben Shieldaig, we always knew we wanted to include a small part of the Couldoran estate in our woodland creation scheme at Glen Shieldaig," says Estate Manager, Malcolm Turner. "But when the entire estate came up for sale, we looked at our general objectives and it made sense. Our goal is to expand plans for Ben Shieldaig and create woodland and nature 'corridors' that connect with other woodlands in the area and Couldoran will help us achieve that."

This means linking the Shieldaig Pinewood site of special scientific interest (SSSI) with the Rassal Ashwood SSSI and other important local habitats by expanding existing fragments of woodland.

The plan would also give wildlife a boost, with species from the iconic red squirrels to butterflies, lichens and mosses benefiting (see page 2 for more on red squirrels).

The Woodland Trust team are exploring a range of opportunities, which they'll be consulting on in the coming months. "One opportunity is to create our own nursery facility to grow the trees on site at Couldoran but there could also be opportunities that could benefit the

local community, including affordable housing, which we're very keen to explore," said Malcolm. "Couldoran also gives us estate grounds with facilities that we don't have at Ben Shieldaig so we have lots of space for our own development. For example, we're hoping to be able to take on a wildlife manager, which would be an exciting prospect for us."

While plans for Couldoran are in their infancy, the Trust envisages an additional 320 hectares of woodland potentially suitable for planting in addition to the 110 hectares that were already included in the Ben Shieldaig plans. "We'll be starting survey work very soon, which will give us a much better idea of where the best opportunities for woodland creation are," said Malcolm.

This summer, Couldoran will host the Woodland Trust's BioBlitz, a day filled with family-friendly and 'citizen science' activities. For more information, see page 2.



Image credit - Dani Connor

Shieldaig stars in red squirrel film

A new YouTube series on the conservation of red squirrels includes an episode filmed in Shieldaig.

Shieldaig has recently featured in a new series of YouTube films about the conservation of red squirrels produced by zoologist, wildlife photographer and 'Queen of Red Squirrels' Dani Connor.

Dani, who has been filming red squirrels across the UK for the series, shot to social media fame in 2020 after tracking the progress of four orphaned red squirrels in Sweden in a YouTube video series.

Shieldaig was chosen for the new series, sponsored by the Red Squirrel Survival Trust, because the conservation story in the west Highlands is different from the rest of the UK, says Estate Ranger, Caz Austen. "In places like the Lake District where they are also filming, a large part

of conservation is about controlling grey squirrels but our story is one of reintroduction back into a habitat where that threat doesn't exist. Our woodlands are a stronghold for the red squirrel."

Filmmaker Dani is also interested in the Woodland Trust's plans to create a 'squirrel highway' by expanding woodland cover in the area. "We have a unique opportunity to establish stable red squirrel populations here. Our problem is one of connectivity as the woodlands are so fragmented meaning the squirrels have to travel quite a long way across open ground to expand their range. They can do this – we believe squirrels released in Shieldaig may have made their way to Torridon or beyond – but it's much easier if they have trees to spread through." The woodland creation schemes at both Ben Shieldaig and Coudoran will see important woodlands linked together, creating habitats with much greater connectivity.

Dani's film also includes interviews with local people such as red squirrel volunteer, Kalie Wilkinson.

"I've been a red squirrel volunteer for two years now, helping Trees for Life (the charity that reintroduced red squirrels to Shieldaig in 2016) to track the squirrels progress," says Kalie.



As part of her volunteering duties, Kalie spends an hour or two every few weeks scouting for signs of the elusive animals. "Trees for Life has a map divided into 1km squares on Ben Shieldaig and along the coast road. We pick a different square each time then look for signs like chewed pine cones or hazelnut shells as it's quite hard to spot an actual squirrel."

Kalie also accompanies Woodland Trust Estate Ranger Caz Austen onto Ben Shieldaig twice a year to monitor the red squirrels. "Both in spring and autumn we set up peanut feeders and trail cameras to get footage of the squirrels. The feeder also has a sticky strip that traps a few hairs, which are sent for analysis to check their DNA and health."

To watch Dani's red squirrel films, visit her YouTube channel at Dani Connor Wild.

Get involved!

The red squirrel surveys for this year will be starting soon, contact Caz Austen if you'd like to get involved cazausten@woodlandtrust.org.uk

Citizen scientists assemble!

The Woodland Trust's BioBlitz offers a day of fascinating and fun activities for the whole family this summer as it seeks to learn more about the wildlife on the Coudoran Estate.

Volunteers and enthusiasts play an essential role in tracking and recording wildlife in the UK, as 'citizen scientists' across the country contribute to many databanks of information on both native and non-native UK species.

If you want to find out more about local wildlife and help the Woodland Trust at the same time, then this summer's BioBlitz is the event for you. The day-long BioBlitz

will see a range of activities including expert-led wildlife walks, learning sessions and even the opportunity to undertake hands-on fieldwork by collecting and identifying species for experts to identify.

"We encourage anyone interested in finding out more about the unique and varied wildlife on the estate to join us at the BioBlitz," says organiser, Estate Ranger, Caz Austen. "No expertise is required because we will have a range of experts who can help you with any questions you might have. It's a great way to get connected with nature but you'll also be helping us as we want to learn as much as we can about the wildlife on the estate."

While the event is still in the planning stages, Caz hopes to get the moth traps and bat detectors out, as well as explore the pond with a dragonfly expert. More details about the schedule will be available nearer the time.

If anyone is interested in volunteering to help at the event, Caz is looking for experts to help with identifying the wildlife that visitors find as well as those willing to help with the general running of the event such as stewards. cazausten@woodlandtrust.org.uk



Breaking new ground

Image credit Steve Carter / WTML

The Woodland Trust has just published its draft woodland management plans, kickstarting an exciting year for Ben Shieldaig.

Since the Woodland Trust acquired the Ben Shieldaig estate three years ago this month, there has been a tremendous amount of working going on behind the scenes. Malcolm and Caz – assisted by an army of local volunteers – have been surveying, planning and laying the foundations for a bright future.

2022 will be a pivotal year for the Woodland Trust here in the north-west Highlands. This Spring, the Trust has published its draft management plans for the next few years and, in the autumn, ground preparation and fencing will begin for planting the first trees in 2023.

"The Trust took on Ben Shieldaig because it is a fantastic opportunity to conserve a unique landscape with pockets of rainforest, including an amazing section of ancient Caledonian pinewood" says Estate Manager, Malcom Turner. "This once-wooded landscape has been degraded by overgrazing by sheep and deer and our plans have always been to conserve and expand on the existing fragments of woodland. We aim to kickstart a positive cycle that increases biodiversity, improves soil composition and raises the resilience of the landscape."

Over the past three years, the team has got to know Ben Shieldaig very well indeed, establishing an ecological baseline against which it can monitor progress, as well as identifying the areas most suited to planting. "We are a woodland conservation organization so planting trees is our main objective but we want to put them in the right places. There are habitats where we would not plant, such as deeper peats, bogs and oceanic heath, which is incredibly vibrant and biodiverse especially in bryophytes (mosses, liverworts and hornworts)."

With this essential work done, the team is finalising its woodland creation plans, which will go to the government in March and then be published online. They will also form part of a 5-year management plan for the estate. Plans for Ben Shieldaig will take place in two phases.

"Phase 1 will focus on the north of the estate, replacing the deer fence that runs over the back of the hill and replacing the stock fence which comes around through the common grazing," said Malcolm. Once fenced, the plan will see 90 hectares of

Image left: One of the red squirrels in Dani Connors' new film
Image top: Ben Shieldaig in the mist

Ben Shieldaig Proposed Site Map

Access
Path through lower birchwoods would complete a summit circular route and allow for access into the bryophyte rich woodlands.
A 4x4 track would allow for management access to the top of Loch Darnih for boat and woodland creation works along the east of Ben Shieldaig.

Existing woodlands
These will be fenced off and allowed to regenerate, free from deer browsing. This will create the conditions for biodiversity to flourish, with varied tree and ground flora species, and more.

Coire an Fionn-uillt
A previous large landslide here, rising up from the shores of Loch Darnih, provides good conditions for woodland creation. Around 90 hectares will be of new native woodland will be planted here from 2023 onwards.

Loch Dughail
Car parking for around 10 cars to be located here alongside interpretation of hegy features and a picnic area. This would be the main starting points for walks with the summit loop and a circular route joining up Kùrlach woods and the Coille Creag Lach pinewoods. A shorter loop through the pinewoods would give audiences a taster of the woodlands.

Seed source for the future
Possibility of up to 60 hectares of planting here in the future will create the conditions for natural regeneration.

Glen Shieldaig
Linking up with the woodlands on Ben Shieldaig and Cauldorán, over 260 hectares of new native planting in the glen will kickstart better ecological conditions, improving ground conditions and creating corridors for wildlife.

Glen Shieldaig Viewpoint
Car parking for 6-8 cars available here. Interpretation of future woodland and habitat restoration and possible picnic facilities. This area has a great view along the glen which will be the site of tree planting in Phase 2.

Legend

- Existing woodland
- Woodland creation
- Fence lines
- New access track
- Existing path
- Potential path
- Waymarked route
- P Parking
- i Interpretation



new woodland created, primarily in Coire an Fhionn-uillt at the top end of Loch Damh, as well as allowing the existing woodland to regenerate naturally."

The second phase of planting will focus on Glen Shieldaig. "Starting where the pinewood is now, we aim to wrap around the entire glen, approaching it as a single catchment. This means we'll be able to tuck the fences away and so reduce their impact on the landscape," said Malcolm.

The second phase, which is likely to start next year, will see an additional 260 hectares of woodland created. Between the two phases, around half a million new trees will be planted. "We are not looking for blanket, plantation type approach," said Malcolm. "Our aim is for woodland

Image bottom - Caledonian pinewood on Ben Shieldaig



cover of around 40 to 50%, where some areas will be denser and some more sparse. It's what we call a 'mosaic of habitats,' and it's about putting trees where they can and should go." See box.

Now the woodland creation and draft management plans are published, the team is eager to hear the views of local people. "There will also be lots of opportunities for people to express their views and to get involved. We will be presenting these plans at a meeting this year plus we will be organising a range of events from tree-planting to the ongoing seed collection project (see page 7) and our big summer event, our BioBlitz (see page 2). There will be opportunities for anyone who wants to get involved."

Maximising the chances of success

Ben Shieldaig is a challenging landscape for woodland creation but the Woodland Trust team has a strategy to maximise their chances of success. It has four pillars:

Using local seeds:

The trees on and around Ben Shieldaig are perfectly adapted to our local environmental conditions so using their seeds for new planting increases their chances of success. The seed collection project, which has been in full swing for over a year now, sees local people collecting local seeds from a range of native species of trees included in the Trust's plans and this will continue.

Micro-siting:

Rather than thinking of the landscape in general terms, the Trust team will be 'micro-siting,' a technique to study the ground in detail, identifying pockets of ground that are best suited to planting of new trees (and those areas that are not).

Taking time:

The team's focus is on employing the best technique rather than the quickest. For example, they will be 'mounding' the planting area, or turning over the ground with a machine (or by hand in places) stir up the nutrients in the soil. These will be left for as long as possible to settle and let the vegetation rot.

Harnessing what nature provided:

Did you know the new planting on Ben Shieldaig will be harnessing cutting-edge science? Visiting experts have been studying the fungal networks in the ground for an experiment to see if planting trees such as willow within those networks will bring benefits, for them and for other species of trees. [NB: For more on the power of fungal networks, Caz recommends Professor Suzanne Simard's bestselling book, Finding the Mother Tree].

The 5 year draft management plan for Ben Shieldaig is out for public consultation until 2nd May 2022.



Sowing a seed for the future



Get involved
If you are interested in volunteering to collect seeds contact cazausten@woodlandtrust.org.uk

With the help of local volunteers, the Woodland Trust aims to collect enough local seeds to supply its entire woodland creation scheme.

Image top - Seed collection volunteers at work
Image bottom: Collecting rowan berries

For the past nine months, groups of local volunteers have been venturing out onto the slopes of Ben Shieldaig in all weathers scouring the trees and ground to collect the seeds the Woodland Trust needs for its woodland creation schemes.

Although perhaps best known for its important Caledonian pinewoods, the Trust's plans for Ben Shieldaig include a range of other species of trees, including birch, hazel, oak, alder, holly, willow, aspen, juniper, rowan and, of course, Scots pine.

"When planting new trees, it's really important to use seeds of local provenance from as close to the site as possible," says Estate Ranger, Caz Austen. "And because of the amount of trees we'll be planting, we need help collecting the seeds."

Some species are more difficult to get than others. "For example, we only have four or five oak trees that we can get easy access to so we've had to go slightly further afield, but we want every seed to come from the local area," says Caz.

A volunteer who has been involved in the seed collection project from the start is

Jo Polak from Alligin. "We live just across the loch so we look at Ben Shieldaig every morning and we were very keen to support the Woodland Trust so when the seed collecting came up, I thought it would be a really nice thing to do."

The volunteers go out in a group and focus on a specific tree species each time, ably guided by seed expert Craig Shearer. "Craig trained us how to collect the seeds, as you collect different seed species at different times of year and process them differently," says Jo. "At the moment we're collecting Scots pine cones and before that was holly, and we collected birch seeds in the early autumn."

Craig also recently visited Shieldaig primary school to talk to the children about seeds, taking them out on a seed collecting walk.

The volunteers have been learning some tricks of the trade. "With rowan, you have to wait for the berries to be really ripe, dark red and about to fall off, and, with birch, it has to be at the stage where you can easily strip the seeds off. It really varies a great deal."

The day the volunteers collected holly seeds has stuck in Jo's memory. "That was a really interesting day as it was pouring with rain and you have to use secateurs to get the holly berries off. As Craig explained, we can take a maximum of 20% of a tree's seeds so can't just strip a tree and diversity is important so you want to get several different trees when you're out collecting."

With more collecting days coming up in 2022, Jo is keen to continue. "I didn't know very much about seed collecting before this so it's been a real learning process but you can ask lots of questions when you're a volunteer. It really is a lot of fun."



Wildfires in the Highlands

Do you know what to do in the event of a wildfire? Please follow the advice from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

As the fire on Shildaig Island last year highlighted, wildfires in the Highlands are an ever-present danger. And with our often dry and warm Springs, peak wildfire season is earlier than you might think.

"Many people, especially visitors, think peak wildfire season is in late summer in the west Highlands but the risk of fire can also be high earlier in the year," says Woodland Trust Estate Ranger, Caz

Austen. "In the Spring, the vegetation hasn't started to grow yet so if there is a dry, warm period the 'dead' grasses from last year can dry out very quickly."

Wildfires are very dangerous, spreading fast, changing direction, jumping to and from other areas potentially threatening wildlife, livestock, domestic animals, environment, property and people, says the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.



Make sure you – and your visitors – know how to protect our local area from wildfires.

- ✓ If you see a fire, however small, **CALL 999 IMMEDIATELY.**
- ✓ Always follow the Scottish Outdoor Access Code
- ✓ Do not discard lit cigarette ends – make sure they are completely extinguished.
- ✓ Avoid lighting fires outdoors when high winds, high temperatures and low humidity are present or predicted
- ✓ Report anyone acting irresponsibly or carelessly with fire in the countryside
- ✓ Never burn heather or moorland outwith the permitted season
- ✓ Make sure your home number or name is clearly visible from the road or main access point
- ✓ Make sure there is a safety zone around your home – remember, a wildfire can develop quickly.

For more information on wildfires, visit firescotland.gov.uk

Image left - wildfire signage with artwork from Ullapool high school pupils

We have an exciting summer of events lined up, from seed collecting through to guided walks and a Bioblitz in July. To keep up to date with the latest information and find out more about our events follow us on Facebook.

 **WTBenShildaig**



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