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**Ben Shieldaig update**

14th December 2020

**It has been a challenging year, with a number of our planned activities having to be postponed until 2021. The delays caused by the pandemic have, however, provided an opportunity to spend more time getting to know the estate, develop our plans, and to discuss with our neighbours how we might better collaborate to bring as much benefit to the local environment, its wildlife, and the people who live here.**

**Donnie Chisholm has now left his role at Ben Shieldaig and moved on to a new career. Whilst this is a loss to the project, Donnie has had a great impact on our plans for the estate and especially for conserving and expanding upon the native woodland, and we wish him all the best in his new career. His departure provided us with the opportunity to restructure the project roles slightly so we can better achieve our long-term objectives. I have now taken on the permanent role of Estate Manager and we will be recruiting an Estate Ranger, on a 4-year fixed term contract, early in 2021. More information on this role will be available in January, when it is advertised, and we hope to get as much interest as possible locally.**

**As always, thanks to everyone for their patience and continued support. We’re very much looking forward to more activity and engagement in 2021, and beyond!**

**Woodland Management and Creation**

* The COVID-19 pandemic stopped all activity on site in March. Unfortunately, our ecological baseline surveys, which have to be undertaken throughout the Spring, had to be postponed until Spring 2021. These will begin again in January to complete in July and will be used to produce our management plan and woodland creation schemes, which will then be consulted on through the summer.
* As explained in the previous update, from the results of some of the surveys which have been completed, the main areas for planting will likely be the corrie in the north east of the site and the western and south western slopes of Ben Shieldaig along Glen Shieldaig. In this way the designated woodland on the estate could be extended southwards though it is important to note that the ground is in quite a challenging condition. The main species will initially be birch and willow and, though there will be substantial numbers of pine, these may take time to establish.
* One innovative survey we did manage to carry out later in 2020 was a mapping exercise to assess the availability of fungal networks, known as mycelium, which exist in the soil on the estate. These networks are crucial to growth of almost all plants and trees – it’s been shown in previous studies that woodland has a much better chance of becoming successfully established if it is planted in areas where these networks exist. The results of this survey will therefore help us to further refine our planting plans, and make sure they are given every chance to succeed.
* Finally, Trees for Life Woodland Services have almost completed the scoping study exploring the idea of working with our neighbours to undertake a collaborative woodland creation scheme, including the above areas of Ben Shieldaig, within a large strategic fence. This study will report its findings in January at which point a meeting will be held with all the land managers who would like to take these plans forward for their estates. There will then be further consultation with the local community and the local Deer Management Group.

**Deer Management**

* Our contracted stalker, Derek Ross, has been undertaking deer management throughout the season this year, using cull targets based upon recommendations made by the Deer Management Group. Thanks to everyone who is keeping us updated on any deer sightings.
* A drone survey using thermal imagery was planned for October 2020 however, due to some technical issues, this was not able to take place. We therefore continued with a survey using thermal binoculars. The survey conducted was a ‘minimum count’ meaning that in the absence of a drone, we covered what ground was feasibly practical utilising roads and vantage points. 32 Red Deer were counted, with a further 22 counted on neighbouring land directly adjacent to the estate. There are likely to be more deer which were not included in this count, mainly if they have been lying up in the dense forest or in the more inaccessible parts of the eastern side of the estate, which we didn’t cover. We aim to conduct a drone survey in early 2021 which should provide a more accurate count.
* It’s great that the community have been able to take and distribute a few carcasses this year. We will continue to offer any carcasses as long as there is desire and the capacity to take them.
* The existing fence which runs from Loch Dughaill over to Loch Damh will be repaired in a few sections before the end of the year, with a new stile at the top. This will ensure it can remain in place until our fencing plans are confirmed for the estate.
* We will begin undertaking Habitat Impact Assessments in Spring 2021 to monitor the impact of browsing on the estate.

**Access & Estate Management**

* Due to the delay in our survey work above, our management plan for the estate will not be ready to publish for consultation until Summer 2021. Please get in touch if there are any management issues you would like to discuss.
* We are still looking to put in a new 4x4 management access track from the A896 to Loch Damh, along the boundary of our estate, along with 2 small car parks in Glen Shieldaig. An archaeological walkover has been completed and will report shortly. Further ecological surveys for these sites will take place in the Spring, along with our main survey work.
* Thanks to those kind individuals who helped manage and clean up some of the waste left behind by those camping on the estate in 2020. Depending on how the situation created by the pandemic progresses, this has the potential to be repeated in 2021, especially in the high season. We’d love to hear any ideas on how to raise awareness for people visiting on the importance of cleaning up and taking away any waste, and the dangers of setting fires.
* We’ll also be undertaking work early in the year to control any *Rhododendron ponticum* on the estate. Although there are relatively few larger plants, it is important to be vigilant in stopping their spread so many thanks to those who have been helping pull these out whilst walking on the estate.

**Engagement and Interpretation**

* Unfortunately, many of the events we had planned for 2020 had to be put on hold. We hope that we will be able to hold these in 2021 and we’ll continue to monitor Government guidelines to make sure these can take place safely. We’ll put out more information on these as soon as possible, and look forward to being able to many of you joining us.
* In the absence of being able to meet in person, a community update event was held in November via Zoom – many thanks to those who attended and contributed to the discussions. It would be great to get more input into our plans so please get in touch any time via the contact details below.
* We are now planning to change the name of the estate to the Gaelic spelling, **Beinn Shìldeag** (pronounced ‘been HEEL-jak’). Huge thanks to the local Gaelic speakers who researched and advised on the appropriate translation, and everyone else who provided input.
* We now have a page on the community association website where any reports produced by our survey work or other areas of interest will be made available. Please also look for ‘Malcolm Turner’ if you would like to connect on Facebook. I have joined the Shieldaig Community Association page so should be easy to find.

**Volunteering**

* Thanks to the help of 3 local volunteers, we’ve begun a project to monitor the population of red squirrels on Ben Shieldaig and in the surrounding area. Using feeder stations and trail cameras, we’re aiming to get a better idea of the squirrels’ distribution and hopefully, in time, to get a better idea of the numbers that might be present.
* Trees for Life, who reintroduced the red squirrels in the area in 2016, have been a huge help with pulling the project together, and providing online training to the volunteers. We hope to work with them in 2021 and beyond to take on the annual monitoring that they’ve been carrying out for the last 4 years as well as contribute to their citizen science monitoring project.
* With restrictions hopefully easing up in 2021, we’d love to provide more opportunities for people to become involved with our work in the area. Some of the areas where people have already expressed an interest, and where we think there will be opportunities shortly, include; monitoring of wildlife (especially red squirrels initially); assessing natural regeneration of woodland and grazing impacts; and collecting seeds for some of our planting plans. If anyone would like to discuss ideas further, please get in touch.

**Please contact me for any further information:**

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