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**Ben Shieldaig update**

26th March 2021

**Well, despite lockdown restrictions, 2021 seems to be keeping us busy. Our survey work has kicked off again, we’re still in discussions with our neighbours to link up our woodland plans, and we’re researching what innovative ways there might be to help ensure any trees planted will be successful. Unfortunately, there haven’t been many opportunities for engagement but that will hopefully change soon, as restrictions lift.**

**Helping with this will be our new Estate Ranger, who will be in place in April! A big welcome to Caz Austen who will be joining us straight from working with NTS at Balmacara. We’re very excited she’s joining the team and I know she’s looking forward to getting started.**

**As always, thanks to everyone for their patience and continued support. We’re very much looking forward to being able to meet up a bit more with everyone face-to-face soon!**

**Woodland Management and Creation**

* Our ecological baseline surveys have now begun again and will continue until the Summer. As well as giving us a better idea of some of the wonderful flora and fauna which exist on the site, these will help us to produce our management plan and woodland creation schemes. We then aim to consult widely these in June/July 2021.
* We’ve been part of a 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 deer fence. There’s been a bit of a delay in the study reporting back however it should be ready by the start of April. At this point we hope to organise a meeting with all the land managers involved to identify who might 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 this last season on the estate. 3 stags, 12 hinds and 4 calves were culled, based upon recommendations made by the Deer Management Group. As always, we’re very happy to provide carcasses to the community to distribute.
* A number of residents got in touch to express concern about the number of deer coming down from the open hill to the village and causing damage in crofts and gardens. After consultation locally and with the South West Ross Deer Management Group, we agreed to apply for an out-of-season license to cull a limited number of deer with the aim of discouraging them from coming down to the village. There was a limited cull of 1 young stag and 1 hind on the 20th March. We will keep monitoring the situation to see how effective this is. Thanks to everyone who is keeping us updated on any deer sightings.
* A drone survey will take place in April using thermal imagery to count the number of deer on the estate.
* A Habitat Impact Assessment will take place in April/May to gather a baseline for monitoring future impact both within the woodland and on the open hill.

**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.
* In the coming months, we aim to apply for planning for 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 has not highlighted any issues. Further ecological surveys for these sites will take place in the Spring, along with our main survey work.
* In April, 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. A big thanks to those who have been helping pull up some of the little ones when out walking!

**Engagement and Interpretation**

* Unfortunately, we’re still unable to plan any events for 2021 until the Government timeline is confirmed and we have a better idea of what the guidelines are to make sure these can take place safely. We’re hoping to be able to offer some guided walks over the summer at least so will provide more information on these as soon as we can.
* It looks like it may be a busy year in terms of visitor numbers to the area and we may face some of the same issues as summer 2021 in terms of littering, human waste and campfires. We’ll be trying to keep an eye on some of the usual spots on the estate where people go and will be working with surrounding estates and partners to try to help coordinate our message to visitors to behave responsibly when camping. We’ll also be putting up wildfire awareness signs when there is a higher risk.

**Volunteering**

* Thanks again to the help of 3 local volunteers to begin to monitor the population of red squirrels on Ben Shieldaig and in the surrounding area. Once we’re able to get out with Trees for Life to continue their monitoring work, looking at distribution in the area, we’ll report back on some of our findings.
* Finally, the Woodland Trust is starting a new seed collection volunteering project to gather seeds from a number of our sites around the country. Using a local provenance of seeds is likely to make any planting on Ben Shieldaig more successful as those trees are already adapted to the more challenging conditions of the site so we’re keen to collect as many as possible. We’d love to hear from anybody that might like to help us collect a variety of species in the coming months, and learn more about how they can be processed to be ready for planting.

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

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