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**Ben Shieldaig update**

27th October 2021

**Before memories of the lovely long, dry summer get washed away by the October rain, it’s time for another update. We’ve had a busy summer at Ben Shieldaig and have managed to host quite a few events, as well as getting a lot of work around the estate underway with the help of an increasing number of volunteers. It’s been wonderful to see everyone out and about a bit more. We’re very grateful for all the help and support we have received from everyone.**

**Many of you will have seen the coverage of the exciting news and appeal regarding Woodland Trust Scotland taking on the neighbouring estate to the south, Couldoran. This is a major step for us, making the estate over twice its original size and we want to hear your views on plans for the expanded estate. We will be hosting an open house on November 24th and would love to see you all there. Please get in touch with us if you’d like any further details or keep an eye on our Facebook page.**

**Woodland Management and Creation**

* Our baseline survey work has finally completed now and we’re getting closer to our final woodland scheme designs. There’s just a little more to do in terms of confirming fence-lines however this should be completed by the end of the year and we’ll apply to Scottish Forestry shortly after. Work will then start on the ground in Autumn 2022 with fencing and ground preparation with trees being planted in 2023.
* We would be happy to provide a concept map of our proposed woodland creation areas, along with results of any of our survey work, if requested.

**Deer Management**

* A Habitat Impact Assessment of the estate was completed in July and found that browsing pressure by deer is generally ‘high’ within the woodlands but ‘low’ on the open hill. If anyone would like a copy of this report, please get in touch.
* In agreement with Hugh Tollemache, rather than trying to reduce stag numbers on Ben Shieldaig in this season, we have been attempting to reduce stag numbers on the common grazings. Unfortunately, during the rut, there weren’t many stags present and so have as yet been unsuccessful. Given that the issue of deer coming into the village is only likely to get worse with the winter, we plan once again to apply for an out-of-season authorisation from NatureScot to continue our culling efforts over the next few months
* In a recent deer count using thermal imagery, we counted 83 deer on Ben Shieldaig. We will be aiming to cull 20 – 30 hinds over the next few months to reduce the impact of the deer.
* Once again, we would be happy to donate any of the carcasses to the community, if there is interest.

**Access & Estate Management**

* With the acquisition of Couldoran Estate, our plans for the new access track to Loch Damh have been delayed, however we hope to apply for planning in the coming months with work starting on the track in August 2022.
* Fabulous news, we now have a new boat! ‘Wild Wood’, was named by the players of the People’s Postcode Lottery and is going to be immensely helpful for our work around the estate. We are working on improving access to it and are looking forward to getting out and about on the water.
* We’re continuing to clear *Rhododendron ponticum* around the estate. It’s amazing where they pop up, if you do spot any please let us know where and we’ll be along with our hammer & saw to dig them out!

**Wildlife Monitoring**

* It has been exciting getting the results back from the ecological baseline surveys. Some of the key finds on the estate include golden eagles, peregrine falcons, greenshank and snipe.
* Protected species wise, we have the red squirrels that still appear to be thriving (see more in volunteering), pine martens and water voles. Also outside of the survey we spotted a mountain hare at the summit of Ben Shieldaig.
* Other interesting finds this summer include small pearl bordered fritillary butterfly, a few sightings of azure hawker dragonfly and also southern hawker dragonfly – one of the most north westerly sightings for this species. We’ve also found a number of orchids including the lesser butterfly orchid, another vulnerable species.
* Most recently at our COP26 event Andy Taylor from the James Hutton Institute found the unusual Ghostwort (*Aneura mirabilis*) a liverwort that lacks chlorophyll and lives underground.
* Looking forward to 2022 we are looking at priorities to build up our knowledge of the species on site, getting a more in depth picture of the lichen and bryophyte assemblage is one of these and we will be working with the new advisor for Savings Scotland’s Rainforest, Dr Oliver Moore on this. Hopefully there should be some training opportunities here as well, get those hand lenses at the ready!
* We’ll also be looking to find out more about the bat species and various invertebrates on the site.
* Anyone who is interested in helping with recording please get in touch, we are trialling using an app called iRecord which makes recording anything from plants to butterflies very easy and any extra records we can get are useful. Recording can be done in many ways from the very informal, noting down what you see on your walks, to more structured transects for specific species.
* We also located a ‘lost’ camera trap from the pinewoods, over the course of a year it had gathered some fantastic footage of pine marten kits, red squirrels, a family of badgers, foxes and red deer. As soon as we get chance we’ll put a montage together of the highlights.

**Engagement and Interpretation**

* Our new Facebook page is proving popular and we now have over 250 followers, if you haven’t ‘liked’ us yet you can find us here - [facebook.com/WTBenShieldaig](http://www.facebook.com/WTBenShieldaig) we’ll carry on posting details of the work we’ve been doing and upcoming events here as well as interesting things we find out and about.
* Thank you so much to everyone who has come along to our events this year, we hope everyone has enjoyed them as much as we have. From our inaugural summit walk, spotting ancient trees with Wester Ross Biosphere, training in dragonfly ID with British Dragonfly Society to our most recent COP 26 event where many of you braved the windy weather to have a go at the activity trail and get up close and personal with the weird and wonderful delights of the soil under our microscopes. Our guests from the James Hutton Institute and Aberdeen Science Centre were kept busy all day! Many thanks to everyone who contributed to making the event a success.
* Hopefully everyone has been able to find out about the events but if you have missed any of them and want to be kept updated another way please get in touch.
* We have an exciting calendar of events shaping up for 2022, including the postponed squirrel event, a BioBlitz and seed collecting alongside some guided walks. If you are interested in putting something on or have any ideas let us know. We’re also starting to work with the primary school to help with some outdoor learning opportunities.
* Plans for interpretation are still developing but a couple of projects are now starting to gather pace – we are hoping to contribute some bespoke woodland inspired seating for the play park to compliment the new equipment and we’ll be after some creative input! Watch this space!
* Also you may see a new Wester Ross Biosphere post popping up at Loch Dughaill car park. We are part of their exciting project to highlight the UN sustainable development goals launched to coincide with COP 26. Ben Shieldaig is hosting goal 15 ‘Life on Land’, find out more by using the QR code on the post! We are just one of a number of sites from all over Wester Ross taking part.

**Volunteering**

* In August we held the first of our seed collecting events, an exciting landmark in the project as it’s one of the first steps to us planting trees in the ground. To maximise the chance of success for new trees in challenging conditions, as we have, it’s important to try and grow trees that are adapted to the local conditions. We are very grateful to have your help to collect as much seed as possible. We have over 15 volunteers now signed up, all the seed collecting events have been very well attended and a lot of fun. Although we have had slightly challenging conditions for the events, from swarms of midges to torrential downpours. We will try harder to schedule the next one for a dry day! Thank you to everyone who has come out and helped us, if you’d like to get involved get in touch as the seed collection project will be ongoing for the next few years.
* Our red squirrel survey program is also continuing, our volunteers have now taken over the survey work previously done by Trees for Life and are looking for sign in a number of 1km squares around the area to check for presence of squirrels. In the spring we will again be putting out the camera traps and feeders to see how they are doing.
* As we start to have a greater variety of tasks around the estate we are looking to start a woodland working group to help with some of these. Tasks will vary from rhododendron pulling to general repairs and maintenance. Initially we anticipate the group will probably meet once a every one or two months but could be more regularly if people are keen, again if you’d like to get involved please get in touch.

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

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