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**Ben Shieldaig & Couldoran update**

27th July 2022

**Sorry it’s been a while since our last community update. The acquisition of Couldoran at the end of last year, as well as getting our Management Plan ready for consultation, took up quite a lot of time.**

**We aim to now provide 2 of these updates per year, as well as 2 physical newsletters (available in local shops). Regular information and updates will also be sent out through our** [**Facebook page**](https://www.facebook.com/WTBenShieldaig)**,** [**WT website**](https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/visiting-woods/woods/ben-shieldaig-estate/)**, and through various events and meetings**

**As always, thanks to everyone for their feedback and continued support and please get in touch if you’d like to discuss any of the below.**

**Woodland Management and Creation**

* Our draft 5-year Management Plan went out for consultation in April and received a number of comments and queries, which we will try to answer and incorporate. There were two larger issues brought up which have meant that we’re still collecting more information and consulting further before we finalise and publish the plan. These were related to our access and parking plans (see below), and to our proposed woodland creation and fencing plans.
* We currently have an application in to Scottish Forestry for our woodland creation plans. As outlined in the recent community newsletter, these entail two large fenced-off areas: one in the north of the estate, encompassing the existing woodland and using the current fence-line which comes over the ridge of Ben Shieldaig, and a second in Glen Shieldaig, where the majority of our woodland creation will take place. A concern which was raised is that, if we fence off the existing woodland and exclude all deer, this will have an extremely negative impact on some rare lower plants – mosses and liverworts – for which the site is designated. These plants require some browsing and disturbance by deer. We are therefore exploring the option of not fencing off the woodland and allowing some browsing pressure by deer – enough to still allow these lower plants to thrive but still reduced to allow natural regeneration of the woodland. We will be consulting on this possible approach over the coming months.

**Couldoran**

* Our ecological surveys are currently taking place for Couldoran and will help identify possible woodland creation opportunities. Once we have more of an idea on these, we will organise further consultation events to gather feedback.
* We’re also exploring a number of potential development opportunities for the estate grounds, which includes affordable housing, renewable energy, and a tree nursery. We’re also looking at how we might work with partners to repurpose Couldoran House, the main lodge which we acquired. If you haven’t completed the survey for feedback on our current feasibility study there is still time to do see <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/couldoranhouse1> there is also a consultation event planned for 10th August at Lochcarron Village Hall, 7pm to hear more about the feedback so far.

**Deer Management**

* As of the last count in April 2022, there were 86 red deer recorded on or in the immediate vicinity of the estate. 41 deer were culled in the 2021-22 season, mostly hinds, and of these, 4 males and 2 females were culled from the Common Grazing area. 83 were counted in October 2021 and so it seems our management is currently keeping numbers fairly static.
* Browsing levels are still therefore high within the woodland and therefore we aim to now reduce numbers further to begin to see more regeneration. Also, as we’ll begin fencing off woodland creation areas of the estate soon, we’ll undertake a compensatory cull to ensure that there won’t be any animal welfare issues from there being less ground available for browsing. Cull targets will be set after consultation with neighbouring estates and the local Deer Management Group.
* There are still reports of deer entering into the village from the Common Grazing. We’ve agreed with the owner to continue to undertake limited stalking on the Common Grazing with the aim of deterring the deer from coming down. Thanks to everyone who is keeping us updated on any deer sightings in the village.
* Our contracted stalker, Derek Ross, will be undertaking deer management again this season. As always, we’re very happy to provide carcasses to the community to distribute.

**Access & Estate Management**

* Our plans for parking areas on the estate have brought up a number of concerns from the community as well as neighbouring estates, mostly related to the impact of visitors and the risk of wildfires. We’d like to apologise for not consulting on these sufficiently before seeking planning permission. We’ve withdrawn the application so that we can continue to discuss these plans and hopefully amend to try to ensure these concerns are addressed. We want these parking areas to bring benefit to the estate, community and wider area, whilst mitigating the possible impact of visitors and reducing wildfire risk.
* We currently have a planning application in for a proposed new 4x4 management access track from the A896 to Loch Damh, along the boundary of our estate. Whilst this track will be gated to vehicles, it will be open for public access by foot/bike. Eventually we hope to link this with the existing track which crosses over to the birchwood from the Balgy area, and then the track to the village.

**Monitoring**

* In September we are hosting visitors from the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology and will be helping to undertake a resurvey of woodland plots initially visited in 1971 by Professor Robert Bunce in his large scale survey of woodlands throughout the UK. The survey at Shieldaig Woods is the last one to complete in this large scale undertaking and results will help us to understand how woodlands of conservation importance have changed over the last 50 years. More information about the Bunce survey can be found in [this edition of Wood Wise magazine](https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/media/1710/wood-wise-forest-flora.pdf) (pg 16).

**Engagement and Interpretation**

* We have had a busy start to the year event wise with a number of events taking place including seed collecting with Shieldaig primary school, hosting a West Coast Outdoor and Woodland Learning skills share event, a family friendly red squirrel event and a number of consultation events around the area.
* In May we had the first of our rainforest training days looking at bryophytes (mosses and liverworts) in the birch wood by Òb Mheallaidh, there is another training day in September looking at lichens, there are currently a couple of spare places for this, get in touch if you’re interested in attending. As the courses have proved very successful we hope to run them again in the future.
* Most recently we had a Bioblitz day at Couldoran and across the estate where we had a nature trail, spotter sheets and lots of activities to enjoy alongside several experts coming to help us identify as many species as possible across the site. A few of the wildlife highlights included spotting a hedgehog on our night time ramble along with several common pipistrelle bats. We also spotted lesser butterfly orchids, over 30 species of moth in the overnight moth traps and yellow specklebelly, which in case you can’t guess is a specialist rainforest lichen! We’re still collating all the records but early indications are we spotted over 200 species in the day and we had great feedback from the attendees.
* Next on the agenda we’ll be at the Shieldaig Fete on the 6th August so hope to see some of you there for a chat!
* Over the next few months we’ll also be looking to finalise the name for the new combined estate of Ben Shieldaig and Couldoran so please keep an eye out for opportunities to feedback on this.

**Volunteering**

* Our volunteering activities have been expanding over the last few months, with a variety of monitoring and invasive species removal starting alongside development of a newsletter which hopefully many of you will have seen.
* We hosted some competitors from the new Celtman Solo Point Five event at Couldoran this year to help with some *Rhododendron ponticum* clearance. It’s amazing how much you can get done in a couple of hours with a few extra hands and hopefully this is something we will continue next year and will prove to be a perfect preparation for completing an ironman triathlon!
* It’s coming up to a busy time for seed collection with birch, hazel and rowan all starting to show their fruits, nuts and seeds, it’s always a fun task and a great way to get outdoors.
* We’re also looking to start a regular woodland working group to help with a variety of tasks around the estate, this will involve things like invasive species clearance and maintaining infrastructure such as fences.
* Get in touch if you’d like to be involved with any of our volunteering activities or have any other ideas about ways you’d like to help.

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

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