Ring ouzels and a new vision for the Cairngorm ski area

Description

Approaching the abandoned ski tow in Coire na Ciste two weeks ago, partially concealed by the rows of abandoned chairlift seats, three men in flak jackets, each with a camera whose lense was the size of a telescope, were reclining on the ground. Two of them had come to Speyside from the south east of England to watch birds and had spent half the day are the Coire na Ciste carpark getting to know the Ring Ouzel. On an average year I see a few Ring Ouzel, but always around boulderfields and often under crags, although these birds are normally associated with montane scrub zones. Cairngorm is a good place to see them because the forest is growing back.

An hour later we had wandered up into Coire Cas where we saw first an adult then the chicks

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Photo credit Dave Morris



Photo credit Dave Morris

Brilliant, ring ouzel in montane scrub! It got us thinking. What an opportunity missed. It would have been perfectly easy to put a camera on the nest and relay the photos to the Day Lodge. Do that and suddenly tourists would have a reason to be there, even when the cloud was down as on our visit. Something far better than the funicular â?? it had us grinning for the rest of the day and not just because we had got better views than the men with enormous cameras. Visitors might go into the cafe afterwards to have something to eat or even a drink to celebrate. Travel to Speyside to see Osprey at Boat of Garten, Peregrine at Aviemore (this summer you can watch them by video link from the Youth Hostel), Ring Ouzel at Cairngorm and, hereâ??s hoping, Hen Harrier at Newtonmore. Better still though, imagine the whole of the lower part of Coire Cas was covered in montane scrub, the numbers of Ring Ouzel â?? which are in serious decline nationally â?? might increase and people could just wander along paths or up through the pistes and see them like we did.

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Now in general I am opposed to planting on the edges of forest which are relatively natural and capable of regenerating naturally as the Caledonian pinewoods are doing on Cairngorm. Speeding up rewilding is likely simple to create habitats the way we, or the powers that be, think they should be. A form of gardening, however sophisticated. But Cairngorm I think is different.

It is ecologically different because the soils and ground vegetation have for a long time been affected by intensive human use and now in places, as in the bulldozing done by Natural Retreats, in effect destroyed. In destroying these soils and the ground cover, erosion is bound to increase and the chance of a major catastrophic event, such as the whole slope failing, more likely. Planting trees that will develop into montane scrub wonâ??t do any more damage on areas which have been extensively modified and could help stabilise them. There is even guidance on how to do this http://highlandbirchwoods.co.uk/UserFiles/File/publications/Montane-Scrub/guidance.pdf

Cairngorm has also been subject to a number of tree planting experiments which provide precedents, the latest of which show that a montane scrub zone could probably be well established in 10 years.



These lodgepole pine â?? non-natives â?? were planted by an employee of the then Cairngorm ski lift company. Guerilla gardening!



These native trees originated from a grant awarded by the then Nature Conservancy at the end of the 1970s to demonstrate to the chairlift company that trees would grow in Coire na Ciste. Subsequently there has been some natural regeneration


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These trees were planted when Ben Humbleâ??s Alpine Garden was relocated uphill at the time of t

Trees here are unlikely ever to grow to full height, unless global warming ends the harsh winters and wind speed decreases, but the photos show that a planted montane Alpine scrub zone in Coire Case could become well established in relatively short periods of time.

While there is some natural regeneration in the ski area, this has been limited, probably

in part due to accidental destruction by ski machinery and skiers. Planting trees behind the solid new fences would offer them protection from this threat but in time soften the harsh linear lines of the fencing improving the landscape. In time, the trees might provide an effective alternative to snow fencing.

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There is nothing revolutionary about this idea. Look at similar ski areas in Norway and Canada and the runs are often through forest or montane scrub which help trap the snow and look much better. Imagine if trees had been planted at the time of the construction of the funicular, this area would have been transformed.

The potential attraction of a montane scrub zone is not just limited to the Ring Ouzel and trees. At present there is very little montane scrub in Scotland due to the long history of overgrazing and the best such habitat at Inshriach is inaccessible to the general tourist. If a montane scrub zone was planted here it would provide an attraction for the general tourist which they could not see anywhere else.

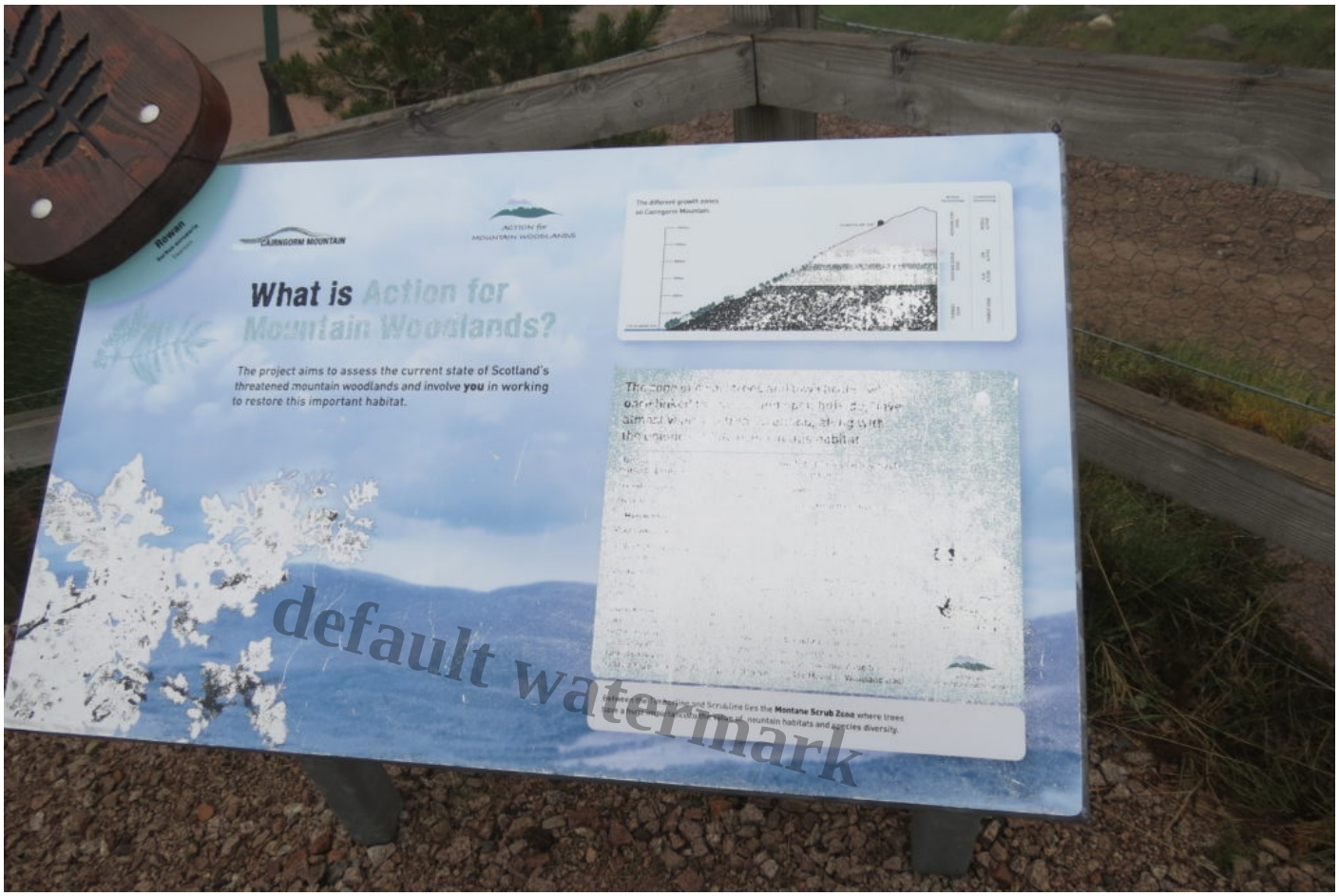
Indeed, at the time of the funicular construction, the staff at Cairngorm made a serious attempt to promote understanding of montane scrub zone. While a lot of the interpretation that was developed then is now sadly neglected, it points the way and some of it could still be used.


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GLEN

One of a number of signs in the â??viewingâ?• station on the edge of the Coire na Ciste carpark



No sign of the alpine bistort among the dwarf cornel



A once great idea undermined by neglect



Wildlife of montane scrub in Norway

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Info from James Hutton Institute on fungi



Cloudberry growing on the ski slopes

There are still some very informative signs, including ones comparing Cairngorm with similar mountains in other parts of the world. At present almost all the interpretation is in the neglected â??Alpineâ?• garden above the Day Lodge. There is scope to extend this onto the ski slopes in Coire Cas where its possible even now to see plants that the general tourist is unlikely to see anywhere else. Some further planting of Alpine plants in suitable places along sections of the existing paths and tracks in lower Coire Cas could create an attractive trail like some of the Alpine gardens on the continent which are much larger in scale than the current one in Coire Cas.

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The creation of montane scrub habitat in Coire Cas could help counter the steady drop in the number of visitors using the funicular. This has approximately halved since it was constructed and continues to threaten the whole financial viability of Cairngorm which, on the current model, depends on visitor numbers. Visitors coming to the ski area to see the wildlife wonâ??t in themselves rescue what is a white elephant but it could be part of a different model of sustainable tourism which is based on recreational enjoyment of the natural environment. It might even put the â??naturalâ?• back into â??Natural Retreatsâ?•.

In the past the primary concern about attracting visitors to Cairngorm has been about the serious threat that large numbers of people would have to the uppers parts of the mountain and the Cairngorms plateau. This is why the funicular is to all intents and purposes a closed system in summer. Attracting people to visit a montane scrub zone in Coire Cas though is unlikely to have any impact on the plateau. The vast majority of people would be what I would loosely describe as â??general touristsâ?• who tend to do short walks. It should not be difficult to keep them in Coire Cas through path signage and interpretation. Hillwalkers who wanted to see the montane scrub would proceed up the hill anyway and for those wanting longer walks, walking back into Glenmore will most of the time be the more attractive option. I donâ??t think there is much more likelihood of the general tourist heading for the plateau after seeing the montane scrub zone than there is now of then general tourist travelling to the top of funicular and liking the view so much that once they have been taken back down they decide to walk back up on their own two feet.

I have tried in this post to put the argument for the creation of a montane scrub zone in Coire Cas through planting trees and some plants. This would reduce the impact of the ski development on the landscape, improve the skiing, improve habitats for wildlife and create a reason for summer visitors to come to Cairngorm. The evidence of the destruction in Coire Cas suggests then neither Natural Retreats nor Highlands and Islands Enterprise are fit to deliver such a vision and that there is a strong argument to integrate management of the ground in the ski area with that in Glenmore below.

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Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. Forestry Commission Scotland
4. natural environment
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