

How can the Cairngorms National Park protect our rarest species?

Description



Letter to Strathy 15th March 2001 courtesy of Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group

My apologies to readers that in my post on Curr Wood ([see here](#)) which highlighted the importance of the wood to the pine hoverfly, I had missed an article from the Strathy the previous week making this very point and providing some of the history to the site [Strathy 17.4.20 Curr Wood felling concern](#).

Taken together the articles raise some serious questions about how species which have been agreed by government as priorities for conservation are being protected in the Cairngorms National Park.

Controversy about the management of Curr Wood, which is situated just south of Dulnain Bridge on Speyside, dates back at least 15 years (see letter from Adam Watson above), i.e before the CNPA was created in 2003. The importance of Curr Wood to wildlife appears linked historically to a sparse felling regime which has allowed Scots pines to grow older and larger than elsewhere and left much of the ground undisturbed. Curr Wood hosts the largest population of the twinflower in the UK and is the last remaining refuge of pine hoverfly. Both are priority species under the UK and Scotland's Biodiversity Action Plan, although strangely the site itself has not been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The site therefore, although of obvious importance to conservation, is not protected as such.

Pine hoverfly larvae have very specific habitat requirements. They develop in rotten pine stumps, usually in association with the pine butt-rot fungus, which are 40 cm in diameter – this is thought because smaller stumps do not provide a sufficient area for the larvae to develop. After about 8 years, rotten stumps dry out and the hoverfly needs to move on. <http://www.snh.gov.uk/docs/A1849928.pdf> What this means is if smaller trees are chopped down too early, the stumps are no use for the pine hoverfly, while if too many are chopped at the same time, there is nowhere for them to move on to. Pine hoverfly are still found in Curr Wood precisely because the felling has been so selective. Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) in their statement to the Strathy last week, claiming to have protected pine hoverfly by putting machine exclusion zones in place, appear to have missed the point – for the pine hoverfly its the felling regime that matters. What FCS has not explained is the likely longer term impact of the felling license on the remaining population of pine hoverfly, and in particular, the likelihood that the pine hoverfly will colonise the areas being felled in future. If we want to save the pine hoverfly, restricting it to one area of one wood looks a high risk strategy.

Both the pine hoverfly and twinflower are also listed in the Cairngorms Nature Action Plan as being priority species for the National Park. This was confirmed in the new draft Cairngorms National Park Partnership Plan, to which FCS is a party. One of the priorities of that plan is “*Safeguarding species for which the Cairngorms National Park is particularly important*” – which includes the pine hoverfly. It is legitimate therefore to ask how FCS thought it good enough, after sending a formal consultation to CNPA and RSPB about Curr Wood, to proceed with the felling license when they received no reply. Did no-one in FCS think of picking up the phone to ask the views of others on the “mitigation measures” it had decided? This is a failure in Partnership working by public agencies – just what the Partnership Plan is supposed to prevent.

Ten years ago (see SNH document above) there was a serious attempt to conserve the pine hoverfly and indeed to re-introduce it to areas such as Rothiemurchus, which included the appointment of a dedicated member of staff. These re-introduction attempts appear to have failed and the pine hoverfly

appears to have disappeared from its other refuge, Anagach Wood, so is now confined to Curr Wood. Even more reason one might have thought for FCS to have worked in partnership with all the parties, including the pine hoverfly Biodiversity Action Plan Steering group, to work out a joint approach for Curr Wood. That doesn't seem to have happened so far. Its time therefore for the CNPA to take a lead here, in terms of partnership working, and to call on FCS to work with other parties, including local people. One might have hoped that, 14 years after the National Park was created, agencies would be working together more effectively.

The unstated issue and challenge behind all of this is land-ownership. There is something wrong when private landowners can still more or less do what they want on sites vital for conservation in our National Park without considering the wider good. While the failure to designate the site as a SSSI has no doubt contributed to this, there have been at least four different owners since 2001: Seafield Estate sold the wood to BSW timber 2001 who sold to Henry Becker in 2002 who then sold on to Billy Martin. That is not a good way to manage a prime wildlife site which needs a consistent approach. Instead, Curr Wood has been subject to different owners with different objectives. More evidence of the need for a new approach to landownership in our National Parks.

One option would be for FCS to buy Curr Wood – after all it did stump up £7.4m to buy up part of Rothiemurchus, so why not other woodland of conservation importance in the National Park?

The strongest advocates for this site though, as with other areas of woodland on Speyside, appear to be the people who live near it. The CNPA in its Partnership Plan included some positive commitments to empowering local communities without saying how it might do this. So why not engage with the local community about the future of Curr Wood? While resources to buy the wood might be an issue, why not think ahead? How about the CNPA sponsoring a common good fund for the Cairngorms which could assist communities to buy up land in the National Park? As with the Victorian common good funds, people might even bequeath money for the benefit of the National Park and the people who live in it and enjoy it.

A wider perspective on why the CNPA needs to intervene in Curr Wood is given today in an excellent piece by their Chief Executive, Grant Moir, in the Scotsman ([see here](#)). Nature is good for people, so why are we destroying it? And, Curr Wood even includes a core path!

Category

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Author

nickkempe

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