

Lessons for our National Parks from Creag Meagaidh

Description

A winter's day

In a deep and dark December

Is what it was for most of December. Dreich was the word to describe it.

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Creag Meagaidh National Nature Reserve Dec 2019

What better kind of day for a trip down memory lane?

I first climbed on Creagh Meagaidh in the early 1970's. The place gripped me from the start. The location was, well odd. Midway twixt the Ben and the Cairngorms, you walked in from a nondescript car park by Loch Laggan, taking a diagonal line up and rightwards from Aberarder till the path evened out on a long slow left through some ancient scattered birches, and the wonderful immensity of 1500 feet of snow and ice plastered schist came into view. Heroic deeds were done in those days. Not by me. I did a few of the classic climbs, spent some alcohol infused nights in the howff, and even became benighted on the walk out one time. That four mile walk in and then out intrigued me.

In 1986 control of the land in that area went to the government, in the shape of what is now Scottish Natural Heritage. They immediately implemented what was billed as a radical plan. All sheep were removed almost immediately, and the deer population was hugely reduced, to about 10% of the then current level. I believe the expectation was that the ancient birches would gradually put out seed and regeneration would take place. However, it was only a year or two later that rowan saplings started appearing. Logical really. Winter thrushes eat the berries, and they crap out the seeds, all in their own pellet of natural fertiliser. The saplings thrived with few herbivores, and it was not long before young birch trees started peeking out from the heather.

I took a walk up into Coire Ardair, must have been 1994 or so, with that great naturalist Dick Balharry, and a film crew. On the walk in the new saplings were already person high, there were black grouse and ring ouzel around. We found a tiny birch sapling right up by the lochan. Clearly the trial was proving a success. I am sure I must have been up there climbing in the winters to follow, but just noticed a few more young trees. So, fast forward a few years to a Saturday last month, when this old git took a handful of painkillers, grabbed his walking poles and camera, and hit the road to Meagaidh.



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track has been upgraded, but what was a trek through open ground is now a forest walk.



I went

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up to about the 400m contour, where some of the old birches are still hanging in, dominating, but only for a few more years before the new growth takes over.



There

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were birds around too, mixed finch and tit flocks, and a few thrushes. Most Scottish uplands are devoid of wildlife at this time of year. The lichen growth on the old trees by the burn looks more substantial than I remember too, perhaps an indicator of increasing rainfall?

So, this is rewilding. A dramatic change in only 30 years. And please note politicians. No trees have been planted – well, maybe a few of the new Scots pines have, there being no relict population. Just remove or control the destructive herbivores and leave it to the birds. And nature.

One has to ask now why Cairngorms Connect is establishing tree nurseries? We are talking lowland with plenty of established trees, we have the model established by the RSPB at Abernethy, (and even at Knepp in Sussex, so well described in “Wilding”) i.e. control deer, bring in cattle, let the scrub grow first. If we need planting anywhere, surely it is at the higher altitudes, helping the montane scrub to re establish?

Category

1. Cairngorms
2. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. forestry
4. LLTNPA
5. paths
6. rewilding
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Author

anon

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