

The state of the western Cairngorms (4) – the bleeding heart

Description



Looking down onto Loch Einich and the Rothiemurchus Estate, with Braeriach on the Mar Lodge estate beyond, from the summit slopes of Sgurr Gaoith. Note the extensive muirburn along the sides of the glen. Photo credit Louise Brimelow

Rothiemurchus Estate has been split in two since it sold off the Caledonian Pine Forest in its middle section to Forestry Commission Scotland, as it then was, for £7.2m in 2016 ([see here](#)). The upper part, which extends to the head of Glen Einich, is sandwiched between the landholdings which have formed Cairngorms Connect and the Mar Lodge Estate owned by the National Trust for Scotland. All, are involved in major conservation and re-wilding initiatives. Yet near the geographical centre of all this good work, Rothiemurchus is managing a significant part of its landholding as a grouse moor and, as the photo shows, is practising extensive muirburn. Why are they being allowed to do this?



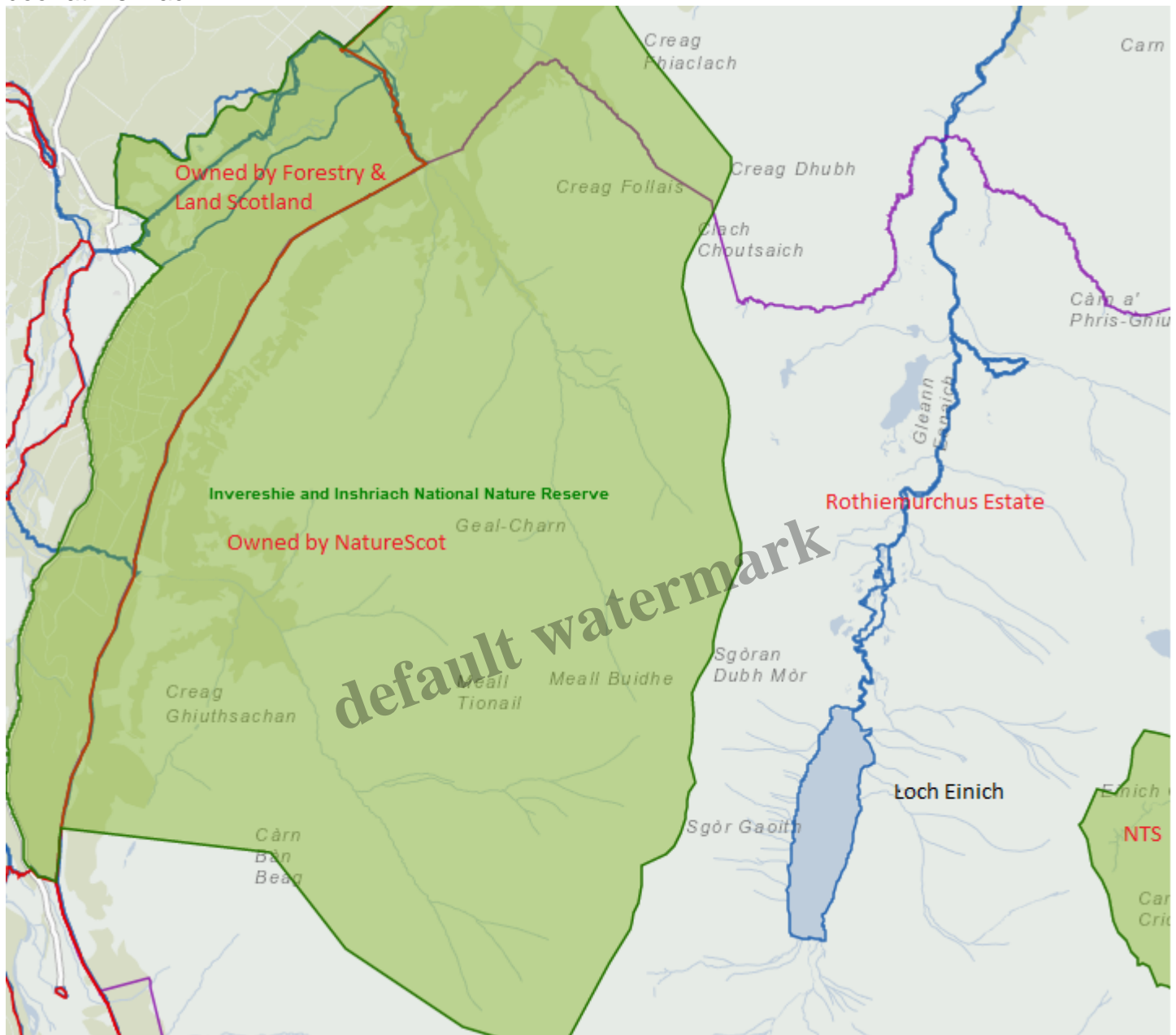
At the mouth of Loch Einich, muirburn is even being practised right next to an area of heavily eroded bog. Not clever!

The land owned by Rothiemurchus here is supposedly protected by many designations. It's in the Cairngorms Site of Special Scientific Interest, Cairngorms Special Area of Conservation (which protect habitats) and Cairngorms Special Protection Area (for birds). Loch Einich and the River Einich below are part of the River Spey Special Area of Conservation. Loch Einich itself is a Ramsar site (protected wetland). It's also in the Cairngorms National Scenic Area. It should therefore be one of the top priorities in Scotland for conservation management.

Where land has been designated as a SSSI, NatureScot considers what might damage the land and then produces a list of Operations Requiring Consent. By law, the landowner then has to get consent from NatureScot before doing these. The list for the Cairngorms SSSI ([see here](#)) includes "Burning" and "Game and Waterfowl Management and Hunting Practice". One can only assume therefore that NatureScot, the main agency responsible for conservation in Scotland, doesn't believe the muirburn taking place around the Einich is damaging and has granted permission for it.

If so, the incoherence in NatureScot's thinking is striking. This is starkly illustrated by the difference

between how they treat the land on Rothiemurchus and how they are managing their own land next door at Inshriach:



The land that NatureScot owns is part of Cairngorms Connect and the Inshriach and Invereshie National Nature Reserve ([see here](#)). While NatureScot's revised plan for the Reserve (the consultation closed 3 years ago in May 2018) has not been published, their website states:

Pinewood and mountain habitat

Our priority for managing the reserve is to enhance the natural sequence of habitats – from mountain peaks. We aim to encourage a more diverse structure and varied ground flora in the

In places where forest has been planted, this will involve restructuring. But, for large parts of by reducing herbivore grazing to a sustainable level.

The reserve is not an isolated site, and we work in partnership with our neighbours on many have a common aim – enhancing and reconnecting forests, uplands and species in the west work together through [Cairngorms Connect](#) [↗] – a landscape-scale partnership project.

A natural sequence of habitats of habitats on one side of the boundary, intensive grouse moor management on the other. Besides converting vegetation into atmospheric carbon, the muirburn prevents the Caledonian Forest below from expanding up the hill, is preventing the peatbogs from expanding (and is almost certainly damaging them too), destabilises the river banks and is increasing the speed of water run-off into the Spey.

The final paragraph is correct to say the Inshriach NNR is not an isolated site. But then why does NatureScot tolerate a landowner taking such a radically different approach to the land next door when it is designated and they have the power to intervene? The land owned by Rothiemurchus in Glen Einich should be at the core of the landscape scale project on the western side of the Cairngorms. But instead it is functioning as a hole at the heart of the National Park, bleeding other conservation initiatives.

The root of the problem is that for as long as I can remember NatureScot has not been prepared to use its statutory power to take on the Rothiemurchus estate and prevent them carrying out damaging land-management practices. It's the same of course with other private landowners, from the Royal Family ([see here](#)) down. Indeed, the Rothiemurchus estate's unwillingness to manage all its land according to the conservation objectives was one of the main reasons why the Cairngorms National Nature Reserve, which should have acted as the core conservation zone in the National Park, was abolished in 2006. Nothing has changed since.

With the climate and environment crises, there is no longer any excuse for this. This is not the fault of front-line staff, most of whom try their best against all odds, but it is a failure of leadership. NatureScot should be using its powers to stop the muirburn now, just as it should be using its powers to reduce deer numbers around Glen Bancher ([see here](#)) and the Cairngorms National Park Authority should be calling on it to do so.

Note

I have renamed this series of posts, based on what I saw during my stay up on Speyside last week, the state of the *western* Cairngorms. This reflects more accurately the area they cover. I hope to write a

series on the state of the *eastern* Cairngorms in the future.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. Forest Land Scotland
4. landed estates
5. muirburn
6. NatureScot

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