

The power of nature – no need to plant trees in the Cairngorms National Park

Description



Spruce sapling at c950m below Beinn a' Chaorainn Bheag, with Bynack Mor across Glen Avon behind. Photo 2nd May.

I am not a good enough botanist to tell whether this is a Sitka or Norwegian spruce but it tells a tale. I spotted it during a stravaig round the Mar Lodge estate in what is still, despite global warming, a very challenging environment for trees.



The spruce sapling was below the summit cone of Beinn a' Chaorainn Bheag

While the sapling had been browsed – two nibbled shoots are visible on its left-hand side – its bushy shape is also probably a consequence of the strong winds that blow across the plateaus in the Cairngorms.

Those winds also probably explain how the sapling got here. I would have fairly impressed if the sapling had been a Scots Pine and had been blown up across the Moine from Glen Derry c6km away but the nearest source of spruce seed I can think of is near Mar Lodge – c12km distant!

It would be wrong, however, see this sapling as a miracle. If it is was wind that blew the seed to near the summit of Beinn a' Chaorainn Bheag – and seed can blow miles across frozen snow – it was probably one of thousands. Most of these would have ended up on stony ground or bog and never germinated. And of those that did germinate, most will have been shaded out by other vegetation or else, until recently, eaten before they were spotted by any human.

That this sapling has survived to grow as large as it has, therefore, is part of the success story on the northern half of Mar Lodge estate where, since the National Trust for Scotland has reduced deer numbers to c2 per km, trees are spreading up the hillsides.



Pine sapling above An Diollaid on Beinn a Bhuird 9th July

I spotted another sapling, Scots Pine this time, at almost 3000ft on Beinn a'Bhuird on Saturday. It too had been browsed. Its presence was far less of a surprise as it was only c2.5km from the old Caledonian pine trees down in Glen Quoich and there were lots of pine saplings colonising the ground alongside the path we had taken. It was just that it was the last pine sapling I spotted, a few hundred metres up the hillside from my penultimate sighting.



View down to the Caledonian pine forest in Glen Quoich from close to where I spotted the pine sapling

There will have been more pine saplings scattered away from the path. But the second sapling helps illustrate the fact that as you travel further away from a seed source, the fewer the seeds. This means natural regeneration takes longer. Added to which the remoter you get on this corner of the Mar Lodge estate, the harder it is for the National Trust for Scotland to prevent deer moving in from neighbouring landholdings and keep browsing pressure under control. The fact that these saplings have survived, therefore, is a testament to the work NTS is doing but is also an indication that there is more work to do.

This browsed and weather beaten spruce sapling stands as a rebuke to all those foresters and conservationists who claim we need to plant trees to restore nature. Partly because of that, I resisted the temptation to uproot it as a non-native species in the heart of the National Park. The tree gardeners include the RSPB, who have been trying to plant “missing species” just 4km away in Glen Avon on their Abernethy Estate.

This sapling stands as proof that there is no justification for the RSPB’s attempt to plant the Loch Avon basin. To my mind it was poetic justice that many of the trees they planted initially were destroyed by browsing reindeer! The lesson is if the RSPB controlled the numbers of grazing animals, as NTS are doing, all they need to do is to be patient and trees will colonise areas from which they are now missing on ground that is suited to them.

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A SCOTTISH PERSPECTIVE

Fresh bid to restore mountain tree life

By Ellie Forbes

SCOTLAND'S hilltops were once a landscape full of woodlands – but tree cover disappeared over thousands of years due to human activity.

Now researcher Sarah Watts is among those collecting information on where trees are taking root as part of her work on mountain woodland restoration.

"When we are talking about altitudes above 900 metres that is very, very extreme for a tree to grow," she says.

But she says trees have been found at heights of more than 1,000m (3,281ft) on some of Scotland's highest peaks.

The trees reach the mountains as seeds – often blown on winds or deposited in bird droppings after being eaten.

"It's a natural process," says Ms Watts, a PhD researcher based in the Highlands with the University of Stirling's Global Change Ecology research group.

"Native trees should be there if the seeds are managing to make it there and germinate and grow without intervention."

However, she says they are unlikely to ever reach maturity, because the harsh conditions stunt their growth.

Ms Watts, who is also chairwoman of the Mountain Woodland Action Group, says she hopes hillwalkers and climbers will contact the MWAG with any high altitude tree sightings.

Ms Watts says many are classified as a willow species, but tend not to be counted as a tree because they grow as a dwarf shrub barely more than a few



centimetres above the ground. Other organisations are also gathering data on mountain trees, with the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland collecting UK-wide information and Mountain Birch Project interested in

The project aims to help restore Scotland's mountain woodlands

details of where mountain birch is found in the Scottish hills.

Ms Watts is eager to see Scotland's mountain woodlands flourish once more.

These woods are believed to have occupied altitudes to 600m (1,968ft) more on hills and mountains, above extensive lowland forests and below a mosaic of scattered shrubs higher up.

The decline began around Neolithic times, with trees cleared for agriculture or felled for use as building materials and charcoal.

There was a further loss of trees in the 18th century as large-scale hill sheep farming and increasing deer densities resulted in overgrazing.

Ms Watts says: "We now have a situation where there is almost no altitudinal treeline left in Scotland."

It would be hard to choose a less appropriate photo! The Herald

With all the pressure to plant trees, fuelled by public subsidy ([see here](#)), it was very good to see that a researcher is now asking hillwalkers and climbers to record high altitude tree sightings:

"Native trees should be there if the seeds are managing to make it there and germinate and grow without intervention".

The RSPB, BrewDog and others who want to plant some of our most special areas should note:

"The trees reach the mountains as seeds – often blown on winds or deposited in bird droppings after being eaten".

So why, when RSPB's mission is to promote birds, are they ignoring the role of birds in spreading seeds? The researchers could have added that animals too, including red deer, help disperse seeds in their droppings and on their coats, .

Whether the spruce sapling on Beinn a' Chaorainn was blown or carried doesn't really matter. The point is that all the natural processes that enabled trees to colonise the land as the ice receded are still there, if only we gave them the chance and stopped the planting behind deer fences. Enabling natural regeneration should be at the very heart of how all land in Cairngorm National Park is managed and the spruce sapling was testament to that

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. natural regeneration
4. NTS

5. RSPB

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