

Sheep grazing in Glen Banchor – the consequences for nature restoration on the River Calder

Description



What was naturally regenerating native woodland in Glen Banchor 30th December 2024.

Happy New Year! Much of the woodland I have been by or through recently has had sheep in it ([see here](#)) as happens at this time of year.

When food is in short supply on the moors and open hill sheep will find a way through deer fences or hop over stock fences into woodland. Being selective browsers by choice they start with the herbs and grasses, as in the photo above, but then, as that food source runs out move on to immature deciduous trees and then, if still hungry, to immature conifers.

If grazing levels are uncontrolled the consequences are the same in ecological terms, whether the woodland has been planted or regenerated naturally: any palatable vegetation below the trees is hoovered up and only the plants most resistant to grazing survive.



A native woodland plantation with sheep beyond the road end in Glen Banchor. Note the ditches between the rows of trees. January 2024

Sheep and deer grazing is why a significant proportion of the native woodland that has been planted in Scotland looks like that in the photo above, with no woodland understorey and of very limited ecological value. That is not to deny its importance to farmers for enabling sheep to survive outside during the winter.



A sheep, one of several, in the fine birchwoods taken by the Wildcat trail above Newtonmore. 31st Dec 2024.

Where naturally regenerated native woodland, as opposed to plantations, is grazed by sheep it is far more varied, looks better and usually of greater ecological value. While there was no sign of any natural regeneration in the woodland in the photo, there are two further blocks of planted woodland next door – both at one time protected with stock fences.



Dead sticks in the second block â?? an indication that sheep have been steadily reducing biodiversity in this woodland. 31st Dec.

Too many sheep have been allowed into the first, too early. There were dead sticks everywhere, the remains of the many birch browsed to death, and few now appear likely to survive. That leaves the Scots Pine and minimal ground vegetation. Planting birch here â?? like so many other native woodland creation projects â?? was a complete waste of time and money.

In the third enclosed block there were dense thickets of planted and self-seeded birch. Apologies for the lack of a photo, I only realised the significance of what I was seeing for sheep management afterwards! Unless sheep continue to be excluded completely from this block until the birch matures or else their numbers are strictly controlled this too risks being destroyed like the block next door. With proper management, however, in time the third block could be used to provide food and shelter for the sheep that currently graze among the old birch in the first block allowing this to recover.

The point here is that woodland grazing by sheep is not necessarily a bad thing and can be managed but there are far too many places in Scotland where sheep are not controlled properly with damaging ecological consequences. Add high deer numbers to the equation and the those consequences become disastrous with many native woodlands being grazed to death.

Getting decisions on farm woodland right in the uplands requires co-operation from sporting estates, expertise about both farming and woodland but also depends on farmers being able to afford to reduce or remove woodland grazing for significant periods of time. The photos indicate that the elements of the Scottish Forestry grant scheme for sustainable management of forests ([see here](#)), which includes provision for â??livestock exclusionâ?• and â??woodland grazingâ?•, are not working.

Time for a review! Glen Banchor could be a place where the Cairngorms National Park Authority starts to work out what needs to change if sheep are to be managed more sustainably, including what financial support farmers would require to do so. Unfortunately, instead it recently allowed NatureScot to erect further fenced enclosures along the River Calder to plant trees ([see here](#)) without addressing the fundamental issues: the population of large herbivores in Glen Banchor is currently too high to allow woodland to regenerate naturally and sheep are being treated like wild, rather than domestic animals, and allowed to wander where they will.

The consequences for NatureScot's nature restoration project in Glen Banchor are predictable. Both sheep and deer will get into the enclosures, almost certainly sooner rather than later, and they will end up being of no greater value than the overgrazed plantations and natural woodland downstream which have featured in this post.

Category

1. Cairngorms

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1. CNPA
2. conservation
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4. sheep

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