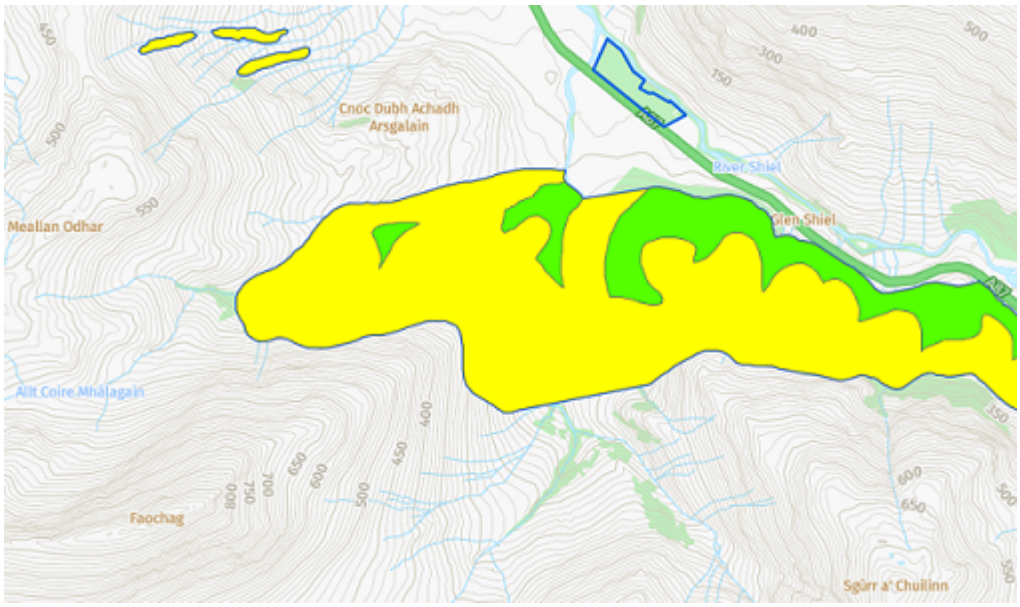
# Forestry grants, tree planting and native woodland (1) â?? 30 years on in Glen Shiel

## Description

Faochag and the Sgurr nan Forcan viewed from the A87 in Glen Shiel January 2026

This is the first in a series of posts which looks at what forestry grants to *large* landowners to plant trees has done for native woodland in Scotland based mainly on the evidence I have seen on the ground over the last few years. It provides lessons for our National Parks, not least because of the announcement yesterday that the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) has been awarded Â£670k by the National Lottery to plan how to restore woodland with a further Â£9.2m potentially to follow (see here).

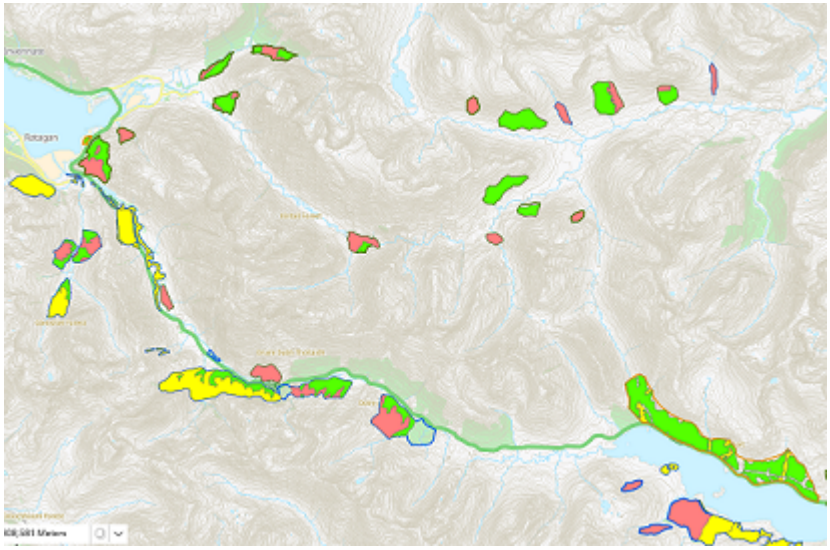
I will start with the native tree plantation I came across on a walk up Faochag in Glen Shiel the week after New Year.




Extract from Scottish Forestry Map Viewer showing the extent of the scheme. Green = new planting; yellow = restocking. Faochag is the hill at bottom left of map



The plantation extends from Coire Mhalagain, around the lower part of the north east ridge of Faochag and then east into Glen Shiel and was planted under the Woodland Grant Scheme 2 1991-94. This was a product of the successful campaign by the RSPB, Nature Conservancy and others in the 1980s against the afforestation of the Flow Country. The forestry tax breaks which had driven planting on this important habitat were abolished and replaced in 1988 by the ostensibly more environmentally sensitive Woodland Grant Schemes. There were three versions of the schemes (WGS1, WGS2 & WGS3), which lasted until 2004 and provided direct subsidies to landowners to plant and manage woodland. They prompted a wave of new native tree planting across Scotland, including Glen Shiel, Glen Affric an Kintail..



WGS schemes in Glen Shiel and upper Glen Affric from Scottish Forestry map viewer. Pink = natural regeneration.

This particular scheme â?? its not named on the Scottish Forestry Map Viewer â?? appears to have been planted in two separate fenced enclosures leaving the ground between the two open.

The eastern end of the western â??Faochagâ?• enclosure. I walked around the perimeter and then cut up to the N.E Ridge

In the snow, there was no obvious way through the Faochag enclosure to its north east ridge so I decided to walk around it. Even from a distance, there were far fewer deciduous trees than one might expect in a planted enclosure of this size. When I reached the fence I spotted several red deer walking through the trees in the middle distance before losing sight of them. Deer are very hard to spot in woodland when stationary and I could not spot them in this photo afterwards.

Deer tracks through the former gate

A little further on I came across a gap where there had once been a gate.  It seems deer had been deliberately let into the plantation to provide them with food and shelter.

While the sparse distribution of deciduous trees within the fenced area provided a clue, the full impact that deer were having on this â??woodlandâ?• only became fully apparent when I walked through the plantation on my descent.


View down towards the WGS2 native woodland. The red lines highlights the upper fence. A gate is just visible above the horizontal line.

The densest woodland on the left of the photo is primarily Scots Pine. The bare ground behind the fence of the right of the photo appears to have been intended as deciduous woodland.

Once down inside the fence and below the upper treeless areas, there were many examples of dead or dying young deciduous trees that had been browsed,  These trees may have been planted subsequent to the plantation being established or may represent a period when the plantation had started to regenerate naturally.  Whatever the explanation, all the younger and smaller trees are being systematically destroyed by hungry mouths.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Browsed sapling with deer prints and droppings

How long this process, which has put an end to woodland development, has been going on is unclear.

There was also evidence of Red Deer pulling down branches from older trees to chew the bark.


While people often talk about Scots Pine and non-native conifers â??getting awayâ?•, deciduous trees remain vulnerable to grazing for a considerable time â?? much much longer than the average deer fence lasts.  Except on better soils, where trees may be able to grow quicker than deer can eat them, high deer numbers are generally a death sentence for native woodland.

Snow within the enclosure disturbed by red deer searching for food, forced to forage as they would do on the open hill (and also possibly clearing patches for resting the night).

Since I first started really looking, I have observed many plantations like this, ostensibly intended to increase the amount of native woodland cover but where thirty years later many of the trees have been destroyed. What remains does not deserve to be described as woodland and has little value for wildlife.

From a sporting landowner perspective, however, what matters is not woodland but maintaining high numbers of red deer for stalking and estate valuation purposes. Opening up native woodland plantations after the first few years provides red deer with much needed food and shelter, helps them survive the winter and helps keep their population high. While this gradually destroys the value of the plantation as a refuge for deer, as evidenced by the photo above, from a landowner and land-management perspective this doesnâ??t matter. There is always another forestry grant available to pay for a new plantation for deer.

Far from promoting native woodland, therefore, the forestry grants system has become a means of subsidising stalking estates. Instead of paying stalkers to cull deer, reduce deer density to 2 per km or less and allow native woodland to regenerate naturally, the public are paying private landowners to plant trees to maintain deer numbers at high levels. The result is after thirty years of forestry grants, very little native woodland has developed on sporting estates, either as a result of planting inside fences or through natural regeneration because any accessible tree gets eaten.

Two factors have made this system, in which deciduous trees are repeatedly planted and then eaten, possible. The first is that the primary focus of the UK and Scottish Government has been on the amount of â??woodlandâ?• created and planting targets â?? hence why there is always another grant to pay to plant trees for sporting purposes. The second is that Scottish Forestry and its predecessors

have taken no interest in what happens to the trees they pay to plant in the medium term. Under the grants system landowners are required to maintain tree density at certain levels for the first few years, otherwise the money could be reclaimed, after which they can do what they like.  We are paying landowners to plant trees whose average life expectancy is probably less than 15 years.

Unless we address deer numbers, recent plantations will suffer the same fate as many of those created under the Woodland Grants Schemes.  Conversely, if deer numbers were reduced, there would be little or no need to plant â?? nature would do the job for us.

Naturally regenerated tree on the north east ridge of Faochag above the plantation

Apart from the Red Deer, the land was still and silent until I was on the summit of Faochag.


At almost 3000ft,  a common shrew, a mammal more usually seen in woodland and grassland, was scurrying across the snow.  My first thought was how could a shrew, which needs to eats two or three times its body weight each day, survive in such an environment.  My second was what did its presence say about the state of the native woodland below.


I found out afterwards that:

*â??Common shrews have evolved adaptations to survive through the winter. Their skulls shrink by nearly 20% and their brains get smaller by as much as 30%. Their other organs also lose mass and their spines get shorter. As a result, total body mass drops by about 18%. When spring returns, they grow until they reach roughly their original size. Scientists believe that low temperatures trigger their bodies to break down bones and tissues and absorb them. As temperatures start to rise with the onset of spring, their bodies start to rebuild the lost bones and tissues. This ability to shrink their bodies significantly reduces their food requirements and increases their chances of survival in the winter.â?•* (Wikipedia).

Nature is amazing, it just needs to be given a chance.

In the LLTNPAâ??s news release yesterday about their award from the National Lottery, Simon Jones, Director of Environment and Visitor Services, was quoted as saying:

â??*Nature conservation at scale takes years of sustained, collective effort. There is no quick fix to habitat restoration, but this funding gives us the opportunity to embed long-term nature recovery processes with people, delivering benefits for decades to come.*

It would be a major step forward if our National Parks were to state publicly that planting trees is not a â??quick fixâ?• for habitat restoration and does not create woodland. A start might be for the LLTNPA to use some of the National Lottery money to research what difference the Woodland Grant Schemes 1998-2004 made in the area they are now hoping to â??restoreâ?•?

It is concerning, however, that the LLTNPA is still talking about â??collective effortsâ?• when, until such time as there is significant land reform, all that really matters is what large landowners do. If landowners were to reduce deer numbers to two or less per square km, there would be no need for any more *large* native woodland plantations, nature would restore itself.

**Category**

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs
2. Other parts Scotland

**Tags**

1. conservation
2. Deer
3. forestry
4. Governance
5. landed estates
6. scottish forestry



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