

The A9 south of the Drumochter â?? demonstrating the wonder of nature

Description



Aerial view of a section of the dual carriageway. Note the thin strip of natural regeneration on the near side of the railway in the left foreground. Photo credit: screenshot from â??Scotlandâ??s Missing Forestsâ?•.

The section of dual carriage way on the A9 between Dalmamein and Dalnaspidal, just south of Drumochter, was opened in November 1979. The woodland along it is highlighted in Lesley Riddochâ??s film, â??Scotlandâ??s Missing Forests: the Great Eco-Conspiracyâ?• ([see here](#)). That film, which has had over 200,000 views, focuses on the restorative tree planting by Ron Greer, Derek Pretswell and others at nearby Loch Garry:



Loch Garry, which lies outside the boundary of the Cairngorms National Park, viewed from Dalnaspidal. The trees that were planted within small fenced enclosures along its shores are visible from the A9.

I had long been meaning to write about woodland along the A9, contrasting recent planting with past natural regeneration, but someone advised me last year they thought Ron Greer had planted some of the trees along the dual carriageway south of Drumochter. Near the end of August, I went with Ron â?? whom I had never met before but who has contributed to parkswatch ([see here](#)), ([here](#)) and ([here](#)) â?? to have a look at what he had done and to talk about the merits of tree planting v natural regeneration on site.



Some of the ground still appears inhospitable to trees and yetâ?â?â?â?â?â?â?

The first thing that Ron emphasised was that when the dual carriageway the area affected by the construction had been left almost completely barren and the newly exposed rock faces held little or no soil. It was the type of ground and at an altitude (above 400m) where most people in Scotland thought

it was impossible for trees to grow. This was at a time when the Drumochter was regularly closed by windblown snow but, from what he had seen in Norway and Alaska, Ron thought they were wrong. He therefore planted a small number of trees, less than 30 in total, to see what would happen.

Ron's project was therefore scientific in nature and purpose and completely different to the large native woodland planting projects that have proliferated over the Highlands since the 1990s ([see here](#) and [here](#) for two early examples).



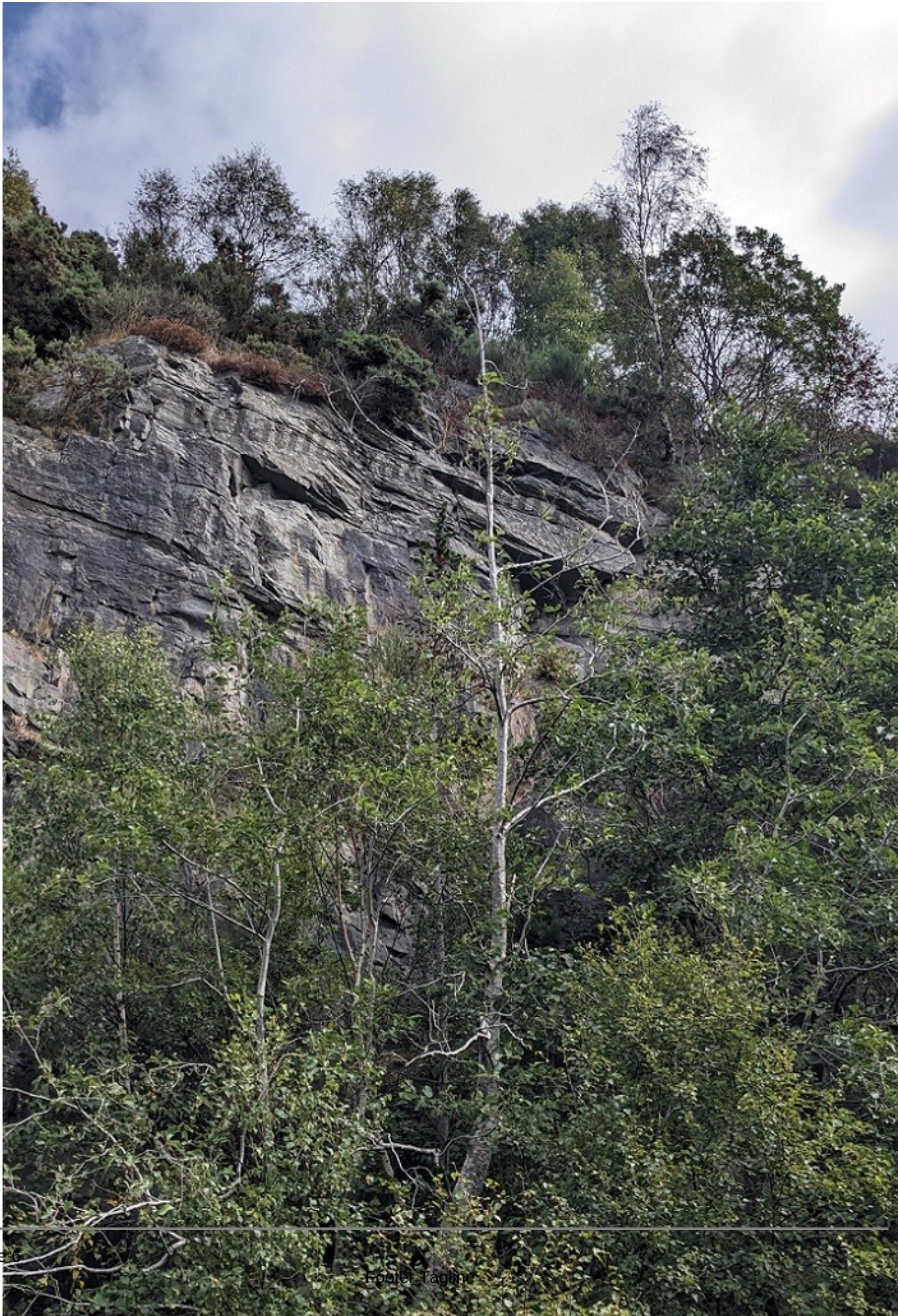
Lupins colonising bare ground between the two carriageways

Ron also used the area along the dual carriageway as a nursery for lupins, soil improving plants, whose seed he then used along the shores of Loch Garry to help the trees he planted there to get established.



Lupins along the edge of new woodland

The progeny of those lupins can still be seen in some of the remaining open areas along the central section of the dual carriageway. Lupins, as Ron explained, quickly get shaded out and the ones you can see now are in different places to where they were originally planted. Although the lupins may have helped some of the trees to get established, they never proliferated to the extent that they account for what has happened since.



Thirty years ago this area below the cutting was completely open, now the natural regeneration makes it almost impassible

Ron stressed that the vast majority of the trees that we saw owed their origins not to the trees he had planted but rather have colonised the area by natural means. He is certain about this because many of the species now found on the site are different to those he planted. He has also been monitoring his trees ever since he planted them, keeping track of those that have survived and noting those that have started to produce seed and regenerate naturally.



Looking out over the cycle path on the south side of the dual carriageway and the railway and River Garry below to the managed grouse moor beyond.

While almost two hundred years of muirburn and overgrazing by deer had removed trees from the hillsides south of Drumochter, pockets of native woodland had survived along the banks of the River Garry inaccessible to grazing,. It appears these then spread along the narrow area on either side of the railway protected by fencing (see top photo).

A local seed source of this extent would now be considered by Scottish Forestry as insufficient for natural regeneration and used as a justification for planting native trees with public money under the Forestry Grants Scheme. The evidence, however, shows that despite the harsh environment, it has taken less than 45 years for trees and many other species to colonise the much wider corridor created

by the A9 dualling and form new woodland.



The seed for the rowan on the left could have come from miles away.

This is partly because much natural regeneration does not depend on the availability of a local seed source. Birds, mammals and the wind can all transport seed considerable distances and in the case of species like rowan, miles and miles. This seed gets scattered all over the countryside but in most cases any that takes root then gets eaten or burned. As soon as an area is protected from overgrazing or muirburn, as on the A9 corridor, trees start to get established. Part of the importance of the natural regeneration along dualled section of the A9 is it shows just how little time it takes for diverse woodland to develop.



The naturally regenerated woodland along the single track section of the A9 just to the east of the dual carriageway contains a fair amount of birch and Scots Pine, the species most commonly planted under native woodland creation schemes and the Woodland Carbon Code ([see here](#) and [here](#) for example). Ron highlighted, however, that the naturally regenerated woodland along the dual carriageway is far more diverse and contains a high proportion of willow species.



While I was envious of Ron's ability to identify trees from a significant distance away, he was very reluctant to do so with willow even close-up because of their propensity to hybridise

While noting every area is different and what tree grows where is affected by multiple factors, Ron also observed that the forest industry at present is planting what appears, from the evidence on the ground, to be an unnaturally high proportion of birch. That observation is supported by an analysis of tree records in the Cairngorms National Park by Andy Amphlett ([see here](#)) which he cited in his recent post on the Altitudinal Range of the Abernethy/Glenmore wildfire ([see here](#)): Andy's analysis showed that downy birch (*betula pubescens*) came 7th or 8th in the tree species most commonly found between 500 and 1000m.



Ron near his home in Blair Atholl

Everyone who professes to care about the landscape of the Highlands – whether conservationists, land-managers, politicians or members of the public – should consider what can be learned from the natural regeneration of woodland between Dalnamein and Dalnaspidal and the implications for land-use and management in Scotland. Even better, if driving up the A9, they should stop off in one of the laybys and take a look for themselves. A few interpretation boards from the Cairngorms National Park Authority would be money well spent.

At Dalnaspidal Ron had been banned by estate staff from parking because of what he had explained in Lesley Riddoch's film. After they found red grouse (supposedly a moorland bird) were nesting in the woodland enclosures and their chicks were getting trapped, they opened up the fencing but without removing the sheep. In the film Ron noted, with some surprise, just how quickly sheep had destroyed the woodland understorey.

I was able to park, however, and we went to have a look at the – restoration – of the ground affected by the construction of the Beaulieu Denny power, an area Ron had not visited before and hidden from

the A9 by trees. I will consider what we saw in a further post.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. Deer
4. forestry
5. restoration
6. scottish forestry

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