

AUTUMN 2014

# Wild Land News

Magazine of the Scottish Wild Land Group



Walking the Tay River Catchment  
Managing for Wilderness?  
Grouse Moor Management  
A History of Glenlyon's Woodland



# Autumn 2014

## WILD LAND NEWS

Autumn 2014, Issue 86

Magazine of the  
Scottish Wild Land Group

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Calum Brown

## Editorial

2014 has been a significant year for Scotland's wild land and for the country as a whole. While the independence referendum raised the possibility of dramatic change in the overall governance of the country, a series of smaller political decisions – on wild land mapping, planning laws, land reform, ecological networks and species protection, amongst others – had the potential for substantial positive effects on the management of wild land. In the event, all of these decisions have or probably will result only in relatively minor alterations to the current situation. Nevertheless, their exact consequences remain uncertain, and will certainly be interesting to follow (and will be covered in this and future issues of *Wild Land News*).

What better time, then, for taking an overview of the state of (some of) Scotland's land and our impacts on it, from mountains to rivers, estates, farm fields, forests and coasts? In his long-distance walk around the Tay River catchment this summer, Stefan Durkacz had such an overview, and writes about what he saw and learned in this issue. The SWLG is particularly grateful to Stefan for using his walk to raise funds for us (he also raised funds for the Venture Trust), and donations can still be made as detailed in his article.

Also in this issue, *Wild Land News* continues to host a long-running debate about wild land management, and the scope for rewilding some areas. In his piece, Ken Brown considers the need and potential for truly wild areas in Scotland – a sharp if theoretical contrast to the increasingly intensively-managed grouse moors that Pete Ewing describes. The SWLG believes that there is and must be room for both extremes of human management, but the best approach to 'managing for wildness' will inevitably continue to be debated.

Tom Beels concludes his three-part history of Glenlyon's woodlands in this issue, and Jamie Grant describes the making of his acclaimed photography book *Winter in Glen Lyon*. Jamie also provides this issue's *My Wild Land*. John Milne, meanwhile, turns his attention to islands, setting a course for some of the most remote and fascinating he can find, and Beryl Leatherland catches up with the recent activities and writing of Mike Tomkies.

We hope that you enjoy this issue of *Wild Land News* and hope to see some of you at our AGM in December.

## News & Views

### **Rannoch wind farm**

The SWLG has objected to and will continue to campaign against the Talladh-a-Bheithe wind farm proposal in Rannoch. The scheme would include 24 turbines of 125m height, located between Loch Rannoch and Loch Ericht and visible from 30 Munros and Corbetts. The developers themselves say that the proposal is a test of the Government's commitment to protecting wild land, and we certainly agree. Rannoch Moor is internationally famous and one of the Wild Land Areas supposedly protected by new planning law. If approved, the wind farm would do terrible damage to landscapes, environments and Scotland's reputation.

### **SWLG supports Stronelaireg legal challenge**

The SWLG is supporting the John Muir Trust's legal challenge of the Government's decision to grant approval for the Stronelaireg wind farm. The Trust is seeking a judicial review of the decision by Fergus Ewing MSP, Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism, to grant approval without a Public Local Inquiry and against the advice of SNH and the Cairngorms National Park Authority. This decision has resulted in the site of the

development – covering an area the size of Inverness - being removed from SNH's map of Wild Land Areas and threatened with industrialisation.

This development would be terribly damaging to a huge area of wild land in the heart of the Monadhliath mountains, destroying peatlands and important habitats. We strongly believe that it should not go ahead, and that the manner in which the decision was reached should be challenged. We have therefore donated £1,500 towards the costs of the John Muir Trust's challenge. For more details, see <http://www.jmt.org/stronelaireg.asp>.

### **Hill tracks**

In a partial success for the campaign to stop the spread of unregulated hill tracks in Scotland, the Minister for Local Government and Planning, Derek Mackay MSP, recently announced a change in the law to require prior notification for agricultural and forestry tracks. Tracks claimed to be for these purposes are currently covered by Permitted Development Rights (PDRs) that effectively allow them to bypass the planning system. The SWLG and several other environmental organisations have been campaigning for many years

for these Rights to be scrapped. The new rules stop well short of this, but do introduce some level of oversight.

Under the proposed laws, local planning authorities will have to be notified of any plans to construct a new track, and will then have 28 days to respond (if they do not respond within this time, the track can be constructed). The planning authority will be able to approve the proposal as submitted, ask for a full planning application if the track is not thought to be covered by PDRs, or for further information and binding conditions if it is covered.

These new rules retain the original, undefined distinction between agricultural, forestry and other tracks, meaning that planning authorities will still have to determine which purpose a track serves and therefore whether it is covered by PDRs. It is crucial the Government introduces some method for planning authorities to make this decision if the system is to be workable. Whatever the details, however, there remains no provision for public consultation, meaning that local people, environmental organisations and other interested parties will have no opportunity to learn of or comment on the plans.

Overall, while the new rules will allow for improved monitoring of hill track construction, they are unlikely to significantly curtail the extraordinary freedom given to landowners to construct tracks across Scotland. We will continue to work on this issue and ask that any evidence of poor practice in track construction be submitted to Scottish Environment LINK at <http://www.scotlink.org/work-areas/link-hill-tracks-campaign/>

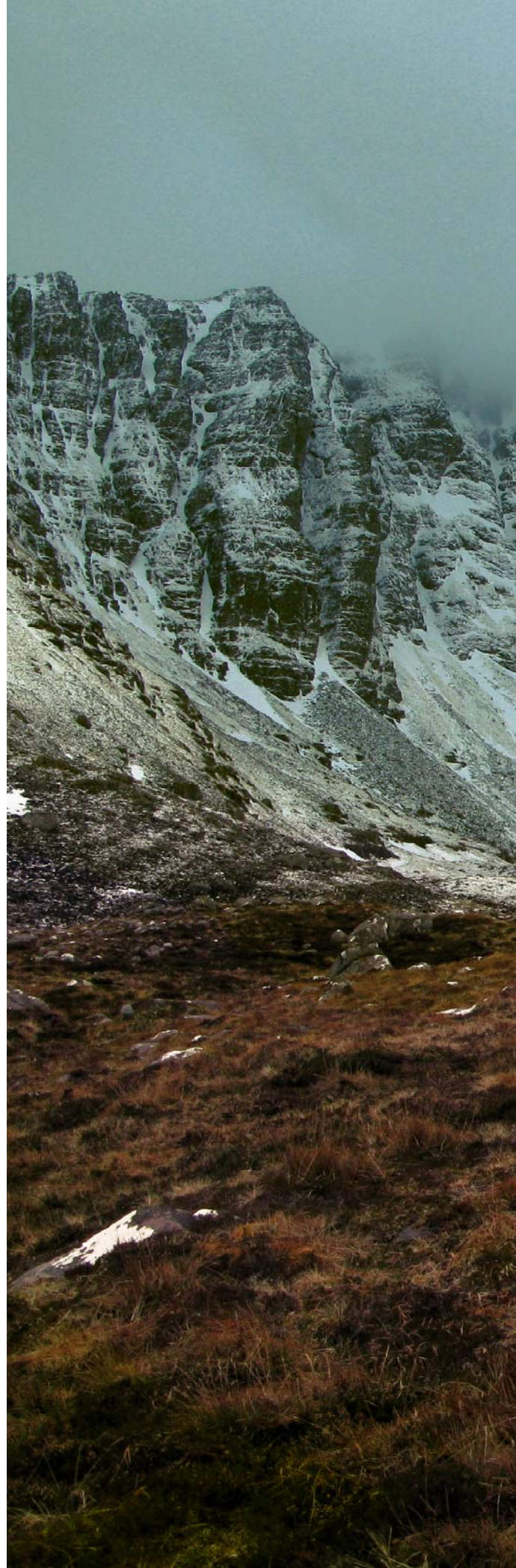
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*Photo: An Teallach,  
A. Torode*







## **Scottish Wild Land Group 2014 AGM**

As announced previously to members, the Scottish Wild Land Group's AGM will be held on Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> December, in the Royal Hotel in Bridge of Allan.  
Speaker: **George Charles** (Member Of SWLG Steering Group), NTS Mar Lodge  
**"Everyday Life at Mar Lodge"**  
1.30pm for 2pm - Bacon rolls for all!



Stefan Durkacz

## Walking the Tay River Catchment

Stefan Durkacz works as a social researcher in London. Originally from Scotland, he frequently returns to explore and camp in the Highlands and elsewhere. This summer, he completed a walk around the Tay Catchment, raising funds for the SWLG and the Venture Trust.

On a warm and overcast morning in late June I emerged from tall pines on to the sand dunes at Tentsmuir Point. Beyond a row of concrete blocks placed as anti-tank defences during the Second World War, skylarks gave way to surf as I reached the edge of the North Sea and journey's end. Away to my left, across the entrance to the Firth of Tay, the buildings of Broughty Ferry and Monifieth fringed the sea, with a mantle of trees and fields sitting above them. Five weeks earlier I'd touched the sea there and walked north out of Monifieth into the lush rural hinterland of Angus, tracing the boundary of the River Tay catchment. Now, five weeks later, I'd come almost full circle.

Much of the journey in between was through and over familiar places and summits visited piecemeal over many years.

However, to draw them all together in a single walk, to approach summits often from remote or unusual angles or link them together in ways not open to the day tripper, and most of all to sleep out amongst them night after night, was to experience something almost entirely new. I wasn't so familiar with these places after all. I was a guest in the landscape, or maybe a pilgrim, and the hospitality, or lack of, the gifts and lessons, the things granted and the things withheld, I had no control over. With nature, it seems, you can only ever approach, little by little.

This walk could well be described as a grand tour of the central and southern Highlands, and it certainly was. However the lead-in through Angus and the fade-out through lowland Perthshire, Kinross-shire

*Photos: Author*





and north east Fife were full of revelations. Wildness hides in plain sight here; these are landscapes most often experienced as a blur through a car window. They rewarded me well for travelling at human speed, on a route that followed the logic of the landscape rather than the priorities of main roads. I remember the richness of warm sunny days powering up the summer as I walked through Angus. Early morning haar burned off, and in the afternoon St Mark's flies swarmed lazily over field margins. On Carrot Hill south of Forfar on the first day of the walk I ate lunch by the cairn on a vibrant moor of heather, gorse and blaeberry, bracken unfurling and bumble bees weaving. I looked south and down through the haze to the Firth of Tay and marvelled at how far I'd come on foot in a little over half a day.

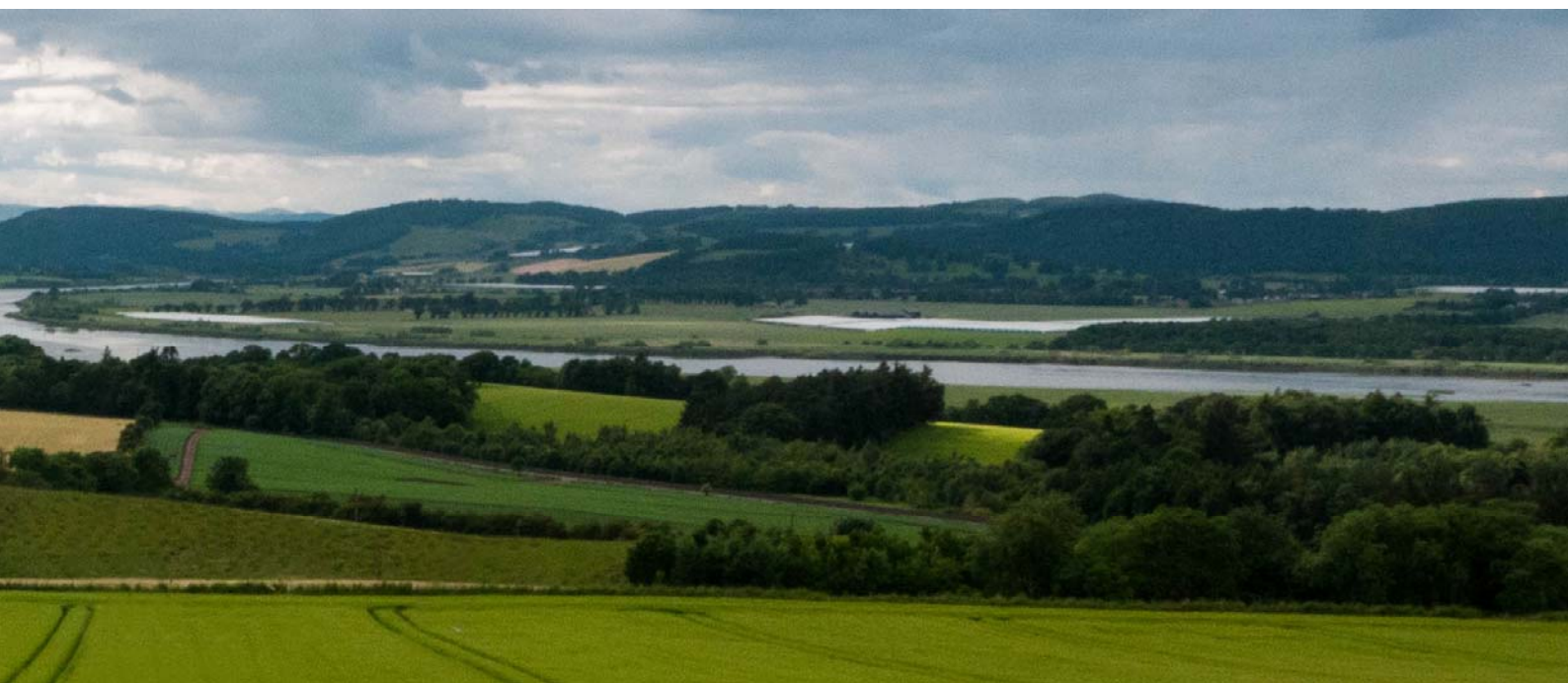
The more I walked the more I started to read the land and to feel it come alive around me. On foot it is a close and concentrated reading, every nuance and change hard-won. At times I was lost in the detail of my surroundings; at others I simply sunk into myself and endured through fatigue and poor weather, the thought of a safe pitch, hot meal and dry sleeping bag keeping me moving. Then

there were moments of huge revelation, pivotal moments in the landscape when I realised I was moving from one place to another, that I really had come a long way. In the second week of the walk, two and a half days of sun, wind, hailstorms and rain from the Cairnwell came together in sunshine once again on the summit of Carn Bhac. Behind lay the awkward tangle of Munros above Glen Shee; ahead, suddenly, was a vast unfurling expanse of mountain, moor and sky: the west Mounth, and the Cairngorms to the north. I felt a kind of reversal of polarity here. For once I, we, were dwarfed, dominated by the landscape. I walked into it with unexpected unease. The next day I was forced to take my chances on the slopes of Carn an Fhidleir as a thunderstorm played out overhead. Shaken by a close brush with lightning and unnerved by the exposure of these moors, I was knocked out northwards to Glen Feshie for a day. The disappointment of leaving the watershed route for a while was tempered by a wonderful camp in the fast-regenerating Scots pine woods.

There were the runes of blind time, the scouring and gouging of

“The more I walked the more I started to read the land and to feel it come alive around me. On foot it is a close and concentrated reading, every nuance and change hard-won.”

*Photo: Tay view near Newburgh*





“In more recent and settled times the human grip has tightened and land use has changed. The landscape at each part of the walk seemed to be marked with the signature of its human utility”

glaciers, frost-cracked and rain-weathered rock, deep peat and the bleached bare bones of forest around the upper Feshie and Lyon, drumlins and kettle-lochs in Strath Fillan. But alongside was the shadow-writing of human history. On the second day in Angus I stopped for lunch at Restenneth Priory outside Forfar, near the heads of the Dean the Lunan waters. Restenneth was founded by the prosperous and powerful Pictish kingdom of Fortriu in 745 AD. Sixty years earlier Fortriu defeated Northumbria at nearby Dunnichen, a battle arguably even more important than Bannockburn in forging Scottish nationhood. Several weeks later I walked through the eastern Ochils, through hills crowned with the iron age forts of the Venicones. Here was another Pictish kingdom: *Fibh* (Fife). The Romans expended great bursts of energy on this troubled frontier. Roads and forts paralleled the Highland boundary fault east and west of the Tay, guarding the entrances to the glens: I crossed this line a few miles south of Forfar, and returned over it at the A822 road south of Muthill.

The human centre of the walk, however, was the Tigh nam Bodach, the ancient Celtic shrine in upper Glen Lyon. In a ritual stretching back to a time out of mind, the family of stone figures – *cailleach*, *bodach* and their children – are taken out of the little house in spring and returned in autumn, mirroring the movements of transhumance, taking animals to high pastures for the summer and returning to the lower lands as the days shorten. This is the oldest surviving fragment of Celtic ritual in Europe. I met some local people here who had walked up from the Loch Lyon dam with friends to

show them the shrine. The few minutes we spent at the Tigh nam Bodach were playful and full of talk. It seemed right: this little place with its oddly-shaped figurines, by a cheerful burn in a beautiful glen in the morning, gently asked for respect, but not solemnity.

In more recent and settled times the human grip has tightened and land use has changed. The landscape at each part of the walk seemed to be marked with the signature of its human utility: the rich agricultural lands of Angus and Fife; the patchwork of muirburn and intrusive fences of the grouse-managed Mounth; the block forestry with its seven foot high deer fences around Strathyre reaching up almost to the acid, boggy ridges; the sheep-cropped grassy mountains around Tyndrum. Even the great emptinesses of the west Mounth, Ben Alder and Rannoch serve their purpose in hosting more red deer than is good for them. When you see a bright yellow mechanical digger parked on a plateau at 800 metres at the end of a freshly gouged track in the soft turf, peat layered over countless years stripped away in minutes, you know straight away what the dominant narrative of our relationship with the land is.

Moving into present times, the evidence of industrial society's increasingly desperate determination to do anything, no matter how costly, complex or destructive, to keep its foot to the floor rather than change course, is also being written on the land around the Tay watershed. Reaching the summit of Stuc a'Chroin, last big mountain of the walk, on a late evening of beautiful light and shifting cloud, wind farms were visible from the Ochils far



ahead round to the ridges south of the Forth. Business as usual shorn of the carbon, as the writer Paul Kingsnorth puts it. The Braes of Doune development was a day's walk away. On another fine evening I walked through the sterile swoosh and hum of monstrous turbines. Shadows strobed far out across the moor; a startled red deer hind wove through the metallic trunks. Braes of Doune is a wide moorland plinth shelving gently down to the lowlands, and it still has a magic about it. The terrain is rough and tiring and riven by huge peat canyons that force the walker into endless detours. A slender cairn overlooking the wind farm marked springs, where clear, cold water welled up amongst rocks and moss on the flanks of Uamh Bheag. I camped by a murmuring burn that had cut a little valley deep into the moor and watched a long, golden twilight.

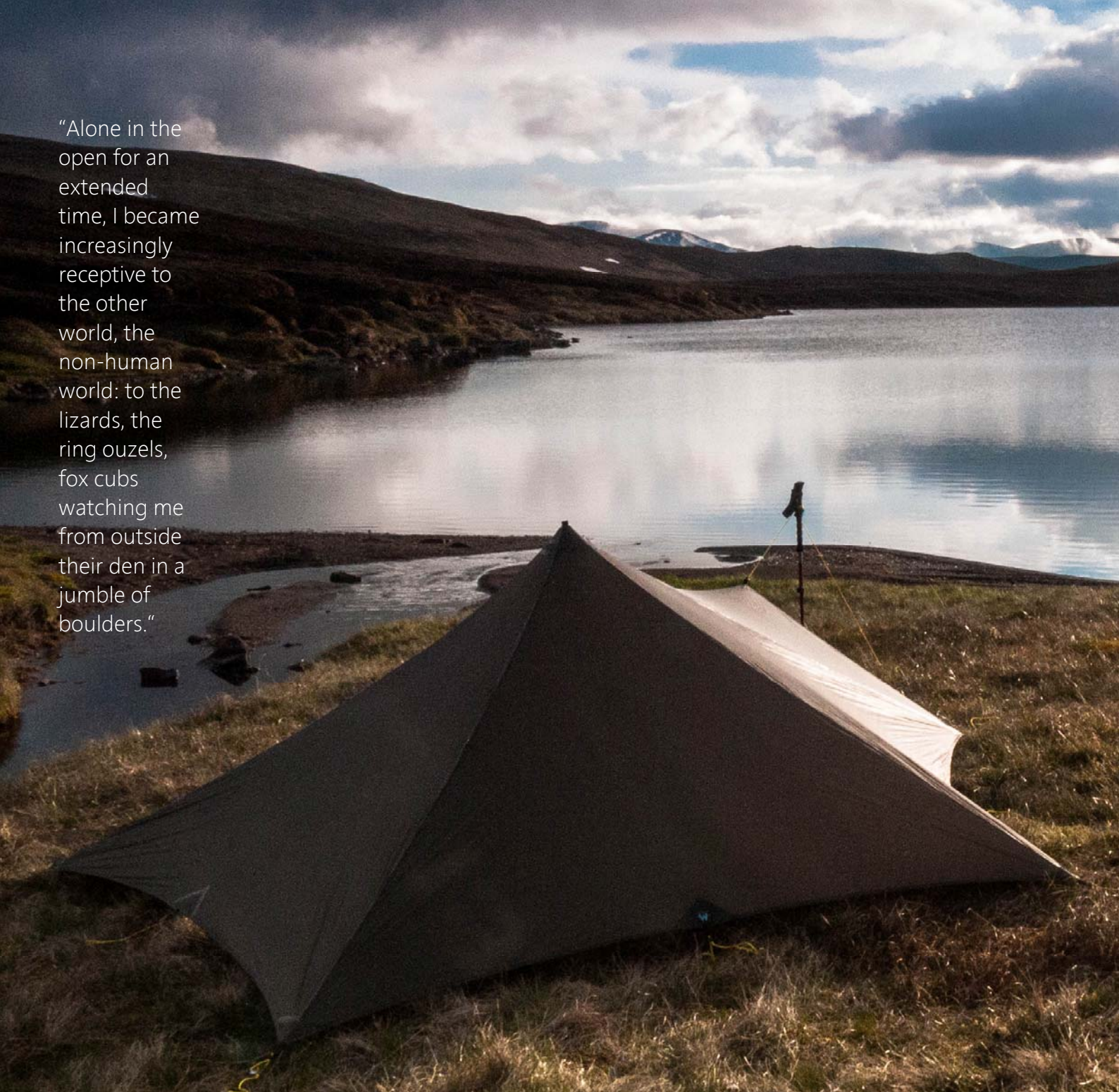
Ordering these human imprints chronologically tells a story of ever-increasing pressure and careless

detachment. From the echoes of harmony embodied in the Tigh nam Bodach, the story around the Tay catchment boundary is a familiar one of a burgeoning, ever more self-absorbed human project, ratcheting up inexorably over time. So what room is left for the non-human? Surprisingly much, I found – or so it seemed to a nature-deprived city dweller. Being alone in the open for an extended time, I became increasingly receptive to the other world, the non-human world: to the lizards, the ring ouzels, fox cubs watching me from outside their den in a jumble of boulders. I grew to love bedding down at night. I rarely felt alone; as my breathing settled and eyelids drooped, the night would come alive. The thud of roe deer hooves, the strange drumming of snipe, grouse chuckling and voles rustling. And there were heart-stopping encounters with golden eagles too, one flapping heavily off a dismembered hare above Glen Feshie, and two soaring in the early morning blue over the Drumochter

*Photo: Braes of Doune wind farm*







“Alone in the open for an extended time, I became increasingly receptive to the other world, the non-human world: to the lizards, the ring ouzels, fox cubs watching me from outside their den in a jumble of boulders.”

plateau as I headed for Dalwhinnie after seven straight days' walking. On the Braes of Balquhiddy I began to wonder if the journey had marked me out in some way, when a red deer fawn, overwhelmed with curiosity, actually locked eyes with me and ran *towards* me.

There was still room to breathe for nature, but the rising tide of human pressure was often evident. I was shocked at the number of

fences – often new fences, way over head height – slicing up the land on the Highland fringes. And electric fences too. After seven days of quiet, walking along the A9 to Dalwhinnie with traffic roaring past my shoulder, massive pylons marching alongside, I could feel tension seeping back into my body. I suspect it will take a metaphorical brick wall to stop the all-consuming trajectory of industrial society in a finite world. Until such a thing ever occurs, wild places and spaces for





nature will need to be spoken up for and fought for – both for its own sake and for our sake. It is really all we have, after all.

As I lowered my backpack onto the sand at Tentsmuir Point, I reflected on the landscapes I'd walked through: altered, managed and suppressed, but still full of wonder and enchantment. I felt at peace with myself in an imperfect world at that moment, which is as much as I could ask for from a long walk.

*Stefan walked to raise funds for Scottish Wild Land Group and Venture Trust.*

*Visit <https://mydonate.bt.com/fundraisers/taycatchmentwalkswlg> to donate to SWLG, and <https://mydonate.bt.com/fundraisers/taycatchmentwalkvt> to donate to Venture Trust.*

*A slideshow and field recordings from the walk can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/105408162>*

*Photo: Loch Vrotachan camp*



Ken Brown

## Managing for wilderness?

Ken Brown is member of the SWLG Steering Team. He was first coordinator of *Coed Cymru*, the ongoing campaign to save and enhance the woodlands of Wales, and worked as an environmental consultant in Scotland for SNH and the Forestry Commission.

James Fenton expresses values about the wild environment that all of us in SWLG probably share (WLN, Summer 2014). There is powerful aesthetic and scientific appeal in the idea of nature left to its own devices to create a richness and complexity of biological interrelationships that we will probably never fully replicate or even understand; an ideal worth striving for in all appropriate situations. And there certainly are such situations; James offers us the examples of the Arctic and Antarctic wildernesses from his personal experience.

These are uncontroversial paradigms – but as he implies,

there are many more examples where non-intervention should be the golden rule. Even in the relatively intensely-managed Rocky Mountains national parks of Canada there has been increasing acceptance of natural processes to accomplish what human intervention cannot. Wildfires, once regarded as a serious threat to these great wildernesses are now recognised as a vital source of natural regeneration, of biological diversity and of a varied age-structure across great swathes of forested land. Then there is the minimalist approach to management that consists in restoring or at least protecting keystone species like wolves, an experiment that has been a spectacular success in Yellowstone National Park – even down to the level of enriched soil structure and chemistry. Indeed, wolves now seem to be migrating south from Canada, to Montana’s Glacier National Park and via the Cascade Range of Washington state to the wilder regions of the western United States. New packs have even been reported as far south as Arizona.

There are, however, two major problems associated with the ‘hands-off’ approach to wild land conservation. The first is the disconcerting truism that humans are in all respects part of the





natural order, even as an agent of extinction; a product of natural selection as much as the ebola virus. This deprives us of an external, objective viewpoint from which to evaluate our relation to the rest of the natural world. We have to make arbitrary choices about the constructions we place on it. One such is the utilitarian view exemplified by the American forester and conservationist, Gifford Pinchot; that nature should be conserved and managed for the benefit of people. An alternative, espoused by another famous American conservationist, Aldo Leopold, is closer to the Fenton position; a commitment to wilderness for its own sake but also to enrich the human spirit. 'Of what avail are forty freedoms without a blank spot on the map?' he asked.

James tells us that he does not want to live on a planet where every square inch is managed. He has distinguished predecessors, including the great Victorian philosopher, John Stuart Mill, who expressed his unhappiness, *'in contemplating the world with*

*nothing left to the spontaneous activity of nature... If the earth must lose that great portion of its pleasantness ... for the mere purpose of enabling it to support a larger, but not a better or a happier population, I sincerely hope, for the sake of posterity, that they will be content to be stationary, long before necessity compels them to it.'* (John Stuart Mill on 'wilderness', from 'Principles of Political Economy' (1848), Book IV, Chapter VI, S. 8 and 9)

Sadly, these remain minority views. And this brings us to the more immediate, practical problem about leaving wild nature to its own devices in overcrowded Britain and Scotland. Even our tiny, threatened redoubts of wildness are far from pristine and devoid of predator species like wolves, bears and lynx, animals at the peak of trophic cascades that would once have maintained a vibrant ecology in relative equilibrium. The contrast with places like the great North American national parks with their very visible populations of black and brown bears, elk, moose, hoary marmots and hosts of

“Even our tiny, threatened redoubts of wildness are far from pristine and devoid of predator species like wolves, bears and lynx, animals at the peak of trophic cascades that would once have maintained a vibrant ecology in relative equilibrium.”

*Photo: Ken Brown*





“Perhaps it is not too late to mount a campaign to first research and then promote a really ambitious programme of wild land conservation and job creation that could make the protection of the wild an integral feature of land management in rural Scotland.”

smaller mammals is dramatic.

We also live in an increasingly crass and philistine culture in which everything must be justified in terms of its contribution to a ‘bottom line’ or at least to the satisfaction of perceived human needs, often of the most superficial kind. Our political leaders tailor their policies to populist tastes and follow the fashions. (Even the reputedly intellectual Ed Miliband confesses that he ‘researches’ television programmes like *East Enders* to keep up with the taste of the masses – though apparently without demeaning himself by watching them. We should remember that while Sir David Attenborough’s superb natural history programmes could attract audiences of 3 million, *East Enders* has been watched by as many as 16 million). In such a climate, what chance is there of persuading people that wild land is anything other than a resource that, at best, attracts a certain amount of tourist income or, at worst, is wasteland crying out for industrial or agricultural development?

Wild land is now very much on the defensive. Although the John Muir Trust greeted the Scottish Government’s acceptance of about 19% of our landmass as *relatively* inviolate wild land with enthusiasm, it is in fact a qualified defeat when one considers the extent of what Scottish Natural Heritage had previously defined as wild. It also creates the danger that areas outside those small parcels of land will be up for grabs, particularly by wind farm developers.

All this might have been avoided many years ago by a determined effort to develop much larger areas, especially in the Highlands, as nature conservation priority areas in which efforts were made

to reconcile economic motives with that of preserving wildness.

That, however, would entail a broad consensus amongst conservationists about which areas require the highest level of protection and which could be managed sensitively for such compatible activities as agriculture and forestry within ‘buffer zones’. It would also entail recognition that only by creating conservation-compatible jobs that rural communities could be reconciled to measures for the protection of wild areas. Highland landscapes and wildlife are, after all, major attractions for tourists and important sources of income and employment. As things stand, we have an abundance of environmental expertise throughout Scotland but very little shared vision and cooperation; a multitude of relatively small wild land conservation schemes that fail to match the alarming rate of attrition caused by wind and hydro schemes and out-of-control hill track construction; an emphasis on voluntary conservation initiatives but little matching effort to professionalise this kind of work and weave it into the life of local communities.

Perhaps it is not too late to mount a campaign to first research and then promote a really ambitious programme of wild land conservation and job creation that could make the protection of the wild an integral feature of land management in rural Scotland – particularly in the Highlands where sentiment about its natural wonders is now being rapidly overtaken by piecemeal desecration of them. And the Scottish Wild Land Group might well be the ideal organisation to undertake such an initiative.



Pete Ewing

## Grouse Moor Management

On August 28<sup>th</sup>, 1888, Lord Walshingham killed 1070 grouse in a single day. At today's prices, that one day of shooting for one person would have cost his Lordship a mere £86,000. Grouse shooting on that scale makes pathological gambling look like a fairly economical hobby.

Such large bags can only be achieved with 'driven' grouse shooting where teams of beaters push the birds towards a line of shooters. This type of shooting requires high densities of grouse, and that requires intensive -almost industrial - management of the moor. Ground predators such as fox and stoat are controlled by snaring, trapping and shooting. Some (but certainly not all) estates illegally poison raptors such as the hen harrier. This is one reason why England has only three pairs, despite having the biological capacity for over 300 pairs.

Patches of heather are burned on a rotational basis, sometimes as frequently as every seven years – red grouse prefer old heather to nest in and young heather to eat. The keeper puts out grit which helps the birds' digestion. Nowadays the grit is treated with drugs to combat the strongyle worm infestation which is a major cause of the cyclical fluctuations in

grouse numbers. Grouse can also suffer 'louping ill', a viral disease transmitted by sheep ticks. Various strategies are used to combat this from sheep vaccination to bracken control.

Some estates artificially drain the boggy parts of the moor – a process known as 'gripping'. Tracks are constructed to deliver shooting parties to the butts.

Grouse shooting interests are quick to point out the benefits of all this management. Controlling ground predators tends to benefit ground-nesting birds such as waders. Heather moorland is, in global terms, a relatively rare habitat, with much of it found in the British Isles. There is considerable demand for driven grouse shooting, which brings money in to the area and provides some employment. Rotational burning of heather is claimed to make access easier by preventing overgrowth and also to reduce the risk of wildfires.

All of this is substantially true, but there is increasing concern amongst conservationists about the wider effects of intensive grouse moor management.

Illegal poisoning of raptors, particularly the hen harrier, is perhaps the chief concern – it certainly generates the most emotion. About 70% of those

Pete Ewing is a GP in Crieff and a recreational stalker. He is working towards the Mountain Leader qualification and is also a member of the SWLG Steering Team.



“Some (but certainly not all) estates illegally poison raptors such as the hen harrier. This is one reason why England has only three pairs, despite having the biological capacity for over 300 pairs.”

convicted are people involved with the shooting sports. It is common sense that detection rates for this type of rural crime will be low, and there is a perception that the practice is very widespread, as evidenced by the near extinction of the hen harrier in England.

All of the main shooting organisations condemn illegal raptor persecution, and some have expelled members who are convicted of wildlife crime. The Scottish government has tackled the issue by outlawing the possession of the poison carbofuran, and introducing a vicarious liability offence that allows an employer to be prosecuted for his employee's illegal actions. Unfortunately the Westminster government has failed miserably to enact similar legislation, claiming that as Scotland has yet to complete a vicarious liability prosecution, there is no evidence that such laws are effective. That is like saying Trident is a useless deterrent because we haven't nuked anyone yet.

And it's difficult to see why possession of carbofuran *shouldn't* be made illegal – it has no legitimate use and it's been illegal to supply or sell it for the past thirteen years. Legislation banning possession seems entirely workable

and useful - there have been several convictions, all of them, naturally, in Scotland.

Meanwhile, the hen harriers keep dying - horribly, because carbofuran kills in exactly the same way as nerve gas does. Given that hen harriers can threaten the profitability of a grouse moor, the persecution seems likely to continue until something changes.

But what should be changed? Some conservationists campaign for grouse moor licensing, or even banning driven grouse shooting altogether. The shooting organisations are pushing for diversionary feeding or so-called 'brood management'.

Diversionary feeding involves putting out alternative food on or near a grouse moor. It can reduce predation of grouse chicks but evidence that it increases grouse numbers is lacking. Brood management involves removing hen harrier chicks if hen harrier densities reach a certain level. The harrier chicks are relocated to aviaries and then released elsewhere at a later date. The technique has been used in France, although in the very different circumstance of removing lowland harriers from areas about to be harvested. Many conservationists are worried about introducing brood management now, when





English harrier numbers are so low. It *might* make it easier for healthy harrier populations and commercial grouse shooting to co-exist, but this remains to be seen.

The issue of 'gripping' – artificial drainage – and heather burning is also a cause for concern. Heather moorland is not a climax habitat – left unmanaged it may eventually become forest – but blanket bog is, and it's a beautiful, under-appreciated habitat that plays a significant role in keeping both carbon and water locked up. The 'Ban the Burn' campaign group are concerned that intensive burning of heather and blanket bog drainage increases the downstream flood risk.

The science suggests they might be right. The charmingly named EMBER study ( Effects of Moorland Burning on the Ecohydrology of River Basins), published in October 2014, reports significant negative impacts from burning on peat hydrology, peat chemistry, river water chemistry and river ecology. Muirburn is often seen as benign but the evidence is suggestive of harm.

Regulation of grouse moor management is difficult. In 2012 Natural England launched a prosecution against Walshaw Moor estate, reporting 45 grounds

of alleged damage to moor and blanket bog. The legal action was then abruptly discontinued, and the exact reasoning behind this decision is somewhat unclear. The RSPB considered that Natural England's decisions were in breach of European habitat and birds directives and have made a formal complaint to the European Commission.

The greatest concerns over grouse moor management relate to England – here in Scotland we have lower flood risk, better laws, a Muirburn Code, longer burning rotations, single estates with more hen harriers than the whole of England, and keepers who aim for a less aggressive 'cool burn' of the heather. And perhaps the debate about grouse moor management is less heated as a result.

Grouse are certainly wild birds, but the modern grouse moor is like a monoculture arable farm – the land is intensively managed to generate a single product, and this inevitably detracts from wildness. We need to have areas of upland that *are* wild – large areas that can be managed less and less as natural processes are restored. I'm sure Scotland is big enough to have managed grouse moors too, but the challenge will be to maximise the benefits that grouse shooting brings and to minimise the harms.

“Grouse are certainly wild birds, but the modern grouse moor is like a monoculture arable farm – the land is intensively managed to generate a single product, and this inevitably detracts from wildness.”

*Photo: C. Brown  
Monadhliath mountains*





Tom Beels

## A History of Glenlyon's Woodland (Part 3)

Tom Beels is a forester in Glenlyon.

The editor stands in woodland once more, its shade familiar, the inhabitants probably not. Notebook out, he records the trees around him; girth size, planting date, future values local histories, everything really. He is a Victorian Gentleman quite gripped by the spirit of the age and deeply enthused by trees. Fortunately for him his passion is in the right place at the ideal time, for he is observing both the big-tree legacy of the 1500s Campbell planters and also that of the Jacobite planters like James Menzies of Culdares (see *WLN Autumn 2013*).

It is 1883 and Thomas Hunter has travelled to Glenlyon as part of

a personal mission to document Perthshire's remarkable woodland heritage for his planned book, *Woods Forests & Estates of Perthshire*, a compendium of, and enlargement upon, articles he has written for his paper *The Perthshire Constitutional*.

His means of transport is a horse and trap that he probably hired in Aberfeldy. Most likely he came to Aberfeldy from Perth on the train, changing at Ballinluig. During this trip he will provide a description of Glenlyon's sylvan heritage circa 1880s which, when accompanied by the newly issued Ordnance Survey maps, allow us - people living in a century of technological luxury that Hunter simply could not have envisaged - to see just what was going on in the woodlands of Glenlyon.

20 pages cover the journey up the glen, which in Hunters book begins in Coshieville and seven pages later reaches the foot of the glen after a ponderous passage through Garth and Fortingall. "*Famed Fortingall whose aged yew / Still braves the tempest's shock.*". Mention of the improving hand of Menzies of Culdares is made almost immediately upon entering Glenlyon, which he says "*appears less than 150 years ago to have been destitute of timber*". Hunter says of Menzies' legacy in the glen



*Thomas Hunter: Journalist, historian and chronicler of woodland. Image taken from The Historians of Perth 1906*

that he is associated with the introduction of larch, that he was the proprietor of the greater part of the glen and that *“judging from the many noble trees which now embellish the property and the system upon which they have been planted, he appears to have been a gentleman of superior taste, and possessed of a knowledge of arboriculture much beyond the age in which he lived”*.

Hunter was seeing Menzies' work 130 years ago, roughly 150 years after his arboreal dream dug its roots deep into the fabric of the glen. We today who dwell in an age so removed from both their times now drive, cycle or walk in the glen and so doing imbibe some of that wilderness that Menzies was (perhaps unintentionally) creating. The irony maybe being that, in our times, so safe compared to his, Health and Safety dictates increasingly mean that his roadside rows planted *"for the protection of travellers"* are deemed to be potentially hazardous to passing traffic and may need to be felled. Times have changed and what was once a reassuring protector has become the threat; it is a disadvantage to beech that it can drop branches, sometimes massive, at random and without warning, and that it can do so in proximity to humans. Perhaps the most striking aspect of Hunter's picture circa 1883 is how little the glen has changed; the first 13 miles are when one sees trees to remark on, punctuated as now with pastoral scenes. It seems to be essentially today's glen but without conifer plantations of significant size and with less impressive trees lining the road, though more of them. Young and smallish plantings of pine and larch catch Hunter's

eye and particularly the area around Slatich *“comparatively barren...cold and melancholy”* he thinks *“could do with more. A few strips of plantations would be a very great improvement to the landscape and might not be unprofitable”*: a tree man through and through the cultivated lowland stirs him not a jot. Soon some of Menzies' roadside beeches revive him and by Cambusvrachan the lyrical waxing is regaining full swing. He is entering the green heart of the glen where Menzies' knowledge was most practiced and where his example had been most followed. The next strip (larch and Scots fir) is beautiful, and along the roadside are many handsome beeches. At the area where we now see a memorial and a picnic site Hunter sees *“several acres of a thriving plantation of Scots fir and larch planted ten years ago”*. It is here he leaves us; his trap clicking through the dappled shade of another avenue of beech trees, its passenger enraptured, heading on up the glen.

In this and several other plantings of pine and larch undertaken by the Stewart Menzies, there is every reason to think that the family larch and their native pine would have been used as a source of growing stock. As these trees were taking root, Britain was engaged in various military actions around the world, a significant part of which was then the empire, or Greater Britain as some Victorians called it. During this time a soon-to-be glen resident was fighting from camel and horseback during campaigns in Egypt, Sudan and Abyssinia. The pines and larch may perhaps have been thinned a few times prior to the outbreak of the First World War when this by-now

“The pines and larch may perhaps have been thinned a few times prior to the outbreak of the First World War when this by-now resident volunteered for service and died in 1915, aged 55.”



“Following that terrible war, sporting interests that favoured deer forests and grouse moors dictated land management and little planting was undertaken.”

resident volunteered for service and died in 1915, aged 55. His name is first on the war memorial, that of his son Clyde, who died in 1916 aged 20, is directly below, as are the names of another eight men from an already under-populated glen.

Following that terrible war, sporting interests that favoured deer forests and grouse moors dictated land management and little planting was undertaken. Most probably the pines and larch just grew on until the next intervention we know of, when demand for timber during the 2nd World War sent a timber camp to the area around what today we know as the picnic site and car park halfway up the glen. Timber extraction was by horse, and over the course of four years the east side of the pine and larch plantation from 1873 was felled and brought to the mill. The slopes of Ben Meggernie were also harvested during this time, most probably yielding some pretty spectacular timber.

The felling operation finished in 1954 and the timber workers

moved on, to be replaced on the same site by the men who would begin work on the Hydro Electric dams and bring that most life-changing of all things, electricity, to Glenlyon. The next tools on that bit of land belonged to the Forestry Commission who were particularly active in the glen in the early 1970s and who, over the course of many thousands of man hours, established various close-planted coniferous blocks, part of a strategic reserve of timber for a wood hungry island. These plantations, efficient uniform production units of often non-native trees, are not something that one would necessarily expect to form good habitat, yet nature will always work with the tools available and these theoretically sterile woodlands are now inhabited by a wide range of species. Some, like deer and feral sheep, seek shelter while others, like red squirrels and small birds, plunder cones for their small seeds. Raptors in particular seem to find choice nesting sites in the serried ranks of spruce while down below mice and voles move frenetically in the furrows left by the deep forest plough.

*The man in the photo was responsible for servicing the saw mill and vehicles, His granddaughter and her friend in the other photo, visited during school holidays and were responsible for bringing milk from a nearby farm dairy.*



Many of these woods have parts that it is difficult to imagine ever becoming either accessible or economically viable for felling and extraction. These parts of the woods will likely become increasingly good habitat, where before there was windswept moor. Standing up or blown down, these trees will enhance biodiversity and ultimately flora and fauna will make far better use of them than humans will. So, in the unexpected way that often occurs when people try to manage the environment, what was planned in the office becomes somewhat different in the reality of its actual situation. It is 1998 and we are back on our bit of ground, the area where the saw mill was is now close-planted with Sitka spruce and the approach to it has become a picnic area, car park and toilets. The remaining western half of the 1873 planting is being felled and yielding high quality logs in long straight lengths. A number of the trees are retained to aid in the regeneration of the new forest that will emerge from the old one. One of a number in the area which are being planted (or regenerated) with trees intended to have long futures as woodlands rather than timber products.

We are in very different times now; the mindset has changed and the forestry management is more enlightened as concerns conservation forestry. In stark contrast to the ethos that saw so much Sitka planted, these pine and broadleaf woodlands are going to exist for reasons less connected to commerce and more to do with conservation and habitat creation. They are an attempt to not only recreate the revered yet feared

wildwood, but also to provide for the needs of species other than our own, and to replace a component of wild land that timber demand and grazing had made scarce. The change in mindset is the interesting thing here. During these articles on Glenlyon's woodland history we have seen forestry management advance in tandem with the evolution of a more secure, soft and comfortable society. Hunter's journey by train from Perth would have been unimaginable to Menzies in 1737, whom history records "*travelling by coach from London with the [larch] seedlings he had acquired in the Tyrol in his portmanteau bag*".

Pause for a second and actually imagine sitting on the seats of all those horse drawn coaches Menzies must have taken on the unmetalled roads from the Tyrol to London, London to Glenlyon, bouncing along on much-used horsehair cushions. "*Roads*" says Robert Campbell in the 1670s; "*were just muddy tracks mostly*" – "*especially following my clear fell with oxen extraction*" he may have added in this imaging of him. If we take the Pinewood back to the earliest known inhabitants in its proximity - the Neolithic or New Stone Age quarry workers - they must have known where the trackway was; they were exporting goods after all, though whether they used animals to assist with transport could only be conjecture.

Woodland from 1873 refilled with stock grown on from seed sourced from the relic wood and replanted in 1998 looks great now. Young trees swiftly become forest and also part of a whole new chapter to be embedded in Glenlyon's fabric. These new woodlands in the glen

"Pause for a second and actually imagine sitting on the seats of all those horse drawn coaches Menzies must have taken on the unmetalled roads from the Tyrol to London, London to Glenlyon, bouncing along on much-used horsehair cushions."



*Photo T Beels  
Renegade  
broadleaves  
show conifers a  
thing or two  
about upland  
afforestation. In  
the plans all the  
afforestation  
was coniferous,  
mostly Sitka  
spruce.*

come in our time; we witness the beginning of their existence as we see nutrient-poor upland desert become mixed forest. To children growing up in the glen today these native pinewoods whose growth began in the 1990s will seem to have always been there, for unknown generations of future visitors to the glen they will be

there. Becoming ever more impressive and increasingly wild, growing again on the slopes of Glenlyon as they have for so many centuries.





John Milne

## To the Isles

David Yeadon in his book *Seasons on Harris*, which I review later on in this article, suggests

*"islands do indeed possess strange and intriguing qualities. They lure you in with their uniqueness, captivating you with their history, people and folklore. And while lulling you with the pleasures of enticing isolation, they also spur the very spirit that brought you to them in the first place. They succour the lust for more searchings - more explorations - of island places even further out. Far, far beyond the sea-hazy horizons."*

That is very much my experience and so having come to a recent conclusion that my serious hill walking days are over I decided that I shall turn my remaining years' attention to relatively small and relatively inaccessible islands or at least with interesting access thereto. These are places for which I have always had something of a fascination even though I have only visited so far Eilean Shona, Staffa, Ulva, Lunga, Out Skerries, Papa Westray, Grip Island, Tannara Mòr and now St Kilda. One of my objectives for this summer, Heimay, the only populated island of the Vestmannaeyjar Islands, defeated us not because of an eruption of Edfell but because of a seriously deep mid-Atlantic depression. Such islands can be

every bit as challenging as any Munro or Corbett. Probably often more so. Certainly frequently more difficult to reach.

To my surprise and indeed pleasure Geoff Salt's article in the Summer 2014 issue of WLN - *My wild land* - opens with a paragraph which reads as follows

*"There seems to be a fundamental link between some mountain men and the sea. The nature of that link I know not, only that it exists strongly, in the same way that a fast running tide, though it may not easily be seen, can exert a great influence on one's course."*

Surely even the most hardened cynic could not deny that is a synchronistic confirmation of my new enthusiasm in life. I am reminded of the quote attributed to George MacLeod of Fuinary by his biographer Ron Ferguson, *"If you think that's a coincidence, I hope you have a very dull life!"*

So where next? I am looking most seriously at Mingulay, North Ronaldsay and Foula and with some longing at North Rona and the Shiants but for the latter two cost (not to mention accessibility) could be an issue, even for a pensioner.

I must confirm a suspicion you may have: the identification of these islands is entirely subjective. It is all

John Milne is  
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Photos:  
J Milne unless  
otherwise  
stated



to do with the feel of a place. But even that is not entirely satisfactory. Why, for instance, have I not mentioned Iona, that most magical of islands, which I first landed on over fifty five years ago and many times since? I think because it is in a category of its own, not to be submerged in a mere list of islands "bagged". The same most certainly applies to Harris, "*that old soul of an island*".

As far as "relative inaccessibility" is concerned I must admit that I flew from Out Skerries and to Papa Westray but that was part of the fun. I think in time I may include in my list some others such as Vatersay in spite of the causeway. I guess one has a relationship with an island, as with a person, the basis of which is mystery. Of course given the brevity of many a visit it

has frequently to be love at first sight! Such as with the St Kilda Archipelago.

Speaking of which on 5th June this year we set sail, in hope, on the MV Hebrides from Uig bound for Tarbert on the first leg of a journey to St Kilda. In hope because it was not our first attempt on that archipelago some forty miles west off Harris. The first was 'rained off', to put it mildly, ten years before.

However two days later we landed on Hirta. We had started out from An t-Òb (otherwise known as Leverburgh) on a grey early morning but by the time we got to Village Bay, after a remarkably smooth passage, the weather was glorious.

Hirta itself exceeded our expectations (St Kilda was correctly

*Below: Dùn, Hirta, Soay and Stac Lee not to mention a minuscule percentage of the 120,000 Northern gannets and other species totalling 1 million seabirds including nearly 300,000 puffins.*



described somewhere as "*the least plausible place on earth*") but what really amazed us was the return home via Boreray, Stac Lee and Stac an Armin. A truly wondrous experience: not just the tens of thousands of Northern gannets (the world's largest colony of that magnificent bird) - but the surreal rock formations. The word Tolkienesque came immediately to mind. However at that point I blew it. Just as I was being transported into magical realms by the vision before me, something in my brain clicked and I thought 'I must take a photo' and I landed back, so to speak, on the deck of the boat with a bump.

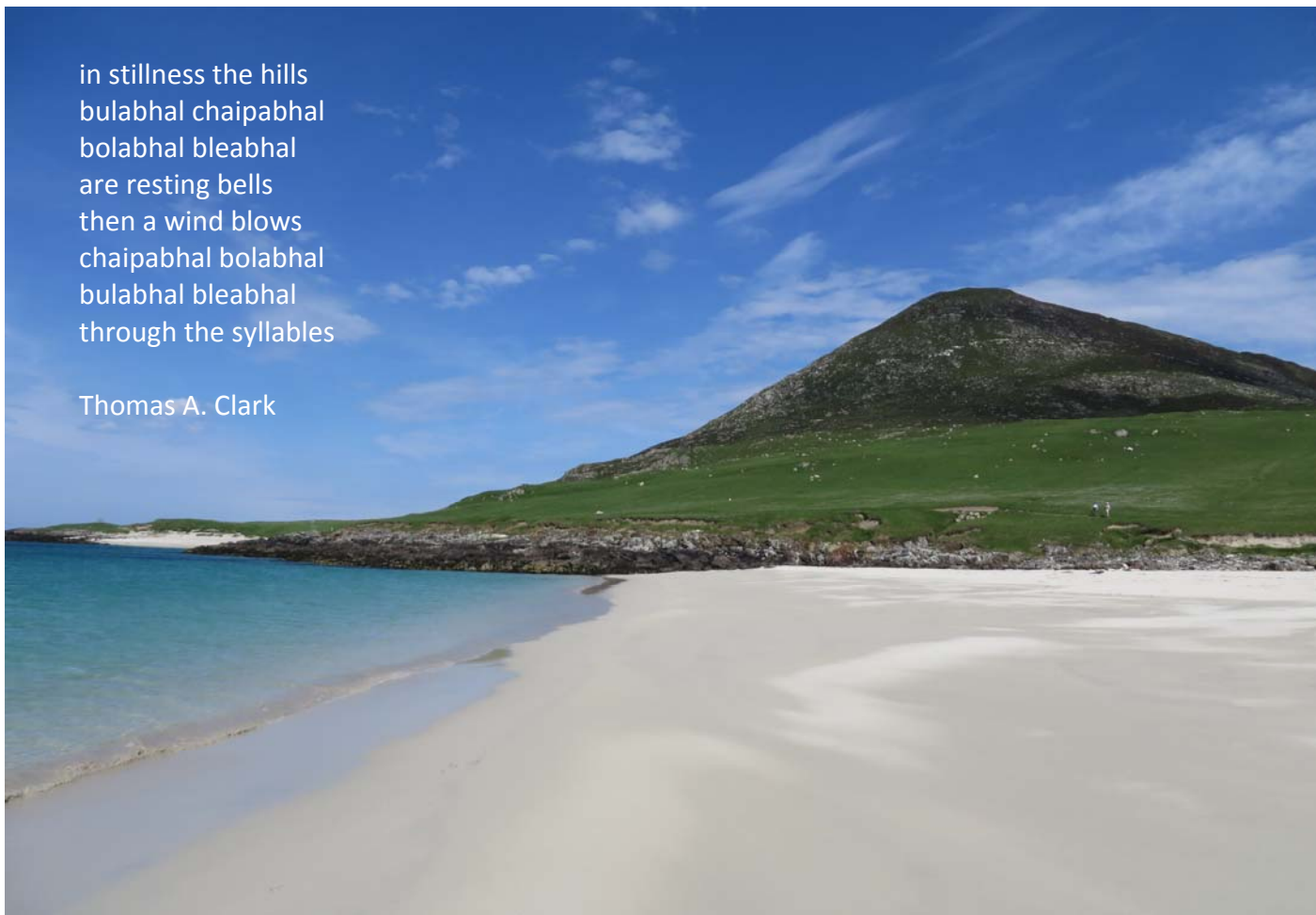
However it is not my intention to describe St Kilda in any detail, it having been done so effectively and so often elsewhere (for instance in David Yeadon's book *Seasons on Harris: A Year in Scotland's Outer Hebrides*). So instead I return to Na Hearadh, that most paradisiacal of islands, our starting-off point for St Kilda.



Above: Boreray  
Below: Chaipabhal, Harris

in stillness the hills  
bulabhal chaipabhal  
bolabhal bleabhal  
are resting bells  
then a wind blows  
chaipabhal bolabhal  
bulabhal bleabhal  
through the syllables

Thomas A. Clark







to Thomas and to all  
 who love  
 our wild island spaces  
 I issue an invitation  
 to join us in spirit  
 as we walk  
 from the top of  
 bleabhal  
 to sgarasta's shore

*Above: Looking from Traigh an Taobh towards Sgarasta, Sheileboist*

taobh tuath sgarasta  
 sheileboist losgaintir  
 each consonant and vowel  
 a stepping stone on  
 these hebridean meadows  
 between the retiring hills  
 and the empty white sands  
 each step accompanied by

the music of  
 the lark ascending  
 in the clear air  
 our hearts overflowing  
 with shared joy



*"the spangle of buttercups and heartsease, milkwort and orchids, the sort of carpet that until then you might have thought existed only in the imagination of a Botticelli. It is the sort of place, as you walk these miles of empty beach, as the wind blows in off the Atlantic, where you remember again what the point is of being alive.....It is a spectacle worth travelling halfway around the world to see,....."*

*(Adam Nicolson, Foreword to Seasons on Harris: A Year in Scotland's Outer Hebrides)*

Northton Machair.  
 Photo: D Cole  
 www.darrencole.com

© Darren Cole Photography 2014



but down the east coast  
the golden road leads us  
by meander, swerve and hill  
to fhleoidiabhaigh  
Fhionnsabhaigh  
Lingreabhaigh  
a stone-strewn landscape  
fashioned by a more severe wordsmith

a landscape  
that seeks only to be  
protected in its turn  
and cherished in all its  
rock-bound and  
water-logged harshness

that inspires  
21st century artists  
Photographer  
Ceramicist  
weaver and  
knitter of tweed  
painter and sculptor

landscape of St Clement  
patron saint of quarrymen  
how ironic  
watched over by  
once threatened Roineabhal  
save by Stone Eagle  
how appropriate

a barren landscape  
of lazybeds, potatoes  
peat and kelp  
that protected as best it could  
those cleared from the west  
who sought its shelter

a thought provoking  
landscape  
a creative  
coastline for  
those who now seek  
to reveal  
na hearadh's soul



## Notes

"There are many reflections which will appeal to readers of WLN who will understand intuitively what he means by "something in the wild land, the ocean, and these great sand spaces that resonates deeply in the bass chords of human awareness and evolution."

(1) Adam Nicolson's Foreword to David Yeadon's *Seasons on Harris: A Year in Scotland's Outer Hebrides* is a worthy introduction to an intriguing book. While not shrinking from singing the praises of the scenery of Harris, Yeadon's emphasis is on the Hearsaich of today and their future. He refers for instance to "new possibilities, new initiatives and synchronicities" which he believes are giving rise to an "authentic and optimistic future for Harris".

I recommend this book for being a distinctive and necessary addition to the literature on Harris (Harper Perennial reprint edition 2007). I would describe it as being an important record of Harris, its people and their outlook at the start of the 21st century from an internationally renowned travel writer and artist: realistic in not ignoring the challenges of living on the edge's hard rock, yet, where appropriate, optimistic, as the above quote demonstrates. Not only his own insights but those of the many Hearsaich he befriends are an important contribution to an understanding of that "old soul of an island" which so readily refreshes the spirits of those who "seek it and strive to reveal its truths". There are many reflections which will appeal to readers of WLN who will understand intuitively what he means by "something in the wild land, the ocean, and these great sand spaces that resonates deeply in the bass chords of human awareness and evolution."

But above all he is passionate about Harris, "*an island that never bores. And how can it? It would take half a lifetime to truly explore the wealth and variety of sensory and aesthetic experiences here.*"

(2) Adam Nicolson is author of *Sea Room* about the Shianta (a "*finely crafted masterwork, a book much respected by islanders for its scope, accuracy and enticing sense of place*")

(3) As an example of Yeadon's "new initiatives" and "new possibilities" I mention specifically the **Hebscape Gallery and Tearoom**, Aird Asaig, by Tarbert ([www.hebscapedgallery.co.uk](http://www.hebscapedgallery.co.uk)) which supplied the photo of the flowers on the Machair. Thanks to Darren for the photo and to Chris for his scones.

4) For the photos of St Kilda I thank Alasdair Milne and Calum Brown the photo of the old lazybeds by the Golden Road, showing some indication of old lazybeds receiving current care and attention.

(5) I sourced the photo of Traigh an Taobh Tuath from *Virtual Hebrides* ([www.virtualheb.co.uk](http://www.virtualheb.co.uk)) with thanks to Chris Walling.

(6) We thank Carcanet Press for permission to reprint the poem by Thomas A. Clark from *Yellow and Blue* published in 2014

**For Fiona who walked and loved  
our wild lands.**

**She kept returning as will her  
spirit.**

Jamie Grant

## Glen Lyon in Winter

The adventure starts at *Loch an Daimh* towards the top end of Glen Lyon. It is mid-February and half of the loch is bound solid with ice. I find myself balanced at the front of a small boat with stalkers Steven Macdonald and Ally Macaskill, tasked with helping spot a way through the half frozen loch to other side.

It looks like we have made it through when the channel of clear water we are following narrows between thick slabs of ice. As we try to push through a serrated edge scrapes ominously along the length of the hull. Steven steadies the

boat while Ally resorts to smashing through the ice with the anchor on a shortened chain to break through to the far shore.

We leave the boat to scale the steep, rugged ground above Loch an Daimh. The slopes are too steep to bring in an Argo and beasts have to be dragged back down and transported across the loch by boat. The sheer challenge of the terrain makes this Steven and Ally's favourite stalking ground. It's not hard to see why. From the tops we are rewarded with breathtaking views across Rannoch to the Cairngorms beyond.

Jamie Grant is  
a  
photographer  
and writer  
living in  
Glenlyon







Some of the images from this day feature in my book of black and white photos of *Winter in Glen Lyon*, the culmination of ten years of exploring Scotland's longest glen. With twenty-six miles of mixed woodland, heath and high bens, you couldn't ask for a better location in Scotland for landscape photography.

There are so many wild places to explore with a camera, including *Coire Nan Fraochag*, a wonderfully secluded corrie on the western approaches to *Carn Gorm*. The locals simply call it 'The Sanctuary' because of all the deer that gather there for shelter when bad weather comes in.

As well as stunning views the glen has a vibrant, if scattered, community with its own tearoom,

post office, art gallery and primary school at Bridge of Balgie. The people of Glen Lyon are an integral part of this highland landscape and I have also been keen to capture the daily rhythm of life in the glen. In the winter this includes stalking, hill walking, gathering sheep, looking after the Highland ponies or simply having a dram by the fire on a long, dark evening.

One of my favorite images in the book was taken of my friend's collie Seamus, putting his nose into the wind on the summit *Meall Garbh*. The moment is a not too distant reminder of when wolves would have roamed the *Ben Lawers* massif. For me it is a symbol for both the vanishing frontier of wild places and the wildness within ourselves.

***Winter in Glen Lyon*, published by Watermill Books, is a high quality hardback book with over a hundred black and white photographs revealing Glen Lyon in all its winter glory. It is available for £25.00 from [www.aberfeldywatermill.com](http://www.aberfeldywatermill.com).**

***Winter in Glen* has been shortlisted for Scotland's Favourite Nature Book. Please vote for it at [www.scottishnaturephotographywards.com](http://www.scottishnaturephotographywards.com) before the 19th of December 2014. Check out Jamie's photography and writing at [www.jamiemurraygrant.co.uk](http://www.jamiemurraygrant.co.uk)**



Bery Leatherland

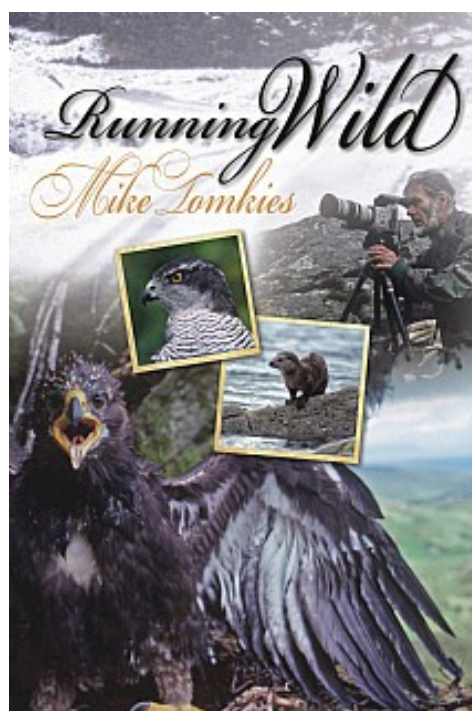
## Running Wild by Mike Tomkies

Mike Tomkies is now in his mid-eighties and was a well known journalist, nature film maker, author and photographer. This book came as quite a surprise as folk generally thought he had retired. Not so; this is a very lively read and covers his activities in his mid sixties to early seventies. He has spent time working in various countries including Canada and Spain as well as Britain, and especially the Highlands of Scotland. He has over 10 books to his name and several videos of eagles in the nest, flying and hunting.

He prefers wild, remote places to crowded honey spots full of people he doesn't know, and especially tourists and noisy children – although he does recognise the economic value of tourism to the Highland economy.

During this period he was largely peripatetic, travelling the length of the British Isles from Sussex to the far north of Scotland in his pursuit of work matters and his passion for wildlife, in particular eagles and other raptors. He travelled in an ancient campervan called Mi Caballo, which seemed to become increasingly expensive to keep on the road. However, out of sentimental reasons, he kept it in roadworthy condition so that it could carry all his paraphernalia,

especially when he was essentially homeless, which seemed to be much of the time. He camped in Mi Caballo, usually in remote quarries and disused tracks or other similar places, and lived frugally and simply. Whenever he found somewhere suitable to live, he settled in and renovated the place to his liking, only then to find some intolerable reason for not living there, to sell up and to set off on his travels again. Always at the back of his mind was the thought that he should retire and live in Sussex, where he was brought up, but he could never commit to doing this. By the end of the book he had settled again in Hawick, but I doubt he stayed there long!



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“At times, I felt that his accounts were slightly anthropomorphic but they are no less enjoyable for that and are beautifully observed. “

Despite being largely intolerant of his fellows and rather an outsider, he made some close and loyal friendships, many with people working in Scottish conservation whom readers will be familiar with. He worked particularly closely with Steve Phillipps, who as a young man joined forces with Mike, shared his concerns for wildlife and working methodologies, and continued to work with him at intervals throughout the book. From his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday he tried to spend the day observing eagles somewhere on each subsequent birthday; contentedly settled into a very close hide of his own making overlooking a busy nest site. Some of the hide sites were difficult to access and his descriptions of what was involved for a man of his age are heroic.

In the book he worked closely observing goshawks, ospreys and peregrine falcons and much else besides, but it is his descriptions of eagle activity that are the most compelling. When renting a farmhouse above Hawick, where he was almost self sufficient, he also reared some owlets very successfully to adulthood. At times, I felt that his accounts were slightly anthropomorphic but they are no

less enjoyable for that and are beautifully observed. He also expresses strong feelings about wildlife quango bodies, but seemed to get on well with rangers and others working in the field.

I think that the reader has to be mindful of the context of the period of time when the book was written; there is no consideration of the impacts on wildlife of global warming for instance, although ecologists expressed their concerns many decades ago. The widespread realisation of the potential consequences of permanent climate change are more recent. In addition, although “conservation” is mentioned there is no definition or consideration of the wider aspects such as biodiversity, rewilding and so on. Tomkins’ main ecological concerns are egg stealing and the impacts of increased recreational use of remote places and their consequences for species disturbance.

This is a fast paced read; one 11 line paragraph described no less than 13 different activities and events. The book is thoroughly engaging and informative and has stimulated my appetite to read more of the author’s material.



Mike Tomkies is a naturalist, writer and film maker and in earlier years was a Coldstream Guardsman and a showbiz journalist in Hollywood. He has lived for 35 years in remote and wild places in the Scottish Highlands, Canada and Spain and is an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland. His other books include *Alone in the Wilderness*, *A Last Wild Place*, *Out of the Wild*, *On Wing and Wild Water*, *Wildcat Haven*, and *Moobli*.

Jamie Grant

## Journey to the ends of the earth

Tom is standing at the front door stamping his feet in anticipation. *"Pleeease give me the head torch daddy,"* he begs. I stand over him, trying to untangle the torch straps, and swear softly under my breath. I am as impatient to step into the night as my three year old son.

Half an hour earlier my wife and I had been winding him down for bed with the usual routine that kids so love. We'd all had our tea before retreating to the living room to drink hot chocolate by the fire. Tom played with his beloved fire engine while Fiona and I watched the news. We were gathering our energies for what we call 'the last push:' bath time, stories and bed.

When our Labrador Gaucho barged into the sitting room and circled me with his helicopter tail I knew that he wanted to be let out. So I heaved myself out of the sofa, walked to the back door and opened it wide enough for him to squeeze past. He slipped into the darkness like a meeting of shadows. I paused there for a moment - it seemed particularly velvety out there beyond the back step.

It was only when I let the dog back in that I realised it was snowing. Gaucho slunk in low, his sleek black coat flecked with white. There had been a few snow flurries in the past weeks, but this looked like the

winter's first fall from the way it had settled along his back. Tom was beside himself with excitement: *"Where are the head torches Daddy...please, please can we go for a night walk."*

So ten minutes later Tom is standing at the front door, bundled up in a one-piece ski suit and wool lined boots, rather than splashing around in the bath. This act of rebellion in itself is a big part of our shared excitement. We are both breaking the rules. I am suddenly a fellow adventurer on a polar expedition, rather than a tired father on autopilot, steering his exuberant son to bed.

Fiona loves the moment as well. She fusses around us in the front hall, making sure Tom is properly zipped up and that his hat and gloves are a snug fit. I finally manage to sort out Tom's straps and slip the over-sized torch onto his head. He insists on turning it on as we stand for a final inspection under the full glare of the hall light. Fiona giggles and says we look like Laurel and Hardy.

Outside I can just about make out the scruffy patch of lawn that passes for our garden. The glen beyond has vanished into a riotous swirl of snow. Tom and I watch the flakes switch direction, like a shoal of silver fish in the narrow cones of our torches. When they carry

"I love going for night walks with Tom in the winter. To me they are an interlude in the evenings' long tenure, a nocturnal stroll beyond the loose collection of houses that make up the hamlet in this remote highland glen."



upwards he takes my gloved hand and asks, *“Daddy does the snow go right up to the sky?”*

I love going for night walks with Tom in the winter. To me they are an interlude in the evenings’ long tenure, a nocturnal stroll beyond the loose collection of houses that make up the hamlet in this remote highland glen. To Tom these walks are forays into a dense wilderness. He may know the route we take down to the river, but the darkness makes everything unfamiliar.

Walking down our drive towards the river we skirt a small plantation of mature Scots pine. By day this woodland is a natural playground for Tom and his friends. They have a den made of bracken and fallen branches at one end and there is a fire pit for cooking sausages at the other. But at night these woods become Foxy’s domain.

Foxy was born in Tom’s imagination when we found a line of paw prints through a patch of mud. They looked too small to belong to a dog, and too large to be a cat, so I suggested a Fox. The tracks certainly made a huge impression on Tom. Before long he had invented a whole back story about ‘Foxy.’ How this wild thing lived in the woods but only came out at night. He said that it watched us from high in the trees, but was actually here to protect us (my addition to the narrative).

Tom now pauses by the woodland, shining his feeble halo of electric light into the fingering of branches at it’s edge. *“Foxy’s up there,”* he says to me, his wide eyes shining in fear and awe. Kneeling down, I wrap an arm around him and tell him not to worry. Together we peer into the ancient stillness that has grown up with the trees. Even the

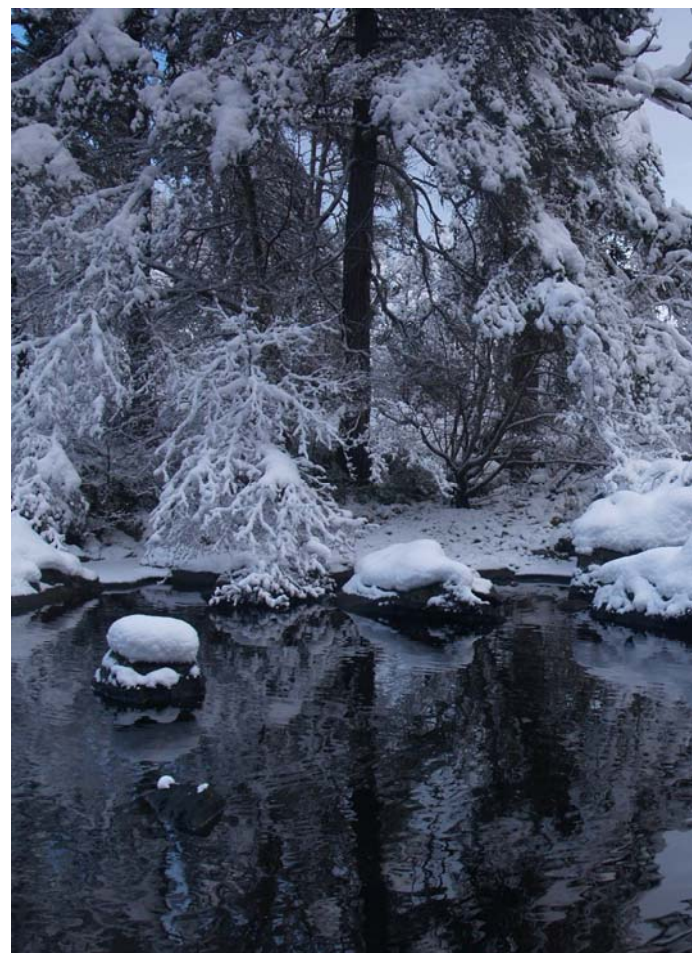
snow has slowed under their canopy to the lazy drift of a few singular flakes. For a moment I sense Tom’s fox out there too, curled up somewhere in the vast forest of our minds.

Crossing the gleaming black asphalt of our road, we pick up the track that runs down to the river. It is rutted and stony with birch trees growing on either side. The base of one of these trees is circled with bracket fungus. There is something about their black hoods and irregular sizes - like a little family - that has always fascinated Tom. We rarely make it to the river without having a little chat with them.

I usually find myself speaking for tree fungus in a low voice, with a hint of Devonshire thrown in. This night is no exception...

Tom: *hello tree fungus*

Tree fungus: *Hello master Tom*



“The darkness is in the mountain, that’s where it lives,” he whispers. “At night time it comes out of the mountains and in the morning it goes back in again.”



Tom: *How are you?*  
Tree fungus: *I'm just fine thanks, a little cold, but otherwise fine*  
Tom: (silence)  
Tree fungus: *Where are you going?*  
Tom: *To the river*  
Tree fungus: *Are you going to see anyone down there?*  
Tom: *Yes, white tree fungus*  
Tree fungus: *Oh that's nice, will you say hello from me?*  
Tom: *Yes (mumbled), bye bye*  
Tree fungus: *Goodbye*  
Tom: *I love you tree fungus*  
Tree fungus: *I love you too*

By the time we reach the river the snow is falling thick and fast and the bridge is an ethereal shade of white. I take a firm hold of Tom and tentatively step onto it, like a nervous skater testing the ice. We reach the wooden rails at the edge and look down. In the narrow beam of our head torches the snow-flakes funnel and accelerate

into the racing black river. It is as though they are rushing to dissolve back into the water that they had separated from.

Once we are back on firm ground I lift Tom up onto my shoulders. As I walk him back towards the house lights, a beacon to our familiar world, he leans forward and tells me the secret of where darkness comes from. *"The darkness is in the mountain, that's where it lives,"* he whispers. *"At night time it comes out of the mountains and in the morning it goes back in again."*

Fiona greets us at the door like triumphant explorers. She helps Tom out of his suit and takes him upstairs for 'the last push'. I return to the sofa, the fire and Gaucho, his back still damp from the snow. It has taken us less than half an hour to travel further into the wild than any journey to the ends of the earth.

*Photo: C. Brown*





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*Photo: Torridon, A. Torode*

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