

WINTER 2015/2016

# Wild Land News

Magazine of the Scottish Wild Land Group



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# Winter 2015/2016

## **WILD LAND NEWS**

Winter 2015/2016, Issue 88

Magazine of the  
Scottish Wild Land Group

## **SWLG**

www.swlg.org.uk  
admin@swlg.org.uk  
8 Clevedon Road  
Glasgow, G12 0NT  
Registered Charity No: SC004014

## **WLN Editor**

George Charles

## **SWLG Co-ordinator**

Beryl Leatherland

## **Membership Secretary**

Grant Cornwallis

## **Treasurer**

Tim Ambrose

## **Editorial**

Individual articles do not  
necessarily reflect the views of  
the SWLG Steering Team.  
Contributions should be sent to:  
George Charles  
editor@swlg.org.uk

## **Graphic Design**

Anna E. Torode

## **Printed by**

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*Front cover: Looking over  
the Torridon mountains, A.E. Torode*

*Left: ...., I. Cameron*

## Editorial

A change of editor to Wild Land News this issue as Calum Brown has stepped down . I'd like to thank him for the years of hard work he's put in to the magazine and hopefully I shall come close to maintaining his high standards. Calum continues to fight for Scotland's wild land as part of the SWLG steering group.

It's been a heartening few months for those concerned about the future of Scotland's mountains. Rejections of Allt Duine, Talladh-a-Bheithe and Stronelaig windfarms all came in quick secession. Much appreciation must go to the John Muir Trust for taking on the Stronelaig Judicial Review, the costs of which the SWLG contributed towards. In this issue we hear from Douglas Wynn of the Keep Rannoch Wild group about their experiences of fighting to preserve their local landscape.

The threats continue, however, and we also include SWLG responses to the Cnoc an Eas windfarm in Glen Urquhart and the Ardessie hydro scheme near Gairloch. Keeping in the same area Jeremy Fenton contributes his response to the Baile Mor planting scheme.

2015 will be remembered as an exceptional year for snow patches with more snow lying on the hills in the summer months than at any time in the last 20 years. Despite a mild autumn there were still an impressive 73 patches that made it through to the arrival of winter snow. Iain Cameron knows more about this stuff than most and he tells us of his tireless work documenting the summer patches.

Finally, Geoff Salt writes of his 30 years of sailing off the west coast and the people and landscapes which made such an impression on him over that time and I wrote a little piece after attempting to digest a little too much WH Murray in one sitting.







Douglas Whyynn

## Keep Rannoch Wild

'Keep Rannoch Wild' (KRW) has now officially won its long battle to protect Rannoch's wild land from the damaging potential impacts of the 24-turbine Talladh a Bheith (TaB) wind farm scheme and the vast infrastructure which would have accompanied it. The epitaph for the application is now on the Energy Consents Unit website at <http://www.energyconsents.scot/CaseDetails.aspx>. Ironically, it was not won on the many substantive objections which we and our allies raised after much research but, ostensibly, on a narrow point of law: that the application was not competent, as the company was not a legal entity at the time of the application and throughout the period of public consultation. We are sure, though, that the strength of arguments and the widespread scale of the opposition weighed heavily in the balance, even if not formally acknowledged. This brief article summarises Keep Rannoch Wild's reflections on key lessons learned in its community-based resistance to a scheme which would have ruined a beautiful and rare environment forever. We hope that it might prove useful to other communities facing any form of 'development'

threat to their environment.

Full details of the TaB scheme itself and its many issues can be found on our website at [www.keeprannochwild.org.uk](http://www.keeprannochwild.org.uk).

Affected communities need their own **independent capability to research and challenge** unwelcome commercial initiatives. Huge vested interests are usually involved and it would be naïve to imagine that applicants can be relied on to volunteer inconvenient facts. In our case we discovered that the applicant's agent had attempted, as a pre-emptive move before the formal planning application, to use the general SNH consultation on Wild Land to have the proposed site excluded from the partial protection of SNH's 2014 Wild Land map. We also found that the applicant company did not legally exist at the time of the application nor throughout the statutory consultation period. Neither of these inconvenient facts was volunteered by the company or its agents in any of its presentations or community liaison meetings and so it fell to Keep Rannoch Wild to make sure that the community and the statutory agencies were fully informed on these and related matters.

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Affected communities need their own independent capability to research and challenge unwelcome commercial initiatives.

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Nor can communities assume that government-sponsored agencies will necessarily give neutral advice on development issues – their agenda will be set by government policy. We would suggest that communities wishing to oppose an unwelcome scheme should take stock of the skills which they will need and, if these are not available locally, source them from a reputable voluntary agency or even buy them in from sympathetic professional practices.

Effective resistance to an unwelcome scheme requires **communication** with all members of the local community, including those who might take a different view and even share information with the project sponsor. This raises the linked issues of how to discuss strategic options without forewarning the applicant, whilst maintaining enough openness to keep the wider community on-side. There will always be some in any community who will be prepared to sacrifice landscape and environment – especially if it is somewhere else – for the lure of ‘community benefit’ money (a recent corruption of the core principles of public administration, in our view). In our opposition to TaB we used public meetings, a leaflet, e-mail groups, social media and above all a regularly updated website to inform the community, both in Rannoch and more widely. We were extremely fortunate to have a prominent local resident who had the essential web and social media skills and the drive to undertake

this key task for us. We had, necessarily, to discuss options and strategy within a smaller group before sharing the outcomes - but always sought maximum openness.

Opposition to any major scheme depends crucially on having a **coherent overall strategy**. In our case, some key individuals came together at an early stage to question the scheme and this later formed the nucleus of the opposition group. Several of those individuals volunteered themselves as members of the applicant’s ‘Community Liaison Group’ in order to learn more about the proposal itself and the applicant’s intentions. The critical early positioning of the campaign was to:

- keep its focus specific to planning and logistical issues in the TaB project itself;
- avoid being drawn into wider (and, in the available timescale, ineffectual) arguments on government policy, though we agreed with many of the criticisms by groups like SAS;
- maintain a constructive dialogue with the planning authority and Energy Consents Unit; and
- whilst retaining local control, seek allies in like-minded environmental and outdoor bodies.

The coalition of opposition which was achieved on this basis included the clear majority of local residents (as demonstrated later by a separate Community Council

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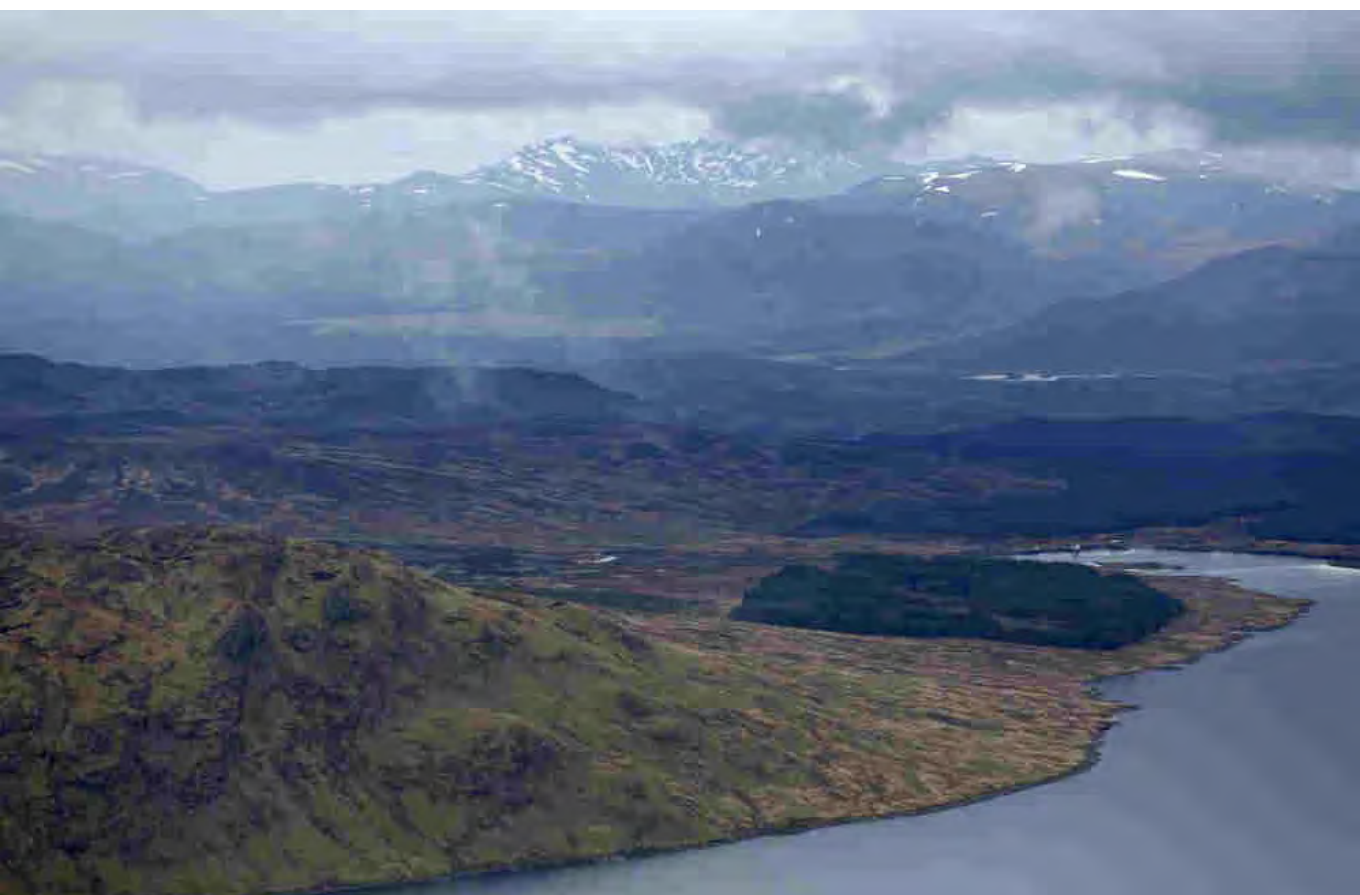


poll), many local businesses, all of the local estates which expressed any view and a wide range of outdoor and environmental bodies, amongst which special mention is due to the Mountaineering Council for Scotland and the John Muir Trust. The John Muir Trust was a particularly appropriate and valued ally as it is widely respected for its research and policy work and has always been selective in its opposition to wind farm applications, so fitted ideally with the approach of the local group. It was crucial for the credibility of the opposition to TaB that it was perceived – rightly – as led by the local community but it has to be said that the support and advice which KRW received from MCS, JMT and other outdoor bodies, from key individuals and from the local sporting estates was invaluable. As it became increasingly clear that the

majority of the Rannoch community did not want the TaB wind farm, despite the legalised bribe of c2% of the TaB revenue stream which that would bring, formal planning objections were lodged by nine of the local sporting estates. The two estates which were approached by the applicant and asked to allow the easiest lines of access across their land for wind farm components both refused, choosing to forego very significant payments rather than facilitate the scheme. Any of the local estates could have used the TaB scheme as a precedent to argue for their own lucrative wind farms but, to their huge credit, none did. Discussion, agreement on roles and growing trust across the opposition coalition were critical factors in our shared success.

The ability and **willingness of KRW to take its own initiatives** after discussion with its allies,

*Ben Alder group  
D. Wynn*





also proved very useful. The KRW objection to the TaB application was written by a member with over twenty years experience of writing Treasury-standard project appraisals on behalf of one of the 'Big 4' global consultancies. Our objection provided a succinct but comprehensive summary and critique of the application which we shared early and widely with those statutory and voluntary agencies which we hoped would join us in objecting.

The intention was to ease the task of these other agencies in assimilating and responding to the huge volume of documentation in the initial application and, hopefully, improve and strengthen their response to this particular application out of the many which they were required to review. It remains hypothetically possible that the applicant company might even yet decide to lodge a new and legally competent application, despite time fast running out on the ROC subsidy regime. If that were to happen, however unlikely, KRW would again respond in the same way, which proved so effective in challenging the initial application: it would circulate its own critical analysis of any further submission as widely and as early in the consultation process as possible. The initiative by KRW which proved most useful was to challenge the legal status of the applicant company directly with the Energy Consents Unit, on the evidence of its Companies' House

Certificate of Incorporation.

This was raised by us as far back as 20 December 2014 and, after ten months of discussion between Ministers, ECU and the applicants, eventually led to the application being ruled not competent on 30 October 2015. Though we found this long procedural delay frustrating, we always had the consolation of knowing that delay to this scheme was likely to be useful in itself, and so it has proved. Given the failure of the applicant company to lodge its promised supplementary evidence by the agreed time, the planning authority lodged a holding objection which, unless withdrawn, would have precipitated a Public Local Inquiry which we and our allies would have fought with total determination. We have to admit to a very slight disappointment that we will not now have 'our day in court' but this is well outweighed by more rational thoughts that we now have our lives back from campaigning. Even if the scheme had not ended in this way, the looming closure of the Renewables Obligation Certificate subsidy regime would anyway have made this logistically difficult and expensive scheme commercially unviable and so we do not really fear that it will be resurrected. The fatal stake through its heart was not the one we expected, nor specifically focused on, but it was satisfyingly effective nevertheless.

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Discussion, agreement on roles and growing trust across the opposition coalition were critical factors in our shared success.

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James Fenton

## Proposed Hydro Scheme at Ardessie Burn, Allt Airdeasaidh, Wester Ross. Ref. 15/00258/FUL

### Objection from the Scottish Wild Land Group

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The upper end of the proposed site lies within an area of 'high wildness' as assessed by SNH in their wild land mapping.

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Wester Ross, including the location of the proposed development site, has long been recognised as being of national importance for its landscape. It was recommended to have National Park status by the Ramsay Committee of 1945, and remained a 'National Park Direction Area' until the area was designated one of the 40 National Scenic Areas in 1982 owing to its outstanding scenery. Later The Countryside Commission of Scotland in its 1990 report 'The Mountain Areas of Scotland' identified the site as being in one of the eight "Most valued mountain cores".

In the recent work by Scottish Natural Heritage which identified the special qualities of all NSAs, including the Wester Ross NSA, the Ardessie Burn is specifically mentioned: "Burns tend to be rocky, with numerous rapids and falls. Particularly notable are the rocky Little Gruinard River; the cascades of waterfalls on the Ardessie Burn ..."

"Great tracts of wild and remote land" has been identified as

a special quality of the Wester Ross NSA: "Roads and tracks are few and far between and much of the mountain landscape is renowned for being wild and remote, with a natural vegetation cover and few, if any, buildings or structures.

Wild areas can be far distant from any road, only accessible by long walks on foot.

"The grandeur of the mountains and the great hidden lochs that can be found between them, together with the wild, unpredictable weather, makes a visit to these remote areas particularly memorable.

"However, **wildness can also be found in many of the more accessible areas** [emphasis added], whether along a stretch of undeveloped coast, a short walk into rocky moorland, or even beside the road where it traverses the mountain interior."

Note that the 'wildness' special quality is not confined to the remote areas – see the emphasised text above. However the upper end of the proposed site



lies within an area of 'high wildness' as assessed by SNH in their wild land mapping. Indeed much of the proposed development is within one of SNH's recently identified core Wild Land Areas. For these areas, the Government's National Planning Framework states: "We also want to continue our strong protection for our wildest landscapes – wild land is a nationally important asset."

By definition, an area is defined as wild if human infrastructure is absent. Hence any addition of infrastructure, whether dam, pipe, hard-standing or track will reduce the wildness: mitigation is not possible.

Considering the above recognition of the national scenic importance of the area and that the development is in a Wild Land Area, it is surprising that a developer is even considering putting forward such a proposal. If it is allowed to go ahead, it rather makes a nonsense of any attempts to protect Scotland's finest scenery, devaluing the work of the Ramsay Committee and all the subsequent work. National Scenic Areas are nationally important by virtue of the landscape qualities that make them special – their 'special qualities'. There seems little point in having NSAs if their identified special qualities are so easily cast aside by developers.

The proposed development will introduce a constructed track up to nearly 300m altitude, which will be widely visible from many places, as recognised by the developer. The argument given that the proposed track will only be formalising an existing vehicle route

is specious: because landscape damage is being created, it does not logically follow that the answer is to introduce a constructed route with a greater visual footprint. If landscape damage is currently being done within an NSA or wild land area, then means must be found to reduce the damage.

The incredibly poor quality of the landscape reinstatement following the recent construction of the Boor Burn run-of-river scheme on Loch Ewe (within the same NSA), gives no confidence that restoration here will be any more successful, or best practice followed. Additionally, the creation of disturbed ground up to nearly 300m altitude will encourage into the SSSI plants which are not normally found there such as gorse (as is happening at the Boor Burn site).

Finally, the waterfalls of the Ardesie Burns provide one of the finest spectacles for the walker in Scotland. Rivers in this part of the world tend to be spate rivers, rising and falling quickly. This means that during dry spells the burn will be relatively empty, and any extraction of water will significantly diminish the spectacle of the waterfalls.

Hence the Scottish Wild Land Group objects to this proposal in the strongest possible terms. If allowed to proceed, it sends a clear message that the people of Scotland care little about their finest landscapes and that no area is sacrosanct.

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Peter Ewing

## Objection to Cnoc an Eas Wind Farm 15/02758FUL

The Scottish Wild Land Group (SWLG) wishes to object to the above development application for 13 turbines of 136m in Glenurquhart.

SWLG is Scotland's oldest and only volunteer-run wild land charity. It is a democratic grass-roots organisation of ordinary people concerned about the increasing damage to wild land in Scotland.

We are particularly concerned by this development because:

1. The severe cumulative visibility of this development with other consented or built wind farms.
2. Although the development is not on a protected area or core area of wild land it will be visible from these areas. The sense of wildness is difficult to measure and therefore undervalued, but it of immense importance to many - and particularly to many visitors to the highlands. This development will severely detract from the wildness of a very large area.
3. It will severely impact on the main road route for tourists along the Great Glen, and on the Great Glen Way, the Great Glen Canoe Trail and the Affric-Kintail Way. It seems illogical to encourage wild country-loving tourists to use these

routes and then build a highly visible industrial development in the area.

4. Many local businesses are dependent on tourist income to be viable. Research evidence (JMT/ YouGov poll) indicates tourists are far less likely to visit scenic areas when they are industrialised with wind farms. We are concerned that this development will thus threaten the livelihood of local communities. It is interesting to note that there is a great deal of local opposition to the development.
5. The proposed wind farm would be built on peat land and involve the excavation of very large quantities (the developers estimate 38 000 cubic metres but it may well be greater) of peat. Although the developers may talk about reinstatement, peat land develops very slowly (circa 1cm per year) and cannot be genuinely reinstated artificially. Furthermore, there is increasing scientific opinion that building wind farms on peat land does not reduce carbon emissions.

The Scottish Wild Land Group consider that the disadvantages of this proposal hugely outweigh any benefits and we urge you to refuse the application.





*Windfarm, C. Brown*

Jeremy Fenton

## The biggest native tree plantation in Scotland!

In 2009 I moved to Gairloch in Wester Ross, and discovered that my house was right on the edge of the biggest native tree plantation in the country, completed two years earlier after five years of planting. I read about it online, and it all sounded very exciting.

“No living Scot will have seen anything like it: a swathe of native trees stretching as far as the eye can see, covering an area the size of Aberdeen.” That is Jeremy Watson in *The Scotsman*, 17th March 2002, writing under the heading “Green Light for £2m City of Trees”. He reveals that the Forestry Commission has given the landowner, John Mackenzie, £2 million to plant 2.5 million trees, under the Millennium Forest Scheme, in the area of Wester Ross enclosed by Loch Maree and the A832. “Conservationists hope threatened species such as the golden eagle, pine marten and capercaillie will thrive in the 8000 acres of dense woodland that will grow on the rough moorland.” Mackenzie, he says, believes that the forest will become a massive tourist draw, justifying the Commission’s biggest ever woodland grant. Just over half

of the trees will be native Scots pine reared from seeds gathered from the islands in Loch Maree. The rest will be a mosaic of birch, rowan, wild cherry, alder, juniper and holly.

John MacKenzie, whose family has lived in the area since the 15th century, is quoted as saying that his vision was to recreate a landscape that his ancestors would recognise. “This is a big piece of ground that many years ago was well stocked with sheep, which were its economic *raison d’être*. That is now history and the land, miles and miles without a tree in sight, was sitting there doing very little.

Having successfully already done a smaller scheme, we thought: ‘We have a larger chunk [of land] and a government exhorting us to plant more native trees. What are we waiting for?’ ... This is not blanket afforestation, there will be no two trees in a straight line (*sic*).”

In a later interview (2003) he said, “It’s a positive, practical use for a large piece of land that frankly was almost totally useless. The forest should become a great amenity for visitors and local folk. It will be wide open for all and

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John MacKenzie, whose family has lived in the area since the 15th century, is quoted as saying that his vision was to recreate a landscape that his ancestors would recognise.

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sundry to come along and enjoy it.”

All very laudable. The planting of the “Baile Mor” forest was completed in 2007. The project was managed by JKD Galbraith, and the statistics are impressive: 2.5 million trees, 64 man years of work, 200 helicopter drops, 800 quad bike trips, 10,000 miles walked by the planters, 200 deer culled, 12 miles of fence erected to keep out deer, 8 miles of new paths to be made to enable public access. The planting could offset 360,000 tons of CO<sub>2</sub>, the equivalent of taking 2200 cars off the road.

In the end 2000 hectares (7.7 square miles) were planted, half of the total area; the other half was too rocky or too boggy for trees. The planting method was “mounding”: a square hole is dug, the resulting turf is turned upside down, and the tree is planted on the turf with a little added fertiliser.

So how is the plantation doing now? The trees are from 8 to 13 years old, and it is time for a report on how well the scheme is fulfilling its aims.

In the six years I have lived here, I have watched the trees in the area above my house grow. They have done well, and the planting seems to have been nicely designed, leaving space for views (although the planters seem to have been unaware of much of the archaeology in the area, planting next to prehistoric walls and inside two hut circles). The winter of 2014-15 with its string of

westerly gales has damaged many of the pine trees; but they will probably recover.

There is good news too about the area near the road to the south, above the so-called Red Stable (it is green!) and above Kerrysdale. Here trees can be seen all over the slopes.

But... (I am afraid that there is a very big “but...”)

Half a mile from my house there is a 238 metre hill called “Meall na h-Iolair”, Hill of the Eagle. I climb it often, walking across pleasantly wooded ground (the tallest trees are now up to 4 metres high) and then up an old peat track (enlarged by the tree planters) and on to the top. There is a magnificent view, from Sutherland to the Skye Cuillin, with the Torridon Hills prominent.

This windswept, shallow-soiled hilltop is not a place to plant trees, but someone forgot to tell the hole-diggers. In the summit area there are about 70 shallow holes with their associated turfs,

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“It’s a positive, practical use for a large piece of land that frankly was almost totally useless. The forest should become a great amenity for visitors and local folk.”

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*Baile Mor  
J. Fenton*



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What has gone wrong? The hole-diggers and planters clearly put in a huge effort; holes are found in some very obscure, inaccessible places. But the trees are very far from flourishing, and it looks as if a majority of the holes never hosted trees.

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but only three or four trees visible; these are very small and battered, barely reaching above the low-growing heather. I imagine that the other holes do not represent plantings, but were dug and then left unplanted; some are no more than scrapes in the ground.

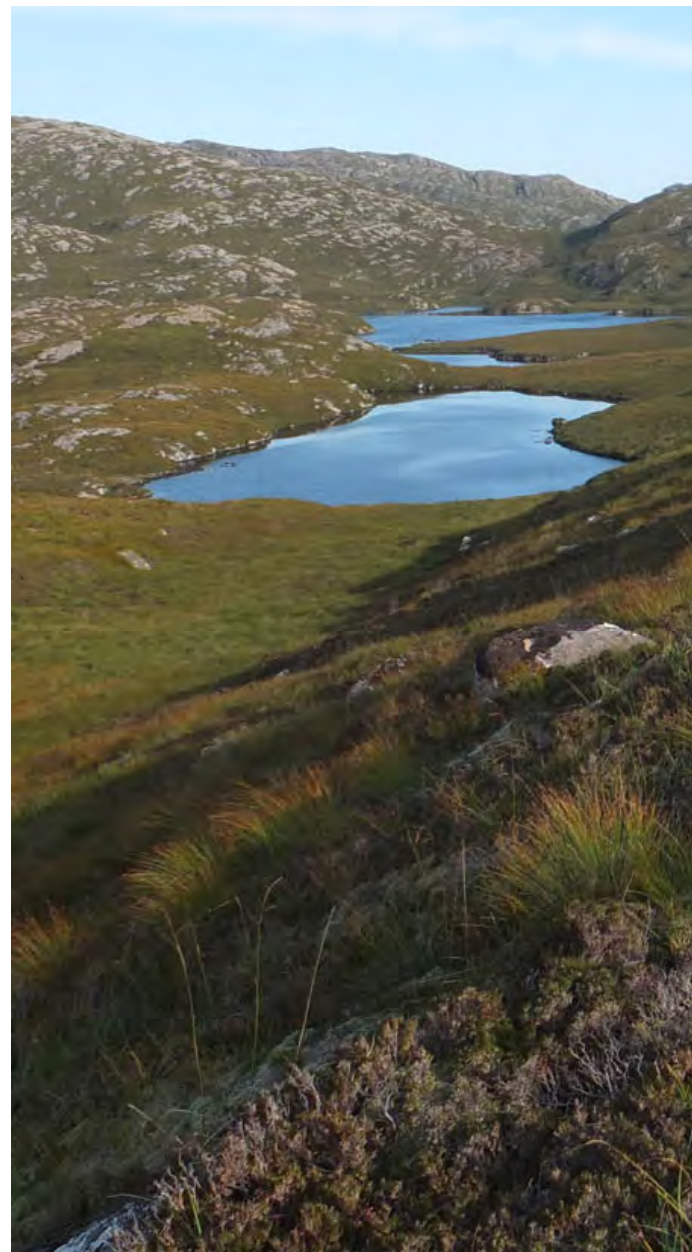
Perhaps that was an aberration? I often walk on beyond this hill over a series of smaller knolls and into the heart of the “woodland”. All this ground is more than 200 metres above sea level; it is typical “cnoc and lochan” country of moorland, lochans and small rocky hills (gneiss and amphibolite, great for scrambling!). I am going to focus now on this 200m+ high ground, which forms perhaps as much as 90% of the plantation area.

In the view from the hill no trees are visible on this high ground. Perhaps they just need a few more years to grow; it will take 15 years for them to become self-sustaining, and the deer fence is due to be removed then.

No. The simple truth is that in the vast majority of this land the trees are dead or struggling to stay alive, or else simply have not been planted. There are a few sheltered slopes where some trees are not doing badly; but more typically one comes across a group of, say, a dozen holes, perhaps half of which have visible trees planted in their turfs; half of these trees are small and distorted, with many dead branches, stunted by wind and poor soil, while the others are simply dead. I have found a lovely small alder plantation of about

twenty trees; but every one has died. Ironically, the most successful tree I have found here is a maple, a garden escape which is growing in the protection of boulders. There is absolutely no sign of a developing forest.

Go back to the first paragraphs and re-read the publicity. The image is of a vast forest, a haven for wildlife and an attraction for tourists, trees as far as the eye can see, 8000 acres of dense woodland. It simply is not there, and it seems impossible that it ever will be. The planters must





have realised this: the planting is in very small patches, and much more land is unplanted than planted; for example, there are whole kilometre squares in the east where no holes and no trees can be seen.

What has gone wrong? The hole-diggers and planters clearly put in a huge effort; holes are found in some very obscure, inaccessible places. But the trees are very far from flourishing, and it looks as if a majority of the holes never hosted trees. Was the area properly surveyed for its

suitability? Was the hole-digging supervised by an expert forester? Was the weather unusually bad after the planting (an excuse I have heard, not very convincing in the north west)? Were there ever trees here in the past? What sort of landscape would “the ancestors recognise”? I guess that Forestry Commission inspectors, if any, do not go very far from the road.

It is a wonderful area, a treasure for those who like wild country. “Frankly almost totally useless”? Is a work of art useless?

*Baile Mor  
J. Fenton*





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Trees did grow here thousands of years ago, but the climate changed, peat formed, and now the ground is hostile to trees – as the planted trees are now revealing. Instead we have a wild and natural terrain which is unique to Scotland, far rarer and more valuable than forest.

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Many walks can be plotted through its maze of small unusually rocky hills (up to 420 metres high), lochs and lochans of every shape and size (good for fishing), bog and moorland colourful with lichen, sphagnum, asphodel, deer grass and heather; the terrain underfoot is beautiful. Few visit it, because there are no paths (“eight miles of paths” were promised!) and the walking is often rough. It is, by the way, all the rougher because of those holes in the ground, traps for the unwary, commonly with no tree to indicate their presence. This seems like vandalism: in these places the ground has been spoilt. Many environmentalists hailed the Baile Mor scheme: it would create a forest wilderness, something which was lost when sheep took over the land; it was restoring the natural forest cover of Scotland, the Caledonian Forest; reintroducing native species had to be good.

But this begs a very simple question, which seems to have been neglected by any of the scheme’s supporters: were there ever trees here? The answer is Yes in the low-lying fringes and a few sheltered glens. But on the high ground there is no evidence of trees ever having grown. If there were any, they died out some 5000 years ago for natural climatic reasons. The rock, loch, bog and peat moorland terrain found today is no good for trees. If the “ancestors” saw any trees here, they were Bronze Age ancestors! Sometimes you see in Scotland

(but not in the Baile Mor area) old tree stumps emerging from a peat bank or revealed by the removal of peat. Many seem to see this as evidence that trees should grow here, whereas in fact they prove the opposite. Trees did grow here thousands of years ago, but the climate changed, peat formed, and now the ground is hostile to trees – as the planted trees are now revealing. Instead we have a wild and natural terrain which is unique to Scotland, far rarer and more valuable than forest. The phrase “Caledonian Forest” is evocative, but has no basis in fact.

So the majority of the 2.5 million trees are to be pitied: we have tried to make them grow in places where they can not grow. I would guess that at least half of that number are dead or dying; the best that the planting may produce on the high ground is small patches of low scrub here and there. My informal report on Scotland’s Biggest Native Tree Plantation reveals that well over £1 million has been wasted, not to mention a huge amount of labour. But in a way I am glad. This beautiful bit of Scotland has not been turned (and can not be turned) into something like Sherwood Forest.

And still the rush to plant trees continues, because of the grants available. Two large areas south of Gairloch are now being covered with trees. Or that is the intention, but nature may know better...

Iain Cameron

## Scottish snow—2015

2015 will undoubtedly go down as a memorable year. Not for its lousy summer – though that will clearly live long in the memory of many – but, rather, for the quantity of snow that lay on its mountains through until autumn and beyond. When I say ‘memorable’, I’m talking about how a small(ish) band of chionophiles\* like me will remember it.

The winter season of 2014/15 followed the pattern of the previous one to a large extent. Namely, oodles of Atlantic weather systems dropping lots of precipitation over Scotland. Much of this fell as snow above 2000 feet across the west and north-west Highlands; and although there was a *lot* of depth present on some mountain aspects at the end of March, it wasn’t what you’d call exceptional. Unusual in the context of the last 20 years, perhaps, but certainly not unique by historical standards. However, winter wasn’t finished. A brief respite in early April, where I remember walking in shorts and t-shirt in the Galloway hills on the 7th, gave way to continuing cold weather that lasted right through

May and well into June. So much spring snow fell that Blair Fyffe (mountaineer and Lochaber avalanche forecaster) and I reckoned the deepest of it on Ben Nevis all season was experienced in early June. Clearly this was going to be an unusual and long season for those of us who seek out old patches of snow when few are even aware of its existence.

For decades the well-known and respected Aberdeenshire scientist Dr Adam Watson has conducted research on patches of snow that survive from one winter to the next on the hills of Scotland. In 1995 the results of this research started to appear in the Royal

*I. Cameron*



Meteorological Society's *Weather* publication. Since 2005, when I contacted Adam with some data regarding long-lying snow in Glen Coe, I have been a contributor to this research; to the point that I am now lead author of this annual paper, with him casting his super-tuned eye over my writings.

After a few years of contributing, in 2008, a thought occurred to me that to get a better idea of what snow was likely to survive from one winter to the next on Highland hills it would be interesting to do something a bit more formal in August.

This seemed to me to be a good point in the year when we could get an idea of which areas were likely to need closer observation, and where survivals could be

anticipated. Would it be possible to actually count *every* patch of snow present on the hills of Scotland at this time, or would it be too onerous a task?

Fortunately, that year we managed to mobilise a small team of enthusiastic helpers, and counted a grand total of 77 patches. Success! Buoyed by this achievement, I continued the survey the next year and every year until 2013, where the total was 81 patches\*\*.

But... In 2014 it was more difficult. Much more difficult. The winter of 2013/14 was immense in terms of snow-fall, and by the start of August it was becoming clear that the few redoubtable characters who'd been helping for the last few years wouldn't be enough.





Nowhere near enough. In the end, thankfully, we got far more volunteers than usual, and counted an impressive 281 patches of snow across many hills all over the Highlands. We managed it. Just.

However, and as alluded to in my introduction, if we thought 2014 was difficult, it was as nothing compared to 2015.

The combination of heavy winter and spring snow-fall, and a miserable, cool summer meant that the amount of snow present on the hills at the start of August was the greatest it had been for over 20 years. 1994, the last 'biggie' for snow survivals, was mentioned and compared against. And so, with a degree

of trepidation, I embarked upon trying to raise a small army of unpaid assistants to go out into the hills and endeavour to count as many patches as they possibly could. I knew full-well that there was a very good chance a lot of them might be missed, given it was likely there'd be more than double the amount there had been the previous year. To give a sense of perspective, the most southerly hill likely to be holding snow was suspected as being Beinn Mhanach, near Bridge of Orchy, and the most northerly on Seana Bhraigh, by Ullapool. Neither of these are easily accessible, and would require people to actually *go* to them. Scores of hills in between would also have snow on them, and counting them was going to be a Herculean task. I must admit that at one point I was so overwhelmed by the charge facing me that I almost called the thing off. Going home after work of an evening only to embark on emailing, phoning and generally organising people and giving advice, was damn near a full-time job in itself. But, as American writer Dale Carnegie said, 'flaming enthusiasm, backed up by horse sense and persistence, is the quality that most frequently makes for success.'

So it proved. The offers of help started to roll in via email, Facebook, and Twitter. These worked a treat to keep morale pegged high where it would otherwise have flapped around the ankles. It was gratifying to have complete strangers email

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and contact me to offer their services. I'd need every one of them.

Finally, then, after putting together a crew approaching 30 people, we were reasonably well set. Everyone knew their beat, and what to do. Hills were chosen that afforded maximum visibility to other, more remote ones. All that was needed for such a survey was an ability to see the snow and count the patches. The only fly in the ointment could be the weather. To help ensure we were not scuppered I secretly prayed to the weather gods for it to be dry, giving the contributors decent visibility and the best possible chance to scope out and record every patch! Cloud and rain would have rendered the survey next to impossible, and meant that all the hard work would be vain. Luckily, Helios smiled on us that weekend.

As the reports started to filter back after that weekend of 22 August it was clear that this year was going to exceed last's by a country mile. Ben Nevis *alone* had 58 patches, and the Creag Meagaidh group of peaks, 42. Even hills that are ordinarily clear by June held snow. In total, in excess of 670 patches\*\*\* were counted. Way more than double the previous year's total of 281, and fully 20 times as many as were counted in 2008.

Whether or not this huge number will translate into survivals until winter (in 2014 twenty one patches persisted) remains to be seen. Even as I write this, snow will be disappearing at a rate

of more than a few patches per day. A mild, windy and wet day in September or October can kill already-small patches very quickly. On top of that, lasting snow – defined as that which covers the old with new – can come as late as December to some locations. In practise this means that the ever-watchful gang of snow patch observers will be, for quite a while yet, scuttling around the country, venturing to the corries and hollows that few people visit.

The question that many people ask snow patch observers is 'Why do you do it?' I suspect that each person's reward for all this effort, which is entirely at the observer's own expense of time and cost, is hard to quantify. For my part I just can't separate out the feeling I experience now to that which I had as a 10 year-old boy, gazing across to a small patch of snow on Ben Lomond in April and thinking 'Why does it last?' I've never really gotten over it, nor – I suspect – ever will.

It's as simple as that.

\* - *Snow lover. From Ancient Greek χιὼν (chiōn, "snow") + -phile*

\*\* - *Totals for August 2008–2013 surveys inclusive: 34, 35, 34, 36, 72, 81*

\*\*\* - *The grand total is based only on confirmed patches, and more are suspected.*







Geoff Salt

## Nyvaig Tales

After a while the desire for a boat which I could live on for longish periods produced Nyvaig, an 8 metre sloop that met that need for the next 25 years. The name means 'Little Ship' in Ancient Norse, and that is what she was to me.

Nyvaig took me and my crewdogs on many an exploration of the great sea lochs that define the North West seaboard of Scotland.

These sea lochs were created during the ice ages of long ago, when ice, many miles thick, excavated the underlying basic rocks, creating narrow channels which concentrated their effects, becoming ever more deeper.

This glaciation over millions or more years, have given us the scenic inheritance of narrow ribbons of deep sea water penetrating many miles into the land, overlooked by high mountain walls left out of the rock the glaciations had carved through.

These sea lochs are very deep, their underwater profiles going from several hundred metres deep, to a few metres at their seaward end, which are usually very narrow too.

This description defines the Scottish sea loch in my own terms, though experts might use different terminology.

I was fascinated by these underwater profiles for I could track and measure the underwater depths with the aid of an echo sounder which came aboard most sailing boats of that era, and I recorded these profiles for my log.

The sea lochs usually provide good shelter to navigate in once one has mastered the tidal influences caused by the slight depth and narrowness of their entrances. These features can speed up the tidal flow rate up to, and sometimes exceeding, 8 knots per hour, a very high rate for a large body of water, and can create vast whirlpools and overflows which in bad weather have sunk small fishing boats designed for these waters.

So, one has to be very cautious investigating these sea lochs, which many say are like smaller versions of Norwegian fiords. Many have small communities living on their shores, and indeed, I came to live at one of these at Inverie, on Loch Nevis.

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Some of the narrower of the sea lochs, which also have a frieze of high mountains overlooking them, can generate balls of high altitude wind local to the area, and roll down the mountainsides generating great fury as they come. These are known as 'williwaws', and they have been known to sink sturdy fishing boats. This might account for the losses of whole sailing fleets mentioned in ancient times.

Sailing in the Sea of the Hebrides can be hazardous, as waters that seem calm and peaceful can, within an hour, be churned into violent fury. So progress should always be made within easy reach of shelter, and with knowledge of what the weather is likely to do next. These are circumstances likely to affect small boats sailing in mountainous areas.

The other distinguishing feature of the Scottish west coast is the double chain of islands known as the Inner and Outer Hebrides which fringe the mainland for many miles. They stretch north to south, with names that resound in Scottish history, and known the world over, wherever their people have settled.

Lewis, Uists, Skye, Rhum, Canna, Eigg, Mull and Jura, which gave its name to the Jurassic period.

I've missed a few, but they are all made of the same hard rock of antiquity, Lewisian Gneiss, or igneous intrusions of volcanism which are also very hard. If they were not made so tough they would have been sculpted away by those same ice sheets that created the sea lochs of the adjacent mainland.

...  
*G. Salt*





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I sank like a stone and became wedged under the adjacent yacht, a position from which I was only just able to release myself after what seemed like a very long time.

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There are at least 150 islands comprising this archipelago, 51 of them inhabited. Some dates go back to the mesolithic, with an isolated dating of 8590 BP for the volcanic island of Rhum.

Made basically of the same stuff, they are each almost completely different, as people can be within the same family. They all offer pristine strands of pure white sands off their western coasts, to the crashing thunderous roar of the great Atlantic rollers that started life a thousand or more miles away.

Yet they are each as different as can be from their close neighbours, even bearing their own variety of common species of *Apodemus Sylvaticus*, the long tailed field mouse.

A fellow called Darwin had monkeyed about a bit and proposed that creatures existing in isolation could develop differentially, and so it seems that our little Hebridean mice have different tail lengths in each of these island houses. That's right, they went to each island and measured them.

The Atlantic outliers of St. Kilda have their own very distinct version of this little creature.

There are many references in literature to these Islands, such as the comedy *Whiskey Galore* by Compton Mackenzie, inspired by the sinking of the SS *Politician* off the coast of Eriskay in 1942.

Mull is composed of old volcanoes, whilst the tiny splinter

of Staffa houses the weird Fingals Cave, into which I rowed my little dingy, whilst leaving Nyvaig parked outside in the big Atlantic. Another memory is the tiny island of Soay, which nestles under the towering Cuillin of Skye. Here are the remains of Gavin Maxwell's Basking Shark processing factory, a cruelty that preceded the inspired images of 'The Ring of Bright Water' for which he will always be remembered.

The island of Iona, cradle of Christianity in Scotland, is located close across the Sound from Mull, whilst in the south lies Jura, where Eric Blair spent the last agonising years of his life bringing his novel '1984' to publication in 1949. Jura means 'Deer Island' and there are thousands of these, some getting almost to the Paps, the highest points on a very rough island indeed.

At the north end of Jura in the narrow sound lying between it and Scarba, the next island to the north, lies the Gulf of Corryvreckan, where a huge whirlpool forms at some stages of tide. The tide is so strong here that great plumes of water shoot skywards, and evil looking whorls endanger any vessel trying to get through.

I was once taken through the edge of what is truly a maelstrom at near full tide and would never repeat the ordeal again. The sheer sound of currents competing with themselves is overwhelming and there is an old saying that when

the old hag of Corryvreckan is trampling her baskets the sound can be heard 20 miles away.

This is the region I explored over a period of 30 years, sailing more than 20,000 miles and making many good friends from the largely self-sufficient people of the Western Isles. Me and my two crewdogs Robbie, then Bosun, were invited into lots of the homes of these good people and I sometimes joined the fishermen in their small boats.

If I could I would like to have taken real root among them and shared the special joys and sorrows of their lives.

Before I finish and leave you thinking how great it must be to idly roam among these delicious seascapes, I should tell you of what nearly became a tragedy for Bosun and me.

My home port was the fishing village of Mallaig on the NW mainland coast. Bringing back dear Bosun from shore leave and a shopping trip, my dingy was passing a moored boat when the powerful wake of a fishing boat upset the dingy, plunging me and the dog into the water.

I sank like a stone and became wedged under the adjacent yacht, a position from which I was only just able to release myself after what seemed like a very long time. Free, I only just made the surface where the aged owner of the boat hooked his boathook through my collar and hung on to that to prevent me sinking again under

the weight of my waterlogged clothes.

This old man did not have the strength to reel me in and it was 20 minutes before help came from the shore 30 metres away.

But where was Bosun?

Was he drowned? We found him paddling for his life underneath the upturned dingy, breathing the air trapped under it.

This was the closest call of my life but the sea hadn't quite finished with me for the foul harbour water put me into hospital to treat the infection I later suffered at its hands.



George Charles

## THOUGHTS ON W.H. MURRAY'S 'Effects of Mountaineering on Men'.

This essay of Murray's (to be found at the end of *Undiscovered Scotland*) focuses on the two prominent characteristics of time spent in the hills – challenge and beauty.

Murray writes of how mountaineering can give direction to a young life and positively focus energy that may otherwise be wasted to directed into more negative activities. He also mentions the benefits of the self-reliance and stoicism which inevitably come from spending time in the hills. Murray appears to relish having his and other's characters tested in the most extreme situations even taking positives from an incident where his friend died on an alpine glacier.

I can't say that this reasoning chimes with my own motivations for going to the hill. Their surely has to be a distinction made between environmental and vertical hardship; between that inevitably encountered by those who choose to spend time in wild places and that deliberately sought out for its own end. The first is a part of mountain life to be accepted and embraced; the second a personality trait which

may appeal to some but not others.

Murray writes elsewhere about his initial desire to know the mountains in all their different forms and moods. However, his true desires are somewhat betrayed by his actions, the massive focus on Coe/Nevis/Skye at the expense of other mountain areas suggests different priorities. His impression that Scotland's mountains are defined by their visible rock and that to know them you must climb on them seems somewhat at odds with reality. Unlike the Alps, for example, the vast majority of the 'natural lines' up Scottish hills are walking routes; with a handful of notable exceptions. To be a 'complete' Scottish mountaineer requires a certain degree of scrambling and climbing (clearly more than just struggling up the Inn Pinn) but a whole lot more walking.

I feel much more comfortable with Murray writing about the religion of beauty, which he does so well. This, for me at least, is the core of why I go out on the hills and the gift which has seeped into every part of my life. The physical act of mountaineering can, of course,

give great pleasure but without the element of beauty I would find it hard to justify what is an entirely selfish passion with no real benefit to anyone other than myself. Where I obviously differ from Murray is that he found the challenge and beauty complementary whereas I find one to be a distraction from the other.

The difficulty with beauty is that it is tied up with all sorts of cultural influences. We know the aesthetic appreciation of the mountainous landscape has changed enormously over the last 200-300 years and while the emotions evoked by the landscape contain impressions of permanence this may be as illusionary as the permanence of the mountains themselves. It is this element of untrustworthiness in our

response to landscape which creates so much fascination. Beauty is truth and truth beauty but both can be very flexible concepts.

So what is the relationship between mountaineers and mountains?

There are certainly elements of the addict in us. The way we sacrifice all other parts of our lives in order to get the next fix. The way the next hill day looms large long before the last one is over. If the relationship is all one way, however, there's really not a lot of point. As Murray writes, we have to be students, to make a conscious effort to cultivate the positive elements of hill going and bring them into our everyday lives. I doubt it's a course of study from which we will ever graduate.

*Photo: G. Charles*





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