

ISSUE 98
WINTER/SPRING 2021

Wild Land News

Magazine of the Scottish Wild Land Group

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The impact of new hydro-schemes on wild land

Shooting, conservation and wild land

Wild land in the Anthropocene

Winter/Spring 2021

WILD LAND NEWS

Issue 98

Magazine of the
Scottish Wild Land Group

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Help us safeguard wild land!
If you come across any proposed developments which might damage wild land, please let us know

Front cover: Coire an Lochan, Glencoe
Left: Sgorr Chálum and the lower slopes of Ben Nevis
Photos James Fenton

James Fenton

Editorial

Thank you to Beryl

Beryl Leatherland stood down as Convenor of the Scottish Wild Land Group at the AGM in December. We must thank her for all the hard work she has put in over the years on behalf of the Group, keeping abreast of developments, penning letters of objection, organising meetings, contributing articles to *Wild Land News*... At the same time she has managed to find time to remain heavily involved in Scottish Environment Link's Hill Tracks Campaign, and she will remain as the Group's representative on Scottish Link.

Continual threat to wild land

This issue covers a broad range of issues and all the excellent articles have been written by members of the Steering Committee – with exception of the one by David Jarman on the impact of run-of-river hydro-schemes.

Wildness is being lost from a wide range of activities, including new bulldozed tracks into the heart of the

hills, for hydro-schemes, windfarms, sporting or agricultural access, and forestry schemes. Such tracks are now entering some of the core areas of our iconic landscapes, including Torridon and Glen Etive.

Other threats include dams, power-houses, wind turbines, masts, power-lines, forestry ploughing and deer fencing. Indeed it is sad to see the return of forestry ploughing in the last year or two, perhaps the most damaging activity possible in a wild landscape, with recent ploughing now visible from the A9 north of Blair Atholl.

If this is of concern to you, and I hope it is if you are reading this magazine, why not join SWLG's Steering Committee? All that is needed is a passionate desire to safeguard wild land and a willingness to do something about it! If you are interested contact me:

james@swlg.org.uk

Wild land is crying-out for your involvement!

The fate of wild land in Scotland if current policies are taken to extremes

A little bit of wild land left here: is this the fate of upland Scotland?
Note also the new wind farm being constructed



Not much wildness left in a landscape of forestry plantations, tracks, wind turbines, dams, reservoirs and draw-down zones



Location: Loch Glashan, Mid Argyll
Photos James Fenton



Tim Ambrose

Wilderness, Wild Land, Scenery and Landscape

During one of our recent steering Group meetings, on Zoom unfortunately rather than in person, we had a brief discussion on the differences between ‘a wild landscape’ and ‘wild scenery’, compared to ‘wild land’ itself. To me there is a fundamental difference: ‘landscape’ and ‘scenery’ are what you are looking at, and may look wild and be attractive; but ‘wild land’ can only be where you actually are, what you are standing on, what is all immediately around you – the place from where you are doing your looking at the landscape or scenery.

This distinction is important – I think landscape and scenery can be pretty well captured and recorded in a painting or photograph, but wild land can only be experienced in person, perhaps after a strenuous walk or climb, wading through bogs or high heather, in tough weather, wind rain or sleet, and with exhilaration at being somewhere that feels natural and untouched.

We despise industrial wind turbines in the wild hills, not only for their impact on the views from afar, their effects on the landscape and scenery, but for their destruction of the wildness of the land itself, the ground where they are plonked and many yards around, the

spoil heaps, the bulldozed gravel tracks, the intrusion of ugly waste and diggings, plants obliterated, fences gates and barriers, and the loss of the aloneness.

Scotland is losing its wild land, like a ratchet, more goes each year, and although some abandoned land may come creeping back towards wildness through nature left to itself, this is a slow process compared to the speed of destruction – a man with a digger in a day can destroy hundreds of years of natural growth.

But what of ‘wilderness’? Do we have any wilderness in Scotland? Large stretches of undisturbed trees or rock, places where a person could become seriously lost, distinctly dangerous for the unprepared or ill-equipped, possibly also with large predators (or black fly and leeches) and certainly the potential for severe conditions? We have nowhere to compare with the Scandinavian mountains and forests, with the Siberian forests, or the American canyon country. Certainly no dry deserts! Probably no real wilderness in Scotland, though the Cairngorms plateau in a winter gale may come close, and there are large areas of Sutherland which may almost qualify.

—
We need
wild land!
—

But true wilderness is no place for the ordinary person, and I am happy that we focus on trying to preserve wild land, which is attainable and precious. Tough days in the wild make fine memories, and a sense of achievement which lasts.

Understanding the land, its origins and geology, its plants and wildlife, and how they all fit together, is a challenge for a lifetime, and one worth taking. We need the wild land, and should fight to help preserve it.

Tim is Treasurer of the Scottish Wild Land Group



The Letterewe Forest from Beinn Airigh Charr. This is often popularly known as the ‘Great Wilderness’, but is there true wilderness in Scotland?



A hydro-scheme nearby in the heart of the Torridon Mountains, Beinn a’ Chearcaill in the background.

Photos. James Fenton

Grant Cornwallis

Membership matters

Well, it certainly does to the Membership Secretary! It's that time of year again, I'm afraid, when subscription renewals are on everyone's minds. If you don't already renew your subscription by Standing Order, I would heartily recommend you fill out the form (or a copy of it) on the inside back cover of this magazine, and send it to our Treasurer. It makes life so much easier, and you can also choose Gift Aid, if applicable. Cheques are still very welcome, but the administration is considerable for the volunteers involved, hence the plea for those who can switch, to switch.

Please include your email address in correspondence, if you are online, as this also is very helpful. If you move house and forget to tell me, this may be the only way I can contact you.

Distribution of *Wild Land News*

We have many outlets around Scotland and Cumbria, mostly outdoor shops, where magazines are available to the public at £1 (usually to the Rescue Team tin), and this is an excellent way of recruiting new members. We need more outlets!

Back issues can also be distributed in cafes, surgeries, libraries... when they re-open, that is. If you would be able to distribute magazines in your local area (Edinburgh, Dundee, Perth, Stirling and Aberdeen are currently not being covered consistently, for example), then please do get in touch and I shall post some copies to you. grantswlg@hotmail.co.uk

Ben Macdui from Cairngorm. *Photo. James Fenton*



Jane Meek

Update on Glen Etive hydro-schemes December 2020

Three schemes in wild land

It seems a very long time ago now, that fateful day in March 2019 when the full Highland Council voted to approve three run-of-river hydro schemes in Wild Land Area 9 on the south-east side of Glen Etive, four schemes on the forested west side having already been consented (see previous articles in *WLN* 94 & 96) The Council's decision was a body blow to all those, including Save Glen Etive and Mountaineering Scotland, who had campaigned hard to save these three tributaries of the Etive – Allt a' Chaorainn, Allt Mheuran and Allt Ceitlin – from industrialisation.

As a National Scenic Area and Special Protection Area fringed by Wild Land, Glen Etive has long been recognised for its special qualities. These qualities, campaigners argued, would be lost forever once the bulldozers moved in. So, as the year 2020 draws to a close, it may come as a surprise to some to learn that not one of the seven schemes has been completed. In fact, the contractors have still to break ground anywhere in the glen. Not

even the schemes on the forested west side, which lie outside the Wild Land Area (WLA) and which might be considered simpler in their execution because less sensitive in landscape terms, are still poised on the starting blocks. Then again, this lack of 'progress' on the part of the developer may come as no surprise at all to the many who have followed the Etive saga, given that 2020 has been overshadowed by the Covid-19 pandemic and its profound impacts on all aspects of life, from which run-of-river hydro developments in remote and beautiful places have not been exempt.

Highland Council planners have been working largely from home since March 2020, leading to lengthy delays in the posting of key information on the planning portal. This has made it difficult, if not impossible, for members of the public to find out exactly how much headway has been made on each of the schemes: for headway there has been. The bulldozers and hydraulic rock breakers may be biding their time but, as of 23rd December 2020 and the appearance

The Allt a'Chaorainn confluence, site of the intakes

Photo. Jane Meek



on the planning portal of a raft of long-awaited updates, it looks as though almost all of the pre-commencement works associated with the schemes are now complete. As the new year dawns, there is little if anything to stop Dickins Hydro making a start on what I, personally, remain convinced will be the wholesale devastation of one of Scotland's best-loved landscapes.

It is worth highlighting that the UK Government has bowed to pressure from the hydro lobby and granted an extension to the Feed-In Tariffs accreditation deadline. That news will have gone down particularly well at the London HQ of Dickins Hydro; for it seems clear that this developer, whose track record in run-of-river hydro construction looks – to the eye of those who have sought to research it – vanishingly small, had been struggling to find a contractor willing to take on the sensitive WLA schemes and was already far behind schedule when Covid, falling like a bolt from the blue, brought everything grinding to a temporary halt.

Allt a'Chaorainn, site of intakes

Photo. David Jarman

Various company names have floated across the front pages of successive Construction Method Statements on the planning portal over the past few months to crystallise, finally, around one Tam Shilliday. I have no personal knowledge of this contractor and can only hope they will stick to the letter of promises made and demonstrate a commitment to “get it right” that might leave some hope for the future of Glen Etive as a landscape of international importance.

Glen Etive road upgrade

In the course of 2020, the existing powerline through Glen Etive was upgraded. I understand that the glen has been spared the kind of intrusive pylons that blight so many other parts of the Highlands. The single track road has likewise been upgraded with the inclusion of new passing places. Road users will be pleased by that; less so by the news that the developer, having obtained consent on the back of an undertaking to bring in heavy equipment and materials from Loch Etive, has successfully applied for a



Looking up the Allt Mhearan to Glas Bheinn Mhòr

Photo. Jane Meek

variation to the agreed Traffic Management Plan for Allt a' Chaorainn – the scheme nearest the main road – which will allow construction traffic to access the glen from the A82.

The claim that this should reduce the overall volume of traffic on the popular narrow road has to be set against the cost, namely a huge increase in the size of vehicles



permitted to roar up and down the glen. More specifically, the weight limit will increase from the previously agreed 18 tonnes to a norm of 26 tonnes, rising to 40 tonnes under certain circumstances. The application received many objections but there was never any doubt that it would pass. Whether the developer will push for the new traffic arrangement to be extended beyond Alltchaorunn, as seems likely to my jaundiced eye, remains to be seen.

Problem of flash floods

In my previous update for *Wild Land News* I raised concerns about flash flooding and the ability of the intakes on the three WLA schemes to

Allt Mheuran, site of intake

Photo. David Jarman

withstand such events. I also queried the developer's ability to restore these sensitive locations in such a way as to 'leave no trace'; which, after all, is the outcome we have been promised and one of the main reasons the schemes were consented. The developer and his engineers have consistently denied any issue with flash flooding and maintain that the intakes are designed to deal with anything these wild tributaries might throw at them.

The developer and his contractor remain confident that they can cover their traces and insist that the intakes will be easily serviced, even in the absence of a retained access track. In the event of an unforeseen incident requiring major repair work for which – you've guessed it – an access track would be awfully handy, well, they'll just apply for that when the time comes. Highland Council has reiterated its commitment to keeping the Mheuran and Chaorainn schemes free of new built tracks, but it's hard to see them turn down such an application if and when it arises. Wouldn't it be a case of needs must and a necessary evil?

The outlook is bleak

All in all, as 2020 gives way to 2021, the outlook for Glen Etive and its wild tributaries looks bleak. The Ecological Clerk of Works for the Chaorainn

scheme noted in a recent report: "Eagle monitoring was completed for the 2020 breeding season and birds were considered to have failed in their attempt." I can't help thinking that, if the eagles fail to breed in what must have been the quietest – and, from their perspective, the most propitious – season for decades, they will have little chance of succeeding once 40-tonne trucks start roaring up and down on the edge of their territory.

Anyone who lives within travelling distance of Glen Etive – subject to Covid restrictions, of course – is encouraged to take a trip down that long, winding road in 2021 to see just what is being done in the name of green energy. Perhaps if the developer and his contractors can be made to feel the weight of a critical public eye upon them they will raise their game. Perhaps. But I, for one, won't be holding my breath.



The head of Glen Etive from Beinn Trilleachan. The hydro-schemes are on the side glens to the right.

Photo. Jane Meek

David Jarman

Run-of-river or Death-of-river? Micro-hydro and wild land

Just when we thought it couldn't get any worse, all those endless assaults on ever-shrinking remnant cores of wild land, it did. The post-war waves of big hydro, of commercial forestry, of bulldozed track excavation, of giant wind farms, have all pummelled the shores, rested on their incursions, scarcely ebbed, spread further as opportunities arose (all those Phase Twos...).

And then, another feel-good green panacea comes along which no-one can possibly object to, Run-of-River hydro-electric schemes (RoR). Just as wind energy seemed a nice idea at first, local, low-key, distributed, safely hippy Machynlleth, crofts on Scoraig (Little Loch Broom)- until Big Energy muscled in on the act.

So someone has punted an easy win to a government keen to flaunt a climate-saving fig-leaf or two – and a line goes into the Budget creating a new financial incentive. No lengthy consultations, no proof-of-concept impact studies, no planning policy guidance, no Bill or Act, purely private enterprise with not a penny of taxpayers' money (fuel-bill payers money is different), individual

planning applications, case by case on their merits, oh and government wants to see it happen, asap, tick some box, green light.

This is government by fiat, by lobbyists, behind the scenes, by stroke of pen. Bypassing the handfuls of cranks and nimbys who might see a downside, for scenery and wilderness, for the living landscape. Bypassing them not brazenly but by simple default – they won't get to know about most schemes till they go onsite, nodded through in out-of-the-way places with no locals to object; and once wised-up to what was happening, we were all swamped by the deluge. For this latest wave has truly been a storm wave, a tsunami, unseen till it nears the shore, suddenly rising and breaking and rushing up every little creek to choke it with concrete detritus.

After the RoR of the storm wave – taking stock

It would seem that this Run-of-River wave has peaked and receded, for now, who knows why, someone must have decided it was getting too expensive, enough is enough, box



The original hydro schemes had a large environmental impact: the Loch Cluanie dam. Photo. James Fenton

ticked. But there are plenty more opportunities out there still untapped. Plenty of consultants who have already assessed and costed them. Plenty of contractors with the ready-to-go skills. Plenty of landowners who have seen neighbours reap windfall and now waterfall incomes from hitherto worthless tracts of moor and glen. Plenty of investors – power companies, funds – who just adore gold-plated neatly-packaged spread-risk long-term nest-eggs. So it's worth surveying the damage, learning lessons.

Run-of-River is of course old-tech and low-tech, easy stuff. Many sporting estates installed them to light their Lodges (the turbines all too soon removed, to aid the war effort) – and their weirs and works were sometimes obtrusive, though now often hidden in the woods they planted (Braemore; Letterewe; Fairburn); I recall being surprised by the mess at the bare rocky outflow from sweet Loch

Beoraid. But they did not require industrial-grade tracks to install them. Of course these early, low-rated schemes serve nicely as pretexts to 'uprate' them – as with the Grosvenor Estate's scheme at Kylesku, in a highly-sensitive landscape (National Scenic Area (NSA) and Geopark, smack in the classic view of the Moine Thrust); the huge power station may be built into a hillside, but the narrow track to its precursor along Loch Glendhu is now a broad bulldozed scar, conspicuous from NC500 (as if anyone racing or campervanning round that notices or cares).

The first thing to observe with the new crop is that they cluster around existing power lines and substations – the economics and energy losses discourage long connections, or demand multiple schemes harvesting entire glens, maybe with local boosters. Thus we have our very own Forestry Commission not content with carving a pipeline through its very

own totemic Ancient Native Pinewood on the south side of Glen Affric, it has to bulldoze a track much further into secluded Gleann nam Fiadh on the north side than discreet judgement would have suggested. A weir in the ravine within the top of the plantation, using its existing track, would have been tolerable – but no, they have pushed well beyond into the formerly wild gateway to those reining peaks, Mam Sodhail and Carn Eige. Why? – to optimise the 'head' (the vertical drop) and thus the wattage, offsetting the cost of the long (10 km+) cable buried in the verge down to the big hydro station in Strath Glass.

So keep an eye out for new power lines: I haven't followed the proposals for links to the Beaully–Denny trojan horse, whether across to Lochaber or over to Ullapool for Lewis, but not only will these unleash scope for big wind farms (1), they will free up vast catchments for RoR potential. And not just these biggies – local lines and

upgrades easily create scope to capture a good few tumbling burns.

The next thing to notice is that the term 'Run-of-River' with all its harmless feel-good connotations has, inevitably, been hijacked by the vested interests to window-dress what, I would argue, is nearer to Death-of-River (DoR). Early watermills in the Highlands could be called RoR – a small weir, a short lade, a minor waterfall or rapids deprived of some of its flow some of the time. Conversely, there are early public hydro-schemes which are truly DoR – Falls of Clyde reduced to a trickle save for one day a year; Kerrysdale, once beloved of visitors to Gairloch, now enfeebled; the sad, dead River Garry below the A9.

The present wave is not instant death, but a more subtle and for me distressing 'dying'. At the river protection authority's behest (SEPA, about the only public body left in our



This is Glen Quoich, one of the most intrusive schemes, formerly wild and secluded, yet conspicuous from the South Cluanie Ridge and the Quoich Munros, in off the Kinloch Hourn road. Photo. David Jarman



The Boor Burn in Wester Ross where you could enjoy a wild walk up to the moorland above (left). Now you encounter a new path and a concrete dam.

Photo. James Fenton

field not completely neutered), let's say a third of the flow has to remain in the river. Clearly this varies between spates and droughts. But I happened to go up from the Achnasheen-Glen Carron road into the big Moruig corrie when the river was foaming down uncrossably – except for the tolerably short section between the new intake weir and the turbine house, where you could step across on dry boulders at will.

Such a river may have retained ecological life, albeit surely changing its balance, its productivity, just as windfarms reducing some bird populations by two-thirds is deemed ecologically acceptable. But the river has died as a powerful component of the natural landscape. The sight of white water, of spray, of torrents; the sound of white water, of spray, of torrents. When these are lost – but there is no point referring to the spirit of the place, however many books and programmes and folksie records iconise Nan or Robert, because the spirit cannot be measured and costed, it can only be stolen. You do not still have a third of the sense of being there, in the hills, seeing and hearing. The whole of that awe and majesty has

gone, and we are left with – the tawdry pale imitations that visitors to Dog Falls in Affric, or the Falls of Falloch, or Corrieshalloch Gorge are not told are not what they were rightly famed for, were belvedere-path-accessed and suspension-bridged to view.

There are times (2) when the only sound you hear, away in the recesses of the hills, is that of water. Trace that sound to its source, and it is often not the large river making it, it is the little tumbling tributaries. These are what the green harvesters are after, for noise is wasted energy, and in our Calvinistic mindset must be harnessed. And where whole valleys are harvested thus – exemplified by Wester and Easter Glen Quoich in behind Gleouraich, with half-a-dozen weirs and their ramifying access tracks – we have another Silencing of the Glens to follow the Clearances. Again, all in the cause of progress.

Beyond these human senses, sight and sound and spirit, there is yet another dying, the slowest death, by a thousand cuts not made. Mountain

streams and their courses are dynamic, the most vigorously active features of our mineral landscape. They incise their beds, they carry debris down from pool to pool, they extend fans out into glen floors, into lochs. Releasing fresh nutrients as rock disintegrates – those ribbons of burnside green in the glour where one might hope to camp. Nearly all this erosion takes place during the highest spates, water weaponised by bedload stones. All these green ribbons and tiny deltas are created, refreshed, by peak events. Put a weir across the burn, and it ceases to do useful work. It becomes geomorphologically dead.

The Rogues' Gallery (with a few quiet heroes, just to show)

At first (just as with the first wind farm – commandeering our then-view to the hills from Stirling), I really did not see it coming; did not realise the volume of pipelines in the pipeline (OK sorry, in the planners' in-tray); could not believe 'the system' would not

take care of it, even wind farms have largely been kept out of National Parks and NSAs, if not the views from them. But a hill-going friend making mincemeat of Munro's Tables was quicker to see the contagion spreading, at breakneck speed, a bonanza while incentives lasted. A parallel race against time ensued, to beat the contractors to this glen, that range, while memories could be harvested, while still pristine. We met up at Glenfinnan, already a local hotspot. Seeking a mid-level day, and to escape this bane, we headed west along the Mallaig road, to Loch Eilt, to Ranochan, where the map suggested a straight ravine slanting back north-east as an interesting approach to that fine rugged wee hill, Glas-charn (633m). We cruised round the rock bluff seeking a parking spot – to behold a turbine house and a fresh bulldozed track brazenly corkscrewing up the rim of our ravine. The Allt Raineachan is only just over 2 km long, with a tiny catchment. Its yield in megawattage is



A new scheme near Gairloch in Wester Ross National Scenic Area. *Photo. James Fenton*



Allt Coire Peitireach access track to weir, above Loch Quoich and below the Munro Gleouraich. This V-ravine is never going to be restorable, as some kind of access will always be needed – and it is in full view of Hamish Brown’s ‘best’ stalker path (see page 20); it also makes the point that the sight and sound of this torrent will have been stifled.

Photo: David Jarman

completely trivial, for this lasting desecration, in fullest possible public view. What collective bunch of Philistines could have conceived, waved through, inflicted this little insult to such a special, finely-sculpted part of this land? Follow the money ... but not into any permanent pay-packets worth mention.

From that lightning strike of indignation, of the most utter disbelief at the crassness of it, evolved a Rogues’ Gallery, a PowerPoint slideshow (available from the writer), illustrating 13 DoR schemes, mainly as chanced upon, nearly all northwest of the Great Glen. Several things emerge, simply about the schemes themselves, as visible construction projects :

- Most were rated **disastrously intrusive**, some just **very intrusive**, and only two **tolerable** (under caveat

that most were recent or still being built, restoration not perhaps complete – on revisit one has become more acceptable).

- The edifices are usually given some thought – most turbine houses are in scale with the landscape, with pitched roofs or buried into hillsides; weirs are more or less concealed and well finished; pipe tracks are invariably well restored (re-strewing erratic boulders has become a twee signature).

- The intrusion is nearly all due to the **access tracks** to the weirs, which necessarily run up steep side valleys, close to attractive burns and ravines, often destroying old paths – and are thus even more conspicuous than the webs of tracks that disfigure and industrialise windfarm moors.

- Yet such full-scale vehicular tracks for 4x4s to race up are quite clearly

“Utter disbelief at the crassness of it!”

not needed to maintain robust, long-life, low-maintenance weirs. Operational control is done remotely. Clearance of vegetation is a hand-tools job. Even dredging gravelly infill only needs a pocket-size digger. All routine access can be done on foot or by quadbike – as a couple of schemes prove, notably at Coulags in Glen Carron, where the stalkerpath was used for construction access with such minor upgrading and restoration that you might think it had merely been ‘quadded’. And if heavy plant is ever needed again, in decades’ time, make a temporary road again (3).

- The lasting damage of these unnecessary industrial-scale tracks – to views from afar, and to the whole experience of going in that way – marks an abject failure, yet again, of our planning system, in the Scottish Highlands. This is not about refusing schemes wherever they compromise wild land, however ideal that is, it is

simple mitigation. Planners may have been overwhelmed by this goldrush, but it is not difficult to insist a track is downscaled to the necessary temporary minimum, and it is the work of a moment to add a standard condition requiring reinstatement of *both tracks* to the weir – pipe track and construction track – at the same time. Of course the landowner may well like to have a spanking new jeep road, another freebie – but that should be a separate application, justified by demonstrable need.

- Not one scheme we have seen so far has included any landscape-scale woodland planting, or even an enclosure fence to let burnside trees spread (4). This would rapidly screen the less concealable weirs, even at close range. And this is the simplest of planning conditions to impose. Nor would it cost much, if part of a wider grant-aided scheme. Indeed it is becoming bizarre to see native



A new RoR scheme above Loch a’ Choire, Kingairloch. Photo: James Fenton

woodland plantings, now commendably going in on a vast scale, on either side of DoR projects left stark.

Going beyond mitigation, where scheme extents are taken as givens, there are several in the Rogues' Gallery which could have moved into the Tolerable category had they been reined in. Of course, we don't get to hear where this has been achieved in negotiations (one of the Etive group [see previous article] was pulled back down a tier from the Starav corrie staircase, we understand). Gleann nam Fiadh (Affric) we have mentioned as going in much too far; Ceannocroc, off Glen Moriston, is a tragedy of simple greed, pushing weirs and access tracks way up the three once-gloriously secluded side glens, rarely visited, though often looked into from the Cluanie Munros. Coulags, off Strath Carron, by contrast has chosen to keep the weir below the hang, outside the vastness of Coire Fionnaraich, before you reach the footbridge, well before

you reach the bothy and Clach Con nam Fionn – thus foregoing some tens of metres of potential 'head'. And at Moruisg, the near-invisible weir, in a cranked slot gorge, is 200 m lower than the main corrie lip. These cases must reflect landowner sensitivity – a faculty one used to associate with planners and designers.

Naming names

And why shouldn't we, it's our fuel-bill money they're spending, and the planning system we pay for. You may well have your own candidates – nominations please – but the stand-out disgraces that should never have been allowed to get away with it in an advanced society include

Gleann Cia-aig. This is a main access point for the Lochy Munros, hanging steeply into the foot of Loch Arkaig by a scenic little waterfall viewed by thousands almost from their cars. For once, this fall is spared – but at what cost. For the power station is hidden in forest just above, forgoing 50 m of

The new track, replacing a stalker's path, up Gleann nam Fiadh in Affric.

Photo. David Jarman



head yet still capturing a lucrative 200 m with a substantial dam and lake (no weir this) far up the glen. So hillgoers expecting to take the old path up above the falls are at once confronted with the extraordinary enormity of a full-scale permanent road blasted down the rock wall in two great zigzags, to reach the powerhouse from the forest road above. The ugly word 'gobsmacking' is inadequately ugly. Who owns the land all this is on? Our very own Forestry Commission.

Glen Quoich. The heartbreaking word 'heartbreaking' was coined for sights like this, this maze of tracks seen unawares from the magnificent South Cluanie Ridge, realising that a certain tent-wide green strip up a secluded backwater is 'only a small price to pay'. Except more than a heart is broken, mind and spirit are for some souls, and anyway this term has no place in Environmental Assessments let alone in Recommendations by Planning Officers. See the slideset, and weep for lost innocence. Even exemplary restitution of all the access tracks could not retrieve that; for Alltbeithe was a nexus for some of our most extraordinary zigzag stalker-path

flights, each a joy to pursue to the fine ridge-crests; and nearby, that up Gleouraich from Loch Cuaich-side is Hamish Brown's favourite, the start now beside a crass access track.

Ceannocroc. Referred to above.

Bearneas: South of Strath Carron, but (encountered too late for the inclusion in the 13, a defilement as delicate as a moustache on a Mona Lisa).

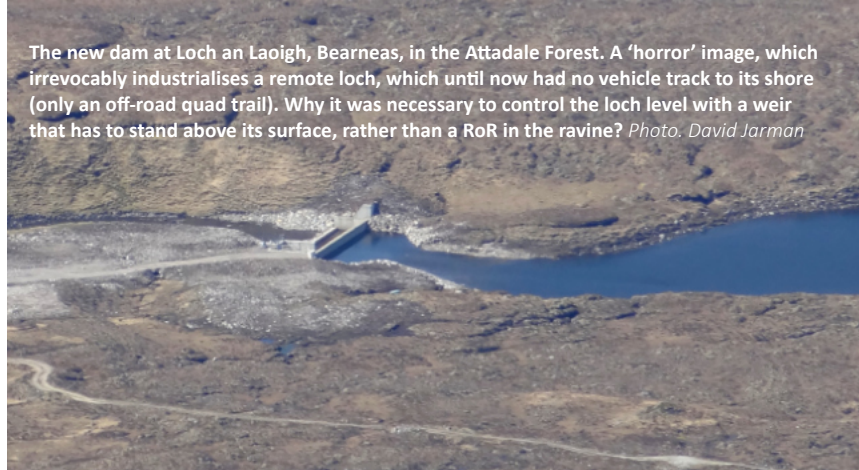
Some of these could have been made acceptable, if we had to have them. Gleann Cia-aig off Loch Arkaig was long ago ruined by coniferisation, but the old path up it could have been spared, and its waters could easily have been piped round or under the hill to a power station in the gloom of the Mile Dorcha, beside that existing forest road. The cost of tunnelling would be more than recouped by regaining that sacrificed 50 m of head (tourists evidently not needing told the Falls are on one-third power). Glen Quoich is an odd one, the head seems negligible, but did it really need a parallel access road in, every burn

The track of the Gleann Cia-aig scheme.

Photo. James Fenton



The new dam at Loch an Laoigh, Bearneas, in the Attadale Forest. A ‘horror’ image, which irrevocably industrialises a remote loch, which until now had no vehicle track to its shore (only an off-road quad trail). Why it was necessary to control the loch level with a weir that has to stand above its surface, rather than a RoR in the ravine? Photo. David Jarman



tapped ? In a grown-up, planning-guidelined system, this would have been a last morsel to grab, not a first, in meeting green targets.

A special place in the Fourth Circle of Hell is reserved for the desecrators of Liatriche above Glen Cannich. This modest back valley with a modest catchment in modest hills could have been tapped with modest impact had it not ... earned a one-line mention in Clifton Bain’s admirable 2013 guide to the Ancient Pinewoods of Scotland, as an adjunct to the extensive spread along the main glen. It being unknown to me, I went for a look (pre-tsunami). The Wood itself may only extend a kilometre up the V-burn, but one heck of a slog to reach and explore, in thick heather, up one side down the other, entirely pathless. A complete joy, so private, so unvisited, so perfect, so undisturbed. Such majestic specimens, especially on the upper fringes. A year later, yomping the hills to the west, I came out onto the promontory above, to gaze down onto it with warmly-

recalled pleasure, to steal it away with my camera...

It matters not whether any old pines were felled or compromised by the massively over-engineered, clearly permanent track that scythes up through the more open east side of the pinewood and carries on close above it to the weir.

Pausing mid-this very para, I happened to take a hike up through the great pinewood in Strath Farrar, just over by. The hill path appeared freshly ‘quadded’ (sigh), a machine having moved the odd slipped boulder and filled the odd hole, but done minimal other work beyond heather-munching. In a while, it will be hard to notice. The track suddenly plunged off down towards the ravine. Assuming this must be the way the path went (wrong, but path largely gone), I followed – to stumble upon a major concrete weir, capturing the burn near its foot for the big hydro. A traxcavator had gone in to clear it out and build a substantial flood berm. This ‘Dam’ is

It ill already be too late”

on the 25k at NH331391 (but not on the 50k). There is no trace of any access road to it, whether for its original 1950s construction, or for the tunnel taking its water to the power station, or of its spoil. Surreal really, in this magnificent, flourishing, half-secret, uncompromised Wood – a Mayan jungle moment. Someone cared, or controlled things (was an NNR, now an SSSI), back then.

So if there is a next round of DoR schemes – did I dare say if ? – any further ‘Liatriche’ obscenity can be rebutted with Allt Coire nam Bràthan in Strathfarrar. Its access track could have been low-key and temporary and routed entirely away from the Wood, along with its pipeline, with its turbine house hidden down the glen (never mind putting the water back in the

burn, for its last ignominious few yards). Compare Farrar with Gleann Cia-aig – we have gone backwards. For once this is not actually ‘follow the money’ but about gross over-design, in an indiscriminate standard-spec health-and-safety mindset not subjected to any test of necessity or fittingness – as the right-design examples demonstrate.

The next round

If there is a next round – it will already be too late. That sudden innocuous policy shift, the oven-ready schemes, the deluge of applications, the phillistine councillors and MSPs – without even job creation or the windfarm community bung as a pretext, just that climate figleaf (5).

A new RoR track above Loch Monar, at the head of Strathfarrar. Photo. David Jarmann



There is no prospect of wild land interests winning the argument in principle, even in the most sensitive locations. There is no discernible nor potential public or media interest remotely sufficient to sway politicians. Only a long haul of generational awareness-raising, of educating, of asking again and again why the 'Nan and Robert' rose-tinted JMT-calendar NTS-magazine TV-programme Guardian-travel view of endless, inexhaustible forever-wilds does not translate into saving the little that actually remains of them.

Glen Etive proved that conclusively. This is the only DoR case to have aroused any appreciable wider public concern (6) – intriguingly spearheaded not by any recognised NGO but by a

near-anonymous social media campaign hyped on crowdfunding lines, but dismissable as city froth by politicians. Equally remarkably, it drew strong local resistance (a dark story lurks there). Meanwhile the 'official' Save Glen Etive campaign did its best but never gained traction as a voice, as a partner in design discussions. I went to the local and my MSP's surgery in Aviemore through a Lagganside blizzard, cold from inspecting the sites, found her charm personified (7), and quickly realised she had no sympathy for the environment in any aspect. Follow the votes. An economist, now Finance Minister. Is there one MSP with any influence who does ?

Glen Etive also proved that the big NGOs are terrified of upsetting the green lobby – save the planet, but for whom to enjoy ? Here someone could usefully establish just what the cumulative yield of all DoR schemes in the Highlands amounts to, as a percentage of power demand and of all green sources – not just at rated optimum, or on average, but during the extended periods when the rivers run low, as they do surprisingly often, the smaller the spatier. And what the financial yield is, on capital invested. Follow that money. The NGOs have also learned to draw their horns well in, when it comes to not upsetting their members (paying and board – follow them too), their

The River Grudie scheme into the heart of the Torridon Mountains. Picture taken from Slioch with Beinn Eighe visible on the left and Liathach in the distance. Photo. David Jarman



A small unobtrusive RoR scheme in forestry above Glen Orchy.
Photo. James Fenton

sponsors, their reliance on government. They avoid controversy, promote the feel-good factor, push positive imagery – young people roaming sunny hills, happy families on woodland projects – never doom-and-gloom, achievements never defeats. Managed by accountancy and PR principles, not by campaigners. Declining involvement in the Etive campaign, declining to resist the killing of the beautiful cascades out of Coire nan Eoin, despite it being the greatest corrie in the Nevis Range (if, again, rarely visited – wildness, on that measure, is a minus not a plus). Nicola says 'whatever it takes to create more jobs in Lochaber industries' – even before they ever happen, or last more than a few years till the next corporate take-over. Even a trivial buckshee extra few megawatts on top of the vast Lochaber Big Hydro that captures – did you know – the entire upper basin of the distant Spey.

Mitigating the next round

If there is a next round, the key, pragmatic short-term messages for wild land are:

1. We have to forget stopping them, in general, or even in the most destructive locations. Resistance Is Useless.
2. We should highlight just how badly designed many of the first round are, and – with the better practice examples – demonstrate that the planning system can and must do a whole lot better next time.
3. We need to establish ourselves as a key consultee, from the earliest stages, paving the way to approval of the tolerable.
4. As we are tiny and have no staff, we need to work within a wild-land coalition, so they have to buy in to this approach.

So we could:

- Work up the Rogues Gallery to a publishable standard, in the form of an objective study and report, whether in print or online (8).
- Ask to present it to Highland Council (the majority case handler) – staff and members – and offer to assist them with best practice guidelines.
- Promote a seminar reviewing RoR progress and lessons for the future



The Coulags scheme, Glen Carron. Top marks here! The intake weir is well sited outwith the glen proper (they could have been greedy and gone further in for a bit more 'fall'); the access track to it is beautifully restored, and looks like the old stalker's path has just been widened a bit for quad vehicles. *Photo. David Jarman*

(which apply not just to this but any project in wild land) – or maybe offer a session to one of the bigger conferences, they like a bit of 'profile', and it lets the planning staff, including in the lesser relevant councils, see it on neutral territory.

- Invite relevant agency heads and ministers and councillors to a site visit to Gleann Cia-aig – the actual fruits of public policies, on public land. Maybe they might instruct a declutter of all the useless signage and stuff (see below).
- Seek media attention for the story, not as news (where even a sympathetic Guardian Scottish correspondent could not see a piece in the Etive issue, even at its peak of controversy), but as a feature, a look back in anger – possibly engaging a media specialist to place it.

Useless signage and stuff

Let us end on a note of trivial banality, before we all put our feet up again. Why is it that some schemes are littered (the word is chosen advisedly)

with signs and markers (9), some dayglo hi-vis from miles away, and with other unnecessary clutter, while others are almost devoid of them? There clearly cannot be a rule requiring them. It is about over-specifying at some remote designer's desk, with an unlimited budget for such peripherals (the greater the capital 'value' of the scheme the more attractive it can become, on the asset book). And equally it is about no-one, really no-one, having an oversight of the project who really 'gets' landscape and why wildness is so fragile, and who wants to minimise impact on every level. It is just carelessness. And the worst culprits – our Forestry Commission. Walk up the rough track, sorry, now super-highway, from Achnashellach to Glenuaig, you can be visually unaware of the buried pipeline, you could dismiss the intrusive weir had they bothered to extend the vast forest to screen it),

but you will be reminded that you are now trudging up a hydro access (massively upgraded of course) by the procession of 'buried pipe' warning signs always in view.

And never forget, tell them all, the froth and rush and roar of the Allt a' Chonais down in the gorge no longer insists; but then I had to look up its unmemorable name. What does this say? It says, all the burns that we are losing sight and sound and life of – are nameless. There is great outcry, indignation, loss when the named Mona Lisa is defaced; when the named Bamiyan Buddhas are blown up; when the famed Library at Alexandria is burned; unnamed, unfamed burns are harder to save, to grieve for a distributed, collective loss.

David Jarman is a long-standing member of SWLG. His Rogues' Gallery is available on the SWLG website.

Notes

- (1) Beware those innocuous 'offshore' ones, ending our wild views out across the Atlantic – sail past Gigha out to Islay, and weep.
- (2) You especially appreciate it just now, while the ceaseless flow of overflying transatlantic jets is reduced to a trickle.
- (3) Local overhead power lines are routinely 'repoled' by entirely off-road machines, leaving almost no trace, even in the wet rugged west; compare off-road tree-harvesters.
- (4) Exceptionally, one scheme at Heights of Kinlochewe on the way in to Loch an Fada chances to be within a pre-existing native woodland re-establishment, and is thus one of the more tolerable.

(5) There are of course countless better quick ways to avert climate disaster, for example banning the pet food aisles or outdoor space heaters, or recreational boats and planes, or car trips to the remote hills – Sir Hugh didn't have one; so where do our priorities really lie?

(6) Why Etive? The schemes are up side valleys invisible from the road, mostly little visited. Their local impacts are hellish – but strictly local, a few precious metres despoiled. Had Glen Etive been in Sutherland, or named Gleann Bhragh Choinneach Mhalagain, would it never have been noticed? My radical suggestion was to swap the side streams for one proper RoR on the main river, no access tracks needed, weir hidden in gorge – taking only a third of flow but twice the output. Oh but half the river is owned by NTS (is that right- we couldn't find out); and the canoeists wouldn't like it.

(7) So appreciative of my slides of Etive, hot off camera, including a poetic memorial just above foaming rapids to be no more, and one of a teenage lad wild camping just above another weir that takes out a delectable confluence – he forded the Etive barefoot, before a Stob Gabhar circuit the off-piste way. Memories are made not to be sullied.

(8) it could now sadly be extended by another dozen cases, including rampant devastations such as Heights of Kinlochewe and the tragic Attadale group tapping Loch an Laoigh and the upper River Ling; and we had imagined the sanctuary of Bearneas to be inviolable.

(9) One access track on the way into core wild land was lined every hundred yards with a bright post marking the power cable route. Not seen elsewhere, only possibly needed where it crosses under the track.

Pete Ewing

Shooting and conservation

For many years I was a member of both the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC). This meant I received the quarterly members' magazine from both organisations. It was sometimes like having a ringside seat at a boxing match.

Many conservation issues have become polarised, with strong disagreement between shooting organisations and conservation organisations, which has sometimes led to angry discussion on social media and even several lawsuits. This conflict inevitably generates rather more heat than light.

This degree of polarisation seems to be a relatively recent phenomenon. Many famous conservationists such as Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold and Sir Peter Scott were enthusiastic shooters in their youth, and some, such as Sigurd Olson, continued hunting well into their old age. So why are shooters and conservationists nowadays at loggerheads?

It helps to understand where the shooting enthusiasts stand, as this results in a deeper appreciation of the issues.

There are five main forms of sporting shooting regularly practised in the UK.

Wildfowling

Firstly there is wildfowling – the pursuit of common ducks and geese with a shotgun, typically carried out in the autumn and winter at dawn and dusk, and usually by a single person. In the purest form it is carried out below the sea wall on estuaries and tidal mud flats, where bags are typically very low (approximately one bird per outing per shooter, according to the official returns for the Eden Estuary). Originally it was very much a working man's sport but in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries it was embraced – perhaps romanticised – by affluent and educated writers. Geese can also be decoyed inland which results in very much larger bags. The shooting community, dismayed at this, introduced a system

Issues
have
become
polarised



of licensed 'goose guides' to prevent excesses.

Lowland game shooting

Secondly there is lowland game shooting. This is a group activity, where a team of 'guns' shoot pheasants (a non-native species, perhaps introduced in Roman times, but certainly by 1059) with shotguns in drives. Pheasants are typically purchased young from rearers and raised in a pen by the gamekeeper before being released. About 47 million pheasants and a further 10 million red-legged partridges are released each year.

The sheer scale of gamebird release has raised ecological concerns. However, the revenue from their sporting tenants may encourage landowners to retain hedgerows and woodland which is beneficial for biodiversity. In theory, the dead pheasants enter the food chain, but there are reports of them simply being dumped. In fairness, the fiercest critics of this waste are shooters themselves.

Rough shoots

Thirdly there is rough shooting with shotguns which can be done alone or in small groups, where the quarry is entirely opportunistic: wood pigeon,

woodcock, ducks, rabbits, hares, etc. This is the 'one-for-the-pot' pursuit.

Grouse shooting

Fourthly there is grouse shooting on heather moorland. The red grouse is native to Britain and a sub-species of the willow grouse found throughout northern Europe. Traditionally the sport was done by the 'walked-up' method: a team of guns and dogs walk in a line; the grouse are flushed to the guns by the dogs. Bags are typically low (perhaps three or four birds per gun) so high densities of grouse are not required. The moor therefore does not need to be intensively managed for grouse. It is physically challenging as the guns walk long distances over rough ground and skill at dog training and handling is necessary. Many conservationists, myself included, consider walked-up grouse shooting to be largely benign from the conservation viewpoint.

The other, and far more controversial, kind of grouse shooting is 'driven' shooting, developed around 1850, and possibly triggered by the development of breech-loading shotguns which can be quickly reloaded. A line of beaters drive grouse towards the guns who are concealed in a line of stone and turf butts. The procedure is labour intensive and provides some low-paid casual employment. Bags can be high and historically they were shockingly high – Lord Walsham personally shot over a thousand grouse in a single day in 1888. Perhaps unsurprisingly, when first introduced there were letters in the sporting press condemning it as





unsporting. Nowadays the shooting community see it as traditional, despite it being only 170 years old. No physical exercise is involved as the guns are typically driven up to the butts in vehicles. Skill in marksmanship is required as grouse fly fast and low.

Obviously this process requires artificially high densities of grouse, which in turn requires intensive management of the moor which comes close to monoculture. Legal management includes rotational burning ('muirburn') as grouse prefer young heather to eat and older heather for shelter. Muirburn has

some benefits, such as wildfire risk reduction, but may have harms such as carbon release, flooding risk, loss of wildness and adverse effect on water quality.

Medicated grit containing anti-helminthic drugs is provided to suppress *Strongyloides* infection, which was the cause of cyclical changes in grouse numbers. Ground predators are suppressed with trapping (for mustelids) and shooting and snaring (for foxes). Some estates illegally kill raptors, principally hen harriers. This is done by shooting, post trapping and poisoned bait.

Rifle shooting

Fifthly there are the rifle sports. Rabbits and corvids can be shot with air rifles or .22 rimfire smallbore rifles. The latter is sometimes used for foxes but the more humane tool is a powerful centrefire rifle. All six species

Regulations have increased over the years



of deer found in Britain can be culled, also with centrefire rifles. There is a grave responsibility on the rifle user to ensure a safe back stop, as the typical centrefire bullet is still lethal at three miles.

Over the years the degree of regulation of shooting has increased. Gun laws have been progressively tightened. The grant of a firearm or shotgun certificate costs around £80, but there are suggestions that this should be increased to around £200 to reflect the actual costs of gun licensing. Applicants for a firearm or shotgun certificate now need to obtain, and pay for, a medical certificate.

Airguns are now licenced in Scotland. Snares now require a training course and licensing. Other laws were brought in because of illegal raptor persecution – possession of poisons such as carbofuran is illegal, employers can be prosecuted under vicarious liability laws, and 'general licences' that allow control of common pests can be withdrawn when wildlife crime is suspected.

Ammunition

Lead ammunition is prohibited on wetlands, although research on shot wildfowl shows this law is not always obeyed. Lead ammunition is now to be phased out completely for all live quarry use over the next five years. This is being done voluntarily by the main shooting organisations, who can see that future legislation is inevitable as evidence on health risks mount up. There are alternatives to lead such as steel, bismuth, tungsten matrix and copper, but these raise issues of cost and effectiveness, and some older (and expensive) guns may be unsuitable.

Licensing

Recently, the Scottish Government decided to begin grouse moor licensing, despite the Werrity Report suggesting this be delayed for five years to allow the shooting community one final chance to get their house in order over illegal raptor persecution.

Wild Justice launched legal challenges over general licences (which permit any authorised person to kill certain specified birds in certain specified



circumstances). They successfully argued that the existing general licences were too broad and scientifically flawed. However, the licences were then abruptly revoked which caused considerable alarm in the shooting community, as well as disrupting some non-controversial control of agricultural pests. Eventually the situation was resolved with consultations and the issue of new and more conservation-oriented general licences.

Other issues

Last year Wild Justice launched a further legal challenge regarding the release of non-native pheasants and red-legged partridges close to European protected sites in England. Given the large numbers released, there is legitimate concern over the ecological impact, but it is an under-researched question. Wild Justice proposed that shoots releasing pheasants within 5km of Special

Protection Areas and Special Areas for Conservation would require a licence. Again this caused much alarm within the shooting community, although this diminished when the distance was reduced to 500 meters.

Conflict has also arisen over deer densities. Many conservationists want to see low deer densities to promote native woodland regeneration. Some sporting interests want higher deer densities, which tends to raise the value of the estate and facilitates profitable stag stalking. The issue is, of course, rather more complex than this brief summary.

A toxic & febrile environment

It is no surprise that many in the shooting community feel they are under siege from the conservation lobby, the animal rights lobby and the government. This can lead to quite bizarre beliefs. For example, a satellite-tagged golden eagle abruptly

Some shooters may have sympathy with wild land

stopped transmitting on a grouse estate in Perthshire in 2016. Four years later, the satellite tag was found in the nearby River Braan, wrapped in lead sheeting. Most people would regard this as at least circumstantial evidence of deliberate and illegal raptor persecution. But when it was discussed at length on a shooting internet forum, several otherwise rational contributors claimed, apparently seriously, that it must have been deliberately put there by conservationists to discredit shooting.

In this toxic and febrile environment, conservationists like ourselves have a difficult task. We know that only those who have experienced wild land feel inclined to protect it – most SWLG members are hill walkers, mountaineers, canoeists, and the like. Some shooters, specifically wildfowlers, deer stalkers, walked-up grouse shooters and rough shooters have similar exposure to wild land. They may well have some sympathy with wild land conservation, and shooting interests have sometimes objected to inappropriate development in wild land, alongside SWLG.

It is also useful for conservationists to understand that shooters are very keen on tradition and will tend to obey an ethical code when it is properly ingrained over a long enough time. As an example, shooting accidents are phenomenally rare in the UK compared to other countries due to the long-standing emphasis put on safety. Less admirably, driven grouse

shooting is now seen as old and traditional and an intrinsic part of our heritage, despite being invented by the Victorians. It's also striking how shooters and ramblers dress totally differently to go out in the same environment, and again this is explained by tradition and conservatism.

Although illegal raptor persecution is a widespread blight, it is a mistake to assume all estates are guilty. I nearly always see hen harriers and other raptors on a local shooting estate, and the estate has never once featured on the Raptor Persecution UK website. We can lower the heat if we are careful not to blame all shooters for the crimes of a significant minority.

Be careful what you wish for

We also need to be careful what we wish for. If all grouse shooting was made illegal as some conservationists demand, landowners would look for alternative ways to profit from their assets. We might hope that they would turn to rewilding and subsequent wildlife tourism, but the market for this would be easily saturated. They might instead turn to blanket Sitka spruce afforestation and wind farms.

Photos. James Fenton

If sport shooting becomes illegal or too hedged with regulation, landowners may convert their land to Sitka spruce plantation. *Photo. James Fenton*



Andrew Painting

Fragments shored against the ruins: The perception of Wild Land in the age of the Anthropocene

Last year, T.S Eliot found himself enjoying a brief renaissance, for the simple reason that he accidentally wrote a brutal, uncannily prescient epithet of lockdown a hundred years before it happened. Scores of opinion piece writers, dredging through their muddy memories of apt quotations for ‘unprecedented times’, came to write that ‘April is, indeed, the cruellest month’.

Here at *Wild Land News*, we will go one further, and quote four lines:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

The restlessness of the verse, its juxtaposition of life and death, hope and despair, nature and culture, speaks to us in our rolling lockdowns. For Eliot’s *The Wasteland* was written in a time of uncertainty. The First World War had ravaged the earth, as had the Spanish Flu. The good times of the Roaring Twenties were yet to come to pass. He was writing at a time of cultural slack water. The world had already entered a new phase, the

Modern, but it just didn’t know it yet. A century later, we find ourselves in a similar period of cultural slack water – an unfrozen moment where the future seems uncertain. This unfamiliar moment is the dawning realisation among not just scientists, anthropologists and ecologists, but among entire cultures, that we have already entered a new phase, the Anthropocene, the period in which humans have become the driving ecological, geological and climatological forces on the planet. Quite how this will turn out remains undetermined. Dull roots stir in spring rain, as yet unseen. We wait, uneasily, to see what this new season will bring.

As the first lockdown ended, I headed out in search of dotterels, the bright montane waders that haunt only the highest hills of Scotland. On furlough, no longer hill-fit and generally miserable, I walked deep into the Cairngorms, up to the plateau, on a bright blue day. Time spent with rare, beautiful and inaccessible creatures seemed to me to be just the tonic for my greyed spirits. Up at 900 metres altitude, I came across a male, a few

Dotterels
are truly
birds of
wild land



Dotterel. Photo. Shaila Rao

metres off the path. He must have been tending a nest nearby, so I left him be. Further up, at getting on for 1,200 metres altitude, I came across a female. Dotterels are peculiar in that the males tend to the chicks; after laying the eggs, the females are essentially ladies of leisure. I watched her for five or ten minutes as she picked for craneflies near a corrie edge, before she tottered off into the distance. Later in the year, I found a couple more, this time in the Grampians, and all the more exciting for the fact that I had not set out to look for them. Dotterels are truly birds of wild land. They nest only in places where humans are scarce. They are compact and hard to find, but they can also be confiding and characterful creatures. They were the perfect creatures for bringing succour to a human coming out of a particularly unpleasant few months.

But all is not well with Scotland’s dotterels. Recent research has shown that dotterels are declining swiftly in

Britain – from over 1,000 males in the 1980s to around 400 today. A new paper has looked at what is causing us to lose Scotland’s dotterels. It found that dotterels are retreating 25 metres up the hills per decade. At this rate, it will be a mere matter of decades before dotterels simply ‘run out of hill’ in Scotland, and have nowhere further to retreat. The paper also highlighted the problem of increased nitrogen deposition in the Highlands. Nitrogen is essentially a fertiliser, and it tends to reduce the extent of arctic-alpine plants in favour of more vigorous species, reducing the suitability of the habitat for montane birds.

My perceptions and enjoyment of those dotterels as totems of wildness were mediated by my knowledge that humans were causing them to disappear. This is the curse of the Anthropocene, to see everything through the lens of human intervention, both positive and negative, to the detriment of a wild land quality. The Anthropocene has



Mountain hare. Photo. Andrew Painting

many definitions. Perhaps the best is this one from Lorimer: 'the public death of the modern understanding of Nature removed from society'. It is impossible to perceive land as truly wild in an era when humans are the dominant ecological power on Earth.

It is not just dotterels which are struggling in our hills. Arctic-alpine plants are at risk of become extinct in Scotland, due to climate change and nitrogen deposition. Our summer snows are disappearing. Another recent piece of research by the James Hutton Institute shows the impact of climate change on mountain hares. The annual moult of hares from blue-brown to white is now out of sync with the seasons. They found that there was an average decline of 37.14 days of annual snow cover between 1960 and 2016 on their Highland study sites. By 2016, early autumn snows occurred

four days later and the late spring snows were a week earlier than in the 1960s. Mountain hares were simply unable to keep up with this change, making them more vulnerable to predation. Good news for eagles, bad news for hares.

The wildness of our high hills is threatened in other, tangential ways. Poorly placed wind farms and hydro-schemes have a huge visual impact on the perception of wild land. These technologies are direct knock-on effects of years of overconsumption. These symptoms are all pointing to the simple fact that humans (and mostly humans in the richest countries) are sitting too heavily on the planet. These are all symptoms of the Anthropocene.

This is not just a Scottish problem. Climate change is affecting perhaps

the last truly wild places, the polar regions, faster than anywhere else. Across the planet, animals are going extinct 1,000 to 10,000 times faster than the 'baseline extinction rate'. Humans and their livestock now account for 96% of the total mammalian biomass on the planet. Plastic has now been found both 10,927 metres below the surface of the sea in the Mariana trench, and 8,440 metres up, on the highest slopes of Mount Everest. Radiocarbon dating readings are dated to BP – with this 'Before Present' referring to 1950. The reason? Nuclear weapons testing has ensured that readings of atmospheric carbon-14 are now so sullied that radiocarbon dating will never work again for any time after this.

The impacts of the Anthropocene threaten to infect our every interaction with nature, whether it be on the high hills or the garden bird feeder. The anthropologist Andrew Whitehouse describes this niggling feeling as the 'anxious semiotics of the Anthropocene'. Others talk of 'solastalgia', 'emotional or existential distress caused by environmental change'. Of course, the ultimate paradox of the Anthropocene is that humans have grown to appreciate the importance of wild land at a policy level just as it is disappearing. Members of the Scottish Wild Land Group have been ahead of the curve on this, and instrumental in helping to protect what we have left. Now, the rest of the world is beginning to catch up. Readers will be forgiven for

We need more wildness in our daily lives

indulging in an element of *schadenfreude*.

The term 'Anthropocene' is not without its detractors. Critics point out that the word lacks nuance – ascribing blame equally to all humans for the destruction of the environment, when of course it is the rich and super-rich who are by far the most to blame. The term 'Anthropocene' itself is an implicit acceptance of a human/nature dichotomy, in which humanity is pitted as the antithesis of nature. It is, by definition, anthropocentric. This outlook has had profoundly damaging impacts on both nature and our ability to perceive it as it truly is – vast, complex, and ultimately life-giving. It is therefore seen by some deep ecologists as part of the problem of seeing 'humans' removed from the 'wild', which ultimately renders the wild a 'resource' to be enjoyed, mined, cleared or farmed. But for all that, it remains a useful term, and one that has entered the mainstream.

So how do we try to perceive the wild in this emerging cultural age? What do we do?

Is our task, here in Scotland, to protect the fragments of what little wildness is left, and shore them against the ruins of the Anthropocene? Certainly. But personally I would rather think in less absolute terms. We also need to push to see more wildness in our day to day lives – to see more wildness

A late-lying snow-patch, the Sphinx Patch below Braeriach. Most years this is present year-round, but with global warming it is now becoming more common for it disappear completely by the end of summer. *Photo. Andrew Painting*



everywhere, to sit more lightly on the landscape in all of our interactions with it. Perhaps the Anthropocene can push us to do better by nature. Life in the Anthropocene demands of us a closer attention to nature and the plight of wild land. The solace that is afforded to us by the Anthropocene, the lilac growing out of the dead land, the hope at the bottom of Pandora's Box, is the chance to be participants in the act of bringing about a wilder, less human-dominated future. Perhaps we might just have our own 'roaring twenties' of environmental protection and restoration, and a cultural reconnection with nature.

So I return, finally to the dotterel, sitting high in the Cairngorms. The anthropologist Hugo Reinert locates 'the wild' at a 'complex, awkward juncture in contemporary human–nonhuman relations: simultaneously an object of control and withdrawal,

absence and intimacy, wildness and impurity; a site of complex and intractable controversies – but also, perhaps, of hope'. It is a beautiful, complex statement to which I regularly find myself returning, as I return to the dotterels of the high hills. Dotterels are among the world's hardiest creatures, but they have little defence against climate change. They will probably not survive much longer as a breeding bird in Scotland. The hope is that we can learn from their plight. The great ornithologist Desmond Nethersole-Thompson finished his book on dotterels on a note of warmth. As is so often the case in the age of the Anthropocene, his words harbour new, tragic undertones. 'Whatever happens in the future,' he wrote, 'these lovely and confiding dotterels will always call and hold us. We remember them with affection.'

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Scottish Wild Land Group

Working to protect Scotland's species, environment and landscapes



Liathach by James Fenton

The objects of the Group are:

- (a) To promote the conservation of wild land in Scotland;
- (b) To promote public awareness of the problems facing wild land in Scotland;
- (c) To promote and encourage the implementation of good planning policies;
- (d) To co-operate with other bodies to promote the foregoing objects.

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- ✓ Protection and promotion of Scotland's wild land
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- ✓ Environmentally-sensitive land and wildlife management
- ✓ Planning controls on the spread of hill tracks
- ✓ Restoration of rare and missing species and environments
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