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SUMMER 2021

Wild Land News

Magazine of the Scottish Wild Land Group

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**A new project to assess
the state of wild land**

The use of social media

A walk up Ben Starav

The Mòine Mhòr track

Summer 2021

WILD LAND NEWS

Issue 99

Magazine of the
Scottish Wild Land Group

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Individual articles do not
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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: Garbh Bheinn in
Ardgour. Left: Looking NW from
the summit of Garbh Bheinn
Photos James Fenton*

Editorial

Ambitious new project to assess the state of wild land

The Scottish Wild Land Group has teamed up with the Scottish Mountaineering Trust and the Cairngorms Campaign to undertake a major study into the current state of wild land in Scotland, and the rate at which it is being lost.

It is easy to say that ‘we are losing wild land’, and we can all point to cherished locations where we have seen development intrude. This is exemplified by Tom Cuthbert’s article in this issue. But there is no objective data available which we can use to convince hard-nosed politicians that wild land is under threat

The six-month project will look first at trends across all 42 of Scotland’s official Wild Land Areas (WLAs), particularly around tracks, wind turbines, dams and commercial plantations.

A more detailed study of four sample areas will come up with maps to show just what is happening on the ground. The four areas are in the highlands: NW Sutherland (WLA34); the Creag Meagaidh area (WLA19); the Glen

Affric area (WLA24); and the Monadhliath (WLA20), including land within the Cairngorms National Park.

The three organisations have commissioned Dr Steve Carver of the Wildland Research Institute and Ian Kelly of Ian Kelly Planning Consultants Limited to carry out the work.

The next page gives more detail on the project, as does my article on page 8.

New acting Convenor

The SWLG has welcomed Jonathan Binny on board as our new acting Convenor.

In recent years Jonathan has been a director both with Mountaineering Scotland and the Nevis Partnership.

More onshore wind farms

The *Sunday Times* on 5 September reported that the Scottish Government is planning another 4,000 onshore turbines in the Scottish countryside over the next few years. So we need to be on the alert to ensure these are not placed in the wildest parts of our uplands.



Further details of the wild land project

The research team comprises:

- Dr Steve Carver who, over the last 20 years, has built up considerable Scottish and international experience in the mapping of wild land attributes
- Ian Kelly, an experienced planning consultant who has, in the last 15 years, assessed most of the wind farms that have potentially affected wild land in Scotland
- Ben Carver who will provide data set analysis and GIS mapping support.

Dr Steve Carver says:

“This project will build on the original mapping work carried out as part of the identification of the Wild Land Areas in 2014 and on more recent work for the John Muir Trust and Wildland Ltd. It will provide a clear, comprehensive, robust, and objective overview of what is happening with wild land as a result

of historic and current forces for change.”

Ian Kelly says:

“Project decision-making in terms of the various developments that affect wild land tends to be based on the locationally subjective assessment by a particular professional without really understanding the true significance of what is happening to the wild land resource. Also, there is nobody consistently acting as the advocate for Scotland’s landscape or Scotland’s natural heritage. This project will provide an overview that will, hopefully, assist in policy making and decision making in the future.”

The team will consider the historical trends in land use in Scotland, especially within the Highlands of Scotland and the five study areas; map

the effects of the developments that are currently posing the major threats to wild land and the Wild Land Areas (energy generation, plantation forests, and hill track construction); and review the role of planning policy and planning decision making.

A preliminary report will be produced in October in time to feed into the

expected government consultation on the new National Planning Framework 4. In January 2022, there will be a final report, with maps of the key changes taking place in wild land, along with the identification of what needs to change to provide continuing or enhanced protection of wild land.

Date for your diary

SWLG AGM 2021

Saturday December 4

As last year, this will be a virtual AGM taking place *via* Zoom. Details on how to take part will be put on the SWLG website before the end of November

An opportunity to hear an update on the wild land project, and to hold a discussion on how SWLG could make more use of social media

See also on page 13 a motion to be tabled on converting the group to a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO)

Jonathan Binny

SWLG to make more use of social media

Recently I was asked “How can NGO's, such as SWLG, raise the profile of wild land?”

An interesting question – which goes with the assumption that NGOs have limited resources. That is correct, of course: SWLG has a small membership and therefore it is less likely to achieve as much as larger or governmental organisations.

However in recent times the growth of social media has given even the smallest organisation a voice with a potentially global reach. With most people using social media, it has become an important form of communication in the modern world whether we like it or not.

Social media is an opportunity for SWLG

For SWLG it means that, with the use of minimal resources, we have a greater capacity to raise awareness of wild land. With time, more people may begin to follow the group's social media accounts and others might see them if re-posted. Whilst this may not equate into new members, the network of supporters would have grown, so allowing SWLG to promote its cause. The content of the posts on social media should be varied, encouraging people to appreciate wild

land and understand the issues it faces.

No-one at SWLG is an expert on social media but we see the need for it. Over the coming months, it is hoped that we will be posting more regularly. As this is a learning curve, we will be experimenting behind the scenes to gain confidence in the technicalities of posting. Hopefully that will not be apparent in the posts!

As our profile grows it is inevitable that we will be questioned or challenged. For any organisation that is confident in what it is doing these can be addressed with robust responses, and if they aren't then it shows a weakness that, once addressed, will make the organisation more resilient.

Social media represents an opportunity for SWLG to raise awareness of and extend its message far beyond its membership and in doing so help protect wild land.

We are always looking for media-savvy individuals to help the group raise its social media presence. Please contact admin@swlg.org.uk if you would like to help us with this.



James Fenton

What is happening to wild land?

Have you noticed how we humans are rapidly taking over the whole planet? It is becoming increasingly hard to find places anywhere in the world where you can get away from it all, where you can walk for a day without coming across roads, tracks, buildings, pylons, and where you feel nature is still in charge.

But if you believe the tourist brochures, Scotland, particularly the Highlands, is still pristine, “Come to the wild Highlands”, “Enjoy our unspoilt coasts”... But is this the case? Some will argue that there is no wildness at all in the Highlands because at one time the whole landscape was inhabited, and others that the climate crisis is so severe we need to have wind farms and hydro schemes everywhere: hence we should not be promoting wild land at all. But in my view, this will leave us with an impoverished world.

Whatever is said, many Scottish areas are wild, and NatureScot has identified the 42 wildest as Wild Land Areas. But we also need to accept other areas where climate change mitigation should be a priority. Keeping some areas of the planet wild and climate

mitigation are both ‘green issues’ with different value systems, but they can be in conflict at times: the so-called ‘green-on-green’ issues.

It is easy to say that wildness is being lost, but difficult to prove to hard-nosed politicians. When walking a glen you may notice a new hill track which was not there last time you visited. But this is only one place, and it is hard to know whether this is typical of what is happening across Scotland.

Hence the Scottish Wild Land Group has launched the first ever project to gather data on whether Scotland’s wildness is in fact being lost, and if so, how fast. The six-month project will look first at trends in infrastructural development across all the Wild Land Areas.

A more detailed study of four sample areas will come up with maps to show just what is happening on the ground. The sample areas are all in the highlands: Northwest Sutherland; the Creag Meagaidh area; the Glen Affric area; and the Monadhliath Mountains, including land within the Cairngorms National Park.

—————
We need fresh thinking on how to look after wild land
—————

The project is being supported by two other organisations concerned about the loss of wild land: the Scottish Mountaineering Trust and the Cairngorms Campaign. The three organisations have commissioned Dr Steve Carver of the Wildland Research Institute and Ian Kelly of Ian Kelly Planning Consultants Limited to carry out the work.

Our organisations hope the results will lead to fresh, national-level thinking about how we look after wild land. The government is currently reviewing planning guidance and it is expected that a new National Planning Framework 4 will be out for consultation in the autumn. We want the results of this study to feed into a discussion on the future of wild land areas.

Planning decisions tend to only address impacts on a case-by-case

basis and we lose valued landscapes, including wild land, by the accumulation of many small impacts. Over the years, these all add up to cause major landscape change: what is called the ‘salami effect.’ How often do you hear developers say “We are only impacting a small area”? But maybe, after 100 years of salami slicing, the people of Scotland will wake up to the fact that their landscape is no different to everywhere else in the world: development everywhere. Is this what we really want? Do we not want our grandchildren to still be walking up burns and glens where they can still experience nature in the raw?

This article first appeared in *The Scotsman* on 19 August 2021 under the heading ‘Lamenting the Loss of Wild Land.’



Tom Cuthbert

A walk up Ben Starav

As an Amber Weather warning was in force for much of central highland Scotland, my planned outing to climb some of the Crianlarich Munros seemed ill-advised. I had noticed that the warning was not in effect for ranges near the coast, and as I was yet to climb Ben Starav in Glen Etive, the decision was made and an early start planned.

I had visited the area before to climb Beinn nan Aighenan (the third Munro stashed around the back of Starav and twin) and remembered a boggy diversion around Coileitir House and an eroded path up the Allt nam Meirleach to the bealach and beyond.

As I descended the road towards Loch Etive I was struck by the number of 'wild' campers at the side of the road, it seemed almost like a tent city. The road was in better shape than I remembered and as I got down towards Dalness I saw why. The parking spot for the Munros Beinn Fhionnlaidh and Sgurr nah-Ulaidh had become a large bulldozed area allowing parking space for ...a large bulldozer. Where one now parks to access these hills is anyone's guess, but then it came back to me ...the hydro-schemes. I'd forgotten about them.

As I continued down the road, I contemplated the matter. As our

climate changes, the unsustainability of our way of life will be brought into ever sharper focus. Is the solution really to despoil our wilder areas? As a nerve shaken member of the workaday world, I go to the hills for

bulldozers to cross and blaze a track upwards to the narrowing of the gorge around the 100m contour.

There was little breeze and I was starting to break sweat as the walkers'



solace and sanity, for a re-acquaintance with what is real and important. I need these escapes; I was beginning to feel that Glen Etive was not the place for me.

Is the solution really to despoil our wilder areas?

It was overcast and dry as I began to walk along a new track and over a new bridge across the River Etive whose dark waters stood patiently beneath. The new track surrounded Coileitir and the heavy plant workers were arriving to work in enthusiastic rally-style leaving me spluttering in clouds of their dust.

A new crossing of the Allt Mheuran had been bulldozed flattening boulders and rocks allowing more

path finally climbed above the works. I continued upwards until, at around 900m, I broke free of the cloud and I enjoyed an inversion of the highest quality along the final rocky pull to the summit cairn. I continued round to Glas Bheinn Mhor in and out of the mist watching great towering storm clouds rise ever upwards as the convective effect of the sun made a reality of the forecast thunder. I was a world away in a land of rock and sky, of scree and scrambling. My reverie was interrupted by time and I needed to head for lower slopes. As I descended into Coire Odhar, the sun once again shone and it became warm. I stopped to refresh in the river spending some moments dipping toes in and out of





the cascade and soaking in the scenery.

As I continued to drop back glen wards, thunder! But with unfathomable rhythm? I soon realised as a bolt from the blue that I was hearing what could have been blasting or a hammer drill on an epic scale. My suspicions were confirmed as I approached the machines. Rock, which has 'seen' far more than any human, was succumbing to human 'progress' in a matter of seconds. I sat above the machines feeling their vibrations through the dirt imagining how Edward Abbey must have been compelled all those miles away in the American West.

The walkers crossing point below the main work area was an unpleasant scree and bolder slope, sharp with newly fractured rock. I wondered what sort of power could be generated from a vertical drop of only 100m?

The schism between humans and their world seems to be as wide as the access track to the new Glen Etive hydro schemes. No amount of reinstatement will mend broken rock, will un-pour concrete or will quieten the noise of turbines. Whatever has been promised, I can promise that the glen is not the same. Nor will it be. Up and down the glen the pattern is repeated. New tracks, machines, dust and noise. I wonder how wild a place

The glen is not the same!



those camping on the upper shores of the River Etive feel it to be?

As I returned past them and into the black thunder clouds above the A82, I was once again musing on the juxtaposition of the freedom high in mountains, and the enslavement of the glen.

Photographs by Tom Cuthbert who is an SWLG member. See his Twitter account [@maxicheddar](https://twitter.com/maxicheddar)

The planning for the controversial hydro-schemes in Glen Etive has previously been covered in WLN 98, 96 & 94. This article indicates their impact in reality.





Horns of Alligin, Beinn Dearg and Beinn Eighe. Photo J Fenton

Proposal to become a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO)

Motion to be presented to 2021 AGM

Since the SWLG was set up in 1982, it has been an Unincorporated Organisation. This means that it has had no independent legal existence from its members, and that technically any contracts have been entered into by members of its Steering Committee, and that they have had unlimited liability for any debts incurred, for example for the legal costs if the SWLG were to be sued by a disgruntled third party.

Since 2011, it has been possible for such a Scottish charity to transfer its status to a SCIO, which gives the charity a separate legal existence, enabling it to

enter contracts, and, for example, to employ individuals, both in its own right. It also brings the protection of limited liability to the Steering Committee in most circumstances.

After considerable consideration, the Steering Committee of the SWLG has decided that it would be worthwhile for the Group to transfer to the SCIO structure. This involves setting up the new SCIO and getting the approval of the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) for its entry in the Register of Scottish Charities, and then the dissolution of the existing

Unincorporated Association, and the transfer of its assets and membership to the SCIO.

In practice, we intend this process to be completely smooth for all members, and we intend to retain the same postal addresses, and banking arrangements, for membership subscriptions. It will probably be necessary to renew Gift Aid declarations, but we will contact members after the SCIO is established to do this.

Under the existing typewritten Constitution, dated March 1984, which has provided admirable flexibility over

the years, the Steering Committee will propose to the members at the AGM that the existing Group will be wound up and its assets and intangibles transferred to the new SCIO. Approval will require a two-thirds majority of the members present and voting, so we hope that a good number of members will attend the AGM, on-line, and vote in favour of the transfer to a SCIO.

Details of the AGM, including the full Agenda and how to dial in will be on the website nearer the time.

Tim Ambrose, Treasurer

David Jarman

Mòine Mhòr – that bulldozed track scarring the Cairngorms High Plateau

One of very few beacons of hope that the tide of mechanical intrusion into the wilds might just occasionally be reversed is the erasure of the most egregious bulldozed track in the Highlands, up Beinn a' Bhuid. Climbing to over 1000m on an exposed shoulder, it was visible for miles. When the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) acquired Mar Lodge in 1995, one of their first priorities was to reinstate it. SWLG paid a visit while work was in progress: we were privileged to witness a meticulous and imaginative re-creation of the former

modest stalkers path – our most heartening Group experience. That feels like decades ago now.

Less conspicuous from the glens, but second only to Bhuid as a heinous and unforgivable intrusion must come the track which climbs out the east side of Glen Feshie and wanders across the Mòine Mhòr for miles. We can examine its impact in two parts, glenside (up Coire Caol), and plateau (north and south branches across Mòine Mhòr).



The western half of the Cairngorm plateau: the Mòine Mhòr and its ring of Munros – the Feshie estate track network extends almost half-way across it, entirely above 900m / 3000' (image courtesy Bing Maps).

The track climbs out of Glen Feshie up Coire Caol to the plateau rim (glimpsed here from Druim nam Bò) : it could be restored back down to a terminus in the shallow saddle (Cadha na Coin Duibhe)



1. Feshie glenside - Coire Caol

This classic steep bulldozed track has become familiar to millions – few of whom will have any idea where it is – as a stage set or backdrop for documentaries, thrillers, and films, notably “Mary Queen of Scots” (2018) – where its emergence out of real Caledonian pinewoods adds nicely to the authenticity (as if Bothwell could ever have spurred his steed up such a well-made track... his quadbike, for sure).

Ironically, the rapid spread of this wood may soon screen much of the track from view (cinematic and public) – Scots pine seedlings are now appearing almost to the rim, in response to both drastic deer reduction and global heating. Furthermore, as ‘Coire’ Caol is actually quite a narrow V-shaped valley that escaped glaciation, the track within it is only glimpsed from a few angles. Nor is it the main public path up – that being a heavily rebuilt SNH affair which rises from the Auchlean road-end (in fact the original Coire Caol

path was cut, just to the rim, to suit the Lodge and the estate base at Carnachuin, opposite its foot – it appears on the 1860s OS First Edition).

Retention of the lower and middle reaches of the track within Coire Caol is thus not such a major wild land concern. The aim should be to pull it back from the plateau rim and off the final elegant narrow spur, where it teeters along the edge of the spectacular Garbhloch chasm. The track would then terminate on the shoulder at 750m (Cadha na Coin Duibh) – above here, it would be reduced as at Beinn a' Bhuid to a footpath, just wide enough to allow occasional ATVs up to the rim for essential estate purposes.

2. Plateau - Mòine Mhòr

Out on the plateau is an utterly different world and an utterly different matter, in directly visual terms and in the experience of our most extensive tract of high upland, which has otherwise escaped the physical



The track is 'visible from space' climbing up the rim of Coire Garbhach, then branching across the plateau (this Bing Maps image shows the entire southern branch and half the northern).

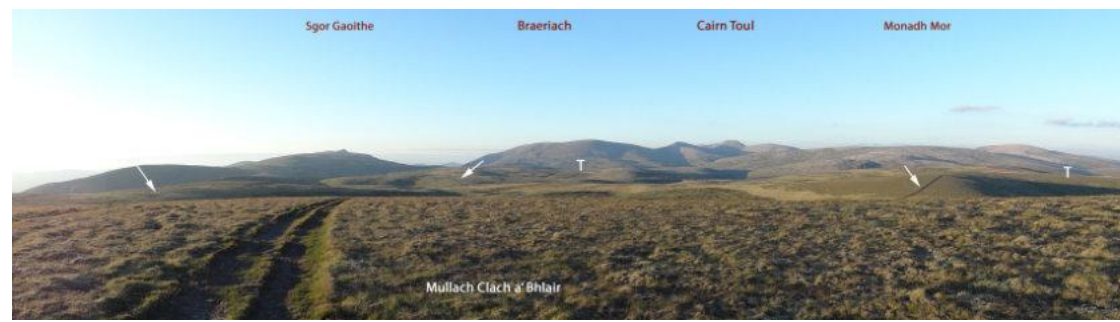
attentions of man (his ecological impact is not at issue here).

The track extends for 6 km in longer and shorter branches, always above 900m, and attaining 1000m crossing the Munro dome of Mullach Clach a' Bhlair (1019m). We have not followed its entirety (preferring to walk by other ways) but where encountered, it is not a mere scrape but an engineered road, smoothly surfaced (apparently with imported fill, not from adjacent borrowpits) to a standard you could drive a Land-Rover along at a comfortable 20.

The purpose of this track appears to have been to gain access to Glen Eidart, the most remote Cairngorm trough, since reaching it up the Feshie gorge and the pathless, peatwaste-

hemmed River Eidart is wearisome. Beyond Eidart, the mass of Monadh Mòr marks the Mar march. Moodily.

The longer northern branch terminates in a neat municipal "T" at the western Eidart⁽¹⁾ headwater, at the foot of that curious inverted nipple of a Munro Top (lower than most of its surroundings), Tom Dubh. Its last kilometre follows the line of a path oddity, first mapped on the 1950s One-Inch map, which extended the original elaborate stalkers path up from Auchlean to the plateau rim⁽²⁾. This extension, at such a late date, was probably more of a worn route over to Glen Eidart than a constructed path; it is still mapped as continuing down the ravine into the trough-head, rather optimistically, and happily a challenge too far for bulldozing.



Mullach Clach a' Bhlair is a superb late-evening viewpoint for the Mòine Mhòr, with a backdrop of high peaks – yet even from this low angle, the tentacles of human intervention are distinct, wrapping round the shallow basin (visible lengths arrowed, termini at T). An ATV route (foreground) crosses the summit dome, over 1000m up.

The high plateau

We should not have to restate the obvious, but we do wonder if anyone really appreciates this let alone cares these days: the Mòine Mhòr is a landscape precious beyond belief. In modern parlance, it is a crown jewel. It is a shallow bowl lipped by the Feshie rim Munros, Beinn Bhrotain, Cairn Toul, and Braeriach, draining abruptly north into Gleann Eanaich (Einich) and south into the Eidart. It is thus the heart of the western half of

the Cairngorm Plateau, less well-known and frequented than the half east of the Lairig Ghru, but more extensive in terms of uninterrupted high ground. And don't forget, the Plateau is our only decent tract of sub-arctic tundra landscape and vegetation.

There are other large extents of upland – Gaick; Tarf; the Mounth; the Monadhliath; Alder – but the Mòine Mhòr is pre-eminent for its



The bulldozed track – northern end. It is simple enough and well-made and drained, and would be inoffensive in ordinary moorland. This is no ordinary moorland. It is also eminently restorable.

The most conspicuous and eye-catching features in such a primordially wild and simple landscape should be these marshy windings of the Allt Luineag, or the subtle convexities of the skyline, or even a late snowpatch – not a bulldozed track 2 km distant (the northern branch terminus).



spaciousness yet with a secluded interiority. You descend into it to cross it; you have to ascend out of it to see beyond. It is in several senses ‘out of this world’. To be brought back into our mechanical world by stumbling upon a track, or by glimpsing its undulations from up on Angel’s Peak, is jarring. It should have been unthinkable, when executed. It is now a glaring wrong waiting to be righted.

Estate history and management

The Mòine Mhòr is almost entirely within the Glenfeshie Estate. The track is of the same vintage and mindset as the Beinn a’ Bhuid one on Mar Lodge, when JCBs began roaming the hills at negligible expense, easing access up high for the indolent or the petrol-head by an order of magnitude.

It predates the designation of the National Play-park, and got in under the radar of any planning controls, in days when ‘agricultural operations’ could extend loosely to any estate activities. Whatever that doughty

campaigner against this particular blight, Adam Watson, had to say about it we have not needed to research, for it didn’t stop it.

One consolation is that the Mòine Mhòr track is almost an aberration on this Estate : thus of the three ravines rising out of the head of Glen Feshie, only the least scenic, westwards across towards Gaick, has a jeep track up it, rising regrettably to 850m almost at the Tarf rim. The central ravine has only a faint, eroded stalkers path, while the eastern exit has the ancient Feshie–Geldie route in its floor, tolerably improved for landrovers up to the ravine head (and now cut by a landslide, so triple fording or tricky scrambling is required). The mysterious and secluded Upper Feshie (a former Geldie headwater, hence its very different gentle Deewards flavour) has been spared the JCB.

Glenfeshie Estate has had one of the more notorious ownership and

mismanagement histories, with ‘wild land’ hopes raised then dashed, until finally raised by the advent twenty years ago of a conservation-minded purchaser whose website address for their portfolio of estates is “wild-land”. Since then, we have seen a rapid and dramatic transformation in the scenery and ecology of the glen, with the excessive deer population culled down to one-fortieth⁽³⁾ of what it had been, and a consequential explosion in Scots pinewood regrowth from suppressed seedlings, all without enclosure fencing.

Nevertheless, the Estate is marketed for sporting activities based in high-end accommodation, and since there is no overt emphasis on traditional walking-up, we might imagine some degree of vehicular conveyance is part of the offer (there are garrons, which is a plus).

So why has the Mòine Mhòr track not been restored yet?

If NTS’ first thought was to erase that track on Beinn a’ Bhuid, why is it not that of “Wild-Land”?? Has it even been contemplated? Clearly this is an estate which could afford to do it tomorrow without blinking, if it wanted to. Has anyone ever asked, or suggested it to them? Let alone strongly encouraged them?? Or is it just one of these inherited ills, no-one’s responsibility to do anything about?

I happened to meet the Director of Conservation for these estates, Thomas MacDonell, a couple of years ago, arranging for him to introduce Feshie to a Highland Geological Society group. He comes from a traditional estate management background, with long experience in the Monadhliath; he is an able and engaging exponent of

The once-handsome and eminently walkable Druim nam Bò shoulder of Mullach Clach a’ Bhlair – now sullied by several ATV lines.



The final rise onto Mullach Clach a' Bhlair. No track is yet marked on OS maps – but soon will be, going by their usual criteria. A key indicator of 'wildness' is an absence of anything on the map, other than contours.



the owners' aims and progress, clearly enjoying their healthy support and appreciation. So I have put these questions to him, and he has seen and been invited to comment on this piece and its revised version.

Reading between the lines of his brief but courteous, not unsympathetic email reply, I have the impression that all the answers are basically "no". And beyond that, leave this with us, we can think about it, there are practical considerations, it may be something we can do when the time is ripe.

I had observed that the track, at the Tom Dubh end anyway, looked hardly used in a very long time. Thomas mentions that they have scientific monitoring installations on the plateau and on Druim nam Bo, also that they plan to restore raised bog on Mòine Mhòr, although he does not say whether vehicular access is actually

required for these activities or for deer management on or beyond the plateau, nor does he comment on present usage of these tracks. Instead, he says "conservation is a compromise, we need access or fencing [to control deer numbers], we have chosen not to use fencing".

More generally he says "we are moving towards our understanding of what some call rewilding ... we need a 'hard landscaping' period (including) infrastructure such as management of track design and location". The Mòine Mhòr tracks of which I sent him these photos "are on our radar to improve". What might 'improvement' actually mean though? Reduction of the northern leg to a footpath permitting ATV usage would at least be a start, bringing it into parity with the Auchlean path that it joins. The southern leg which crosses high over Mullach Clach a' Bhlair is the more

The ATV route was a web of tramlines

objectionable, and with no very evident need for it, ought to be erased.

ATV tracks

A few summers ago, when I was researching Feshie's landscape geohistory, and its network of stalkerpaths, an exceptional fine spell tempted me to bivvi on the summit dome of Mullach Clach a' Bhlair. Maps showed a stalker-path slanting up from Ruigh Aiteachain bothy onto Creag na Gaibhre above the Feshie gorge-foot. It is now almost lost in deep heather, fallen pines, and even juniper, but affords access to the open SW shoulder, thus avoiding any contact with that abominable track. Current satellite imagery showed the shoulder beyond, Druim nam Bò, to be invitingly pristine. And so it proved – for a few hundred delectable mid-evening yards, until an ATV track came in at Lochan nam Bò to access their new weather station ... and carried on all the way to the summit to join the made track. In places this ATV route was a web of tramlines in the grass, but it is now a conspicuous intrusion up the final brow. This cast a long shadow over the extraordinary beauties of the night and the sunrise.

I have a faint impression of Thomas shaking his head in some disbelief at my photo, as he responds "no excuse I know, I accept we can do better": who did drive on up there and why?

The same summer, we went in up that middle ravine to camp in the Upper Feshie and follow the Tarf rim, with its remote single Corbett of two equal summits long miles apart. ATV tracks now criss-cross that landscape too, although rarely on lines we wanted to follow for long.

Clearly culling the deer down so ruthlessly needs a lot of access and extraction visits, but the issue is not a quick fix, for so long as deer keep coming in from Atholl to fill the vacuum, and ATV tracks are very long lived, if not effectively indelible.

NTS and the Glen Quoich track

Our esteem for NTS over the Beinn a' Bhuird track turned to ashes when we went back up Glen Quoich recently. The lovely riverside track we had cycled up was partly washed away in the last big floods. Its replacement is a massively over-engineered, costly-looking, forestry-style roadway which climbs high up through the granny pines and back down, its gradients and crushed stone surface horrible for walking or biking. Mar Lodge manager Dave Frew defends it as having gone through all due design and consultation processes, and as essential for speedy access for staff to 'fend off' similar deer incursions from the adjacent estate into the Quoich pinewoods they are trying to rejuvenate, also without fences. (He offered no answer to my query, why

not upgrade the old direct track across the moor above?)

In both these estates, it seems that a narrow focus on a single ecological rewilding issue – deer control to favour native woodlands, however well-intentioned, is to the exclusion of a wider sense of what ‘wildness’ really means to the broader spectrum of people who revere and benefit from it. Readers may have noticed that the role of the Cairngorms National Park Authority has yet to be mentioned. I have not troubled to bother them with any such questions. They have clearly been consulted on that disastrous Quoich track, without achieving an

outcome that fits the landscape, that is consistent in scale with the existing track either side, or is at all congenial for public access. It can be imagined that they have never thought of raising the possibility of rewilding the Mòine Mhòr track with the Estate, let alone made it a policy objective in any of their preposterously proliferating plans, let alone offered any practical encouragement to get on with it.

CODA: An early crossing of the Mòine Mhòr

Elizabeth Grant, Duchess of Bedford, created her idyllic forest retreat at Ruigh Aiteachain, a hutted colony decorated by Landseer, almost

Scandinavian in its purpose and simplicity. She and her guests delighted in repairing there. On one occasion, an expedition was mounted to camp by Loch Avon for a few nights. The account is a little vague, but they seem not to have gone round by the Feshie–Geldie, preferring to cross the plateau more directly. We can imagine them on their ponies with their ghillies, ascending the ‘Mary Queen of Scots’ valley and crossing the Mòine Mhòr to the broad pass at Loch nan Stuirteag below Angel’s Peak, dropping into Glen Geusachan, and going across Glen Dee through the gap to Glen Luibeg, on into Glen Derry and through the Lairig an Laoigh. They managed it without bulldozed tracks; so can we all, in some future devoutly to be wished.

In that broad pass near our wind-blasted Eidart-head bivvi, we found three low U-shaped stone walls, perhaps shelters for watchers. Watching the Duchess and her party passing through would have been a sight.

Postscript

By one of life’s coincidences, just as this piece was going to press, a fresh blog by Nick Kempe on his admirable Parkswatch site commends a recent hill-track restoration high on Càrn Dearg Mòr – on Glenfeshie Estate (which has now acquired extensive tracts to the west). And he has just

written to the Estate drawing their attention to the Mòine Mhòr tracks... Thomas confirms that they have further track restorations planned in Glen Tromie, but remains silent as to the Plateau.

Notes

- (1) Eidart is pronounced something like ‘etchat’.
- (2) The Auchlean stalkers path does not appear until the 1900s Six-Inch Second Edition, terminating on the plateau brow at 3250 ft just off Càrn Bàn Mòr; its boldly-cut upper zigzags are still just followable below the modern path.
- (3) This is a statistic that bears thinking about, going far beyond ‘decimation’ in its correct one-in-ten Latin sense, to closer on extermination. Such a decline in another species would make it ‘endangered’. One recalls returning from Carn Ban Mor in a winter’s dusk and seeing a drift of hundreds of deer along the misty brow, not a little wistfully. And an unexpected downside – the celebrated braided channels of the River Feshie, finest active system in upland Britain, are fast disappearing from view and may be rendered less active.

David Jarman is a long-standing member of SWLG

Sunrise on the Mòine Mhòr, with ATV lines.





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Lithach by James Fenton

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