



## PROJECT REPORT Scottish Highlands Volunteer Trip August 31 – September 8, 2018



### Executive Summary

The Caledonian Forest (from “Caledonia” meaning “wooded heights”) once covered approximately 95% of the Scottish Highlands with extensive stands of Scots Pine, interspersed with birch, rowan, juniper and aspen trees providing a flourishing habitat for extensive biodiversity. Deforestation and the demand for wooded products has taken its toll over the centuries and today less than 5% of the Highlands remain forested.

Conservation Volunteers International Program provided 10 volunteers, including two trip leaders, to partner with the Scottish non-profit Trees for Life (TFL) in the Caledonian Forest. Guided by two ‘focalisers’ (leaders who provide “focused” oversight) we removed invasive tree species, helped prepare native trees for planting, surveyed and repaired tree exclosures to protect new native growth on part of TFL’s 10,000-acre conservation estate and adjacent property. Approximately 312 volunteer hours were contributed removing roughly 400 non-native sitka spruce, protecting 169 native trees (birch, oak, juniper, wych elm, scots pine), and pricking or packing 7,782 holly, willow, rowan, hazel, and juniper seedlings.

## Detailed Trip Report

**Friday: Day 1** - Beginning in Edinburgh, Scotland, volunteers met for brief introductions and then embarked on our bus trip to Inverness with a very gifted and warmly spirited



guide who shared her passion for and extensive knowledge of Scotland. The route included a visit to the Kelpies, massive mythical horse sculptures, and a stop at the engineering marvel known as the Falkirk Wheel, the world's only revolving boat "Ferris wheel." Our travel continued to Glencoe, the site of the famous 1692 battle between the MacDonalads and the Campbells, and a lunch stop at the Glencoe Mountain Resort. After a brief visit at the Commando Memorial, we travelled



westward to Ft. William and then north along Loch Ness where "Nessie" sightings are known to have occurred! Our Friday evening stay in Inverness, capital of the Highlands, was at the lovely Strathness House along the River Ness. After getting settled into our rooms at Strathness, our group ventured a short walk to a delightful and delicious get-acquainted dinner at Urquhart's restaurant.

**Saturday: Day 2** - Saturday morning we took a walking tour of Inverness along the river and into the city center Victorian Market. At 1 PM the TFL focalisers arrived to take us on the 1-hour journey to

Dundreggan Estate, TFL's 10,000-acre site. The Dundreggan Lodge housed us in three bedrooms. With a well-equipped kitchen, large dining room, three nicely appointed baths and cozy lounge, the lodge was charming and comfortable. All TFL meals are vegetarian and everyone, including the TFL focalisers and ConservationVIP® trip leaders, shared in meal planning, preparation, and cleanup.



**Sunday: Day 3** – Our first workday consisted of an orientation by the TFL focalisers including safety tips, gear distribution (vests, helmets, wellies – aka “rubber boots”) and we learned of essential boot cleaning protocol that ensures the nursery and estate grounds remain native. After loading into the TFL van, we took a short drive to our worksite. After arriving at the Forestry Commission property adjacent to the Dundreggan Estate, we canvassed approximately 4 acres in boggy heather to identify and remove approximately 400 non-native sitka spruce ensuring their continued growth does not encroach onto TFL’s 10,000-acre site. The group split into pairs utilizing hand bow saws and loppers to perform



the work.

**Monday: Day 4** – The following day’s project involved surveying property surrounding the Dundreggan Lodge. Numerous exclosures (protective fencing) were examined around native trees including birch, oak, juniper, and wych elm. More than 100 tree exclosures were either repaired or removed by the volunteers who were split into two smaller groups.

**Tuesday: Day 5** – Volunteers worked in the nursery separating or packing an assortment of young tree seedlings. Varieties included the woolly willow, tea-leaved willow, downy willow, eared willow, and rowan. Volunteers were delighted to be assigned this nursery project, since it enabled them to play a vital part in the early stages of the Scottish Highlands reforestation effort. After dinner, we watched [the TED<sup>x</sup> talk by Alan Watson Featherstone](#),



TFL’s founder and visionary, and learned a great deal about the importance of reforesting the Highlands.

**Wednesday: Day 6** – A scheduled TFL rest day, our group enjoyed a special road trip that included hiking and site-seeing. Our guide, Craig Dickson, himself a former volunteer group coordinator for TFL, drove us to other areas of the Highlands. Our first stop was the Corrimony Chambered Cairn, a 4,000-year-old chamber surrounded by standing stones. We were then treated to the Glen Affric National Nature Reserve and hiked Dog Falls in a forest immersed in scots pine, birch, and oaks covered in grey lichen. We enjoyed some waterfalls and took in the scenic views during lunch. Then we drove along a dirt road, crossed a creek, and parked at the TFL bothy (cottage) deep in Glen Affric. We returned to the lodge in time for dinner.

**Thursday: Day 7** – Returning to work in the nursery, we packed 2210 holly, hazel, and willow in preparation for planting and pricked 1856 rowan seedlings, staging them into root starters for further growth. After dinner we enjoyed the film, “[The Man Who Planted Trees](#),” an animated, allegorical story set in France in early – mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. The powerful message beautifully portrays the vital importance of trees to the land and its inhabitants.



**Friday: Day 8** - Our last work day involved an experiment using plastic rings with sharp prongs to stave off deer eating the scots pine trees. Our group was the first

to employ this new technique where the bright orange plastic rings with sharp prongs were attached to the outer-most branch where deer were likely to approach for feeding. Although the prongs are relatively sharp, they are not designed to hurt the deer, only to divert them. GPS coordinates were taken for each installed and the group was divided based on tasks (some scouted for scots pines, others installed the ring; some gathered GPS coordinates, while others recorded). When we returned to the lodge, everyone pitched in to clean while some prepared dinner. After dinner, we had a round-up discussion where the focalisers invited feedback from all. Many good ideas and valuable comments were offered.



**Saturday: Day 9** - Saturday was departure day so we finished any remaining cleaning of the lodge, ate breakfast, packed a lunch, and returned our TFL gear to the focalisers. After a final round-up, we loaded into the TFL van and the focalisers drove us back to Inverness Railway Station, where we said our goodbyes at 10:00am.

### General Observations

The weather for the week could not have been better! The only rain we experienced was during our nursery day while working under cover. Although the midges were present in the mornings, they did not bother us for long and head nets were issued and repellent was offered to those who needed. The trip was very successful and the TFL focalisers and nursery staff were especially pleased with the volume and quality of our work. Over the course of 312 volunteer hours there were no injuries and we successfully accomplished all the work assigned. The variety of activities ensured the group was stimulated and the task difficulty level was commensurate with the group's abilities, making for a pleasant experience all around.

Everyone in our group eagerly joined in to help prepare and cook dinners, or clean after, and each meal was nutritious and enjoyable.

The focalisers, Peter Underwood and Stephen Couling, were enormously knowledgeable, especially gracious, and joyfully engaging at every waking moment making this trip a huge success. They deserve the highest praise and commendation. One could not leave this experience without gaining a substantive knowledge and, more importantly, an endearing love for the Caledonian Forest and the Trees for Life mission. Not only did our appreciation grow for individual characteristics of trees, but learning of their contribution to the harmony of nature was significantly enhanced and enriched for each of us because of them.



ConservationVIP® is proud to partner with Trees for Life and make a lasting difference in the Scottish Highlands!

**Leaders:** Barbara Kennedy, Paul Adams