



CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS INTERNATIONAL PROGRAM

PROJECT REPORT

Volunteer Trip, Scotland, September 25-October 3, 2015

SUMMARY:

Ten volunteers, including two trip leaders, worked in the Scottish Highlands under the supervision of two focalisers (leaders) from the Scottish non-profit, Trees for Life. TFL's mission is to re-forest the Highlands. We worked in TFL's nursery, planted native trees and removed invasive species. We volunteered approximately 270 hours for TFL.

DETAILS:

Our trip began in Edinburgh, Scotland's capital. Most volunteers came to Edinburgh a day or two before our trip began in order to explore the city. Many of them stayed at the Castle View Guest House, the home where Kenneth Grahame, author of "The Wind in the Willows," was born.

Friday morning, we left Edinburgh with a guide and a bus and stopped at the Falkirk Wheel, the world's only revolving boat "ferris wheel." Our tour continued to Glencoe, the site of the famous 1692 massacre of the MacDonalds by the Campbells. Then we drove to the Glencoe Mountain Resort for lunch and then to the Commando Memorial. Our bus continued west to Ft. William and then north along Loch Ness (where we did not see the "monster.") We arrived in Inverness, capital of the Highlands, where we stayed Friday night at Strathness House, which is along the River Ness. That night we had a wonderful group dinner at the Mustard Seed, where we really started to get to know each other.

Saturday morning we took a walking tour of Inverness along the river and then at noon we met the TFL focalisers. We then set off in the TFL van for Dundreggan, the TFL estate situated on 10,000 acres. The Dundreggan lodge comfortably housed all of us in three small but adequate bedrooms. The lodge has a well-equipped kitchen, a nice dining room, a comfortable lounge and even a washer and dryer. All TFL meals are vegetarian and meals are planned and prepared by the volunteers.

For our first work day, Sunday, we drove to the Invermoriston Forest, which belongs to the Forestry Commission Scotland. We removed Sitka spruce and hemlock, which are non-native species. On the way back to the lodge, we hiked along the River Moriston.

Monday morning we were honored to be visited by Alan Watson Featherstone, the founder and visionary of TFL, who is passionate and informative about TFL's past and future. After

lunch, most of the volunteers hiked up Binnilidh Bheag, which is 373 meters high. It's about 250 meters higher than the lodge. (For those interested in elevations in Great Britain, see the film "*The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill But Came Down a Mountain.*") Later that day we met with Dundreggan's stalker. Since the Highland's deer have no natural predators, the government requires landowners to thin deer herds and that is the job of the stalker.

Tuesday we worked in Dundreggan's nursery. We learned how TFL collects seed for their nursery. Since we would be planting seedlings during the week, some trip members dug out alder, goat willow, downy birch and bird cherry seedlings. The seedlings were counted and bagged. Other trip members cleared rocks from a newly tilled area of the nursery and planted willow sleeves.



Every Wednesday is an off day at TFL. We were fortunate that Craig Dickson, the volunteer group coordinator, agreed to drive us that day in the TFL van to other areas of the Highlands. Before Craig arrived, we hiked to a pen to watch Dundreggan's boars being fed. Once we boarded the TFL van, Craig drove to the Corrimony Cairn, which is 4,000 years old and is thought to be a burial chamber. Then we drove to the Glen Affric National Nature Reserve where we hiked along a TFL enclosure (an area fenced to keep out the deer). We were able to see the incredible difference between trees outside the fence (stunted with some only 6" tall despite being 10 years old) and trees protected inside the fence (some 20' to 30' tall). Along the trail we met the local Forestry Commission Scotland ranger who pointed out that what's important is what we take away from our work with TFL. We then drove to Plodda Falls, where we hiked through the evergreens and stopped at an overhang over the falls. On the way back to Dundreggan, we stopped at the town of Tomich, where there's a statue dedicated to the golden retriever, which was created and bred there by Lord Tweedmouth. (Yes, that's his name.)

Thursday morning some of us were driven to Loch Garry to see the sunrise through the fog. After breakfast, the volunteers drove to the heart of the Dundreggan estate along a rocky track. After hiking for about 20 minutes, we arrived at a fenced-in area where we planted downy birch, bird cherry and alder seedlings in rocky soil. Since TFL is a registered Scottish charity, people send in donations for trees with requests to have those trees dedicated in honor of or in memory of others. So as we planted the seedlings, each of us read dedications sent to TFL. After lunch, some trip members walked to a hideaway used by Dundreggan's stalker to spot deer.



Friday we returned to Thursday's enclosure and planted other seedling varieties -- oak and hazel. As we planted, we read more dedications. Since Friday was the last work day, we washed the TFL van after returning to Dundreggan lodge.

Saturday was departure day so we cleaned the lodge. Then the focalisers drove us back to Inverness, where the trip ended.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS:

The weather for the week was incredibly pleasant. During our week in the Highlands there was no rain, snow, sleet or hail. There is a book of recipes at Dundreggan lodge, which makes it easy to plan meals. The trip was very successful. There were no injuries and we accomplished all the work that was set out for us. We removed approximately five acres of non-native species, planted approximately 1,700 trees, planted another 1,400 seedlings in Dundreggan's nursery, and removed and bagged more than 1,000 seedlings from the nursery in preparation for planting. It was nice doing different work on different days.

The focalisers, Mick DiMaio and Lucy Cunningham, were instrumental in making the trip such a success. They made sure to educate the volunteers on the nature of the work that we were doing, the safe use of tools, proper digging techniques, and wildlife and environmental issues unique to the Highlands.

The common complaint was that as Americans, we had to pay for and obtain a Tier 5 charity worker visa from the British government despite the fact that we were volunteers. All of us successfully obtained the visas but we felt that as volunteers we should not have to go through that process.

The Scottish Highlands are one of the least populated parts of Europe. Being able to do our part in re-foresting that land brings to mind the environmental pioneer John Muir, born in Scotland, who encouraged people "To explore, enjoy and protect the wild places of the earth...."

