



**PROJECT REPORT**  
**Scottish Highlands Volunteer Trip**  
**September 23-October 1, 2016**



**SUMMARY**

The Caledonian Forest once covered a large part of the Scottish Highlands with extensive stands of Scots Pine, interspersed with birch, rowan, juniper and aspen trees. Today only tiny remnants remain, as a result of eons of deforestation, sheep grazing, and post World War non-native tree planting to address the burgeoning need for wood products.

Eight volunteers, including two trip leaders from ConservationVIP, worked in the Scottish Highlands under the supervision of two focalisers (leaders) from the Scottish non-profit, Trees for Life (TFL). TFL's mission is to "restore the ancient Caledonian Forest to the Scottish Highlands". We worked in TFL's native plant nursery, removed invasive trees on land belonging to the Forestry Commission Scotland, and surveyed for native red squirrel. We volunteered approximately 238 hours for TFL.

## DETAILS

Our trip began Friday, September 23, in Edinburgh, Scotland's capital. Most volunteers arrived in Edinburgh a day or two before our trip began in order to explore the city. Some 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 Kelpies (huge stainless steel sculptures of mythical water horses) and the Falkirk Wheel, the world's only revolving boat "Ferris wheel." Then we motored to Glencoe, the site of the famous 1692 massacre of the MacDonalds by the Campbells. After lunch at the Glencoe Mountain Resort we visited the Commando Memorial. We continued west to Ft. William and then north along Loch Ness (where Nessie was apparently snoozing). 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 Ness and after eating lunch along the river (and still not spotting Nessie) we met our TFL focalisers at 1 PM. 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. After arriving at the lodge, we put on our waterproofs, took a wet walk and learned about the Caledonian Forest ecosystem. The homey lodge has a well-equipped kitchen, a nice dining room, a comfortable lounge and a small library. All TFL meals are vegetarian and meals are planned and prepared together by the volunteers and leaders. There are recipe books that helped us plan our tasty meals.

For our first work day, Sunday, we drove a few miles to land belonging to Forestry Commission Scotland where, after a safety briefing and tool demonstration, we cut and pulled non native Sitka spruce and lodgepole pine. It rained on and off and we saw some beautiful rainbows. We cleared approximately 5.3 acres of invasive trees, and were encouraged by the abundance of native trees naturally reforesting the area.



Monday morning started with a three hour walk up toward Binnilidh Bheag, which is the hill behind the lodge. We ate lunch on a slope overlooking Glen Moriston. After returning to the lodge, some of the group went to the site of Sunday's work area to remove more Sitka spruce as well as lodgepole pine and fir trees. We cleared approximately another 2.4 acres of invasive tree species. Afterward, we met with Dundreggan's stalker, whose job is to thin the deer herds, whose populations have exploded after extermination of their natural predators. Red deer browse on native trees, and are a major challenge in restoring the native Caledonian Forest.

Tuesday we worked in Dundreggan's native plant nursery. There are several plastic tunnels where thousands of various types of tree and shrub seedlings are propagated. We removed Scots pine and rowan seedlings from small plastic "books" or root trainers and placed groups of them in plastic bags, ready for planting by other volunteers in the coming weeks. Our output totaled bagging 1,690 trees (1,440 Scots pine and 250 rowan seedlings).



Every Wednesday is a free day at TFL. We were fortunate that Craig Dickson, the TFL volunteer group coordinator, joined us for the day and led us on a very educational tour. Our first stop was the prehistoric Corrimony Cairn and standing stones, which are about 4,000 years old and could have been a burial chamber. Then we continued to the Glen Affric National Nature Reserve, another focal area for TFL's efforts. On the way there, we spotted Alan Watson Featherstone, the founder and visionary of TFL. We stopped and had a short chat with him. He thanked us for coming on the TFL Conservation Week. We then continued to Glen Affric and hiked along the River Affric, where we ate some blaeberrries (similar to blueberries) and enjoyed a few waterfalls and scenic views. Then we drove to the TFL

cottage deep in the Glen Affric National Nature Reserve. The drive was through spectacular scenery down many miles of rutted dirt road to a remote destination in a beautiful wide valley. The cottage was recently renovated and has new solar panels and a composting toilet. We were invited for tea and enjoyed sharing stories with the volunteers and focaliser who are lodged there.

Thursday morning started with our group watching Alan Watson Featherstone's inspirational July 2016 TED Talk about restoring the Caledonian Forest. Then Dan Puplett, a tracker, spoke to us about the red squirrel survey that we would be doing that day. He explained some of the differences between the native red squirrel and the invader -- the gray squirrel -- including the how they eat pine cones, and what signs to look for which indicate red squirrel presence. Then we walked up a trail behind the lodge in a downpour, crossed a widening creek and looked for evidence of red squirrels in the area. After lunch we drove a few miles west to the Serendipity Road, where we walked over some rough terrain to do our red squirrel survey. We looked for (and happily found) some evidence of the red squirrels in the area.



Friday we returned to the nursery, where we removed seeds from downy birch calkins. We gathered 3.3 grams of seeds. The seeds are almost microscopic so a lot of them are needed to fill a bowl. Then we returned to bagging seedlings. We bagged another 2,544 seedlings (2,256 rowan and 288 aspen). Then we cleaned out the tunnels and washed the plastic "books" that had housed the seedlings before we bagged them.



Saturday was departure day so we cleaned the lodge. Then the focalisers drove us back to Inverness, where our trip ended. Some trip members headed to other parts of Great Britain for sightseeing.

### **GENERAL OBSERVATIONS**

The weather for the week was very Scottish -- rain almost daily but the temperatures were mild. The trip was very successful. There were no injuries and we accomplished all the work that was set out for us. Over the course of our 238 hours, we removed approximately 7.7 acres of non-native species and bagged some 4,234 seedlings from the nursery in preparation for planting. It was nice doing different activities on different days.

The focalisers, Dominic Andrews and Peter Underwood, were attentive, eager to share their knowledge, and 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, and wildlife and environmental issues unique to the Highlands.

The group cooking task was taken on with relish and enthusiasm by the volunteers, who produced one tasty meal after another. Teamwork, the abundance and variety of ingredients and an excellent cookbook resulted in creative and delicious meals.

The lodge has an infrared camera hooked up pointing at a wall where the focalisers leave peanuts for the local pine martens. Some nights we saw the pine martens scurrying around. There are few of them in Scotland so it was a treat to see them in action.

There is an old Chinese proverb that says the best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The next best time is today. We are proud that Conservation Volunteers International Program is helping Trees for Life fulfill its vision in the Scottish Highlands.

Leaders: Richard Grayson  
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