



PROJECT REPORT

Scottish Highlands Volunteer Trip

September 15 - 23, 2017



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.

Nine 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 tree nursery and planted native trees on part of TFL's 10,000-acre conservation estate. We volunteered approximately 337 hours for TFL, preparing 4,480 seedlings for planting, and planting 2,672 young trees.

DETAILS

Day One - 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 that historic city.

Friday morning, we had an introductory meeting before we left Edinburgh with a guide and a bus to travel to the Highlands. On route, we visited the Kelpies, massive mythical horse sculptures, and then stopped at the Falkirk Wheel, the world's only revolving boat "Ferris wheel." Our travels continued to Glencoe, the site of the famous 1692 massacre of the MacDonalds by the Campbells. After stopping at the Glencoe Mountain Resort for lunch we then visited the Commando Memorial. Our bus continued west to Ft. William and then north along Loch Ness. Apparently, Nessie was sleeping as we drove past her/his lair since none of us were able to obtain a photograph. We spent Friday night in Inverness, capital of the Highlands, where we stayed at a hotel along the River Ness. That night we had a wonderful group get-acquainted dinner at Urquhart's, one short block from the river.

Day Two - Saturday morning we took a walking tour of Inverness along the river and into the city center, saw Nessie's twin beached along the river bank and had lunch in the old Victorian Market. At 1 PM the TFL focalisers came to pick us up in "Hazel," one of the TFL vans. We then set off for Dundreggan, TFL's 10,000 acre estate. 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. Meals are planned and prepared by the volunteer trip leaders, who appreciated the assistance offered by other trip participants and the TFL focalisers.

Day Three - For our first work day, Sunday, we drove on a dirt road to the northwest of the lodge. Our goal was to plant seedlings on a hill near Allt Ruadh (Red Burn), where a fence had been erected to keep out the deer, which enjoy eating tree seedlings. Trees for Life has a 250-year plan to re-forest the Highlands, so fences are erected to protect the seedlings. To reach the planting area, we hiked cross-country for about an hour through bogs. When we reached the site, we began planting Scots pine, rowan, birch and downy willow seedlings. Despite the occasional drizzle, we planted 464 seedlings.



Day Four - On Monday, we stayed near the lodge and worked in Dundreggan's tree nursery. After a tour of the several poly tunnels, or greenhouses, we packed 3,168 downy willow seedlings for planting on Dundreggan estate and for possible sale to other estates. We also packed 688 seedlings for later planting and washed thousands of "books," root trainer containers which had housed those and many other seedlings. Some of us were asked to remove rocks and roots from a newly turned over planting bed. The temperature was in the 60's with no precipitation -- fantastic weather for the Highlands.

Day Five - For Tuesday, some of us worked in the nursery, packed 432 juniper seedlings and washed thousands more "books." The rest of us hiked back to Allt Ruadh and planted another 578 seedlings on the hill. During lunch, we saw an eagle being chased by three crows, apparently to keep the eagle away from a nest. After work, instead of hiking back to the van, we hiked cross-country about 1-1/2 hours back to the lodge. Along the way, we saw a badger's den. The weather was a repeat of Monday's.



Day 6 - Since Wednesday is a rest day at TFL, we had arranged for a special trip for our group. We were fortunate that Craig Dickson, the former volunteer group coordinator for TFL agreed to drive us to other areas of the Highlands. Our first stop was 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, another focal area of TFL's efforts. The weather was pleasant and we hiked along the River Affric, enjoyed some waterfalls and scenic views and had lunch overlooking a small lake. Then we drove along a dirt road, crossed a creek and parked at the TFL bothy (cottage) deep in Glen Affric. There was one TFL volunteer at the bothy and he invited us in for tea. On the wall was a photo of a day when the creek was so high that a car died in the middle and TFL'ers had to wade through the water. The Glen Affric bothy runs on solar power and has a composting toilet.



Day Seven - Thursday's work site was back on the hill at Allt Ruadh. Due to local rains, the ground was boggy and the water level in the creek we had to cross was higher than on the previous work day. It drizzled on and off and the midges decided they wanted to taste us so midge nets and repellent came in handy. We planted 750 seedlings on the hill. During the drive to and from the start of the hike, we saw seven black grouse. After dinner, we watched the Ted X talk by Alan Watson Featherstone, TFL's founder and visionary, and TFL's DVD entitled "The Return." It is about TFL's hope to return lynx, wolf and bear to the Highlands.

Day Eight - Friday was our last day to plant on the hill along Allt Ruadh. The weather alternated between sun and clouds with an occasional drizzle but the breeze kept the midges away. We planted 890 seedlings and those in the nursery packed 192 seedlings. Returning to the lodge, we cleaned the tools and "Hazel."

Day Nine - Saturday was departure day so we cleaned the lodge. Then the focalisers drove us back to Inverness Railway Station, where we said our goodbyes.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The weather for the week was incredibly pleasant. Even the midges weren't too bad. 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 the 337 hours that we worked, we planted 2,672 seedlings on 2.8393 acres and packed 4,480 seedlings at the nursery in preparation for planting. Doing different activities on different days was a pleasant change in the routine.

The focalisers, Matt Dalby and Neil MacDonald, were instrumental in making the trip such a success. They made sure to educate the volunteers about environmental issues in the Highlands, discussed the nature of the work that we were doing, and how to safely use tools

and instructed us in proper digging techniques. We also learned that a lot of information can be found by looking carefully at animal scat.

The group eagerly joined in to cook dinners, which were tasty and nutritious. Teamwork, the abundance and variety of ingredients and an excellent cookbook resulted in creative and delicious meals.

There is an old Chinese proverb that says the best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago and 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
Barbara Kennedy