CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS INTERNATIONAL PROGRAM

PROJECT REPORT
Scottish Highlands Volunteer Trip
April 26th – May 4th, 2019

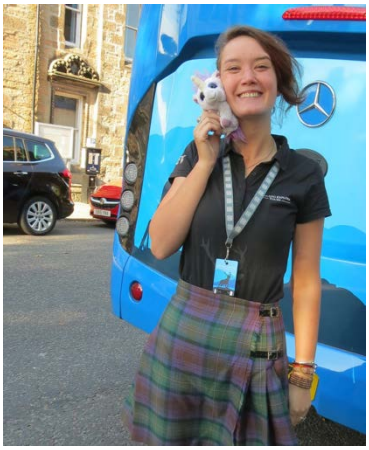
Executive Summary

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, oak, and aspen trees providing a flourishing habitat for extensive biodiversity. Deforestation and the demand for wood 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 TFL ‘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 357 volunteer hours were contributed removing non-native Sitka spruce from 7 ½ acres, checking 108 deer exclosures, removing over 30 of them, transplanting 1,565 native tree seedlings, removing mesh from plant beds, weeding, and re-establishing nursery plant bed pathways, picking and transplanting 2,184 seedlings, and clearing 105 square feet of rocks and weeds and then broadcasting compost, growing medium and Downy birch seed, and then planting 107 trees in the former boar enclosure.

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,Fiona, who shared her passion for and extensive knowledge of Scotland. The route included a visit to the Kelpies, massive mythical horse sculptures, a stop at the engineering marvel known as the Falkirk Wheel, the world's only revolving boat ferris wheel, and stopped to view and feed the "Hairy Coos". Our travel continued to Glencoe, the site of the famous 1692 battle between the MacDonalds 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 the Mustard Seed 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 a 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. Upon dropping our luggage at the lodge, we commenced a tour and orientation by the TFL focalisers. This included the history of Scottish forestry, mythology of the Scottish native trees, and also included the history of the Dundreggan Estate, and the Trees For Life's purchase of the estate. We also learned of essential bio security (boot cleaning protocol that ensures the nursery and estate grounds remain native).

Upon returning to the lodge, while everyone unpacked and relaxed, our focalisers Stephen and Mia, took the first turn at preparing the group meal. They set high culinary standards which were matched every night thereafter by our ConservationVIP volunteers. Each night a group of 2 or 3 Conservation VIP volunteers signed up to cook dinner. Some followed recipes supplied byTrees For Life, while others improvised their own recipes and menus. The experience was quite joyful and tasty!

Sunday: Day 3 – After breakfast our group participated in a 30-minute nature connection exercise. This helped to get everyone into the spirit of place and mindset of the day ahead. The nature connection exercise happened each day before the work began. Our first work day consisted of a safety orientation by TFL, and gear distribution (vests, helmets, wellies – aka "rubber boots"). 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 7.5 acres in boggy heather to identify and remove non-native Sitka spruce so that they do not adversely affect native trees of the Caledonian Forest. The group split into pairs utilizing hand bow saws and loppers to perform the work. While working, Richard found the skull of a young female deer with perfect teeth which the group named Boudica after Queen Boudica, the Gaelic warrior who fought the Romans.

Upon completing work, the group took a walk along River Moriston to enjoy the sun and calm waters. We spotted 2 Golden Eagles soaring over the estate. The significance of this is that the male eagle was born last year. So, this is the sign of growth and a healthy environment in the forest. After dinner, we watched the TED^{X} talk by Alan Watson Featherstone, TFL's founder and visionary, and learned a great deal about the importance of reforesting the Highlands.

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 aspen. More than 108 tree exclosures were mapped and surveyed, and approximately 36 were removed by the volunteers who were split into two smaller groups. Just after lunch, Joyce Gilbert, wife of Doug Gilbert, Operations Manager of the estate,

brought out a microscope to view new bog myrtle specimens and share the different uses of this plant, such as bug repellent and a substitute for hops in beer.

Tuesday: Day 5 – Volunteers participated in a tour of the nursery with Assistant Nursery Manager Emma. One of the interesting processes she educated our volunteer group about was the stressing of young aspen trees in an effort to get them to flower. After the tour our volunteers broke into 3 work teams. One team transplanted 585 Scot's pine. The second team transplanted 980 Willow trees. And the third team removed 360 square feet of wired mesh, removed weeds from Oak seedlings in that area and re-established 450 square feet of pathways. Volunteers were delighted to be assigned this nursery projects since it enabled them to play a vital part in the early stages of the Scottish Highlands reforesting effort.

During lunch we were invited to attend a Ceilidh later that evening in the community of Invergarry, which is about a 30 minute scenic drive from the Dundreggan Estate. This was a great way for our group to be immersed into local cultural heritage.

This was a spontaneous activity that enabled our group to enjoy folk music from all over Britain by a group called FourTune. They are 4 musicians who played a combination of various historical wind, string, and drum instruments.

Wednesday: Day 6 – A scheduled TFL rest day, our group enjoyed a special road trip that included hiking and sight seeing. Our guide, Craig Dickson, 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 gray lichen. We enjoyed some waterfalls and took in the scenic views during lunch. On our way back down from our picnic spot, one of our volunteers spotted a raven's nest along the cliff wall of the river. Then we drove along a dirt road, crossed a creek, and visited Athnamulloch Cottage deep in Glen Affric. This is where Trees for Life volunteers stay for "TFL's Conservation Week". Our group enjoyed a 40-minute hike around the glen. We returned to the lodge in time for dinner. The group really enjoyed the tour given by Craig and the day.

Thursday: Day 7 – Returning to work in the nursery, our volunteers split into 3 teams with TFL Interns as our teachers. The first team's activity included picking and transplanting 1,344 rowan trees. The second team's activity included picking and transplanting 600 Blackthorn trees. The third team transplanted 240 Scot's Pine trees, and then dug up the rest of the Scot's Pine seedlings to put in cold storage to make way for other plantings. They later cleared 105 square feet of rocks and weeds, and then broadcast compost, growing medium and Downy Birch seed. Then they tamped down the soil and covered the area with wire frames and poly vinyl sheets that were held down with wood and rocks.

Doug Gilbert, TFL Operations Manager, joined us for dinner. After dinner Doug gave a presentation that focused on the history of Trees For Life and plans for the future. Those plans include the addition of a re-wilding center. The purpose of the center is to be a place for community building and education, with a mission to develop the next generation of conservationists.

Friday: Day 8 - Our last work day was spent planting 107 trees in the former boar enclosure. This is an area where TFL experimented keeping the wild boar to eat the bracken. The goal of this effort was to reduce the adverse effect of bracken on the native tree species. Since the experiment concluded, the space is used to enrich the forest with more native trees. After lunch we celebrated by planting the last tree as a group. After that the group had the afternoon to spend on our own to enjoy the estate. Some hiked up to the wolf den, some hiked up Binnilidh Bheag, and some walked the country road along the River Moriston. Everyone rendezvoused at the quaint Red Burn Café, where we made new friends with the owners, Laureen and Richard and their 11-month-old Golden Retriever, Bain!

Then we returned to the lodge to prepare our last meal together to celebrate a great week of work. After dinner we had sharing time where each member of our group shared their highlight of the week. This included becoming more knowledgeable about trees and the importance of forests and native species, as well as having a great time making new friends.

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

General Observations

The weather for the week was amazing, sunny 6 of 7 days. Then on our last day we experienced all 4 seasons in one day, including snow flurries, which were beautiful! 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 357 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, Mia Lutsch and Stephen Couling, were enormously knowledgeable, especially gracious and engaging, 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!

ConservationVIP® Leaders:
Richard Grayson & Kelly McCoy