



PROJECT REPORT

Scottish Highlands Volunteer Trip

September 27 – October 5, 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 6 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, and protected new native growth on part of

TFL's 10,000-acre conservation estate. Approximately 195 volunteer hours were contributed removing non-native Sitka spruce from two acres, planting 272 native tree seedlings across ½ acre, packing 1,792 seedlings, husking six liters of hazelnuts and 10 liters of rowan berries, and protecting 79 native Scot's pine bud points.

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, Colleen, 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 a stop 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 took a short walk across the river 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 Trees for Life focalisers arrived to take us on the 1-hour journey to Dundreggan Estate, Trees for Life's 10,000-acre site. The Dundreggan Lodge, a former hunting 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.



Upon dropping our luggage at the lodge, we commenced a tour and orientation by the Trees for Life focalisers. This included the history of Scottish forestry, mythology of the Scottish native trees, the history of the Dundreggan Estate, and 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 others unpacked and relaxed, our focalisers Stephen Couling and Liv Glatt took the first turn at preparing the group meal. They set high culinary standards which were matched every night thereafter by our ConservationVIP volunteers.

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



After arriving at the Forestry Commission property adjacent to the Dundreggan Estate, we canvassed approximately 2 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 fanned out in a grid pattern and utilized hand bow saws and loppers to perform the work.

nature connection exercise happened each day before the work began. Our first workday consisted of a safety orientation by Trees for Life, and gear distribution (vests, helmets, gloves, whistles, wellies – aka “rubber boots”). After loading into the TFL van, we took a short drive to our worksite.



Upon completing work, the group took a walk along the River Moriston to enjoy the sun and calm waters. We spotted a “buzzard” (which we think was a hawk) soaring over the estate.

Monday: Day 4 – Our project was particularly heart-felt and memorable because we planted Karen Grayson’s Memorial Grove on Bienn Bhan on Dundreggan. The grove is a special dedication in honor of Richard’s beloved wife, Karen, who passed away last year. It is a special place to honor a special person, and trees were donated by those who loved her. We planted 144 rowan, downey birch, juniper, woolley willow, downey willow and Scot’s pine in Karen’s grove. The final Scot’s pine is “Karen’s tree” and was placed by Richard. TFL has provided the exact geolocation of Karen’s tree, so we can track it as it grows and flourishes in the years to come.

Volunteers were joined by two of TFL’s apprentices – Eilidh and Louise, who work in the nursery. The apprenticeship program has four participants who spend a year “working” at TFL in order to gain real world experience in their chosen focus – two focus on nursery operations, one on community engagement, and one on deer stalking (culling the herd).

Tuesday: Day 5 – We started the day with a walk to the rope swing near the Lodge where everyone had a turn!



Then, volunteers participated in a tour of the nursery with Nursery Manager Jill. 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 packed 1,792 Dwarf Birch to transfer them from their growing pods into plastic bags. The seedlings were then ready to safely transport to their planting location(s). Volunteers also husked Hazelnuts and Rowan berry seeds, which would be further prepared in order to plant and grow. Volunteers were delighted to be assigned these nursery projects since they enabled them to play a vital part in the early stages of the Scottish Highlands reforestation effort.

Volunteers were joined that evening for dinner by Doug Gilbert, operations manager of the estate, and three of the apprentices. 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. We watched [the TEDx talk by Alan Watson Featherstone](#), TFL's founder and visionary, and learned a great deal about the importance of reforestation of the Highlands. We also watched a video about [Knepp Castle](#) – a rewilding project in England, near Gatwick.

Wednesday: Day 6 – A scheduled TFL rest day, our group enjoyed a special road trip with our guide and focaliser, Stephen Couling, who drove us to other areas of the Highlands. We were treated to the Glen Affric National Nature Reserve and a short hike at 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.



Glen Affric is a cottage where other Trees for Life volunteers stay for TFL's "Conservation Week". Our group enjoyed a 40-minute hike around the glen. Our final stop was the Corrimony Chambered Cairn, a 4,000-year-old chamber surrounded by standing stones. The group really enjoyed the tour and the day. We returned to Dundreggan in time for dinner.

Thursday: Day 7 – We returned to work on Beinn Bhan and planted an additional 128 trees above Karen's Grove.

We were joined by Nursery Manager Jill, and her 2 year old Akita -- Lola. Jill and Stephen planned and denoted monitoring plots for the fungal root inoculation experiment. The experiment is to test the hypothesis that seedlings with native, local fungal spores in their soil would have better survival rates than those seedlings without the fungal spores. Trees for Life had a mycologist gather local fungal samples from Dundreggan Estate and grow those to generate the spores used for this experiment.

After lunch we celebrated by planting the last tree as a group.



Friday: Day 8 - Our last workday started with a hike up to the Wolf's Den and having our focaliser, Liv, explain the Wolf Project.

The Wolf's Den was built by a local artist using local materials to create a "human wolf den" and pay homage to wolves. Wolves were an integral, apex predator in wild Scotland, but have been extinct for over 300 years. To understand how wolf presence could impact deer behavior, TFL volunteers (including our Liv!) spent several nights in the woods of Dundreggan as "human wolves" trying to recreate the movements of wolves. Although initial results showed some indication of impact on deer behavior, the project was discontinued after 1 year.



Adjacent to the Wolf's Den, volunteers placed 79 protective, anti-deer covers around young Scot's pine trees.

After that the group had the afternoon to explore the estate. Some hiked up to the wolf den, some hiked up Binnilidh Bheag, and some took the short walk to the Faery Tree.

We returned to the lodge to prepare our last meal together to celebrate a great week of work. After dinner 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 Trees for Life van and the 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 six of seven days. 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 195 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.

We celebrated two birthdays on the Trip! All TFL meals are vegetarian and everyone, including the focalisers and ConservationVIP® trip leaders, shared in meal planning, preparation, and cleanup. Each night a group of two or three ConservationVIP volunteers signed up to cook dinner. Some followed recipes supplied by Trees for Life, while others improvised their own recipes and menus. The experience was quite joyful and tasty!

The focalisers, Liv Glatt 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 & Rebecca Kramer