

PROJECT REPORT
Scottish Highlands Volunteer Trip
June 4-12, 2022



SUMMARY

The Caledonian Forest once covered most of the Scottish Highlands with extensive stands of Scots pine, interspersed with birch, rowan, juniper and aspen trees. As a result of deforestation, sheep grazing, and non-native tree planting for wood production, less than 5% of the Highlands remain forested.

Our group of ten volunteers, including two trip leaders from Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®), were the first post-pandemic group invited

to return to work with the Scottish non-profit, Trees for Life (TFL). We were under the supervision of one TFL guide to help us assist TFL's mission to "restore the ancient Caledonian Forest to the Scottish Highlands."



We worked in TFL's native tree nursery, removed invasive tree species on part of TFL's 10,000 acre conservation estate, removed plastic protectors from around birch trees and installed battens on fences to help the black grouse avoid hitting the fences. We volunteered approximately 288 hours for TFL, transplanting 4,640 seedlings, installing 5,314 feet of batten in the fencing, weeding 1,980 square feet of garden, filling 640 containers with growing medium, mulching 258 square feet of garden, removing 7.2 acres of plastic protectors from trees, removing bugs from aspen trees and removing 7 acres of invasive trees.

DETAILS

Saturday: Day One - Our trip began in Edinburgh, Scotland's capital, where the volunteers met for introductions. We then boarded a bus to begin our journey to Trees for Life, led by our driver/guide, Thomas. Along the way, we stopped to stretch our legs at the Kelpies, 100-foot-tall mythical horse sculptures, and the Falkirk Wheel, an engineering marvel that allows boats to connect to canals that have a height difference of more than 79 feet. Then we visited and fed Honey and Hamish, the "Hairy Coos" at Kilmahog. After a lunch stop at Glencoe Mountain Resort, near the site of the 1692 massacre involving the MacDonalds and the Campbells, we stopped at the Commando

Memorial and then traveled to Ft William. We then continued north along Loch Ness to Inverness. However, Nessie was camera shy that day.

We stayed overnight in Inverness, the capital of the Highlands, and had a group get-acquainted dinner at a Scottish restaurant, the Mustard Seed, which is along the River Ness.

Sunday: Day Two – Sunday morning we took a walking tour of Inverness, prior to meeting the TFL guide. We started with a stroll along the River Ness and crossed narrow bridges to the Ness Islands. The Victorian Market is being renovated so we ate lunch in a cozy restaurant near the market. After lunch, the TFL guide, Deborah Cooper, picked us up in “Hazel,” one of the TFL vans. Since the TFL estate, Dundreggan, has on-going construction of the re-wilding center and accommodations for the center, we booked a week-long stay at a large country house near the village of Drumnadrochit. Once we moved into the house, Deborah drove us to nearby Corrimony Cairn, which is 4,000 years old and is thought to be a burial chamber. We then drove to a property owned by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, where we took a short hike. Then we returned to our country house for dinner. All TFL meals are vegetarian, and all of our meals were planned and prepared by the volunteers.

Monday: Day Three - For our first work day, Monday, we met with Jill Hodge and Abby Goff, who talked to us about the TFL nursery. Then Doug Gilbert, the operations manager for the Dundreggan Estate, led us on a short hike as he talked about the estate and environmental issues affecting Dundreggan and Scotland. After lunch, we spent two hours removing plastic protectors from around native birch trees.



The group collected plastic protectors from around native birch trees

Tuesday: Day Four - On Tuesday, some of the volunteers removed weeds from 1,093 square feet of the Dundreggan garden while others mulched 258 square feet of the garden. Other volunteers, working in the nursery's poly tunnels, transplanted 1,600 downy birch seedlings from trays into root trainer containers. Since June is not the right time to transplant seedlings out of doors, we spent many hours putting the seedlings into the root trainer containers.



Weeding in the nursery



Loading mulch in the nursery



Transplanting seedlings



Wednesday: Day Five - For Wednesday, some of us worked in the nursery where we filled 640 containers with growing medium and transplanted 640 snowy birch seedlings from trays into root trainer containers. We also sifted 1-1/2 to 2 cups of Scots Pine tree seeds. The rest of us were driven up into the hills, carried wooden battens approximately 40 inches long and wove them through fencing to warn black grouse not to fly into the fencing. The weather for the first three work days was very pleasant.



More than a mile of battens added to protect the Black Grouse



Thursday: Day Six – Before starting work, we were taken into an aspen poly tunnel and educated as to how hard it is to collect aspen seed. We walked along the rows of aspen in the tunnel and pulled off leaves that had been nibbled by caterpillars or aphids. Then we pulled weeds on 887 square feet of garden and transplanted 1,536 aspen seedlings into root trainer containers.

← *Removing infected leaves in greenhouse*



Installing weed barrier in nursery



Watering transplanted seedlings

Friday: Day Seven – Before starting work we were educated by Alan Common, the Dundreggan stalker, whose job is to cull the deer. If the seedlings were not encircled by fencing, the deer would consistently nibble the young trees. Some of us stayed at the nursery where we transplanted 864 willow and aspen seedlings into root trainer containers. Other volunteers removed invasive Sitka spruce from about 7 acres of the estate. Since this was our last day at Dundreggan, we cleaned the tools before returning them. Then we took a scenic drive to the Isle of Skye, which is the largest of Scotland's Inner Hebrides islands.



Removing Invasive Sitka Spruce

Saturday: Day Eight – For our rest day, we arranged for a special trip for our group to other parts of the Highlands. Deborah drove us to the Glen Affric National Nature Reserve. We hiked along the River Affric and enjoyed some waterfalls and scenic views. Then we drove along a dirt road toward the Athnamulloch cottage, where TFL sometimes houses groups. The cottage was being rented by a non-TFL group, but we looked at the composting toilet and solar panels. This part of the Highlands is very desolate and the howling wind was ferocious and made us thankful that we returned to the comforts of “Hazel.”

Sunday: Day Nine – Sunday was departure day so we cleaned the country house, loaded “Hazel” and Deborah drove us to the Inverness Railway Station, where we said our goodbyes.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

This was ConservationVIP's first June trip to the Highlands and the weather for most of the days was very pleasant. We used midge spray and most of the midges took notice of our protection. The trip was very successful. There were no injuries and we accomplished all the work that TFL asked us to do. The specifics of what we accomplished are listed in the Summary at the beginning of this report. We appreciated that TFL gave us different tasks to accomplish on different days.

Our TFL guide, Deborah Cooper, fit right in with our group. Her knowledge of plants, trees, Scottish environmental issues and her sense of humor helped to make our trip such a success. In addition, she sang and played the guitar. She also brought along her whittling gear and gave us whittling lessons.

Everyone joined in to plan and cook creative, nutritious and delicious dinners. There were several birders in our group who freely shared their knowledge.

ConservationVIP® is pleased that we were the first post-pandemic group to be invited by Trees For Life to return to Dundreggan.

Leaders: Richard Grayson
Kenda Peterson