



**PROJECT REPORT  
SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS VOLUNTEER TRIP  
May 5-13, 2023**



**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. In earlier times more than 65% of Scotland was forested. Today less than 16 % of the Highlands remains forested as a result of centuries of deforestation, sheep grazing, and non-native tree planting to address the need for wood products. Scotland has embarked on a mission to “Rewild” the Country and part of that mission is to reforest areas that were once forested.

Ten volunteers, including two trip leaders from ConservationVIP®, worked in the Scottish Highlands under the supervision of two 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 also planted native trees on

part of TFL's 10,000-acre estate. We volunteered approximately 375 hours with TFL. During that time, we planted 1,255 trees on the Carn na Caorach boggy hill, 54 trees at the new Re-Wilding Centre, and 112 perennials at the new Re-Wilding Centre. We separated 800 rowan seedlings, transplanted 672 hazelnut seedlings and 344 oak seedlings, removed rocks from 125 square feet of planting beds, added dirt to 250 square feet of planting beds, and planted 240 oak seedlings in beds.

## DETAILS

**Friday: Day One** - Our trip began in Edinburgh, Scotland's capital. Many volunteers arrived in Edinburgh several days before our trip began in order to explore that historic city.



After our introductory meeting we boarded a bus to begin our trip to Trees for Life.

Our driver/guide, Stephen, stopped at the Kelpies, which are massive mythical metal horse sculptures, and then at the Falkirk Wheel, which allows boats to connect to canals that differ in height more than 79 feet.



Then we visited the “hairy coos” Hamish, Honey and Baxter at Kilmahog. These cattle are adapted to the harsh conditions of the Scottish Highlands.

We had lunch at the Glencoe Visitors Centre, which is near the site of the 1692



massacre involving the MacDonalds and the Campbells. Then we drove to the Commando Memorial, onward to Ft. William and then north along Loch Ness. No one was able to snap a photo of Nessie. Apparently, it was her nap time. We then arrived in Inverness, capital of the Highlands, where we stayed Friday night at a hotel along the River Ness. That night we had a group get-acquainted dinner at the Mustard Seed, which overlooks the River Ness.





**Saturday: Day Two** – In the morning we took a walking tour of Inverness along the river, crossed the Ness islands, hiked past the castle, which is being renovated, and down into the city center.



We had lunch in the new food hall at the old Victorian Market. At 1 PM the TFL guides, Liv Glatt and Sally Granger, picked us up in “Hazel,” one of the TFL vans. About one hour later we arrived at TFL’s 10,000-acre Dundreggan Conservation Estate.

After dropping off our gear in the Dundeggan lodge, we hiked to the Faerie Tree, an oak which is estimated to be at least 500 years old. We discussed the purchase of the Estate by Trees for Life and how it fits into their mission and our contributions to the program.



The lodge where we stayed has three bedrooms, which comfortably housed all of us. It also has a well-equipped kitchen, a nice dining

room/den and a dishwasher, washer and dryer. All TFL meals are vegetarian, and the volunteers planned and prepared all the meals. Volunteers considered this to be one of the highlights of their stay as the communal dining and meal preparation was a very bonding experience for the team.

**Sunday: Day Three** - We drove up a dirt track on the eastern side of Dundreggan. Our goal was to plant a variety of native trees on the hill known as Carn na Caorach. Trees for Life has a 250-year plan to re-forest the Highlands so to protect the seedlings, fences are erected. The hike to the planting site, which is fenced to keep out deer, was not as boggy as on previous planting trips with TFL. However, it was not easy to find proper soil conditions for the seedlings. Many of the holes were either too wet or we hit rocks. Despite these obstacles, we finished the day having planted 60 Scots pine, 120 aurita willow, 45 downy willow and 175 downy birch for a total of 400 trees.





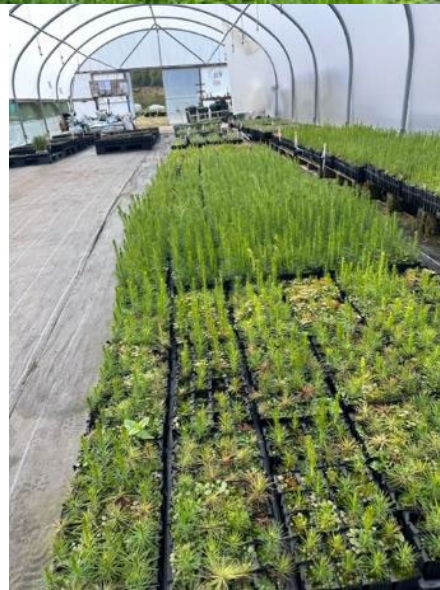
**Monday: Day Four** - We again drove up the dirt track to Carn na Caorach with a load of



trees. But this day we received a steady drizzle in the early afternoon for about one hour. That was the only day on our trip that we received what the Scots call "liquid sunshine." We planted 75 Scots pine, 105 aurita willow and 330 downy birch for a total of 510 trees. The landscape of the Scottish Highlands is dramatic and can be somewhat harsh. The reforestation efforts that are taking place should make a dramatic transformation over time on this landscape.



**Tuesday: Day Five** - This was our first day working in the TFL nursery, where we received a tour from Jill Hodge, the director of the nursery. After the tour we took on various jobs and worked alongside members of the TFL staff. We dug and transplanted 344 oak seedlings in 125 square feet of planting beds, removed rocks and added dirt to 250 square feet of planting beds and transplanted 672 hazelnut seedlings. We learned a lot about the role of the nursery in providing tree and other plant stock for the rewilding effort. The nursery provides plant stock for a variety of other projects including private estates throughout Scotland who are doing their own rewilding efforts.





**Wednesday: Day Six** – For our rest day, we took a special trip. Our first stop was the Corrimony Chambered Cairn, which is a 4,000-year-old burial chamber surrounded by standing stones. It was rumored to be the last resting spot for a Danish Prince who was being pursued by Viking marauders.



We then drove to the Glen Affric National Nature Reserve and hiked Dog Falls, which is surrounded by native trees. Glen Affric is considered to be one of the most scenic Glens in Scotland. We ate lunch along the River Affric and then drove along a dirt track to the remote Athnamulloch Cottage deep in Glen Affric. In addition to Dundreggan, TFL volunteers also stay at this cottage, which is powered by solar panels and has a composting toilet. We took a short hike to the swimming hole since the cottage has no shower facilities.







**Thursday: Day Seven** – We started the morning with a tour of the new Re-Wilding Centre, which serves food and has sleeping accommodations for up to 40 people. All of the descriptive displays at the Centre are printed in English and Gaelic. The Centre is hosting numerous conferences and educational/school groups as part of the mission of rewilding Scotland.



After the tour, we were given trees and perennials to plant near the Centre to enhance the landscaping around the buildings. Among our plantings were hazel (14), blackthorn (14), goat willow (2), gray willow (7), pussy willow (1), oak (1), rowan (3), cherry (1), crabapple (1), viburnum (10) and 112 red campion perennials.

After lunch, we returned to the nursery, where we separated 800 rowan seedlings, removed rocks and prepared planting beds, sowed rowan and hazelnut sprouts and planted 240 oak seedlings.



**Friday: Day Eight** – We started the morning back at the Re-Wilding Centre, where we had a discussion about the Centre. Then we returned to Carn na Caorach for our final day of planting on the hill. We planted 330 downy birch and 15 willow. We celebrated planting the last tree as a group and said farewell to the magnificent Scottish Highlands landscape. Then we cleaned and dried the tools and stacked them in an out building, ready for the next group of volunteers.







After dinner, we shared comments about our week together helping to re-wild the Highlands and making new friends in the process. For our last night at the lodge, we built a fire in the fire ring outside, gazed at the stars and made s'mores with enormous marshmallows.

**Saturday: Day Nine** – After a quick breakfast, we cleaned the lodge and boarded “Hazel” just before 9 AM for the drive to the Inverness Railway Station, where we said our goodbyes at about 10AM.

## GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Climate change might have something to do with it but the weather for the week was wonderful. Temperatures were in the 60's and we received rain only one day. Some of us actually got sun burned. Midges were virtually non-existent.

The trip was very successful. There were no injuries and we accomplished everything that the TFL leaders and nursery staff asked us to do. The specific numbers are listed in the Summary at the beginning of this report. The TFL guides, Liv and Sally, were informative, funny and knowledgeable about the environment. Since Sally is a yoga instructor, she led yoga exercises some mornings and Liv led environmental awareness sessions in the mornings before we set out.

All trip members joined in to plan and cook enjoyable and delicious dinners.

Since 2023 is the first full post-pandemic year that Trees for Life is allowing groups to stay at Dundreggan, ConservationVIP is proud to further TFL's work in re-wilding the Scottish Highlands.

Leaders: Richard Grayson  
Jim Upchurch