



PROJECT REPORT
Scottish Highlands Volunteer Trip
August 9-20, 2025



SUMMARY

The Scottish Highlands is a rugged, mountainous region north of the Highland Boundary Fault that dissects Scotland near Glasgow and Edinburgh. The Highlands contain most of Scotland's highest mountains or "munros," mountains 3,000' or higher, deep glaciated valleys, lochs, unique vegetation, and a long distinctive cultural history. Over centuries of habitation humans have cleared or altered the native forests of this region for farming and grazing, resulting in a significantly altered landscape and ecosystem. Today only about 18 percent of the Highlands remains forested because of centuries of agricultural overuse, deforestation, sheep grazing, and non-native tree planting for wood products. Efforts are underway to "rewild" portions of the Highlands, including

connecting remnants of remaining forests to provide habitat and corridors for wildlife, and replanting and restoring native forests, while recognizing the rich cultural heritage of the region.

The National Trust for Scotland (NTS) is an independent charity, (non-profit) whose mission is to protect Scotland's significant natural, cultural and historic heritage and share it with the public. The organization manages over 100 properties in Scotland including castles, historic homes, gardens, and natural areas, as well as collections of artifacts and written archives.

In August 2025, nine volunteers including two trip leaders from Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) helped on two conservation projects under the guidance of NTS rangers at Ben Lomond NTS within the boundaries of Scotland's first national park, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs, and at Ben Lawers National Nature Reserve, near the historic village of Killin. Our group volunteered a total of 405.75 hours between the two sites repairing trails, clearing overhead vegetation in trail corridors, planting and protecting native trees, removing unneeded deer and grazing animal enclosure fencing, and collecting and processing bracken for thatch on a replica of a traditional building. Except for a few midge bites, the trip was accident and injury free.

As part of the trip, the volunteers also visited a variety of historic sites ranging from Stirling Castle to a small hillside ore processing site dated from the Iron Age. The knowledgeable and enthusiastic NTS staff provided us with natural and cultural history and a few interpretive tours throughout the trip. The team also had a chance to participate in a community agricultural fair, a ceilidh (traditional music and dance) and enjoyed our own private Scottish music performance.

The team experienced spectacularly sunny and warm weather and likely left Scotland with the wrong impression of typical summer weather in the Highlands!

DETAILS

Saturday: Day One -- We met our group in Glasgow, Scotland's most populous city, where we held an introductory meeting and then walked to a local restaurant for a get-acquainted dinner.

Sunday: Day Two -- We boarded a bus to begin our trip to our first project site at Ben Lomond NTS, located within Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park. Our driver/guide, Nicola, played Scottish music and told us stories about the areas we drove through. Our first stop was the Falkirk Wheel, which rotates boats between canals that differ in height by 79 feet. Then we visited the Kelpies, spectacular 90' tall metal sculptures of mythical shape-shifting horses. From there, we travelled onto Stirling Castle, one of the largest and considered one of the most historically and architecturally important castles in Scotland. Originally built in 1110, it was the birthplace of Mary, Queen of Scots.

After lunch in the castle, we visited the sociable Scottish Highland cows or “hairy coos” in Kilmahog. Our trip ended at Ben Lomond Bunkhouse/Ardess Lodge, our home for the next five days. Ardess means “high waterfall” in Gaelic. From the lodge you can sometimes see a waterfall high on the slope of Ben Lomond. The lodge is steps from Loch Lomond and the West Highland Way, one of Scotland’s most popular hikes. It runs from Milngavie near Glasgow to Fort William, some 96 miles. The hostel style lodge contains two bedrooms, which comfortably housed all of us. It also has a large well-equipped kitchen/dining room, a separate lounge with a model of Ben Lomond, and the offices for the Ben Lomond NTS Ranger Service.

Our team was responsible for preparing meals, which included individually created breakfasts and lunches, and a shared dinner prepared by the trip leaders and volunteer sous chefs and clean-up crew. All meals during the trip were hearty, vegetarian food.

The NTS landholding at Ben Lomond is about 5,370 acres, and contains Ben Lomond, Scotland’s most southernly munro. and the hills around it. Close to the populous region around Glasgow, it is one of the most popular hill hikes in Scotland and provides spectacular views of Loch Lomond and the surrounding landscape. The heavily used pathways require regular maintenance and repair.

The area has a long history of human habitation and use, which altered the native vegetation. Originally the tree canopy near the loch and on the lower slopes would have been oak, with birch and hazel extending up the slopes. Today the forest is a mix of oak, ash, and holly, with occasional stands of aspen and various willow species. The higher slopes have been significantly deforested by cattle and sheep grazing, which still occurs to a lesser extent today. NTS rangers are working to re-establish small enclosures of native trees on the upper slopes,

Monday: Day Three – After breakfast at Ardess Lodge, the three NTS rangers who manage Ben Lomond, Alasdair Eckersall, Mick DiMaio and David Allsopp, took us on the Ardess Hidden History Trail. We learned about early agricultural and metallurgy practices in the area. Our afternoon project was to pull up bracken, strip the foliage and bundle it to be used to renew the thatch on the replica of a historic cottage next to Ardess Lodge. A video taken when the cottage was originally thatched in 2015 can be seen at: [The Cruck Frame Cottage](#). It is narrated by Alasdair Eckersall. Our group spent 43 hours on Monday with the NTS rangers.

Tuesday: Day Four – Today was tree planting day. Most of us walked more than 2 hours up the trail to Ben Lomond. On a steep grassy and bracken hillside, we planted 35 oak seedlings in boggy soil. Other members of our group pulled more bracken and sorted and bundled the bracken for the thatcher. We worked 60.75 hours on our two projects.

Wednesday: Day Five – We worked on repairing the path up Ben Lomond by digging out loose rock and replacing it with long, low steps made of squared rocks and packed dirt. The temperature was close to 70 degrees and the sweat freely flowed during our

56.5 hours on the trail. For dinner, we took the group and Alasdair, Mick and David to the Oak Tree Inn in Balmaha, about a 30-minute drive south of Ardess Lodge.

Thursday: Day Six: We walked up the Ardess Hidden History Trail and saw where iron ore had been smelted centuries ago. Then we continued our bracken processing project so the thatcher could re-thatch the roof of the cottage. During the day, a team from the NTS interviewed Alasdair, David and Mick and filmed some of us during our bracken work. See the video at: [Why we Love Ben Lomond](#).

After lunch, Alasdair hosted a tour of historical features of the area. First, we walked to Farmer Duncan's field where we saw and touched a large mysteriously cupped schist stone. Prehistoric, cupped carved stones are found throughout Scotland, but their purpose remains unknown. Then we visited Mill on Ross, across the West Highland Way, where there is a crannach, a human built underwater stone structure that would have been the foundation for a building above water. Alasdair described the artificial island structures built for security, and the shore community that would have supported them. While high water prevented us from seeing the crannach and all we could see was a pole indicating its location far offshore, we enjoyed the beautiful, secluded shoreline spot, and Alasdair's historical lore. Later, we visited the ruins of a stone house in another of Farmer Duncan's fields, which he leases from the NTS. We spent 42 hours on today's adventures.

Friday: Day Seven – We traveled from Ben Lomond to our second project location, Ben Lawers National Nature Reserve and our lodging at Lynedoch, the NTS office and bunkhouse in the historic village of Killin. We packed up our gear and food, cleaned the Ardess lodge and put our gear in the NTS van. We walked to the Rowardennan dock and boarded the 5 PM ferry to Tarbet, across Loch Lomond. The people-only ferry had no other passengers. We enjoyed a sunny and breezy ride north on Loch Lomond in the care of the captain, the mate and the ever-present Scottish terrier. Alasdair met us in Tarbet and drove us to the village of Killin, where we met Helen Cole, the senior ranger, Andrew Warwick, another ranger, and Lewis, the resident botanist. Since we knew that we would be arriving late in Killin, we had pre-ordered pizza from Surprise Pizza, which is open only four days a week and only makes enough pizza dough to fill their expected orders. Since Killin has a population of about 740 people, there are not a lot of pizza establishments in town. Lynedoch has three bedrooms for our group and a much smaller kitchen than we had at Ardess Lodge but had been well equipped by the NTS staff prior to our arrival.

Ben Lawers National Nature Reserve (NNR) was established in 1950 and is 11,119 acres in size. The NNR contains the most extensive populations of subarctic -alpine plants in Britain, some of which are endangered. Its seven munros provide spectacular views across a wide area of the Highlands, and the lower slopes overlook scenic Loch Tay. The NNR is a popular destination for hikers and nature lovers with a variety of foot paths providing opportunities ranging from an easy stroll to a challenging climb.

Saturday: Day Eight – After breakfast, Helen and Andrew shuttled us to the NNR. During our orientation hike they pointed out flora and sheilings, which are ruins of stone huts where women and children stayed May to September looking after their cattle in the hills. We also saw a beaver dam and the start of a second dam on the same burn (stream). We walked down the Edramucky Trail and spent the afternoon removing sod to widen the trail. We also cut branches that overhung the trail. After we returned to Lynedoch, some of us visited the Killin and District Agricultural Fair, which was held at Breadalbane Park, a few minutes' walk from Lynedoch. We enjoyed the pig races and the tractor pull, where teams grabbed heavy rope and pulled tractors across the field. The park is also the site of the Killin Highland Games, which were held on August 6, nine days before we arrived in Killin. After dinner, there was a ceildh in a tent in the park, where the music and dancing accompanied the beer and the midges. We spent 47.25 hours doing trail work that day.

Sunday: Day Nine – At the Ben Lawers National Nature Reserve, we traversed steep grassy slopes and dug holes, planted 35 aspen seedlings, and installed poles and tree protectors to keep the young trees safe from the small herd of cattle grazing the area. After that, we drove to the Moirlanich Longhouse, which is managed by the NTS. It was built around 1800 and was lived in by descendants of the same family until 1968. After dinner, most of our group walked to the head of Loch Tay and then circumnavigated back along a trail into Killin. Most of the inhabitants we saw along the walk were sheep. Our work in the Nature Reserve took 56.25 hours.

Monday: Day Ten – Today's work site was a dirt track in the Reserve up to a quarry. Stone from the quarry had been used to build the dam in the Reserve. We drove up the rocky track pulling a trailer, which we loaded with about 1 ton of rock. We then drove back down the track to the worst rutted part and unloaded the rocks to fill in the ruts. The work was similar to putting jigsaw puzzle pieces together since we had to determine which rocks or stones fit best into the ruts. After we ran out of the rocks, we had to drive back up to the quarry and load about another one-half ton of rock, which we drove back down the track and unloaded to finish filling the ruts. Since the quarry was at an elevation of 690 meters (2263 feet), there were no midges to bother us. After lunch we drove to the Kiltyrie Hidden History Trail, another NTS property. Among other artifacts, it contains the remains of a longhouse, similar to the Moirlanich Longhouse we saw yesterday. Our work today ran 72 hours.

Tuesday: Day Eleven - Today was fence removal day near the Ben Lawers NNR car park. It was also the day that the midges found us. Since the trees within the enclosure had matured enough that they would not be nipped by deer, we removed numerous wood posts and fence staples and thousands of feet of wire. We had to wind up the wire on a wheel. Bug repellent was a priority. After lunch, we drove the posts, staples and wire back up to a site near the dam. Since that was our last night in Killin, we invited guests for a special dinner. Actually, every night on the trip contained a special dinner. Tonight's dinner was curry (sweet potatoes, carrots, broccoli, cauliflower, onion, garlic and rice) with naan, and apple surprise (sliced apples topped with vanilla cake mix

topped with streusel made with brown sugar, butter and muesli). The guests were Helen, Andrew, Lewis and Andrew's music partner, Audrey. After dinner, we were entertained with music. Andrew played the mandolin, guitar and banjo while he sang, and Audrey played the fiddle and two flutes. It was a very pleasant way to wrap up the trip. Our work today took 28 hours.

Wednesday: Day Twelve – Alasdair drove the NTS van to Killin, where we loaded our gear and then he drove us back to Glasgow, where we said our goodbyes as our trip ended.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The weather was the finest that ConservationVIP® volunteer groups have ever had in Scotland. Rain was minimal, snow was non-existent, and the midges (mostly) stayed away from us.

The trip was very successful. There were no injuries, and we accomplished everything that the NTS rangers planned for us. We enjoyed the excursions on the Ardess and Kiltyrie Hidden History trails, to the other places that are not normally visited, such as Farmer Duncan's fields, and the opportunity to visit the Killin agricultural fair. Our transportation varied from NTS van to ferry.

All the NTS rangers are very knowledgeable about Scottish environmental issues, culture, and history, and delighted in imparting that knowledge to us. Their pride and enthusiasm for the areas in which they work and live greatly added meaning to our trip.

We are looking forward to more trips with the National Trust for Scotland since they oversee vast areas that need loving care in the magnificent Scottish Highlands.

Leaders: Richard Grayson
Barbara Kennedy

Conservation Volunteers International Program
<https://conservationvip.org>