CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS INTERNATIONAL PROGRAM

Volunteer Trip Report
Scottish Highlands
May 28-June 5, 2026

Scottish Highlands Volunteer Trip Report, May 2026 Conservation Projects in Ben Lawers National Nature Reserve, Scotland

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 late May and early June, 2026, eight volunteers, including two trip leaders from ConservationVIP assisted the NTS rangers in the Ben Lawers National Nature Reserve, near the historic village of Killin, where we stayed in the NTS offices in a Victorian era building. Our group volunteered a total of 212.15 hours clearing vegetation from trails, filling in a rutted track with stones from a local quarry, planting and protecting native trees and removing thousands of feet of unneeded deer and grazing animal exclosure fencing. 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 the Glencoe Visitor Centre and the Crannog Centre, where we learned how the local inhabitants lived on land and above the water during the Iron Age. The knowledgeable and enthusiastic NTS staff provided us with natural and cultural history throughout the trip. We also enjoyed our own private Scottish music performance.

Although we experienced Scottish sunshine (aka "rain"), the weather was most pleasant.

Detailed Trip Report

Thursday: Day One – We met our group in Glasgow, Scotland's most populous city, where we held an introductory meeting, distributed ConservationVIP hats and other materials and then

walked to a local restaurant for a get-acquainted dinner. Before our group arrived in Scotland all members of our trip received complimentary membership in the NTS, which allows them to visit the more than 100 NTS properties.

Friday: Day Two – We boarded a bus for a guided tour to some of Scotland's most interesting sights. Our driver/guide, Nicola, played Scottish music and regaled us with stories about the areas we drove through. Our first stop was the Falkirk Wheel, which rotates boats some 35 meters between the Forth & Clyde Canal and the Union Canal. Then we visited the Kelpies, spectacular 30-meter-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. It is said, "He who holds Stirling, holds Scotland." Originally built in 1110, its strategic location atop a fortified hill overlooking the River Forth was the gateway between the Scottish Lowlands and Highlands, and some of the most important battles in Scotland took place near there. It was the home of many Scottish kings, and the birthplace of Mary, Queen of Scots.

After lunch in the castle, we visited and fed some of the sociable Scottish Highland cows or "hairy coos" in Kilmahog. Our tour ended at Lynedoch, the NTS offices in Killin, which also includes housing for seasonal employees and volunteers, and has a small native plant nursery behind the building. Located near Loch Tay, Killin is a quaint village of about 740 people with many interesting and scenic sites, including the Falls of Dochart and a waterwheel, once used to power the village's grain mill.

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.

Saturday: Day Three – Our projects were at the Ben Lawers National Nature Reserve which was established in 1950 and is 11,119 acres in size. It was the first property acquired by the NTS primarily for nature conservation reasons. It contains the most extensive populations of subarctic and alpine plants in Britain, some of which are endangered. Its seven munros (mountains over 3000 feet tall) 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.

After breakfast at Lynedoch, the senior NTS ranger, Andrew Warwick, took us on a nature walk on the Edramucky Trail in Ben Lawers NNR. During this orientation, he pointed out many alpine and subalpine plants and discussed cattle and sheep grazing in the NNR.

To reduce the historic negative impacts of overgrazing yet retain the positive effects of limited large mammal presence on the landscape, the NTS introduced a small herd of cattle into the NNR. Each animal wears a collar that tracks their location and limits their movement with a safe, but unpleasant shock. Based on the rangers' desires to rotate grazing and exclude sensitive areas, the herd can be remotely controlled, so no fence is required.

Today's project site was a dirt track in the NNR that led to a quarry with an elevation of 690 meters (2263 feet). Stones from the quarry had been used to build the dam in the Reserve. After lunch, part of our group drove up the rocky track pulling a trailer, which we loaded with about one-half 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 other part of our group gathered stones from the track

and started filling in the ruts, like in a jigsaw puzzle since we had to determine which rocks or stones fit best into the ruts. The elevation meant that the midges did not bother us. Our group spent 56 hours on Monday on those projects.

Sunday: Day Four – Today we carried 100 oak and 50 aspen seedlings to replace dead trees in the NNR. We planted about 100 seedlings before the heavy rain arrived. Since the forecast was for continued heavy rain, Ranger Andrew decided to call it a day on the mountain. After lunch at Lynedoch he gave us a tour of their native plant nursery. The nursery currently produces about 3,000 seedlings a year, and in the past, they produced as many as 20,000 seedlings annually.

Today, we contributed 34 hours on our project.

Monday: Day Five – The village of Killin has a community bus, which we rented for most of the week. Since the morning weather was bleak, Ranger Andrew drove us to the ruins of Finharig Castle. Andrew toured us around the castle ruins and grounds, including the beheading pit and the hanging tree. Then we traveled back in time to the Iron Age and visited the Crannog Centre, a fascinating replica village where the inhabitants lived both on the land and in "crannogs," houses built over the water. Interpretive staff included blacksmiths, weavers, woodworkers, cooks and a storyteller. The latter thrilled us with the story of the giant named Trimm and how he was related to the midges of today. After leaving the Crannog Centre, we drove to Ben Lawers, where we walked down the Morenich Trial and planted 8 oak and aspen seedlings. Then part of our group cleared the trail of underbrush while the rest of the group planted about 35 oak, aspen and hazel seedlings. We contributed 52 hours on our projects.

Our dinner guests included Rangers Andrew and Millie and Andrew's musical partner, Audrey. After dinner, Andrew and Audrey entertained us with a concert of Scottish and Irish songs. Andrew played the guitar and base mandolin while Audrey played the violin and penny whistle. Both Audrey and Andrew contributed their lovely singing voices to this special evening.

Tuesday: Day Six – This was our rest day and we decided to visit Glencoe, a spectacular valley with a tragic history. We travelled from Killin to Glencoe through the starkly beautiful Rannoch Moor. We stopped at the Glencoe Visitor Centre and learned about the local area and tragic 1692 massacre. We enjoyed lunch in a cozy pub in Glencoe on this rainy day, then took a short hike to a waterfall, and caught a glimpse of the sea at Loch Leven before returning home to Killin.

Wednesday: Day Seven – From the Ben Lawers car park, we carried our tools to remove wire fencing, wire staples and wood fence posts. Since the trees within the exclosure 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. Once the wire was removed from the fencing, we wound it on a spool. After lunch, we drove to one of the historic sites near Killin, the Moirlanich Longhouse. It was lived in by many generations of the Robertson family from about 1800 to 1968 and is now owned by the NTS. We contributed 26.15 hours on our project.

Thursday: Day Eight – This was our second day of removing wire fencing. We removed miles of wire, thousands of wire staples, and hundreds of wooden fence posts and spooled the wire fencing. Most of the task was done in rough, boggy terrain but the midges were not out in abundance. We spent 44 hours on this project and were told that we accomplished more tasks than had been expected of us.

This was our last dinner at Lynedoch and we had a full list of NTS guests who feasted on black bean and sweet potato tacos, Spanish “rice” (orzo), and ice cream and biscuits.

Friday: Day Nine – After breakfast and tidying up the lodge, Andrew drove us to the Stirling rail station, where we said our goodbyes. Our trip ended, as some of our group took the train to Glasgow and the others traveled to Edinburgh for flights home, or further exploration of beautiful Scotland.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The weather was among the finest that we have had in Scotland. There was some rain, as is always expected in Scotland, but no severe or wintery weather. The midges (mostly) stayed away from us. We marveled at the long days and short nights as we approached summer solstice in this northern latitude.

The trip was very successful. There were no injuries, and we accomplished more than the NTS rangers expected from our group. We enjoyed trips to Glencoe, the Crannog Centre, Finharig Castle and the Moirlanich Longhouse and felt at home in the lovely village of Killin.

The NTS rangers were superb hosts and helped us learn about Scottish environmental issues, culture, and history.

We contributed 212.15 hours on our projects with the NTS and look forward to more trips with the enthusiastic and knowledgeable staff of the NTS in the magnificent Scottish Highlands.

Leaders: Richard Grayson
Barbara Kennedy