

**Volunteer Trip Report
Scottish Highlands
September 23-October 1, 2026**



**Scottish Highlands Volunteer Trip Report, September 2026 Conservation Projects
in Ben Lomond Site of Special Scientific Interest, 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, livestock 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.

Ben Lomond is Scotland's most southerly Munro. Rising steeply from the eastern shore of Loch Lomond, it provides a stunning backdrop to this part of Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park. Its Gaelic name is Beinn Laomainn, which translates to Beacon Mountain; believed to be so named because early inhabitants may have set signal fires on its summit, that could be seen vast distances. The Ben Lomond Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) was designated in 1987 because of Ben Lomond's diverse upland habitats, including alpine and subalpine willow scrub, bogs, and other distinctive plant and invertebrate communities. Ben Lomond has a long human history dating back at least to the Iron age. Archaeological remains, including iron smelting sites, agricultural field walls, and summer shelters known as shielings provide evidence that the area's human population was more abundant during earlier times. Made famous (and more fictional) by Sir Walter Scott, the area around Ardess Lodge was owned by Rob Roy MacGregor in the early 1700's, a cattle drover who acquired his stock in sometimes "creative" ways.

Located close to Glasgow and Edinburgh, Ben Lomond is a popular area for hiking and trekking, ranging from a network of trails that eventually take "munro baggers" to its 3,196' summit, to the 96 mile long West Highland Way at its base that runs from Milngavie to Fort William. About 40,000 people visit the area annually, and the footpaths require regular maintenance and repair.

In late September and early October 2026, **nine volunteers**, including two trip leaders from ConservationVIP assisted the NTS rangers in the Ben Lomond SSSI. Within the boundaries of Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, we stayed in the NTS Ardess Lodge/Ben Lomond Bunkhouse, near the Loch at the foot of Ben Lomond. Our group provided a total of **298 hours clearing vegetation from trail corridors, building stone steps and trail drains, and cutting back overgrown vegetation in the lodge vicinity**. The trip was accident and injury free.

As part of the trip, the volunteers also visited a variety of historic sites ranging from Stirling and Doune Castles to Loch Katrine, first made popular by Sir Walter Scott's poem "Lady of the Lake." The knowledgeable NTS staff provided us with natural and cultural history throughout the trip, and guided us through our variety of projects.

Although we experienced Scottish sunshine (aka “rain”), the weather was generally quite pleasant with mild temperatures.



Detailed Trip Report

Wednesday: Day One, Gathering in Glasgow – We met our group in Glasgow, Scotland’s most populous city, where we held an introductory meeting and orientation. We then walked to a cozy local restaurant, Café Gandolfi, 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.

Thursday: Day Two, Travel to Ben Lomond, visiting some of Scotland’s attractions along the way – We boarded a Radical Travel van for a guided tour to some of Scotland’s most interesting sights. Our driver/guide, Scott, played Scottish music and regaled us with stories and history 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 representing the mythical shape-shifting horses, and also the Clydesdale, a big, strong breed developed in the vicinity to pull barges along the canals and perform other heavy work. From there, we travelled on to 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 the NTS Ardess Lodge/Bunkhouse which also holds the NTS Ben Lomond Ranger Office and has a small native plant nursery. Located in a scenic wooded setting just above the shores of Loch Lomond, the Lodge normally provides accommodation for trekkers on the West Highland Way and was our home during our time in Ben Lomond. The lodge’s somewhat remote location is near the beginning of the Ben Lomond trail system and we were able to walk from the lodge to our project locations.

Our team was responsible for preparing our own 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. Meals during the trip consisted of hearty, vegetarian food.

Friday: Day Three, Clearing the Ptarmigan Trail- Friday was our first full day at Loch Lomond. After a safety talk with our NTS guides, we began to clear the lower Ptarmigan Trail corridor near our lodge of bramble, bracken, broom and heather that overgrew the footpath during the summer. We used loppers, scythes, shears and hand saws to cut the vegetation back about 2 feet on either side of the trail. The Ptarmigan Trail is a beautiful path that winds uphill past a fast-flowing burn, or stream, that flows from “Ardess,” a high waterfall that we can see from our lodge. As we progressed, we were also rewarded with wonderful views of Loch Lomond. We spent 63 hours clearing 2,061 square feet of the lower Ptarmigan Trail.



Before/After

Saturday: Day Four, Introduction to “Snippy Clippy” – Today we stayed on the overgrown grounds of Ardess Lodge to focus on groundskeeping or perform “snippy clippy” according to our head NTS ranger Gordon around the lodge, outbuildings, and the entry drive. Our objectives were to maintain tree/shrub health, clear out overgrown vegetation, as well as to open extra space for campers when the lodge exceeds capacity. Tasks included cutting back encroaching vegetation such as bramble and broom and pruning trees. Besides “snippy clippy,” we also learned another new term “coppicing” - the practice of trimming back trees to near ground level to encourage healthy, new fast-growing shoots on smaller trees like birch and hazel.

We cleared 2,673 square feet of over a combined total of 63 hours groundskeeping around Ardess Lodge. Our NTS leaders were quite pleased and impressed with how much we accomplished!



Sunday: Day Five, Muddy Knees, Trail Drains, and Hot Soup – The lower slopes of Ben Lomond lived up to its temperate rain forest designation today with heavy, steady rain. But in Scotland, there is a saying, “there is no bad weather, only bad clothing,” and we put on our rain gear and carried on!

We returned to the lower Ptarmigan Trail with our NTS trail guide David and helped with four trail repair and improvement projects. We spent the day creating a stone water bar or trail drain and cleaning out another existing drain, built three stone steps to improve the gradient along an incline, widened the footpath by removing overgrown turf and created six blocking mounds next to the trail to discourage unwanted multiple footpaths and cutting trail corners.

Our rain gear proved its worth today as the rain was a constant companion, but on the bright side it gave us immediate gratification that our water bar functioned beautifully.

We were very happy with our accomplishments today and equally happy to return to Ardess Lodge for hot tomato soup and cheese toasties for lunch, and at the end of the day, a crackling fire and a warm dinner.

Today we created a new 4' water drain, cleaned out another, built 6 blocking mounds, 3 stone steps, and cleared 30' of overgrown turf along the Ptarmigan Trail and contributed 55 hours.



Monday: Day Six, Rest Day and a Visit to Doune Castle and More, or Bagging our First Munro – We awoke to beautiful sunny skies and split into 2 activities during our rest day. Part of our travelers decided to “bag” our first Munro, and hike to the summit of Ben Lomond, where they experienced spectacular scenery made even more dramatic with ever changing weather with blue skies, scurrying clouds and rolling mists. The rest of the team hopped aboard a Walk Wild Scotland van, and our guide Antje gave us an excellent tour including time to explore Doune Castle, the site used in several movies and TV series, including “Monty Python and the Holy Grail” and “Outlander.” Later, we enjoyed lunch in historic Callander. We wrapped up our tour with a boat tour of scenic Loch Katrine, which inspired Sir Walter Scott to write “The Lady of the Lake.” As we cruised along in the late afternoon light we listened to the hauntingly beautiful song, “Ave Maria,” written in 1825 by Franz Schubert, as he sat along the shore. Our group reunited with dinner at the Clansman Pub, Rowardennan, a short hike from Ardess Lodge, where we exchanged stories of the day’s adventures.

Tuesday: Day Seven, A History Hike and More Snippy Clippy – This morning, we went for a hike on the Ardess Hidden History Trail which starts at the lodge and winds uphill into a beautiful hillside clearing, alongside babbling brooks and through a variety of woodlands before joining the Lower Ptarmigan Trail. Our ranger guide, Gordon, led

the hike and provided insights into the farming community that lived here in the 18th century. This is a scenic trail full of archeological points of interest and easy to traverse if one is looking for peaceful views without a strenuous climb.

In the afternoon, we returned to tackle the groundskeeping around Ardess Lodge, opening up fence lines and walls and completing the trimming along the entry drive. Today we cleared 987 square feet of unwanted vegetation along the entry drive and fence lines. We also completed 40 linear feet of overgrown vegetation from the wall near the lodge, and cleaned up 20 linear feet of vegetation which have overgrown a series of stone steps, contributing a total of 63 hours.



Wednesday: Day Eight, Clearing Further Along the Ptarmigan Trail – This morning, we returned to the Ptarmigan Trail and focused on clearing the path above our previous location. This part of the trail was steep and thick with brambles, bracken and broom. We tackled the vegetation with loppers, shears and scythes until we progressed above the tree line where we were rewarded with views of "Ardess", the high waterfall to the east, and a long stretch of Loch Lomond to the west.

We returned to the lodge for a late lunch of homemade soup and sandwiches and then returned to the Hidden History Trail, this time to tidy up the late summer grasses and bracken and also to remove a dead tree trunk that had fallen into a stream which crosses the trail. We enjoyed one last group dinner and cleaned the lodge in preparation for tomorrow's departure.

All in all, it was a beautiful last day to spend in Ben Lomond and Trossachs National Park.

Today we cleared .25 mile of the Ptarmigan Trail up to the treeline, trimmed back .9 miles of the Hidden History Trail, and cleaned the lodge in preparation for departure for a total contribution of 54 hours.

Thursday: Day Nine – After breakfast and finishing tidying up the lodge, we boarded the Dryman Taxi and drove to Milngavie Train Station, where we boarded a train for the short ride to Glasgow Queen Street Station where we said our goodbyes. There our trip ended, as some of our group headed to the airport for flights home, or further exploration of beautiful Scotland.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The weather was mild and generally good with some rain, as is always expected in Scotland, but no severe or wintery weather. The midges were minimally annoying, nothing a little repellent or occasional use of a midge net couldn't handle.

The trip was very successful. There were no injuries, and we accomplished more than the NTS rangers expected from our group. We enjoyed our visits to Stirling and Doune Castles, the Falkirk Wheel, The Kelpies, Callander, our boat trip on Loch Katrine, and the challenging but rewarding trek to the summit of Ben Lomond. Ardross Lodge was welcoming and comfortable, and we all felt at home there.

The NTS rangers Gordon Graham, David Allsop, and Alex Barr-Simm were superb hosts, and their dedication, good humor, knowledge and skills helped us learn about Scottish environmental issues, culture and history.

We **contributed 298 hours on our projects with the NTS** and look forward to more trips with the enthusiastic and knowledgeable staff of the NTS in this part of the magnificent Scottish Highlands.

Leaders: Barbara Kennedy and Nancy Hartsig.

