

£125,000 award for rare mountaintop trees in Highlands

Thursday 30 July, 2020

A Trees for Life project in partnership with the National Trust for Scotland to establish new seed sources for rare mountaintop trees in Glen Affric has received more than £125,000 from the Scottish Government's Biodiversity Challenge Fund.

The conservation charity is working to reverse the loss of the tough, waist-high 'wee' trees such as dwarf birch and downy willow, which were once widespread in Scotland but have now almost vanished following centuries of overgrazing by sheep and deer.

The specialised trees – known as 'montane' species because they can grow near mountain summits, despite harsh conditions – form wildlife-rich high-altitude forests found between lower-lying woodlands and mountaintop heaths.

Trees for Life's West Affric Woodland Habitat Expansion project has now been awarded £125,538 to plant the montane trees. This will strengthen the existing but fragile foothold of these unique woodlands in the famous glen.

"With this funding from the Biodiversity Challenge Fund we can begin to ensure the return of these special 'wee' trees to their mountaintop homes in western Glen Affric," said Steve Micklewright, Trees for Life's Chief Executive.

"Now sadly missing from much of the Scottish Highlands, these precious high-altitude trees are a vital part of the Caledonian Forest. They provide a natural and biologically-rich link between glens, and offer a fantastic source of food, shade and shelter for wildlife."

By working in partnership with the National Trust for Scotland, Trees for Life will plant clusters of the trees within deer-proof enclosures to secure a seed source for the future, and which will provide a habitat for species such as golden eagle, ring ouzel and mountain hare.

Willie Fraser, National Trust for Scotland Property Manager, West Affric and Kintail, said: "We're delighted to be working in partnership with Trees for Life on this positive conservation project, because there's a real urgency to bringing these precious 'wee trees' back from the brink. They're sadly all too rare now, but they form a wonderful habitat on which a wide range of wildlife depends."

The new woodlands will also benefit people by helping to tackle climate change by locking away carbon dioxide, and reducing flooding by improving the soil's capacity to retain water.

Investment in green recovery is one cost-effective way to help make communities sustainable and more resilient, while driving inclusive economic development.

The Biodiversity Challenge Fund specifically encourages applicants with innovative projects that improve biodiversity and address the impacts of climate change, by increasing the resilience of our most at-risk habitats and species and by creating large areas of brand-new habitat.

Trees for Life's West Affric Woodland Habitat Expansion is one of 16 successful projects across Scotland announced in the second round of the £4 million Biodiversity Challenge Fund. The projects will take practical steps to improve natural habitats, safeguard plant and animal species, and improve biodiversity.

The Biodiversity Challenge Fund adds to the many millions of pounds of Scottish Government funding delivered through the Scottish Rural Development Programme and other sources to support biodiversity and help deliver Scotland's Biodiversity Strategy.

SNH Chief Executive, Francesca Osowska, said: "As lockdown conditions lift, green recovery projects like the Biodiversity Challenge Fund put nature and nature-based solutions at the heart of rebuilding our economy. But it's not just about conservation – enriching our nature is also part of the solution to the climate emergency. People know that climate change is a big issue, but not as many know that biodiversity loss is also a global and generational threat to human wellbeing.

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“Nature is at the heart of what we do, and we will continue to deliver the transformational change needed to bring a nature-rich, sustainable and more economically secure future for Scotland.”

Trees for Life is dedicated to rewilding the Scottish Highlands. Its volunteers have established nearly two million native trees at dozens of sites, encouraging wildlife to flourish and helping communities to thrive. See www.treesforlife.org.uk.

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