High-altitude forest to save rare trees and help mountain wildlife

Thursday 20 December, 2018

A new high-altitude forest of 10,000 rare mountain trees supporting wildlife including golden eagles and mountain hares is to be planted near Loch Ness in the Scottish Highlands by Trees for Life next spring.

The waist-high trees form a unique and important wildlife-rich habitat called montane scrub. This should be common between woodlands and open hilltops, but it has now almost disappeared from Scotland – largely due to grazing pressure from sheep and high deer numbers over the centuries.

The project involves collecting seed from trees such as dwarf birch and downy willow on precipitous mountain ledges and rocky crags, sometimes with the help of qualified climbers.

Planting the woodland itself will be challenging because the location – at Beinn Bhan on the charity's Dundreggan Conservation Estate in Glenmoriston – lies at more than 500 metres above sea level.

But the site is perfect for the tough small trees – known as 'montane' species because they can grow near mountain summits, despite high winds and dramatic temperature changes.

"This exciting initiative will address the sad loss of these special wee trees, which form a vital but vanishing part of Scotland's woodlands – while creating a home for golden eagle, black and red grouse, ring ouzel, and mountain hare. We're urging members of the public to support this project and help make it happen," said Steve Micklewright, Trees for Life's Chief Executive.

Trees for Life has launched a fundraising appeal to raise £20,000 to help create the new upland forest, which could also play a role in reducing localized flooding by retaining soils.

As well as asking for help from the public, Trees for Life has been awarded a grant by Forestry Commission Scotland in support of the new forest. Doug Gilbert, Trees for Life's Operations Manager at Dundreggan, said: "We've made maximum use of the forestry grant-aid, but to create a bigger, richer forest environment we need the public's support."

The conservation charity has already begun growing tree seeds it has collected from Glen Affric – but to boost genetic diversity for stronger trees that are resistant to disease, it needs to do more. Expert climbers have to brave difficult terrain and rocky outcrops to collect cuttings from the rare species.

Trees for Life's volunteers will begin planting the new woodland at Beinn Bhan – the White Mountain – in spring 2019, against a backdrop of sweeping views to Glen Affric and its surrounding mountains.

Donations to Trees for Life's Beinn Bhan forest appeal will enable the charity to collect seed and cuttings from the rare montane trees, and then grow these species in its tree nursery at Dundreggan for planting in the new woodland. See www.treesforlife.org.uk/appealor call 01309 691292.

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Trees for Life

T. 07753 488146
E. richardbunting@gmail.com
W. https://www.treesforlife.org.uk

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