Landscape of globally rare habitat restored near Loch Ness in one of first and largest projects of its kind in Scotland

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In one of the first and biggest projects of its kind in Scotland, a landscape of more than 1,000 hectares of a globally rare and threatened habitat is being restored near Loch Ness, as part of Britain's largest rewilding initiative.

A partnership of charities, landowners and businesses has joined together to save and repair a connected area of blanket bog – among the world's rarest habitats – across three neighbouring and diverse landholdings.

It has been facilitated by charity Rewilding Affric Highlands, which coordinates a growing partnership of landowners forming the Affric Highlands landscape. Peatland restoration consultancy Caledonian Climate is providing expert advice and support.

The 1,024 hectare-project is being carried out across rewilding charity Trees for Life's Dundreggan estate, privately owned land at Guisachan, and Corrimony Farm.

"This is about restoring a whole ecosystem at landscape scale, with a shared commitment to tackling the nature and climate emergencies and benefitting local communities," said Stephanie Kiel, Rewilding Affric Highlands executive director.

Healthy peatlands are one of the planet's most efficient carbon sinks. They also reduce flood and wildfire risk by regulating water movement, filter and clean water, and support a unique range of wildlife and plants.

Scotland contains 13% of the world's blanket bog – a type of peatland found in only a few parts of the world with cool, wet or oceanic climates. But 80% of the country's peatlands are degraded, for reasons including drainage, extraction for fuel, overgrazing, and wildfires.

Overgrazing and trampling by high numbers of deer, for example, damages the thin layer of vegetation and prevents natural regeneration of bog plants. The exposed peat then dries out and erodes, worsening climate change by releasing rather than absorbing carbon dioxide.

The Affric Highlands peatland project includes 464 hectares at Trees for Life's Dundreggan estate in Glenmoriston, 315 hectares at Corrimony Farm, and 245 hectares at Guisachan.

This ecologically important landscape encompasses Lochs ma Stac, na Beinne Baine, and Liath. It is home to moorland and wetland birds including dunlin, golden plover, and black-throated divers, as well as otters, water voles, lizards, and invertebrates.

With backing and funding from a British Dragonfly Society project – supported by the Scottish Government's Nature Restoration Fund, managed by NatureScot – breeding pools are being restored for dragonflies across all the landholdings. It is hoped this will benefit rare, threatened bog species – the white-faced darter, azure hawker, and northern emerald.

The project will also benefit peatland plants including dwarf birch, sundews, alpine bearberry, cloudberry, and sphagnum mosses.

David Girvan of Corrimony Farm, an upland working farm with about 150 suckler cows and 180 breeding ewes, said: "We're showing that farming can work well with peatland restoration, which makes a real difference for keeping carbon locked up. It's good to see such a big area across different estates being restored together."

Advanced techniques are being used across the landholdings to halt erosion, raise the water table, and revegetate bare peat areas. Reprofiling peat hags – ridges of eroded dry soil on which vegetation can't re-establish – and gullies prevents erosion. Drain blocking and dam constructions can rewet the bog and aid regeneration of sphagnum moss

Sphagnum moss reintroduction through transplants is another key strategy. This species can hold up to

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20 times its weight in water, and promotes the waterlogged, acidic conditions needed for revegetation and peat formation.

“This cross-boundary project should be beneficial to a wide range of species. Several years of careful planning and organisation should create long-term biodiversity benefit,” said Alex Grigg, at Guisachan.

Peat is a black spongy soil, formed from accumulated layers of sphagnum and other vegetation in waterlogged conditions. A single metre of peat can take 1,000 years to form.

“Peatlands are amazing, wild places that are being lost worldwide. With our neighbours, we want this initiative to be a beacon of hope and inspiration for restoring blanket bog across Scotland,” said Gwen Raes, Trees for Life’s Dundreggan estate manager.

Funders include Peatland ACTION, Wilderway, and Alex Grigg. In a further example of innovation, The Peatland Restoration Foundation (PRF), a new initiative led by a group of five individual food and drink companies – PEAT’D, Suntory Global Spirits, Bruichladdich, Isle of Raasay and Inchdairnie – are co-funding the restoration at Corrimony Farm.

The PRF brings together organisations using peat commercially to provide an accessible pathway to ensure that any food or drink company can restore more peat than they use.

Caledonian Climate and Wilderway will carry out monitoring for the IUCN’s Peatland Code, to ensure the project delivers lasting biodiversity and climate benefits. Independent verification will ensure transparency of results.

Affric Highlands – Britain’s largest rewilding landscape, and a member of Rewilding Europe’s family of major European-wide flagship rewilding landscapes – brings together a coalition of landowners, local people, charities, businesses and others to boost biodiversity, tackle climate change, and create social and economic opportunities.

It aims to restore nature across more than 200,000 hectares of the central Highlands, through a linked network of landholdings from Loch Ness to Kintail. See affrichighlands.org.

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