

Remote woodland – home to Scotland’s oldest wild pine – saved as part of rewilding initiative

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A remote ancient woodland – home to Scotland’s oldest wild Scots pine, which is at least 565-years-old – has been saved from being lost forever and given a chance of regeneration thanks to Trees for Life, as part of the charity’s vast Affric Highlands rewilding initiative.

The pinewood remnant of some 57 pines, all several centuries old and scattered through Glen Loyne in the northwest Highlands, was at risk from overgrazing by excessive numbers of deer – a key threat to surviving Caledonian pinewoods that prevents them from naturally regenerating.

The oldest pine has been dated to at least 1458 by St Andrews Tree-Ring Laboratory, and is believed to be even older. The ancestry of such pines stretches back to the last ice age.

In cooperation with the landowner, whose love of the pinewoods made the project possible, Trees for Life has created a new deer-proof ‘exclosure’ of fencing to protect the woodland, including the most ancient pines, and to allow young seedlings to grow without being eaten.

“Glen Loyne’s wild pines and other Caledonian pinewoods are globally unique, and a special part of Scotland’s character and culture. Saving and restoring them offers a major opportunity for tackling the nature and climate crises,” said James Rainey, senior ecologist at Trees for Life.

Trees for Life surveyed the site as part of its four-year Caledonian Pinewood Recovery Project, one of the most comprehensive surveys of the health of Scotland’s pinewoods. The team found that some of the oldest pines were outside an area of fencing which had been erected in the 1990s to protect the trees from grazing pressure. Deer had also breached the fenced area.

Trees for Life has now erected 1.5 kilometres of new fencing, and has connected up, extended and repaired existing sections, with the heavy-duty materials having to be transported into the remote glen by helicopter. The pinewood will now be able to naturally regenerate for the first time in decades.

“Fencing is only a temporary fix, but for now it’s a vital way of giving these precious pinewoods a fighting chance of recovery until effective landscape-scale deer management can be properly established,” said James Rainey.

Historically part of the royal hunting grounds of Cluanie, the Glen Loyne woodlands would once have been home to capercaillie, wildcat, and lynx. Ordnance Survey maps from 1874 show a more extensive woodland in the glen, but by the 1990s there were only 85 ancient pines left – a number that has since been reduced further to just 57.

The nature recovery project has been funded by the family of Harry Steven, who with Jock Carlisle wrote The Native Pinewoods of Scotland, published in 1959. This pioneering book recognised the special status of the pinewoods, and documented 35 wild pine populations that had managed to survive centuries of deforestation.

In the 1990s, the work of Steven and Carlisle led to the then Forestry Commission Scotland compiling Scotland’s official Caledonian Pinewood Inventory, which today recognises 84 sites.

Glen Loyne, on East Glen Quoich estate, lies within Affric Highlands – the UK’s largest rewilding landscape. Led by Trees for Life and Rewilding Europe, this 30-year community-focused initiative will restore woodland, peatland and riverside habitats over half a million acres from Loch Ness to the west coast, supporting re-peopling and nature-based economic opportunities.

The Caledonian forest once covered much of the Highlands, but today less than 2% survives. The pinewoods are one of Scotland’s richest habitats, and offer refuge to declining wildlife such as red squirrels, capercaillie and crossbills. Trees for Life is dedicated to rewilding the Highlands, including by restoring the Caledonian forest. See treesforlife.org.uk.

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