Unique Highland juniper forest given special European status in UK first

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In a UK-first, a genetically unique juniper forest at Trees for Life's Dundreggan rewilding estate in the Scottish Highlands has been awarded a special European designation to protect and enhance its globally significant diversity.

The 10,000-acre estate in Glemoriston near Loch Ness now joins a European network of genetically important and well-managed sites classed as Gene Conservation Units – a status reserved only for long-standing native tree stands that meet specific criteria.

The network – managed in the UK by Forest Research, the country's principal organisation for forestry and tree-related research – aims to ensure coordinated protection for the genetic diversity of tree species at a European scale. It brings together sites recognised for their protection of genetic diversity and natural processes.

Key parts of both the juniper and silver birch woodlands at Dundreggan have received the prestigious classification – adding to recognition of their importance, and opening up opportunities for further scientific studies.

"This designation underlines why letting our ancient woodlands grow back naturally is so important to us at Dundreggan, and it celebrates the remarkable remnants of naturally occurring and locally adapted juniper and silver birch that still survive on the estate," said Gwen Raes, Trees for Life's Dundreggan Estate Manager.

"The unusually wet location for juniper, and the extreme westerly location of silver birch, have contributed to making their populations at Dundreggan very special. Through this designation and further management, we aim to ensure these unique woodlands secure the extra care and attention they need, so they are protected and enhanced going forwards."

Also key to the designation is the estate's use of 'dynamic conservation' which helps protect the trees' genetic diversity. The land is being managed to encourage natural regeneration – enabling the trees to continuously adapt to their specific environment, including weather conditions and temperature.

Forest Research scientist Tom Sim, responsible for registering the UK's Gene Conservation Units, said: "The juniper and silver birch at Dundreggan are naturally occurring without historic planting, and have likely adapted to their local conditions over many generations.

"As a result, we would expect the stands to be representative of distinct genetic variation for each species at a UK and European level."

Dundreggan has relatively high rainfall for juniper, and experts believe this could have driven some local adaptation.

Juniper is a slow-growing evergreen shrub or small tree, with small blue-green needles and berries that ripen to a dark, blue-purple colour. It is more abundant in the drier, eastern part of the Highlands, where it reaches a larger size.

The species boosts biodiversity by providing shelter and food for a range of wildlife including insects, mammals and birds. Juniper is also valued for its culinary, medicinal and ritual properties, including use of its berries in game dishes and its role in producing gin.

Dundreggan is also at Europe's western edge of silver birch's natural range. This fast-growing species readily spreads over open ground, and supports many insects and other invertebrates, with over 300 species known to feed on it. The tree's roots draw up crucial nutrients, and its fallen leaves add richness to soil.

As part of the Gene Conservation Unit designation, Dundreggan's juniper and silver birch will be regularly monitored to ensure their survival, health and successful natural regeneration.

Visitors to Dundreggan and its acclaimed Rewilding Centre can explore the lush juniper and birch

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woodlands and enjoy walks along forest trails, including an accessible, low-level Juniper Path, known as Ceum an Aitinn in Gaelic. In total, the woodlands on the lower part of the estate are home to some 50,000 juniper and 80,000 silver birch.

Rewilding charity Trees for Life is committed to restoring nature-rich landscapes for people, nature and climate. Together with communities, it is restoring Scotland's natural and cultural heritage while supporting local livelihoods. See www.treesforlife.org.uk.

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