Volunteers collect over 11m rare seeds by hand from remote areas to restore Scotland's native woodlands and rainforest

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A Trees for Life and Woodland Trust Scotland initiative to boost the availability of native trees from western Scotland has surpassed expectations by collecting more than 11 million genetically rare and difficult-to-collect seeds.

Since the three-year project launched in 2023 with an initial target of collecting 1 million seeds, the two charities have worked with around 100 dedicated volunteers who have collected the precious seeds by hand from remote locations – enabling an estimated 7.8 million trees to be grown for woodland restoration projects in Scotland.

With a focus on collecting species that are often hard-to-reach and cost-prohibitive for tree nurseries or contractors to collect themselves, and on supporting genetic resilience for native Scottish tree species, the project has been able to gather huge quantities of rare and unusual seeds from areas on the west coast and from Scotland's rainforest.

Seeds from the west of Scotland and its islands have uniquely adapted genetic traits going back to the last Ice Age. This means trees grown from these seed batches have a better chance of survival when planted – bolstering resilience against disease and climate change.

The seeds are used by Trees for Life and Woodland Trust Scotland in their nature restoration work, and are also donated to accredited tree nurseries across Scotland.

The Tree Seed Collection project is funded by Woodland Trust Scotland, thanks to support from Postcode Lottery players and other supporters; and by supporters of Trees for Life's Big Give Earth Raise Appeal and Wild Seed Appeal, along with the BrITE Foundation and Clean Planet Foundation.

Roz Birch, Tree Seed Collection Project Officer, said: "It's a privilege to coordinate this project. Spending time in the woods with volunteers and colleagues is the highlight of my role – it's inspiring to meet so many different people who all deeply care about native woodlands, nature and wildlife, and want to make a lasting, positive difference.

"Collecting these precious tree seeds is about hope. It's about committing to a better future for ourselves and for future generations, and for Scotland's biodiversity."

The Tree Seed Collection Project is working to address a shortage of tree species with traceable local provenance, particularly from the west coast, and to further support tree planting in the Western Isles and Northern Isles.

The seeds collected include hazel, oak, dwarf birch, willow, juniper, birch, wild cherry, wych elm, yew and elder.

Once collected, the seeds are checked at Trees for Life's Dundreggan rewilding estate in Glenmoriston near Loch Ness.

Many are then donated to tree nurseries across Scotland for sowing and growing on. The more than 20 nurseries which have received the seeds so far are all part of the Woodland Trust's UK and Ireland Sourced and Grown Assurance Scheme – a voluntary initiative which provides assurance that trees have been sourced and grown in the UK or Ireland.

The seed collection project, which launched in August 2023, was initially to last three years, but has proved so successful that it is now continuing for at least another year.

Scotland is today one of Europe's least-wooded countries, with just 4% remaining native woodland cover, and is ranked one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world.

Planting trees is critical for restoring Scotland's Caledonian forest in areas where it cannot recover naturally. This unique habitat in the Highlands supports wildlife including red squirrels, capercaillie and crossbills, but today less than 2% survives.

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On the west coast, as little as 30,000 hectares of Scotland's rainforest now remains. Trees for Life and Woodland Trust Scotland are partners of the Alliance for Scotland's Rainforest, which says urgent action is needed to support and protect this internationally important temperate rainforest to avoid it being lost completely.

As members of the Scottish Rewilding Alliance, Trees for Life and Woodland Trust Scotland are calling on the Scottish Government to tackle the nature and climate emergencies, and boost jobs and health, by declaring Scotland the world's first Rewilding Nation – committing to nature recovery across 30% of Scotland, including a doubling of native woodland cover.

To learn more about the Tree Seed Collection Project visit treesforlife.org.uk.

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