

Volunteers isolate at Highlands 'lost world' to save thousands of young trees

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A team of six people from Trees for Life have been voluntarily isolating themselves at the charity's flagship Dundreggan rewilding estate in Glenmoriston, near Loch Ness in the Highlands since 23 March – to save more than 100,000 native young trees from being lost due to the coronavirus crisis lockdown.

The trees – including Scots pine, rowan, juniper, hazel, holly and oak, as well as rare mountain species such as dwarf birch and woolly willow – have all been grown carefully from seed in Dundreggan's specialised nursery, and were due for planting out on the hills this spring.

Dozens of volunteers help to propagate and grow over 60,000 trees a year at the nursery, from seed collected across the estate. These trees are then planted out at Dundreggan and other Highland sites to restore Scotland's ancient Caledonian Forest and its unique wildlife.

"We were all set for another busy season of preparing thousands of young native trees for planting on the hills by our volunteers, when the coronavirus crisis forced the postponement of this spring's tree planting – meaning tens of thousands of young trees have not left our nursery as planned," said Doug Gilbert, Trees for Life's Dundreggan Manager.

"But nature isn't in lockdown. All these precious trees have been coming into leaf, and we need to take care of them – especially in the dry weather we've been having. Without regular watering, they would all die. We also needed to start sowing new seed now, to ensure a supply of trees for future planting seasons."

So Doug – with colleagues Abbey Goff, Emma Beckinsale, Patrick Fenner, and trainees Catriona Bullivant and Louise Cameron – opted to voluntarily isolate themselves at Dundreggan rather than at their homes when the national lockdown was announced.

Doug and his colleagues aren't leaving Dundreggan except for a few essential reasons, such as collecting prescriptions. Food is arriving at the rewilding estate via supermarket deliveries.

Doug added: "The local Redburn Cafe has started local takeaways, so they're an occasional treat! No one has visited us for weeks now, except for delivery drivers and the postie. We're here in isolation for the long-haul if needs be – together with a growing forest for the future."

Trees for Life plans to open the world's first rewilding centre at Dundreggan in 2022. This is expected to welcome over 50,000 visitors annually – allowing people to explore the wild landscapes, discover Gaelic culture, and learn about the region's unique wildlife including golden eagles, pine martens and red squirrels.

As well as being an internationally important forest restoration site, Dundreggan is a biodiversity hotspot that is home to over 4,000 plant and animal species. Discoveries include several species never recorded in the UK before, or previously feared extinct in Scotland.

Trees for Life is dedicated to rewilding the Scottish Highlands. So far its volunteers have established nearly two million native trees at dozens of sites, encouraging wildlife to flourish and helping communities to thrive. See www.treesforlife.org.uk.

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