



The Heather Trust

Sustainable, Resilient Moorland

Imagining the Moors of the Future

INCLUDING:

A return to Langholm Moor

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Curlews in Finland



Annual Review 2023
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Sustainable, Resilient Moorland

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Professor Davy McCracken, President



Professor Davy McCracken

Working on upland issues is never boring and involves engaging in a diverse range of activities, some of which can be unexpected and unusual.

For example, in the summer, my team and I trained a group of US Army veterinarians in livestock handling at our upland research farms near Crianlarich.

And while speaking about upland land management challenges and opportunities is my bread and butter, it doesn't

often involve a Chinese Minister of Agriculture or members of the public on a Just Transition stakeholder panel.

At the other end of the scale, I – or at least my voice – made an appearance at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, in a show by a Dublin artist highlighting the scale of declines in species rich grasslands.

But a lot of my time has been spent on issues of direct relevance to the Trust, such as highlighting the need for upland land managers to engage in peatland restoration.

Healthy peatlands lock up carbon while absorbing and storing more. They can also act as giant sponges, holding back water during periods of high rainfall.

And, of course, they are important wetland habitats in their own right.

Last year NatureScot identified a shortage in the number of people with the skills to walk onto a degraded peatland and know how best to design an appropriate bespoke restoration programme.

Working closely with NatureScot, we were able to put together a two-week training course, which helped address some of the skills-gaps they had identified.

As I write, there are warnings of extreme rainfall and likely flooding across large parts of Scotland.

How we manage our moorlands across the UK will be crucial in managing flood risk in the future.

And the Heather Trust will continue to have an important role to play in helping land managers to achieve that.

Viv Gill, Chair of Trustees



Viv Gill

Welcome to this year's Annual Review from the Heather Trust. I am writing to you at the close of this year's annual meeting, which was held in Langholm and where members gathered together to visit the Tallas Valley Nature Reserve and learn about a range of issues facing this upland moor.

My reflection from the day - aside from the various speaker events - is how valuable it is to meet members and bring together people with a range

of perspectives to discuss the many threats facing our moorlands. This event was one of many that the Heather Trust has been involved with, where people have come together, often in the great outdoors, to share views. Encouraging dialogue in a positive and meaningful way lies at the heart of how the Trust seeks to promote its work – and it was terrific to spend time with so many of you.

The Board has spent much of this year discussing how we should move forward in response to the growing changes and challenges facing the uplands. I am pleased to share that 2024 will see a number of new Heather Trust initiatives aimed at highlighting the importance of UK moorlands, understanding the threats that we face and exploring ways of promoting sustainable and integrated moorland management. We will ensure that you, as members, are kept up to date on all our work and, as ever, please do provide us with your thoughts and feedback on what we do.

As part of this work, plans are now underway to embark on a significant review of the health of heather moorland in

the UK. More information on this will be published shortly - however, this work will involve newly commissioned research that will map the existence of heather moorland in the UK and will set out plans to create a long term approach to secure its protection.

Environmental issues - whether it be wildfire management or the growing importance of peatlands - continue to be top of mind for the Trust, informing how best we should prioritise our work. In response to this, plans for the 2024 Wildfire Conference in Aberdeen next November, organised by the Heather Trust, are underway. Tickets are now on sale.

In Scotland we have continued to support the Moorland Forum, during what has been a time of huge change, with consultation on muirburn and grouse licensing now underway - as well as supporting Working for Waders. South of the border we continue to steer the Bracken Control Group in England and this will continue despite the recent announcement from UPL that they will not submit any Emergency Authorisation of Asulox in 2024. More details on all of these items are covered in this report.

Finally, I am delighted to announce that our new Director, Katrina Candy, will be joining the Heather Trust in the new year. Katrina brings with her a wealth of experience that will bring so much of this work to life – please read more about Katrina on page 5.

As we all know there are many economic, environmental and social changes impacting our precious moorland - and your support for the Heather Trust helps our work to ensure our much loved moorlands and uplands continue to thrive. Thank you for your continued support.

Office Bearers



President
Professor Davy McCracken

Head of the Department of Integrated Land Management and Head of Hill and Mountain Research Centre at Scotland's Rural College, Davy is an agricultural ecologist and has spent over 30 years studying farming and biodiversity interactions and advising on agriculture and agri-environment policies and land management practice. He is involved with a very wide range of relevant fora, including the Working for Waders Initiative which he co-chairs and Scotland's Moorland Forum – and thus makes the important link between research, policy and practice.

Davy is also a newspaper columnist, writing on upland land management and nature matters; much of his research over the years has been into the challenges and opportunities facing High Nature Value farming systems across Europe.



Chair
Viv Gill

Combining her time as a hill farmer in Northumberland and a business consultant specialising in international pay and reward and board governance, Viv brings her varied experiences of both environmental and charity work to the role.



Vice President
Malcolm Hay

Malcolm's estate at Edinglassie near Huntly in Aberdeenshire has become an important site for peatland restoration work.

Board of Trustees



Dr. Colin Shedden

Colin was Scottish Director of the British Association for Shooting and Conservation and lives near Dunkeld.



Robert Benson

Robert was formerly the Chairman of the Moorland Association and is an experienced sporting manager based in Cumbria with extensive links across upland management communities.



Hamish Waugh

Hamish Waugh is a traditional hill farmer in the Scottish Borders farming over extensive unfenced moorland with heather on the highest areas and on North facing slopes. Hamish uses traditional farming practices which promote biodiversity and encourage a wide array of both plant and bird life.



Roger S. Burton

Roger has recently retired after 26 years with Scottish Natural Heritage and has a strong insight into the public benefits that well-managed moorland can deliver.



George Dodds

George runs an environment consultancy in north Northumberland that concentrates on providing advice on agri-environment schemes to farmers and landowners in England, following his 16-year stint at FWAG.



Richard Cooke

Chartered Surveyor; Retired as General Manager Dalhousie Estates in 2021 after 32 years, Chair Scottish Venison Association, former Chair Association of Deer Management Groups, Now Vice Chair.



Dr. Emily Taylor

Emily heads up the Crichton Carbon Centre and oversees all of its projects. Emily is an environmental scientist and peatland specialist. She has designed and delivered peatland restoration projects across the south-west for almost 10 years and delivers the highly popular programme of Peatland Action restoration training events throughout Scotland. Emily provides a perspective on peatland restoration and the trajectory towards fully restored blanket bogs. Emily comes from a family farming background on Coll, and now lives in Dumfries and Galloway.

INTRODUCING OUR NEW DIRECTOR, KATRINA CANDY



We are delighted to announce that Katrina Candy will be joining the Heather Trust as our newly appointed Director in January 2024. Katrina is currently Head of Communications (Scotland) and an Associate at Bidwells (property consultants). Prior to joining Bidwells in 2015, Katrina worked for the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust as Head of PR & Education for over 13 years.

Katrina will bring a wealth of experience in journalism, public relations, strategic communications, business development and education combined with a great love and understanding of the uplands. Based in Perthshire, Katrina will support the Trust both in Scotland and on all moorland matters that extend across the UK. Her appointment comes at a pivotal moment for the Trust as we embark on a number of new initiatives that aim to raise awareness of the importance of our UK moorlands at a time of climatic, political and managerial change.

Amongst other things, Katrina has published a number of children's books about conservation and land management and is a Chartered PR Practitioner.

Meet the Team



**Membership and Finance Officer
Clara Jackson**
Clara Jackson started working for the Trust in 2010 and manages memberships, finance and sponsorship.



**Events and Business Support
Eppie Sprung**
Eppie Sprung joined the Trust in 2017 and co-ordinates our annual Country Market and Sporting Sale and our communication channels. In addition, Eppie provides general business and governance support to the Trust.



**Consultant
Simon Thorp**
Simon Thorp (previous Director) provides input to the Trust running the Bracken Control Group.



**Administrator
Amy Smith**
Amy has 8 years' experience in the third sector, and over a decade's experience with marketing and operations. More recently she has worked for creative agencies, handling marketing and internal communications for the likes of Honda, Asda, Jaguar Land Rover and Mercedes Benz Vans. Her heart lies with charity work, though!
Amy has a wide range of skills that we hope to make use of at the Heather Trust, including technical operations, website architecture and development, graphic design, marketing management and strategy development, to name a few.



ANNE GRAY STEPS DOWN AS DIRECTOR AFTER FIVE YEARS WITH THE HEATHER TRUST

We were sorry to say 'goodbye' to our Director for Scotland, Anne Gray, who left the Heather Trust in July of this year.

Anne has provided the Heather Trust with the benefit of her wisdom and expertise over the last five years and has played a key role in furthering the interests of moorland. In particular, Anne headed up the Trust's work with Scotland's Moorland Forum and Working for Waders, as well as attending numerous committees and interest groups on the Trust's behalf. She also chaired the Moorland Management Best Practice and Muirburn Code Working Groups, responsible for the development of a set of widely agreed guides for the management of moorland throughout the UK.

Anne has taken up a post with the Environment Bank, where she is working on biodiversity net gain, and we're delighted to hear that she's really enjoying it.

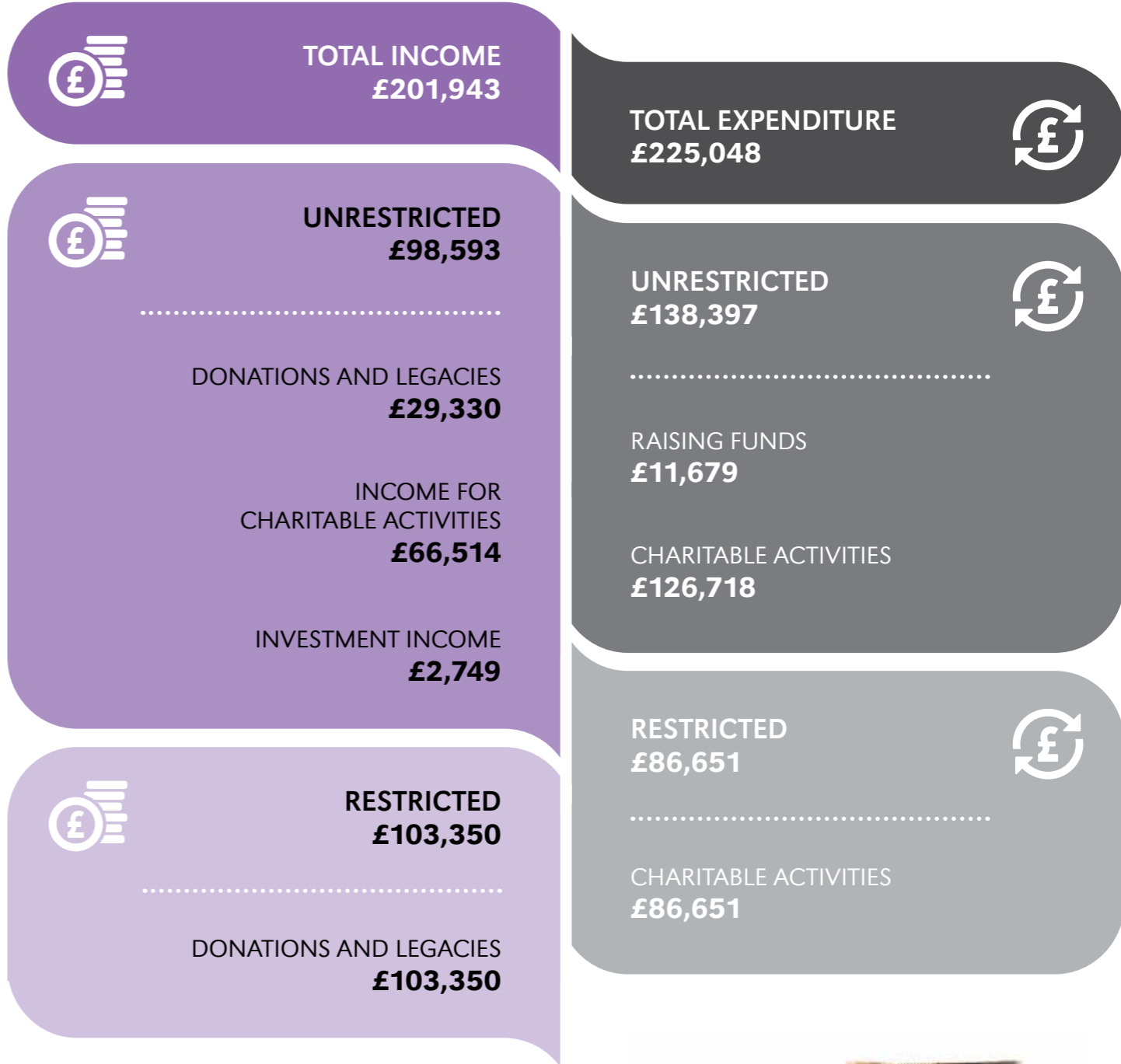
Viv Gill, Chair of the Heather Trust, commented;

"We are delighted for Anne and her new role, and keenly aware that her experience and skilful navigation of sometimes contentious moorland issues will be much missed. She was a key member of the team and we all wish her the very best."

Anne was a staunch supporter of our mission - working towards sustainable, resilient moorland for the benefit of everyone.

FINANCIAL HEADLINES FOR 2022

As presented at our AGM on 24th October 2023



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UPDATE ON SUSTAINABLE FARMING INCENTIVE (SFI) MOORLAND ASSESSMENT ACTION (ENGLAND ONLY)

Following an article in our 2022 Annual Review, Julia Aglionby, of Foundation for Common Land, shares her thoughts on the Sustainable Farming Incentive a year on.

It has been a bumpy summer for the SFI Moorland Assessment Action. While the Foundation for Common Land's (FCL) SFI Moorland Digital Survey App is running well and those in SFI22 are pressing on surveying their moors, the same cannot be said for access to the scheme itself. Under SFI22 the application process was working but, in June, Defra stopped all new applications to prepare for SFI23. Unfortunately, due to computer system issues, the start for that was delayed from August to September but now eventually applications are open for SFI via controlled rollout. (Also instead of being called 'Standards' all SFI options are now called 'Actions'.)

Of the 800,000 ha of 'Moorland' in England 38% is common land. The FCL Digital Surveying App works equally well for surveying both commons and non-commons.

The SFI23 RPA's application process is:

- 'Register your Interest' – each SBI has been sent a link to the form by the RPA. You can also find the form via the FCL website.
- The RPA will invite you to apply. They are currently making checks on each SBI before activating applications.
- For non-commons, the RPA will activate a pack on the Rural Payments portal – the same place you apply for BPS and CS.
- For commons, the RPA will process your application offline as they had not built in functionality for commons. This should be remedied 'early' in 2024.

- For commons, please liaise with our SFI co-ordinator, Tom Lawrence. Tom regularly meets with the RPA to smooth the application process for commons.
- Before submitting an SFI application for a common, you must have consulted all legal interests and signed an enforceable legal agreement that covers the SFI requirements. FCL provide guidance and templates for all these steps.

The Foundation for Common Land's digital app has been fully tested via the Defra funded SFI ELM Test & Trial Road Test and feedback incorporated. The service costs 60 pence / ha. The Defra annual SFI payment is £10.30/ha plus an additional £6.15 / ha for commons. While you are welcome to undertake the survey manually with pen and paper, our road test compared both approaches and concluded that pen and paper was not practical for areas of moorland over 100 ha, i.e. 10 survey points.

Surveyors do not require phone signal to use the app and the photos of each sampling point (1 every 10 ha) are now taken in app to ensure correct geotagging. We will provide you with files with all your data and, via the Land App, will translate your data with maps for the key issues of erosion, soil depth, ground cover. Please email sfi@foundationforcommonland.org.uk or register your interest on our web form.

Looking forward, FCL is trialling expanding our digital app for surveying seven priority moorland habitats to allow for assessing the ecological condition of moorland.

CMSS 2023



Eppie Sprung, CMSS Co-ordinator

Our Country Market and Sporting Sale in 2023 was a welcome breath of fresh air after the previous few years of Covid impact. With a whole flurry of new Lots, we had plenty on offer. Walked Up Grouse in the Yarrow Valley was a big hit, with the winning bidder securing the chance for a group to shoot at Dryhope, near St Mary's Loch. A week's fishing at Glencalvie Estate on the Guinards Beat for two rods also captured the imagination. Stunning donations from a number of artists helped to make sure there was something for every taste.

As I say every year, we are so very grateful to each and every one of our donors and bidders for helping to ensure the success of the auction. The proceeds help to maintain the sustainability of the Heather Trust and so your ongoing support, year on year, means a great deal to us.

We expect the 2024 auction to run from 5th to 21st April. If you are in a position to be able to make a donation, please contact me on events@heathertrust.co.uk.



2024 AUCTION:
5TH - 21ST
APRIL

WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AND MUIRBURN BILL INTRODUCED TO PARLIAMENT



Ross Ewing, Director of Moorland at Scottish Land & Estates, explores the Wildlife Management and Muirburn Bill following its introduction to the Scottish Parliament.

After years of deliberating over the issue of grouse moor management, the Scottish Government has finally brought forward the Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill.

It is worth taking stock as to how we got here. Back in 2017, the then Cabinet Secretary for the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, Roseanna Cunningham MSP, commissioned the independent review of grouse moor management – more commonly referred to as the Werritty review. That review was instigated on the back of concerns about raptor persecution on grouse moors – particularly the fates of the satellite-tagged golden eagles in the Eastern Highlands. Fast-forward to December 2019, the Werritty concluded and its report published. The flagship recommendation was that grouse shooting should be licensed if, within five years, the ecological sustainability of grouse moor management had not improved.

It took the Scottish Government the best part of a year to respond to the Werritty review. When it did, the then junior rural affairs minister, Mairi Gougeon MSP, announced to parliament that grouse shooting would be licensed – irrespective of the condition concerning an improvement in ecological sustainability recommended by Professor Werritty. And so began preparation on the Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill – legislation that would be introduced more than three years after Mairi Gougeon’s statement on the floor of the Holyrood chamber. For those of us who have followed and worked on this issue over the years, the arrival of a Bill feels like a surreal moment.

WHAT DOES THE BILL DO?

The Bill has five headline provisions. These are:

- to ban the use of glue traps;
- to establish a licensing scheme for the use of certain wildlife traps;
- to establish a licensing scheme for the taking or killing of certain birds (initially confined to red grouse);
- to establish enabling powers that certain persons may be appointed to exercise in relation to wildlife crime investigations;
- to establish a licensing scheme for muirburn.

Overall, the Bill is a wide-ranging piece of legislation that will radically change the regulation of game shooting in Scotland.

LICENSING THE KILLING OR TAKING OF WILD BIRDS

Without doubt, the creation of a licensing scheme for the killing or taking of certain birds is the flagship provision of this Bill. The proposal is a novelty in that it is entirely different from regulatory frameworks for hunting that exist in Europe. For the most part, the Europeans tend to focus on licensing individual hunters, whereas here we have something quite different. The Scottish Government’s model would see the person with the sporting right to take certain birds (and by extension the land to which those rights apply) licensed. This model essentially licenses the shooting of certain birds over a landholding, which is better suited to the type of sporting shooting offered in Scotland.

And it is in that vein that it is worth casting an eye to the wider implications of this Bill. Gamebird shooting across the UK is under considerable pressure, and it is likely England will follow either Scotland or Wales in imposing regulation if / when a Labour Government comes to power. The regulatory model they choose remains to be seen, but I would not be surprised if – like Scotland – they move to license the killing or taking of certain birds, which would nicely encapsulate wild gamebird shooting (notably grouse), as well as the shooting of reared and released gamebirds (notably pheasant and red-legged partridge) – both of which are synonymous with the English sporting offering.

It is worth noting that, according to the Bill, only red grouse (*Lagopus lagopus scotica*) will be subject to the licensing scheme initially. That said, Scottish Ministers have given themselves enabling powers to add further gamebirds to the licensing scheme in the future – without the need for a vote in parliament. This is something SLE vehemently disagrees with. It is our view that even the consideration of adding further gamebirds to the licensing scheme would need to be subject to full and robust parliamentary scrutiny, including a public consultation.

The legislative framework for establishing the licensing scheme itself is relatively sound. Regrettably, however, it is completely undermined by three issues that centre on the licence application, licence duration and triggers for licence revocation and suspension.

Firstly, with regards to the licence application, the draft Bill gives NatureScot the power to determine whether or not it is ‘appropriate’ to grant a licence. This appropriateness test gives the regulator a huge amount of discretion when it comes to the granting of licences. SLE have consistently argued that licences should be granted as a matter of course, unless there is strong evidence to suggest raptor crime had been committed by a relevant person on an estate.

Second, the licence duration is only one year, which is completely at odds with the long-term investment associated

with grouse moor management. SLE have consistently argued that licences should be granted in perpetuity to reflect this reality. We are also concerned that an annual renewal will see NatureScot exercising the aforementioned appropriateness test every year, which will provide investors with a complete deficit of certainty.

And finally, the triggers for licence suspension and revocation are disproportionately broad and excessive. It is worth reminding ourselves that the only issue underpinning the licensing of grouse shooting is the persecution of raptors. Therefore, triggers for licence suspension and revocation ought to be tied exclusively to that issue, which in practice would mean that only robust evidence of raptor crime would be grounds for adverse licensing decisions. What is proposed in this Bill, regrettably, goes well beyond the issue of raptor persecution. Under the scheme, non-criminal activity (such as non-adherence to a code of practice) would be grounds for suspension or revocation, along with a broad range of wildlife crimes that have no connection to grouse moor management. In addition, the establishment of a police investigation alone can be cause for licence suspension, even if NatureScot (as the licensing authority) is not satisfied that a relevant offence has been committed. These broad triggers are completely disproportionate and unreasonable.

It is important to note that, among the negatives, there are some positives within the licensing scheme. Chief among them is a robust right to appeal against any licensing decision to the Sheriff Court on the facts of a case. This is vitally important because it separates appeal proceedings from the regulator, which has been key criticism of the appeal process in the context of general licence restrictions. There has also been a move away from focussing on the mere location of an alleged or suspected crime, and there would now need to be evidence connecting a crime to a relevant person.

LICENSING THE MAKING OF MUIRBURN

The picture surrounding the licensing of muirburn is slightly better. The Scottish Government is proposing a two-tiered licensing regime for muirburn: one scheme for peatland habitats (defined as habitat where the peat is deeper than 40cm); and another scheme for non-peatland habitats.

It is disappointing that the Scottish Government have sought to use peat depth (a below ground metric) to regulate muirburn (an above ground activity). It also creates



significant challenges for land managers, because the onus will be on them to determine where the land is peatland or non-peatland. The Bill is silent on how land managers are meant to do this, providing a complete deficit of certainty that would make it relatively easy for responsible operators to inadvertently commit an offence. SLE has consistently argued that using peat depth to regulate muirburn is illogical and fraught with difficulties.

There is strong recognition of muirburn’s evolving utility. Licences on non-peatland habitats can be obtained to:

- manage habitats for moorland game or wildlife;
- improve grazing potential for livestock;
- conserve, restore, enhance or manage the natural environment;
- prevent or reduce risk of wildfire causing harm to people and damage to property;
- research.

The licensable purposes for peatland habitats are fewer, but it is good to see significant recognition for its role in preventing or reducing wildfire risk:

- restoring the natural environment;
- prevent or reduce risk of wildfire causing damage to habitats;
- prevent or reduce risk of wildfire causing harm to people and damage to property;
- research.

Given the starting position was that muirburn should be banned on peatland, SLE is pleased to see the Scottish Government change their position. However, there is a completely illogical provision which states that a muirburn licence on peatland will only be granted if no other method of vegetation control is available. This would compromise a land manager’s ability to achieve the licensable purposes – especially for wildfire mitigation – and SLE will be robustly appealing for that provision to be removed by way of amendment.

SUMMARY

Overall, the Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill constitutes a significant threat to moorland management and investment in the Scottish uplands. SLE will be engaging extensively with MSPs over the coming weeks and months to get the Bill amended.

HEATHER TRUST BRACKEN

Bracken (Pteridium Aquilinum) is one of the oldest plants found on earth. Fossilised bracken, dating back 55 million years, has been found and evidence suggests it was common-place across the globe 24 million years ago. Bracken does extremely well in fertile soils, growing to a height of up to 5ft high (1.5 metres.) However, what grows underground is truly amazing. When an underground bunker was built during the Cold War near to my farm, I remember that the hole, at over 15ft deep, was still unearthing bracken roots. I also recall, at a Bracken Control Group meeting, Dr. Roderick Robinson stating that the most rigorous bracken might produce as much as 300 tonnes of rhizomes per Hectare.

In our hills and uplands shepherds once used bracken as bedding for their house cow. Dried, it was very absorbent; however, if hay was of poor quality or in short supply, it could prove fatal if the shepherd's cow ate its bedding. 150 years ago it would have been in a shepherd's contract that, post shearing, he would be expected to use his scythe to cut an agreed acreage of bracken and gather up the dried fronds, which the flock-master might sell to the local brick maker, the fronds burning at the temperature required to fire the bricks, and in turn the ash would then be used as a mordant in the soap manufacturing industry.

Today bracken has no commercial value and is very much considered to be a weed harbouring ticks and other pests. It can also make shepherding duties very difficult due to it growing taller than the sheep grazing under it where it is sparse enough to let light through to the ground below, allowing other plants to photosynthesise.

Options in controlling this invasive plant will vary according to the landscape. Crushing and cutting will reduce the plant's ability to return energy gathered during the growing

season back to the rhizomes in the autumn when the green fronds turn a golden brown and the plant becomes dormant for the winter. Spraying shows the fastest results but, for long-term success, a policy of follow-up treatment is vital if the plant is to be ultimately defeated. Glyphosate works very well but it should be recognised that, being a total herbicide (killing all plants that it comes into contact with), it should only be used with a well calibrated weed wiper, ensuring non weed plants are not accidentally destroyed.

For larger areas on steep ground there is only one safe and viable alternative and that is the aerial application of the chemical Asulam, formerly marketed under the trade name of Asulox. Asulam is sprayed onto the bracken, usually by helicopter (since 2020 due to restrictions only by helicopter). Due to the fact that Asulam is a selective weedkiller, it will only kill the bracken, leaving desirable plants free to grow and flourish. Experiments have been done using drones for applying Asulam but these were in relatively early stages and never got to be approved.

It is worth noting that the use of Asulam hit a big stumbling block in 2011 when it was declared not approved by the European Commission implementing Regulation (EU) No 1045/2011. In 2012 and every year since we have still been able to use Asulam but regulated under an annual Emergency Authorisation.

Application to the Chemicals Regulation Division of the HSE has been done on an annual basis by the Bracken Control Group (www.brackencontrol.co.uk) whose coordinator is Simon Thorp, one time director and now consultant to the Heather Trust. Simon would be first to admit that obtaining this Emergency Approval every year was becoming more of a challenge as time went by. I think it is worth recording the thanks of every land manager who strives to get on top of

this invasive weed to Simon and his tenacity in assuring we have had Asulam available up until now.

The application for us to use Asulam in 2023 was submitted back in October of last year and finally word came through that the chemical had been approved in England. However, the joy was short-lived when first Scotland and Wales and then Northern Ireland all rejected the application to be able to use Asulam in 2023.

With Scotland being the biggest user of Asulam, peaking in 2011 at over ten thousand Hectares, it came as a bitter blow losing it from the armoury to fight the scourge of bracken. However, it should be recognised that it has been an even bigger blow to those who have used Asulam in the last two or three years and are being denied the opportunity of a follow-up treatment. A farmer living near me has been left wondering if his initial outlay of £10,000 in 2021 has been money down the drain now that Asulam is no longer available to combat this invasive weed.

It is generally agreed that Bracken continues to expand at a rate of 2 to 4% each year. Since 2014 we have struggled to spray an average of 5,000 Ha per annum, whereas it is thought to be spreading at the rate of 14,000 Ha per year. To put that into perspective, an area the size of Fife in only ten years. It isn't hard to see that at the moment we are losing the battle against this weed, creating a monoculture that has limited value to the biodiversity of places it inhabits and should be recognised as being very limiting to the ability of farmers to be as productive and efficient as they could be on ground void of bracken.

On Friday 13th October 2023, UPL, who manufacture Asulam under the trade name of Asulox, have announced in a letter to Bracken Control Group:

"With this letter, UPL Europe Ltd. would like to inform you of the decision taken by the company to cease further work on a permanent solution for the use of Asulam in the control of bracken."

The letter effectively means that Asulam will no longer be available for use in the UK from this point forward, even though it continues to be used on sugar cane crops to control Johnson Grass.

In the short term at least, Bracken Control Group will continue in its work to find a workable solution for the control of bracken going forward. For Bracken Control Group to carry on, funding will need to be secured to explore what other avenues of bracken control might have potential. Quite obviously UPL Europe Ltd are no longer in a position to promote a product that red tape has put out of reach of any potential users and cannot be expected to continue their support in this research.

With Bracken Control Group arguably having the biggest database of research, information and contacts in this field, it would make perfect sense for them to continue their work finding an acceptable and balanced solution to the problem whereby, if bracken is allowed to continue spreading unabated, it would have a detrimental effect on biodiversity and the health of those who heed the encouragement to come out and enjoy the countryside for their "entertainment." Clearly our political leaders have yet to take the time to understand the consequences of not controlling bracken in both terms of human health and biodiversity.

Readers of this article who are able to help ensure this highly important work continues should contact Simon Thorp at info@brackencontrol.co.uk

Hamish Waugh, Heather Trust Trustee

HEATHER FUTURES

If you are involved in moorland management, you are probably aware of far-reaching changes in upland land use which have taken place over the last few decades. Huge areas of moorland were lost to forestry after the Second World War and shifting farm subsidies drove changes which gradually degraded many moorland areas. In recent years, commercial forestry and rewilding projects have begun to gather pace and many of these new interests come at the cost of open moorland.

We know that heather moorland is being lost or degraded – but, while that sometimes seems obvious, it's strangely hard to prove the point. Big changes are often the accumulation of many small ones – a little moorland lost here and there soon adds up to a great deal. While these changes are often determined at a local level, we have no clear understanding of what the effect will be in national terms. It's quite possible that we are now sleepwalking into a situation where large areas of moorland are permanently lost as a result of many tiny cuts. Unless we can measure and monitor the change, we have no real means to engage with it. That's why the Heather Trust is embarking on "Heather Futures", a new project to map heather in the UK, establishing a baseline against which future decisions can be measured. We can't protect these important habitats if we don't understand how they're changing and it's crucially important to gather data which supports wider observations of land use change.

People love heather moorland, and it's easy to assume that famous and ecologically valuable habitats are being actively protected by government policies. It's true that many sites are protected by designations which specifically recognise the importance of heather moorland, but the reality of modern land use is far from simple. As part of wider narratives around climate change and biodiversity loss, heather is often under-valued as a low-grade or artificial habitat. Moorlands are being described as a kind of landscape that we can do without, particularly when it is linked to wider political controversies around grouse shooting.

Even where sites are designated for their moorland characteristics, the picture is still curious and confused. Designated sites are monitored over time, but it's difficult to access the data from that monitoring work, and it's not clear if designated sites are generally in good or declining condition. Designations are often held up as a good way to protect important sites but, without a clear overview of what's happening on designated sites, it's hard to know if they're actually working. We will put a focus on designated sites as part of Heather Futures, not only in an attempt to see if designations are effective but also to understand how these places measure up against those which have not been designated.

One of the reasons why heather moorland is being lost is that moorland managers have not been able to articulate why it's such an important habitat. Foresters and rewilding projects have clear data and statistics to support their progress, and they make simple and well-reasoned arguments to explain why moorland should be converted into something different. In truth, there are some extremely strong arguments in favour of retaining heather moorland, particularly when these landscapes are founded on a full understanding of Carbon storage in peatland and upland biodiversity. The problem is not that heather moorland is inherently "less good", rather that moorland managers have not yet drawn the arguments together in order to present the case fully. Our Heather Futures project aims to gather the information we need to make that case, recognising that in many situations, the case for retaining open moorland is actually the strongest of all available options.

The Heather Futures project is still under development, but even these initial phases have highlighted the fact that we simply don't have the answers to important questions about heather moorland in the UK. We can't start to protect or promote moorland interests until we understand what's happening at a national level; what the threats are, where the losses are, and how the future could look for our uplands. Heather Futures has the potential to be a major piece of work for the Heather Trust and there are many different paths the project could follow. We'd like to invite Heather Trust members to get in touch and contribute ideas and comments to Heather Futures as it develops, and we look forward to working on this project with you.



TARRAS VALLEY

Following the controversies and challenges of various moorland management projects at Langholm, the moor was offered for sale by Buccleuch Estates in 2019. After extensive local consultation, the Langholm Initiative developed a fundraising campaign on behalf of the local community, raising over £6m to purchase 10,500 acres of land which includes deep peatland, ancient woodland and moorland and has become famous for birds like hen harriers, black grouse and merlins. On a wave of public enthusiasm and crowd-sourced donations, the Tarras Valley Nature Reserve was born, offering a range of ambitious and exciting new goals for the hill.

The Heather Trust held its annual discussion meeting at Langholm Moor in 2016, during the height of the second demonstration project. Key issues at that event included grouse productivity, diversionary feeding of hen harriers and the prevalence of heather beetle, which had damaged the moor badly in 2010, 2011 and 2012. It made sense to return to the hill after seven years to find out more about the new project, which is currently unfolding on the former grouse moor. The meeting took place on a cool, overcast day in late October and visitors came from across Northern England, the Southern Uplands and the Scottish Highlands to hear presentations, visit the moor and join in with a panel discussion at the Buccleuch Centre in Langholm.

The day began with a presentation from the hosts at Tarras Valley; Jenny Barlow (Estate Manager) and Angela Williams (Development Manager). Jenny and Angela talked through some of the practical implications of managing a large and complex landholding, paying particular attention to peatland restoration and community engagement. Tarras Valley Nature Reserve has developed a comprehensive long-term strategy to build links with locals and visitors and much of this engagement is based around sustainable land use, peatland restoration and a greater awareness of biodiversity on the moor.

After the introduction, attendees visited sites on the moor to discuss issues including peatland restoration, scrub woodland encroachment and financial sustainability. David Jarrett, Emily Taylor and Patrick Laurie afterwards provided presentations on various aspects of moorland management as they relate to Langholm, particularly around heather beetle and woodland encroachment on moorland sites. A panel discussion, which covered a range of other issues, was then chaired by Professor Davy McCracken, the Heather Trust's President.



DAVID JARRETT

Flushes of Willow snake up the burns towards the high ground, Birch marches up the slopes too. On the high ground, the moorland is slowly turning to Sitka Savannah. A scattered of quarter-grown trees on open ground will be to the liking of Willow Warbler and Redpoll, whether the trees are native or not. Tree Pipit will colonise too as the trees grow taller.

More Harrier nests may be lost to foxes now, though they ought to keep getting broods away. This place should still suit them for a good while, and these are itinerant birds anyway: numbers will fluctuate, they colonise new sites with relative ease, and they'd be back in a flash if conditions were right.

Not like Red Grouse – once they go, that'll be it. Curlew will linger just long enough to trick the callow and wishful into thinking it didn't matter after all that the gamekeepers were stood down. And then there's the Black Grouse – their plight has funded a good few projects round these parts already; not that it's done them much good.

Of course one day, these rolling hills might be swathed in a mature woodland full of birds we wouldn't dream possible, we'll count Sitka as one of our own, and no-one will even believe it when old-timers talk of Hen Harriers and Curlew here.

Tarras Valley is a perfect exposition of the polarity endemic to debates about the future of our uplands – this landscape somehow manages to be both a once well-managed moor going to wrack and ruin with seemingly stark consequences for much-loved birds, and the beginnings of an inspirational, community-driven journey to vibrant, self-willed ecosystems.

There isn't much shared understanding between these positions. For what it's worth, I struggle to quieten a nagging unease that we didn't have it quite as bad as we thought on the high ground: that there are birds for which we have no choice but to get our hands dirty; and that, while the fight for biodiversity is certainly being lost in the lowlands, perhaps the fervour with which we overhaul our uplands in response won't prove quite as efficacious as we hope.



ORGANISATIONS WE WORK WITH



WILDFIRE CONFERENCE

The Heather Trust provides the resourcing and secretariat for the 2024 UK Wildfire Conference, run by the Scottish Wildfire Forum. Our Events Manager, Eppie Sprung, is working with our Administrator, Amy Smith in her marketing capacity to ensure a well-attended and successful conference. The Heather Trust also has a place on the Conference Steering Group, who are tasked with selecting themes for the event, keynote speakers and reviewing abstract submissions.



Impact through Science

JAMES HUTTON INSTITUTE

The James Hutton Institute is a well-respected and globally recognised research organisation delivering fundamental and applied science to drive the sustainable use of land and natural resources. The Institute is one of the Scottish Government's main research providers in environmental, crop and food science and has a major role in the Scottish knowledge economy. The Institute brought together the former Macaulay Land Use Research Institute and the Scottish Crop Research Institute.



SCOTLAND'S MOORLAND FORUM

Formed in 2002, Scotland's Moorland Forum has developed into a unique partnership that robustly engages with matters influencing the uplands of Scotland, and actively promotes improvements in policy, practice and management. The Forum consists of 27 member organisations, of which the Heather Trust is one. Anne Gray was, until recently, Director of the forum. The Forum provides the prime opportunity for cross-cutting debate on the future of the Scottish uplands and its communities, and it seeks consensus on key issues affecting the uplands, founded on a sound evidence base. Their aim is to have a sustainable future for moorland through collaborative work.



WORKING FOR WADERS

The Heather Trust is a longstanding member of the Working for Waders Initiative, historically providing administrative support and distributing funds. The project is open to anyone with an interest in waders and is currently supported by a wide range of charities, organisations and individuals, from farmers and conservationists to gamekeepers and birdwatchers.



NATURE NETWORKS

A Nature Network connects together nature-rich sites, including restoration areas and other environmental projects, through a series of areas of suitable habitat, habitat corridors, and stepping-stones for ecological connectivity. Run by NatureScot, the Nature Networks framework aims to help halt and reverse biodiversity loss. The framework is built from the expertise and time given by over 200 individuals from nearly 110 organisations from a broad spectrum of Scotland's sectors and communities, including the Heather Trust.

MUIRURN CODE WORKING GROUP

The Heather Trust provides administrative support to the Muirburn Code Working Group - a multidisciplinary group from various sectors, engaged by NatureScot, who provide feedback and continuous improvement to the Muirburn Code. The code is currently undergoing a review in light of the new Wildlife Management and Muirburn Bill.

GROUSE CODE WORKING GROUP

The Heather Trust provides administrative support to the Grouse Code Working Group - a multidisciplinary group who have been engaged by NatureScot to create a Code of Practice for grouse shooting and related activities in partnership with NatureScot, in light of the new Wildlife Management and Muirburn Bill.



BRACKEN CONTROL GROUP

The Heather Trust is represented at the Bracken Control Group by our consultant, Simon Thorp, who coordinates the group. The group comprises land managers, crofters, national park representatives, farmers and government agencies, to name but a few. The work of the group is to promote the need for and explore the ways in which to control bracken.



UPLAND COMMONS PARTNERSHIP

'Our Upland Commons Project' is a three-year, £3m, 25-partner project (of which the Heather Trust is one) helping to secure the future of upland commons in Dartmoor, the Lake District, Yorkshire Dales and Shropshire Hills. The project is led by the Foundation for Common Land.



SUSTAINABLE LAND MANAGEMENT

SUSTAINABLE LAND MANAGEMENT GROUP

Part of the Scottish Forum for Natural Capital, the Sustainable Land Management Working Group brings together private, public, academic and non-profit organisations and land managers to explore innovative approaches to sustainable land management. The group aims to promote innovative natural capital practice in land use, sharing knowledge and best practice amongst members and provides regular summaries of current activity for interested parties.

MOORLAND MANAGEMENT BEST PRACTICE

The Moorland Management Best Practice Group create and update a set of practical guides for the management of Scotland's moorland, in partnership with NatureScot. Administrative support for this is provided by the Heather Trust.

CALENDAR OF 2023 ACTIVITIES

JANUARY

- 12 SLMG: Scottish Forum on Natural Capital
- 20 Wildfire 2024 Steering Group Meeting

FEBRUARY

- 1 Heather Trust Board Strategy Meeting
- 6 Heather Trust Board Meeting
- 22 Wildfire Conference 2024 Steering Group Meeting

MARCH

- 27 Wildfire Conference 2024 Steering Group Meeting

APRIL

- 13 Nature Networks Zoom Update
- 21 SMF Full Forum Business Meeting
- 26 SLMG Meeting

MAY

- 3 Heather Trust Board Audit and Risk Meeting
- 5 Heather Trust Country Market and Sporting Sale
- 10 Heather Trust Board Meeting
- 19 James Hutton Institute Natural Capital Workshop
- 22 Scottish Wildfire Forum Meeting
- 23 Wildfire Conference 2024 Steering Group Meeting

JUNE

- 5 SMF Chair's Working Group Meeting
- 15 WfW Facilitation Group Meeting
- 23 Heather Trust Board Meeting
- 27 Wildfire Conference 2024 Steering Group Meeting

JULY

- 11 WfW Funding Working Group

AUGUST

- 10 Heather Trust Board Meeting
- 15 SMF Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Meeting
- 16 WfW Facilitation Group Meeting
- 22 Scottish Wildfire Forum Meeting
- 24 SLMG Meeting
- 29 Bracken Control Group Meeting

SEPTEMBER

- 11 Muirburn Code Working Group Meeting
- 12 Grouse Code Working Group Meeting
- 28 Heather Trust Board Audit and Risk Meeting

OCTOBER

- 23 Heather Trust Board Meeting
- 24 Heather Trust Update Day and AGM
- 31 Bracken Control Group Meeting

NOVEMBER

- 8 MMBP meeting
- 15 SMF Full Forum Business Meeting

DECEMBER

- 6 Upland Commons Partner Meeting
- 8 Muirburn Code Working Group Meeting
- 13 SLMG Meeting
- 14 Grouse Code Working Group Meeting

DR. EMILY TAYLOR

Peatlands at Tarras Valley are heavily drained and consequently are experiencing erosion, losing carbon to the atmosphere, experiencing a decline in habitat quality, and potentially impacting freshwater environments downstream. This is an increasingly common observation in the south of Scotland where prolonged droughts followed by heavy rainfall events are causing a new era of erosion, particularly in areas of peatland intensively, and effectively drained. This means taking a preventive approach. Rather

than just looking at the areas currently in the worst actively eroding condition state, these areas with signs of new and accelerating erosion are increasingly considered as a priority for peatland restoration. At Tarras Valley plans are being developed to block and reprofile these drains, effectively erasing them from the landscape, to maintain more water, for longer, on the peatlands. It is hoped that this will support strategies to reduce conifer encroachment, improve habitat, increase water availability through the spring and summer droughts for wildlife, and improve the areas resilience to wildfires. Restoration will be phased over the coming years, recognising the need to carefully survey peatland extent and condition and develop an understanding of the hydrology of the area, starting first with a site deemed particularly vulnerable to wildfire. This approach demonstrates that peatland restoration can be seen as a strategic tool to help our uplands adapt to climate change.



PATRICK LAURIE

The Southern Uplands have seen enormous changes since the Second World War and many areas have been completely overhauled by afforestation, wind development and gradual changes to agricultural management. Many of these changes are historical but a new wave of enthusiasm for projects around rewilding and green finance has emerged over the last five years. Tremendous amounts of heather moorland have been lost and now it seems that the last few fragments of open ground are under threat.

As a result of demonstration projects which took place between 1994 and 2017, Langholm became one of the most famous and controversial grouse moors in the country – but it has gradually become an outlier for this kind of traditional land management. Despite a strong tradition of grouse in the Southern Uplands, Langholm was one of only a few moors which were still functioning in the area – and most of these were challenged by isolation and obscurity. It's hard to produce good numbers of grouse in the south and southwest of Scotland, particularly on wet or grassy moors where the odds are always against good productivity. Given

that grouse moor management has been withdrawn, now is a good time to think about how we can achieve the same goals through different methods. After all, Langholm Moor was designated for its moorland features because they are fantastically special – and, given the shrinking amount of heather moorland in the region, it's only becoming more important.

It will be interesting to see how the new Tarras Valley Nature Reserve will face the challenge of managing the land without grouse as a primary source of income. I wish them every success, but the clock is ticking to ensure that future management is put in place quickly. Waders and black grouse were almost completely lost from Langholm during the lull between the first and second demonstration projects and it took the second project almost eight years to make up for that interval. Unless the new managers deliver action quickly and decisively across the site, some rare and special moorland species may never return to one of their last strongholds in Southern Scotland.



ANOTHER SUMMER GOES BY



Ecologist David Jarrett has been working on waders and wader conservation for ten years. His research places a particular focus on practical solutions to support rare and endangered species like curlew and lapwings. Here he shares some of his experiences from the 2023 fieldwork season.

In Wensleydale, in mid-April, the silage fields are smooth and firm and the colour of bowling greens. To find Curlew nests here, we sneak from one field to the next, launching ourselves over the dry stone walls to startle incubating birds, giving them no chance to scurry away from the nest before they rise. When the fields are empty we look like fools, but after an hour we have a couple of nests. The farmer is spreading slurry this morning; if the eggs are covered in slurry the nests will be abandoned. We mark the nests with canes and the farmer will take care not to damage them.

High on the moor, the nests in the patchworks of rush, heather and grassland need a more patient approach: these birds seem to have more cunning; they are somehow wilder and more elusive. An hour becomes two; two becomes three; birds come and go; they prod and poke; the wind grows colder, harsher. Eventually a female injudiciously sinks into a patch of short heather and the game is up.

In North Karelia, Finland, a few weeks later, what's left of last year's grass crunches underfoot. Enormous piles of snow still lie next to the farm tracks. Ditches in neat rows slice through the flat brown fields. A crow trap sits next to a line of Norway Spruce. An agitated Curlew rises from the next field. The crests of incubating Lapwing poke out from the straw

and tremble in the breeze.

A band stretches across Finland from Oulu in the West to North Karelia and the Russian border where the winters are harsh enough to make life difficult for Foxes and other generalist predators, but the summers are warm and dry enough to make life good for farmers – and so in the enormous fields of hay meadow, fodder and cereals carved into the forests, the waders do well too. The late-lying snow and cold early spring give Lapwing and Curlew a fighting chance to get a brood away before fields can be mown, and climate change has given them an additional boost: the longer summer means Lapwing now have enough time to re-nest after early failure, and the population has boomed.

They don't just breed in farmland here: on the way out to the bogs, Hazel Grouse, Black Grouse and Capercaillie scatter from the side of forestry tracks or skulk into the Blaeberry and heather. Goldeneye and Green Sandpipers flush from forestry ditches. On the fringes of the bog, the sweet aroma of Labrador Tea and the sound of bubbling Black Grouse fill the air; Whinchat and Rustic Bunting whisper out songs from stunted, waterlogged pines. On the open ground, Lapwing wheel and dive, and Greenshank, Black-tailed Godwit and Whimbrel loop and reel to demarcate their territories. A pair of Whooper Swans light up a distant pool like a couple of discarded shopping bags. Curlew are here too – the bog nesting birds are ever more inscrutable - they rise and alarm at the merest hint of an interloper. Eventually a female creeps away from a knoll a foot or two above the sodden marsh, and a clutch of four is revealed, but this is luck and little else.

On a patchwork of burnt heather in the dead of night, a gamekeeper waits for hours in the freezing cold. When the vixen appears, he pauses, fixes her in the rifle scope and pulls the trigger. Nests are very unlikely to be lost to foxes here and, sure enough, young fledge from both of those nests in the silage fields: the farmer was careful too. She is



Forest bog habitat in North Karelia, Finland

passionate about her birds – she can talk for hours about Curlew; she can also talk for hours about the ever-changing web of financial incentives which confound and enmesh the livelihoods of hill farmers. Schemes that are devised to protect these birds, but which overlook the intervention most likely to deliver results.

In other parts of Wensleydale this summer, nests were being harvested and sent to aviaries to be released to fill the void in southern populations caused by foxes and other predators eating nests and chicks. On the other side of the M6 in Cumbria, a group of volunteers were assembling to deploy their electric fences to protect the last nests in their valley from foxes and badgers.

In summer, that farm in Finland is jam-packed full of Lapwing broods: mangy-looking half-grown things grubbing at recently ploughed fields in neat groups of four; one unremarkable field yields a count of thirty-one juveniles, while Curlew yap furiously from the longer grass. In these parts the farmers don't tolerate predators - they want to hunt grouse in the forests in winter. But the farmers here

pay little mind to the wading birds; the birds are there and that's that.

Those bog-nesting birds in North Karelia will raise their broods in wild habitat subject to little human intervention in the company of bears, wolves and lynx, while those silage field birds in Wensleydale will rise ten times a day as the farmer goes about his work. There are as many ways of a Curlew fledging a brood as there are theories about what kind of interventions are appropriate and justified: theories about what line should be drawn where and by whom; about what is natural and unnatural; about what real Curlew habitat looks like, and if that should even matter. We toil and sweat more for this bird than any other: no other bird can boast such an army of such celebrated devotees, nor so often peers out from the nature-writing shelf at the bookshop, nor the cover of some album or other. Meanwhile, those doing the challenging work on the ground look on with a weary bemusement at a sector which appears content to studiously fiddle away at that which we can countenance, and equivocate over that which we cannot.



Whimbrel in Finland



Juvenile curlew in Finnish farmland

CATTLE GRAZING



Patrick Laurie, consultant to the Heather Trust, reflects on the impact of grazing cattle in the uplands.

While the nation was experiencing the full force of the first COVID lockdown in April 2020, I was hard at work on a farm near New Galloway. As part of an agreement to protect golden eagles on the hill, the land had not been grazed for almost

forty years, during which time the property had changed beyond all recognition. The heather was rank and overgrown, and bracken had spread across all the driest and most productive areas of grassland. Scrub woodland had begun to bristle through and, while most of the trees on the low ground were a mixture of rowan and willow, the hill itself was peppered with sitka spruce trees which had blown in as seed from neighbouring forestry blocks.

Interested in the eagles and anxious about the small and dwindling population of black grouse in the area, the landowner was extremely keen to restore some grazing on his farm. However, despite the fact that he had been given consent by NatureScot to set the wheels in motion, it was hard to find graziers who were willing to work on an area of extremely rough country. The place had a reputation for deep peat, dangerous bogs and the tick-borne redwater fever, which can easily kill cattle. It's a familiar situation for

many moorland managers – cows had been identified as part of the solution, but there was little support for practical implications of putting animals out on the hill. Living nearby with a herd of galloway cattle, I was happy to offer my services.

That long, quiet lockdown gave me time to repair more than a mile of collapsed drystone dyke, and I also worked hard to set up almost two miles of permanent electric fencing. Stockproofing the land was an essential first-step, particularly since the property stands on the edge of the Galloway Forest Park. If the cows had decided to leave their two hundred acre allotment and head north, they would have no fences to block their way for almost forty miles. Fencing was an immediate imperative, but the cost of stockproofing is usually the first obstacle which many projects like mine fail to overcome. I was determined, but I also invested in GPS collars for a few of my cows. Even if they decided to leave, I would have some idea where to find them.

The terms of the designation only allowed me to have ten cows on those two hundred acres, and that seemed like a drop in the ocean of what was needed. I pushed back but, judging from correspondence with local officials, it seemed likely that the whole project would be cancelled if I didn't sing to their tune. Consulting with farming friends and family before the grazing began, I wondered if it would make sense to confine the cattle in certain areas so that the impact of their grazing would be more intensive. Knowing that I was



already under-stocking the hill, I wanted to maximise the benefits as quickly as possible. But taking the measure of helpful comments, I decided to give them full reign across the entire area.

I was particularly struck by a farmer from Wigtownshire who advised me to have faith in the animals; to let them choose where to go. In her experience, cows only founder in bogs or have trouble on rough ground when they're pressed to do things by human beings. Left to their own devices, they'll pick the ground they like the best and work outwards from there. Selecting eight calves at around a year old, I grouped them alongside two old cast cows and pressed them into a group. They quickly settled into a calm, steady bunch that would always come when they were called. With a fair measure of trepidation on my part, they went to the hill on May 1st 2020.

Those satellite tags were worth their weight in gold. I spent that first week tracking the cattle's movements around the hill, but it quickly became obvious that they were only interested in certain areas. They'd lie on the dry ground where the bracken was growing, and the crushing impact on the rising fiddleheads was immediate. When the wind changed, they'd move to other places where the midges were less fearsome. I had worried that they would make no impression on the land whatsoever, but a little network of tracks and paths appeared as if from nowhere on the hill after less than a month. What had been an insurmountable wall of molinia grass quickly dissolved into a network of bald or stubby tussocks. And in the tracks and passages, I found signs of hares and black grouse. Cows broke the hill open, and wildlife rushed up through the cracks.

The farmer's curse is having too many animals in winter and not enough during the summer. That second part was doubly true for me, because the cattle almost drowned in moor grass when it rushed up in June and July. After their initial inroads, the impact seemed to diminish as the summer wore on. But as the grass finally failed in September, they caught

up again – and I believe they did more good for the hill in the last two weeks of their stay than they had in the two months preceding it.

The cattle made their presence felt in other, unexpected ways. In a period of dry weather, they crossed onto an island of dry ground that is usually surrounded by bogs. While they were grazing there, a few wet nights raised the water table and left them trapped on ten or fifteen acres. I should (quietly) whisper that they made a bit of a mess on that land, and I began to worry that I was going to get into trouble. But when the sun returned and the floodwaters diminished, the cows moved off and they never returned to that island all summer. The effect was similar to a kind of mob grazing – high intensity impact, followed by slow and peaceful recovery. The following spring, orchids grew there for the first time in more than twenty years.

In their second year, successive periods of extremely hot weather drove the cows into shelter beneath a scattering of isolated willow trees. The GPS tags showed that they would lie in the shade of those trees for eighteen or twenty hours a day, leaving only to drink and swim in the river between eleven at night and three o'clock in the morning. Of course, they obliterated the vegetation beneath those willows, but only in little circles of less than ten or fifteen feet around the trunk of each tree. A great accumulation of cowpats and footprints was left when the weather broke, and I frequently saw black grouse using those areas into the autumn, not only to bathe in the dust, but also to scratch through the cowpats.

I was worried about ticks, but despite many checks, they never materialised. I worried too about worms and fluke, but I ran several tests and never picked up a single parasite. And when autumn came, I rattled a bag and the cows ran behind me for more than a mile to the gathering pens, whereupon I loaded them up and sold the calves through the Mart in Castle Douglas. I kept the cast cows to become guides for the next cohort of calves and, after that first year, I tried to make sure that my group would always include beasts who had been to the hill before. They became the leaders, and I made sure to tag them with the GPS collars, knowing that wherever they were, the others would be too.

After three years, the hill has been dramatically altered by just a handful of cows. I was impressed by their positive impact on bracken, heather, molinia grass and wildlife too. It's only one of several small projects I run each summer, but it's an outstanding example of what cows can do on tough, abandoned areas of moorland where molinia grass has achieved almost total dominance. Not only do the calves fatten during the summer, but this project has been relentlessly interesting and rewarding in a host of other ways. And it's important to remember that none of this is new – our grandparents understood the value of cattle in the uplands. I have sometimes felt like I was a pioneer, but cows have been in these places for thousands of years. It makes perfect sense to let them loose again.





WILDFIRE ROUNDUP 2024

2023 has been yet another busy year in terms of Wildfire activity, whether it be actual wildfires, or work to prevent them happening and reduce the impact they have, but I think it is fair to say that, while it has been a busy year, it has also been a productive and positive one.

The impact of the disastrous fires that were seen in England during July 2022 is still being felt, with a renewed focus being given by Government both in Westminster and in Scotland. The interest and involvement of politicians is very welcome as it takes the conversations we have been having for some time, about how to better prepare our communities at risk from wildfire and have a multi-agency approach to wildfire protection and response, to a forum where some really positive discussions can be had, and real movement seen.

This is not the only involvement we have seen our elected officials have in 2023. Following the extremely large and challenging fires in the Cannich and Daviot regions of the Highlands earlier this year, we saw a wildfire summit called by the local MSP, Kate Forbes, in the town hall at Kiltarlity. This brought key people from a range of organisations, as well as those immediately impacted by the fires, together to discuss lessons learned and areas we could work on together. The meeting was also attended by Marie Gougeon MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Islands, who was able to hear first hand from attendees their experiences, concerns and plans for the future.

We also have the Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Bill passing through Parliament at the moment, so a number of events have been undertaken to raise awareness and seek opinion as well as provide evidence to Parliament on the potential impacts and consequences of the proposals contained in the Bill. The opportunity to have a licence scheme introduced for anyone using fire as a land management tool is both exciting and challenging but will need careful consideration to make sure it actually achieves the intended result. Much to consider!

Another piece of work that has been kicked off is a review of the Muirburn Code. This important piece of work is at an early stage, but all the key agencies are involved and things are off to a promising start.

Research has featured throughout the year with a range of related topics being explored by academics. This ranges from the ongoing work to develop a UK Fire Danger Rating System to research into community wildfire resilience. It's great to see the subject matter being explored from a diverse range of directions, and I'm absolutely positive that the improved understanding that is bound to result from this work will allow us to focus our efforts more effectively.

We've seen some huge wildfires in Scotland this year, with the Cannich fire, which started in May and was eventually extinguished in June, being among the largest. Although, so far, we aren't seeing a significant increase in the number of wildfires as a result of our changing climate, the fires we are seeing are tending to be larger and presenting more challenging fire behaviour. We are seeing a much better joined-up response from a number of agencies all working hard to control the fire, and partnership working in this area has never looked better. There is still work to be done to create a truly coordinated and integrated response to these devastating wildfires, but great advances have been made.

One of these advances has been the introduction of the Muirburn Practitioner Foundation Course. This course is split into two sections: the first is an e-learning module that allows students to get a good understanding of the Muirburn Code, and the second is a practical skills day which equips the learners with the skills, knowledge and understanding to safely and appropriately use fire as a land management tool. This training will improve practice across all sectors that use fire as a land management tool and is highly recommended to all land managers.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Wildfire Strategy is moving into its final phase for implementation. This will see the introduction of new vehicles and equipment as well as a higher level of skill across Scotland, meaning the response to wildfires will be improved significantly. However, response is only one part of the strategy, which also seeks to further develop the prevention work to reduce the number of wildfires we experience and mitigate the impact of them when they do happen. This will only be fully achieved when we have a common understanding of the risk, and a good

wildfire education and communication system in place, something that is being led by the Scottish Wildfire Forum.

Although we won't see the event this year, preparations are well underway for the UK Wildfire Conference 2024, taking place in Aberdeen on the 12th and 13th November 2024. The steering committee has been working hard to produce this next conference, following the resounding success of the 2022 Conference in Belfast. The theme of the conference is resilience in a changing world, and we have a number of keynote speakers, exhibitors and posters poised to bring us up to date with the latest thinking from across the UK, Europe and the World on how we can develop a

resilient landscape and resilient communities in the changing environment. This promises to be a must-attend event so make sure you book your place early.

A busy year all in all, and great progress being made, but there is still a lot to do, so I'm looking forward to seeing how 2024 develops! See you in November at the conference!

Bruce Farquharson
Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Deputy Assistant Chief Officer
Head of Training
Chair of the Scottish Wildfire Forum



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WORKING FOR WADERS UPDATE

After a busy summer, Working for Waders approached the autumn with another round of funding decisions. Having welcomed a number of project proposals from various partners across Scotland, it was hard to narrow down a list of applicants to match the budget allocated for spending. Each proposal offered to develop different strands of wader conservation in a unique and interesting part of the country, and the diversity of ideas and opportunities showed that people continue to be inspired by a desire to do more for wader conservation. No two sites are ever the same, and different projects require various levels of support and input depending upon local conditions. Some need facilitation and support to get started, while others require help with monitoring wader numbers or technical advice on habitat works.

Three main projects were selected for funding and Working for Waders hopes that these will allow the Initiative to build on ideas which have been prioritised over the last few years. The first of these projects is based on Skye, where excellent facilitation and communication work has developed a really exciting level of interest amongst birders, farmers and crofters on the island. Waders have seen some devastating declines on Skye over recent years and Working for Waders was delighted to support the establishment of a new wader cluster there in March and April this year. Funding will help them

to develop their ideas and trial some ideas around predator control and habitat management over the next few months.

The second project builds on the success of work undertaken in Angus, where birds like lapwings and curlews have held on better than in many other parts of Scotland. But they're still under pressure and, in the face of land use change, pressures to intensify agriculture continue to gnaw away at wader habitats. By supporting a project facilitator who has a background in predator control and estate management, Working for Waders hopes that interest and momentum will continue to grow in this important part of the north east.

A final project is based in the Borders, where a group of farmers has been informally working together for waders for the past five years. In this case, we hope that financial support will allow them to develop their plans for the future, including a move to establish an "official" wader cluster, which should help them to access funding and further help from other sources to ramp up activity through the existing grant and payment schemes.

Working for Waders will be sharing more on these projects over the coming months but, at this point, the Initiative would like to thank everybody who approached us for support in 2023 - we wish it had been possible to help everybody in this way.



WORKING TOGETHER FOR WADERS

In late November, over one hundred and twenty delegates attended a conference titled "Working Together For Waders" on the island of Lusty Beg in Lough Erne, County Fermanagh. Subtitled "a collaborative approach to countryside management", the event placed a specific focus on partnership working, based on excellent projects delivered by wildfowling, conservationists and researchers over the last ten years in Fermanagh. Like large areas of Northern Ireland, the landscapes around Lough Erne have seen substantial declines in wader numbers since the late 1980s, and curlews have become a real focus of conservation effort there.

Small numbers of curlews persist on the many small islands of Lough Erne, and it's likely that these birds are naturally more protected from ground predators than curlews which breed on the mainland – but they still require help. Local wildfowling have been on hand to deliver practical help with predator control and habitat management, and anti-predator fencing has been established to support vulnerable birds in hard-to-reach places. Lough Erne is one of the five sites currently supported as part of the RSPB's CurlewLIFE project, which links to work currently being delivered in Scotland, England, Wales and at Glenwherry in County Antrim.

Curlews formed the basis for the day and the hosting was shared between Michael Stinson of Erne Environmental and the Lough Erne Partnership. The keynote speakers were Mary Colwell of Curlew Action and Patrick Laurie of Working for Waders. Both were well received. After these initial presentations, the conference broke out into a number of interesting and technical strands around wader conservation more generally and also the importance of collaborative projects which incorporate local knowledge, skills and passion. There was a clear emphasis on the value of predator control and Dr. Andrew Hoodless of GWCT provided an overview of what is known and unknown about the ecological implications of managing generalist predators like foxes and crows.

Towards the end of the day, a workshop was held to gather some of the knowledge in the room. Delegates were asked to answer questions across a range of topics, from predator control to peatland restoration in connection with wading birds, and small presentations were afterwards made to the room. These presentations not only highlighted some good ideas, but they were also formulated and delivered by a mixture of people from different backgrounds working together and sharing knowledge. That seemed to close the event on a very relevant note.



A FOCUS ON REWETTING IN THE MANX UPLANDS



Shaun Gelling is a native Manxman with many years of moorland management experience, particularly based around grouse, conservation and collaborative work to promote positive futures on the Isle of Man.

A huge amount of exciting new work is underway on the hills of the Isle of Man. Heather Trust members may recall our previous support of grouse counting and heather management on the island, which offers a useful case study for moorland managers across the UK. The Manx hills are perhaps best known for the Mountain section of the famous TT motorcycle race course and a robust hen harrier population. Despite many decades of positive land management carried out by sporting tenants and a long-standing grouse shooting moratorium, grouse numbers are perilously low.

Much of the Manx uplands are owned by the Government, and overseeing the management of this land frequently falls to the Department of Environment, Food and Agriculture's Uplands Manager, Shaun Gelling.

Responding to changing expectations from upland landscapes, Shaun is part of a team which has adjusted the focus on moorland management to place greater emphasis on peatland, carbon and concerns around wildfire. This has called for a strategic, catchment-based focus on moorlands for the future, and work to rewet and restore degraded peatland now underpins many of the same objectives which have traditionally been delivered by sporting interests.

An ambitious initiative aimed at revitalising and improving 1,000 acres of peatland habitat by April 2025 will encompass both deep peat and shallower peat wet heath sites. Significant efforts, including blocking drains, managing

heather growth, and implementing legal predator control by Shaun and DEFA tenants, have already positively impacted wading birds like curlews. Despite a general decline in their numbers, curlews have shown a noteworthy and encouraging increase.

Further plans involve additional projects, such as a conversion of forested areas into bogs near crucial wader habitats and strategic tree planting in upland gullies. The guiding principle behind all forthcoming upland initiatives is to deliver multiple positive outcomes, including carbon capture, natural flood regulation, improved habitat connectivity, and enhanced resilience against wildfires.

Upland management on the Isle of Man is helped by the island's geography and scale. The uplands are compact enough that Shaun's team are able to cover them all, and their local background allows them to engage directly with tenants and landowners from a position of shared understanding. Shaun is under no illusion that implementing change at a landscape scale can be delivered without a strong partnership working. Hill tenants will have an opportunity to carry out essential peatland restoration works and this he believes will deliver the best results. The Isle of Man's longest river catchment is only around eleven miles from source to sea, and this helps to take a strategic overview on balancing interests which include farming, forestry and the urban environment. A new Peatland and Upland Carbon Officer is now in place, and this post takes a considered view on native woodland creation to complement existing tree cover without compromising open habitats, particularly in terms of riparian planting. These are early days for the new project, but the direction of travel is only positive.

SCOTLAND'S MOORLAND FORUM

HUGH RAVEN, CHAIRMAN OF SCOTLAND'S MOORLAND FORUM PROVIDES AN UPDATE

The past year has been one of change for Scotland's Moorland Forum, as the stakes were raised by the Scottish Government's particularly close interest in the management of Scotland's hills.

Their Bill on Wildlife Management and Muirburn is the first in significant legislative changes planned for this Parliament. Changes to the law on deer management will be along shortly, but meanwhile the focus is on proposals for licensing of both muirburn and the shooting of grouse.

Control of grouse shooting – justified, in the government's words, "to address the on-going issue of wildlife crime and in particular persecution of raptors on grouse moors" – will be through licensing of the land on which grouse shooting takes place. It's a matter of intimate interest to many of our members, whose opinions vary widely on the merits and practicality of these plans.

The variety of opinion was well aired at forum meetings, and those members with a particular interest in grouse moor management have been busy influencing the Bill. Much the same is true of the plans to regulate muirburn, where a licence will be required to "make muirburn" whatever the season.

Responsibility for implementing the new law will rest with NatureScot – which is also the Moorland Forum's sponsoring department. Given increasing demands on its slender resources, it asked us to review our operations and streamline our work plans.

So we've changed our annual schedule to fewer meetings each year, which will in future focus on exchanging information between members and advising Scottish Government rather than developing our own work programme and organising debates for a wider audience.

During the year we also waved farewell to our formidable director Anne Gray who, after five years with the Forum and our key partner the Heather Trust, has moved on to a fascinating job elsewhere. To Anne go our heartfelt thanks and good wishes – as is reflected elsewhere in this Heather Trust annual review.




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RESEARCH UPDATE ON PEATLAND-ES-UK

EVIDENCE ON PEATLAND HEATHER MANAGEMENT



Dr Andreas Heinemeyer is an Associate Professor at the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) at the University of York. He routinely measures and models how and how fast carbon cycles through terrestrial plant-soil systems, how much carbon is stored and how carbon and water cycles interact. In 2022, he published the 10-year report on the previous Defra-funded research project on assessing upland peatland heather management impacts on carbon storage, greenhouse gas emissions, water storage and biodiversity. The peer-reviewed report and summary versions are available and continue to stimulate the debate on heather moorland management.

The Peatland-ES-UK project is now in its 12th year. Defra initiated this project in 2011 to assess climate and management impacts on heather-dominated upland peatlands. The study compares a heather **burn** intervention to alternative **mowing** (with leaving or removing brash) and to additional **uncut** areas across three blanket bog peatland sites in Northern England. The 10-year report has now been peer-reviewed and a short summary and long summary version are also available. However, to provide complete and most policy-relevant outcomes, we need to capture the complete vegetation regrowth impact over 20+ years. Our project is part of a large Natural Environmental Research Council (NERC) project (until 2026) to assess vegetation management in relation to wildfire mitigation. Unfortunately, neither Defra nor Natural England seem to be willing to provide further funding. Why should we be concerned? Why do we need to continue? The two graphs below outline the answers. Here we shall focus on peatland carbon (C).

Looking at the left-hand panel, most research is conducted over only ~3-5 years. As such, it captures only short-term disturbance and, unsurprisingly, burning heather causes a large C loss. However, in the long-term, findings change completely! Peatland-ES-UK's 10+ years of monitoring show that regrowth on burnt plots can more than compensate for the initial combustion losses, whereas mown plots gain less C due to long-term C-loss from brash decomposition. Moreover, we found that aging (unmanaged) heather becomes less C efficient (see last year's article on heather nutrients based on funding from the Heather Trust) and also dries out the peat, stimulating peat decomposition. Clearly, to obtain ecologically and policy relevant outcomes, at least 25 years are needed. Looking at the right-hand panel, aging heather also increases fuel load and thus the risk of wildfire. Depending on site wetness, impacts can either be moderate or severe with either small or large peat losses, respectively. In the worst case (if peat burns deep, smoulders and remains bare) this results in continued peat erosion.

Therefore, it is crucial to consider that (1) policy should consider long-term impacts and (2) not every site can be rewetted (limited by rainfall and topography) and scrub and tree encroachment under a 'no management' approach will only add to this fire risk. To just say, "rewetting will make peatlands resilient" is ignoring a lack of evidence and that rewetting potential is site-context specific. I shall continue to clarify all this as I did in September in the Scottish Parliament. The muirburn review for NatureScot did not consider evidence in light of the above. We cannot afford to see peatlands go up in smoke because of incomplete and misguided reviews and wishful thinking.

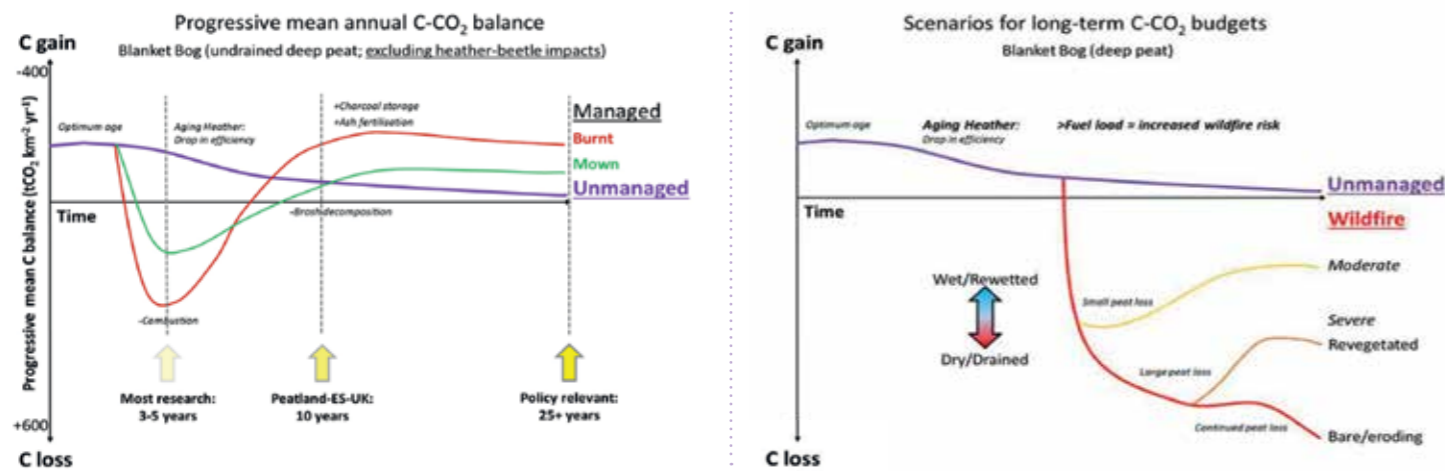


Figure 1: Hypothetical scenarios of the progressive mean CO₂-C balance over time for: (left) unmanaged (aging), burnt and mown heather and (right) unmanaged (aging) heather and wildfire with either moderate or severe fires leading to small or large peat losses, respectively, and (if remaining bare) to continued peat erosion. Note: scenarios in the left panel marked until Peatland-ES-UK (10-years) are based on project data.



Cathy Smith is a human geographer and postdoctoral researcher in the Leverhulme Centre for Wildfires, Environment, and Society, based at Royal Holloway, University of London.

GRAZINGS MANAGEMENT WITH FIRE BY CROFTERS IN THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS

National laws dating back to 1401, and court records from the 16th and 17th centuries suggest that peasant farmers in Scotland have used fire to manage grazing areas for many centuries. Burning practices have evolved through this time to reflect changing economic, social, and political conditions.

I'm researching how crofters' use of fire to manage grazing areas has changed in living memory. I'm particularly interested in how future, tighter, muirburn regulations could affect crofters.

I recently interviewed 25 crofters and two hill farmers from Sutherland, Skye, and Lochaber. Most felt that fire was important in maintaining common grazing areas, managing ticks, and enabling access on the hill. They did not see easy alternatives, given the rough ground they graze.

Given its importance, many were concerned about an ongoing reduction in organised fire use and other trends making burning riskier. It is increasingly difficult to gather helpers at short notice in the limited windows when the weather is right to burn. This is partly due to an aging crofting population, but also the inflexibility of twenty-first century life and work. Declining stocking levels on many common grazings, especially of cattle, have increased the load of flammable vegetation, making controlled burning more difficult. In the past, organisations like the Forestry

Commission had more local staff, who were encouraged to help with pastoral burning, but this support is no longer there.

The financial risk of accidentally damaging plantations, fences, housing etc. makes people wary, as does a lack of understanding about managed fire use among the non-crofting and farming population. As a result, some areas have not seen fire for decades and have high levels of flammable vegetation. Some crofters were keen to resume burning in places like this but feared that they would struggle to control the fire.

Crofters worried that the proposed muirburn regulations would exacerbate this situation of declining and riskier fire use. Most common grazings have areas of peat deeper than 40cm, where burning may be made illegal. People felt that few would comply with the proposed licensing system, which might put some people off burning entirely. Or there is a risk that it unintentionally makes it more likely that individuals 'burn and run', lighting a fire and leaving immediately, to remain anonymous.

I'll publish this research in the coming year. Get in touch to share any thoughts, or if you'd like to read the research outputs at c.smith@rhul.ac.uk.



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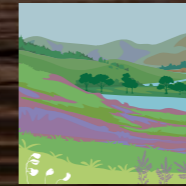
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