



IN CONVERSATION WITH...

# JACK WARD

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Guide & Ranger at  
Cairngorms Connect





## Cairngorms Connect is a project that's truly thinking about the big picture, can you tell us a bit about the background of the initiative?

Members from each of the four partners, RSPB, NatureScot, Wildland Ltd and Forest and Land Scotland, realised that many elements of their land management were aligned with each other, and so came together

to better coordinate their work. This means that whilst each partner still has the flexibility to manage their land in their own way, the greater management spans a truly landscape scale.

## What's your role at Cairngorms Connect and how does it contribute to the vision?

I am one of two deer stalkers that cover large parts of the project area. Our main aim is to manage the deer population to allow the forest to expand and be able to regenerate, whilst in the presence of deer. A major part of the stalking role is to concentrate on the montane zones. This allows specialist plant species to become established. These are

already present but in very low numbers due to many years of overgrazing by high deer numbers.

We hope to create the effect of a predator in the landscape by being present in these remote areas. This causes the deer to move more often and not become sedentary in a single location, which lowers the impact in these vulnerable areas.

### **What conservation work is getting underway within the project area?**

Deer management as part of Cairngorms Connect has been underway since September 2019. Similarly, the ecology team have been recording population data on moth species and deadwood invertebrates among other species since Summer 2019.

The tree nursery, based at RSPB Abernethy, has been under the management of the Cairngorms Connect since September 2019, where montane tree species have been brought on and are almost at a point where they can be planted back out in the project area. Staff have also been recording and monitoring locations where montane willows and birches are present in the field.

In other areas, woodland restructuring work has begun to give native species plantations a more natural structure, allowing natural processes and regeneration to occur.

### **Getting local communities on board for big projects like this is essential, what kind of things have Cairngorms Connect been doing to engage people?**

Cairngorms Connect have commissioned an album by a local musician, with all of the tracks inspired by the landscape and species within the project area.

There is an education program in the making to go into schools and get them enthused about the project, looking at all the different elements of the project and how it all fits in together.

With the river restoration work happening at Insh, the Cairngorms Connect team have engaged with the community and highland councillors and will have a pop-up exhibition for people to come and learn about that project as their feedback is vital.

### **The scale of the project area is what makes this initiative so unique in the UK, how does this benefit the species living there?**

Many of the mobile species, such as pine marten and black grouse, are able to move throughout the landscape in corridors of healthy habitat. This enables species to colonise new areas without having to cross degraded land or areas heavily populated by humans. Several plant species, such as Twinflower, have become rare due to habitat fragmentation. This species spreads by forming carpets on the forest floor, so by re-connecting the woodland sites, Twinflower can spread into new areas.

As the woodland recovers next to rivers and streams, the added shade cools the waters making it better for fish such as trout and salmon to live in, migrate and spawn.





The scale also brings a host of other benefits, such as increased water retention which slows the flow and reduces flood risk, not to mention the essential contribution to carbon capture as the woodland cover expands.

### **Do you have a favourite habitat or location, how does it inspire you?**

NatureScot's Invereshie National Nature Reserve is a beautiful place where the woodland is marching up the hill. With ongoing management, there are promising signs that the woodland is increasing into the montane zones, creating great altitudinal corridors.

### **Why should people come and see Cairngorms Connect for themselves?**

As the UK's biggest conservation project, and a pioneer in large scale habitat restoration, Cairngorms Connect is something we should be proud of. This is a really exciting time to come and see the project area as we're right at the beginning. In 200 years people will talk about the start of this project, and we will have been there and lived it!

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