

STEPS TO WILDER WILDS

Large-scale rewilding projects are all the rage – but smaller networks of rewilded habitat provide equally crucial links.

Report by Kenny Taylor

A mosaic of native woodland, ponds and wildflower meadows is evolving at Wester Tullochcurran, a partner in the Northwoods Rewilding Network.

Both photos: SCOTLAND: The Big Picture

Picture rewilding projects in Scotland and you're likely to think big and Highland. Big swathes of upland heath and bog, river and forest. Big, iconic species such as golden eagle and beaver. Big headline grabbers sparking intense debate: wolf, lynx. Big money. Big organisations.

There's no doubt that large-scale rewilding work in the Highlands has made impressive progress. Two notable examples include the rapid expansion of native woodlands at Glenfeshie in the Cairngorms and Alladale (a 2021 *Springwatch* location); another is the epic Coigach & Assynt Living Landscape project, a restoration of habitat covering 635km² led by the Scottish Wildlife Trust.

But the sheer size of such ventures – Glenfeshie alone spans an area larger than Bristol and Oxford combined – could appear daunting to people with more limited means. Is Scottish rewilding mainly a task for those with access to expansive Highland holdings and the bank balances to match?

Reintroduction projects have championed the return of wild beavers to Scotland and inspired rewilders.



Well, no. A new partnership, launched this spring by rewilding charity SCOTLAND: The Big Picture, seems set to nudge change in the country's rewilding scene – not by competing with the big initiatives, but by complementing them through an array of much smaller sites. Its Northwoods Rewilding Network aims to link landholdings of between 20 and 400 hectares across the whole country. Typically, these modest-sized places (the average Scottish farm spans several dozen hectares

or so; crofts and upland farms are smaller) may also be home to rural enterprises or community projects. But, according to the Northwoods organisers, all have the potential to become links in a chain of rewilding 'stepping stones' to tackle Scotland's nature and climate crises, filling the gaps between major, landscape-scale rewilding sites, creating new nature recovery sites and wildlife corridors, and offering fresh opportunities for rural businesses. ▶



Highland cattle can improve plant diversity in pastures by eating dominant species, for example.

Back to the wild – one step at a time

The Northwoods Rewilding Network currently has 25 partners signed up. Here are six of them – and how they are planning to bring back the wild.

Arkaig Community Forest

Spean Bridge, Highland. 59 hectares. Recovery of three woodland sites, including an oakwood on the shore of Loch Lochy, known for ospreys (above).

Ballinlaggan Farm

Carrbridge, Highland. 18 hectares. Enlargement of wetland habitat for waders such as snipe (right) and curlew. Planting of trees, hedgerows and scrub; removal of intensive sheep grazing.



Glenan Wood

Tighnabruaich, Argyll. 146 hectares. Recovery of an Atlantic oakwood, home to wood warblers and redstarts.

Denmarkfield

Luncarty, Perthshire. 37 hectares. Creation of a mosaic of woodland, scrub and open glades on arable farmland. Herons, beavers and otters will all benefit.

Drumadoon Farm

Arran. 223 hectares. Rewilding of farmland with native trees and water features. Key species include hen harriers and barn owls.



Balmangan Farm

Borgue, Dumfries and Galloway. 134 hectares. Replacement of conventional farm stock with native breeds of pig, cattle and pony for conservation grazing. Creation of wader scrapes and meadows, planting of native trees and restoration of hedgerows.

putting in ponds and wader scrapes, creating woodlands and restoring peatlands and river margins, or restoring missing species,” explains James.

Plans are based on solid survey foundations and scientific monitoring. “We send an ecologist to conduct a baseline habitat survey to show what’s there and what might be missing,” says James, “and a drone videographer to produce images that do two things: they enable us to both measure future ecological progress and tell the story of a place.

“We intend to repeat the surveys and the drone work every three years or so,” he adds. “It will all help to get the message across: that rewilding is good for nature and good for business, and that more people should be thinking about it.”

Ploughing a different furrow

James believes that Northwoods is “ploughing a slightly different furrow” from large conservation charities and owners of big estates dedicated to rewilding. It aligns with many of the aims of those organisations and individuals, he says, but is smaller and possibly more nimble in decision making. “We’re well aware of the good work being done by other organisations, and we’re not here to compete with them but to complement them,” he adds. “This may be the first time there’s been a pan-Scotland network of individual landowners who want to do things differently for nature. I think we’ve tapped into the zeitgeist at the right moment.”

Comments from many of those who’ve joined the Northwoods network echo James’s excitement and hopes for the future. Typical of these are the words of Julie McCallum, owner of Little Drumquharn, a lowland livestock farm near Killearn in Stirlingshire.

“I grew up in this area, and vividly remember fields brimming with wildflowers and teeming with butterflies, bees and grasshoppers,” says Julie. “Thirty years later, those same fields are almost barren of wildlife. My vision for Little Drumquharn is to maximize biodiversity by restoring the landscape and creating habitats to allow wildlife to flourish.”

It seems as if Julie – and many other like-minded people in the Northwoods Rewilding Network – are now taking big steps, whatever the size of their landholdings, to turn such visions into vibrant, wildlife-rich reality.



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FIND OUT MORE Northwoods Rewilding Network: scotlandbigpicture.com/northwoods

Rewilding ‘stepping stones’ can fill the gaps between major, landscape-scale rewilding sites.

The speed of growth of the network suggests that many people across Scotland think the same. At the time of launch, 12 partners had signed up. Less than two months later, that number had swelled to 25. An associated crowdfunder exceeded its first target within days.

“I think it shows the appetite for rewilding in Scotland,” says Northwoods project manager James Nairne. “I haven’t cold-called anyone – these are all people coming to me.”

This diverse group includes farmers, crofters, market gardeners, community woodland volunteers, and managers of ecotourism, outdoor activity and wedding venues. Locations are scattered from the Borders in the south to the Cairngorms in the north, and from islands in the west to Aberdeenshire in the east.

A fruitful union

One early Northwoods adopter, Kinkell Byre near St Andrews, includes a wedding venue in its rural business – perhaps a surprising development in rewilding. “Conventional livestock farming was no longer making economic sense,” James explains. “But they do see benefits in being a green wedding venue while introducing conservation grazing and doing what they can with scrapes and hedgerows to boost waders, and hedgerows to encourage other birds.”

Some Northwoods partners are already well known for their innovative approaches to rewilding. These include the small Bamff Wildland Estate in Perthshire, where the Ramsay family

has long championed the return of beavers. Today, they host several wild, free-living beaver families, and continue to forge ahead with an ambitious plan for nature recovery: a dozen fields, six woodlands and associated riversides will be transformed into a single, nature-rich area linking farmland and beaver wetlands. Inspired in part by pioneering work on the Knepp Estate in Sussex, this will be the first project of its kind north of the border. “We aim to be at the forefront of nature recovery in Scotland,” says manager Sophie Ramsay. Rewilding will be achieved on a modest budget, she says: “through science, recreation, education and art – to share and communicate the exciting things that happen when nature is set free to flourish again.”

Elsewhere, a market garden in an Aberdeenshire conifer plantation is being funded

initially by felling conifers, to be replaced with native broadleaves – a boon for red squirrels and other woodland wildlife. In the Inner Hebrides, the Mull and Iona Community Trust is transforming a Sitka spruce and lodgepole pine forest, replacing conifers with broadleaved trees, establishing a forest school, and working to help hen harriers and scarce butterflies and moths.

Glenan Wood in Argyll is another spot with an exciting community woodland scheme. “It’s a fantastic chunk of temperate rainforest,” says James, “but it has problems with invasive species including non-native conifers and rhododendrons, and pressure from deer grazing.” Work by local volunteers will help Atlantic oakwood to thrive here, benefiting a host of lower-level plants, such as lichens, liverworts and mosses, along with classic western oakwood breeding birds, including wood warblers and redstarts.

If you want to be involved in Northwoods, you have to commit. Partners must make a written declaration outlining what they’re going to do for nature over the next five years. “That might be



Land managed by Northwoods partners should soon see greater abundance and diversity of life.

