



THE GLEN

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“ My eye is drawn by the tiny green-headed pines poking their heads nervously above the heather, like prey wary of predator. ”

Often regarded as the jewel in the crown of Scotland's Cairngorms National Park, Glenfeshie has undergone successive changes in ownership and management. Today The Glen is setting new standards in ecological restoration.



View looking north along the Feshie's braided river channel showing new forest growth on the river flood plain.



Pine trees cluster at the base of the glen transitioning to open moorland at higher altitudes.

My eye is drawn by the tiny green-headed pines poking their heads nervously above the heather, like prey wary of predator. It's not that pines are unusual in Scotland but young pines, or at least those growing in such profusion, are conspicuous in a wider landscape largely bereft of young trees. These tentative pioneers are the building blocks for a future forest.

Secreted away in the southwestern corner of the Cairngorms, the rampaging waters of the River Feshie

carve an ever-shifting channel, dynamic and unlawful with no respect for property or boundaries. Geriatric trees, partly submerged in sand and gravel, litter the riverbed, testament to the power of these waters in full spate. Alongside the uprooted titans, lie fledgling pines. And alder and birch. Unable to gain sufficient traction in the sandy soils, these youngsters have succumbed to the river but their presence is significant.

For decades Glenfeshie has been regarded by many as

a jewel in the Cairngorms crown. Gnarly ageing pines, steep-sided gravelly hills and plentiful red deer, made this glen quintessentially Scottish. Beneath the idealised exterior however, lay a long history of ecological deterioration. With its roots firmly in the traditional fabric of deer stalking and grouse shooting, the Glen, though spectacular to the untrained eye, was dying on its feet with the ageing forest unable to produce young trees in the face of a burgeoning deer population.



An isolated ageing pine stands alone against the backdrop of the night sky.

“ For 3 years in succession
we culled 500 deer ”



Managing Scotland's red deer remains a controversial subject. An integral part of the forest ecosystem, their numbers in many areas prevent woodland regeneration leading to conflict between environmentalists and traditional hunting estates.

A decade ago Glenfeshie consequently found itself in the media spotlight, falling foul of an increasing body of environmental legislation and public scrutiny. In essence, the deer were eating what little remained of the ancient forest, now protected under EU law, and Scotland's regulatory body The Deer Commission, stepped in and forced the Estate's hand.

"For 3 years in succession we culled 500 deer" says Thomas MacDonell, the factor on Glenfeshie at the time. "We met the targets we'd been set to relieve the grazing pressure and allow forest regeneration but still when we counted, we had 500 too many stags."

Culling deer in such large numbers on a traditional stalking estate was not only contentious but flew in the face of the objectives of Flemming Skouboe, the Estate's owner at the time. "I was between a rock and a hard place," says Thomas, "I was being told on the one hand to get deer numbers down and warned on the other that if the deer density fell too low, I'd be looking at the sack."

The pressure of conforming to environmental designations, of which there are many on Glenfeshie, eventually catalysed a sale and the present owner, Anders Holch Polvsen, took the reins.

Thomas MacDonell: "When Anders bought the estate, it was the first time in a very long time that a buyer knew what he was taking on. It was a pivotal moment and we started thinking long term, 250 years into the future." Polvsen's aspirations for Glenfeshie echoed those of a growing number of philanthropic landowners across Scotland and MacDonell, now Conservation Director for the newly-formed Wildland Ltd, was off the leash.

"He gave me authority to really address the deer issue once and for all and for some time, we had a shoot on sight policy, which eventually got us down to around 2 animals per square kilometre."

SCOTLAND
THE BIG PICTURE

The open moorland in Glenfeshie is slowly being recolonised by trees and shrubs which have not seen the light of day for centuries.



Black grouse have benefitted from the emerging mosaic of habitats in Glenfeshie.



Dramatic evening light over regenerating pine woodland in Glenfeshie, Cairngorms National Park, Scotland.

Fast-forward a decade and the jewel that is Glenfeshie is set in a very different crown. Largely free of grazing pressure, the trees are rising, phoenix-like from the glacial soils. Alongside the young pines, juniper, willow, alder and birch are seeing the light for the first time in perhaps two centuries.

In the developing mosaic of woodland and open glades, black grouse are recovering and even capercaillie – struggling in fragmented forests elsewhere – are finding a new home under the emerging canopy. “It doesn’t take 50 years,” says Thomas, “it takes ten or fifteen. In that time we have more than doubled the range of the Caledonian Pine Forest on Glenfeshie and the results are there for everyone to see.”

No one can deny the radical impact of reducing deer numbers here – the trees are growing everywhere. It required a thick-skinned, determined action by both the owner and the staff and the Estate’s deer policy remains widely criticised by traditionalists to this day. What has happened on Glenfeshie took a commitment to challenge the status quo but it also involved significant investment. Today, the vision for this landscape and the people who are employed to nurture it, continues to rely on the owner’s wealth and his willingness to put that to work.

“Anders Polvsen is presently subsidising Glenfeshie and his wider landholdings to the tune of £1.6m each year and we have to recognise that that is unsustainable,” says Thomas MacDonell.



Crested tit, a pine forest specialist, backlit in evening light, Glenfeshie, Scotland.

The challenge facing eco-philanthropists like Polvsen is how to combine their rewilding objectives with financial sustainability. That's always been a difficult square to circle but MacDonell retains a positive perspective.

"Some people ask me why we're doing this. They question our vision from the point of view that this land has nothing to offer other than red grouse and red deer for shooting. I would say that the place itself, the forest, the river, the mountains – the majesty of this land – has an enormous value. We're not turning our back on sport shooting but it has to be part of a much bigger jigsaw in the longer term."

As the long shadows of a winter afternoon reach further and further across the floor of the Glen, it is easy to understand why this place has always stirred the spirit and soothed the soul but today, it also warms the heart. It provides a tangible demonstration of what is possible; a tantalising glimpse of what a wilder Scotland might look like in the future. But this vision, this dream, is dependent on much more than young trees being given a chance to flourish.

"We want to see trees much further up the hill where they merge into a montane scrub zone," says Thomas, "I'd personally like to see ptarmigan and capercaillie thriving here; wildcats and pine martens and of course, healthy red deer, but to be truly sustainable we need the local community to see value in what we're doing – not just from an economic point of view but from a social and cultural perspective. We're not sure how to do that yet but we're thinking about it a lot."

People hold the key to the rewilding door in Scotland. Ultimately, it is their voices and values that will decide what places like Glenfeshie look like 200 years from now. "I'd like to think that we've learned something by then," reflects Thomas, "and that we better value landscapes like this and not just in terms of what they can provide for us."

The young pines, birches and alders slowly finding a foothold in the shifting, glacial soils of Glenfeshie will bear witness to whether or not that door can be unlocked beyond The Glen to reveal a wilder Scotland.